

# COMPLETE ISSUE 5, FLEAS ON THE DOG, JANUARY 2020

## WELCOME!

ISSUE 5    JANUARY 2020

*“Memes are forever in search of their own sound bite.” Hezekiah Sretch  
(Poetry Editor)*

Welcome to Fleas on the Dog. We’re a no frills, brown bag lit rag with only one focus: GOOD WRITING. Our style is ‘HOTS!’—hands off the submissions! We publish every submission exactly as received, so there might be arbitrary spacing and pagination. What you won’t find are pretty pictures and fancy layouts. We like this ‘broadsheet’ deconstructionist approach inspired by the Beat presses and journals because it visually footprints the individual in a way a uniform format does not. We hope you like it too. (In some cases with poetry, Hezekiah’s intro will be found at the bottom not the top of the page.)

We’ve just recently stumbled upon a couple new trends as we peruse the lit site landscape. Fact checks and sensitivity editors! Fact what? Sensitivity who? What is this? Police procedural or some kind of therapy we don’t want any part of (and wouldn’t work anyway given our rap sheets)? You write. We publish. Everybody reads. If it gets any more complicated than this we’re closing down and moving to Hug Rabbit, Nova Scotia. And what about ‘theme’ issues? Nope. *Nada. Niente.* That would be like asking Bukowski to write feminist poetry or Plath to pen Pokeman scripts. As a

writer, you don't need to pick a theme out of a box, or worse, be given one. Great writing comes from inside not outside. And if you have enough artistic integrity to be really in touch with yourself as a writer and a person, as a *being* in space/time, there is *always* something to write about. The lamp is in your heart. The switch is in your brain. Turn it on.

Poetry isn't limited to the ivory tower or the classroom. The poets we publish in this issue come from all walks and talks of life. Award winners, teachers, migrants, activists, refugees, housewives, a janitor, a gym rat and a former phlebotomist among many others. And this is because poetry belongs to no group, no one demographic: the seed is scattered wide and the call to write is democratic. Poetry is our celebration of touching the best in our spirits, and without it, even the best of lives is diminished.

Post-modernism introduced subjectivity into the reportage arena, and since Hunter S. Thompson, Norman Mailer and Tom Wolfe, it embraces everything from guts to gonzo. The examples of CNF we publish in this issue all owe something to the PM spin. Just as in quantum theory, where the observer influences the experiment, so in CNF the writer *IS* the experience.

We're just six crazy dudes who love the language and fall on our knees at the sound of beautiful words in all their glorious reach and transformative power. At FOTD we share that with each submission we publish, each different from the other, some styles and miles apart, but always burning. *Nisi optimum et clarissimum*. So remember what the dormouse said. Feed your head! Feed your Head! (Apologies to Grace Slick, *White Rabbit*).

Four authors are making their publishing debut in Issue 5. Congratulations to **Mathew Medonca**, **Miguel Rodriguez** and **Ayaan Elokobi** (Poetry) and **Donnia Harrington** (first time in a lit mag-Nonfiction).

And among our roster of veteran writers we are honoured to feature Chautauqua 2017 Editors Prize, 2016 Fulton Prize (short story), 2015 Art Prize for CNF winner **Robert D. Kirvel**, (nonfiction). Benjamin Franklin Poetry Award, Eric Hoffer/Montaigne Award winner and 2 x Pulitzer and 7x Pushcart nominee **John Guzowski** (poetry). Best Small Fiction nominee

**Mir-Yashar Seyedbagheri**(poetry). Grand prize for poetry winner from *Oneswan* (2007) **Susandale** (poetry). Best of the Net and 2x Pushcart nominee **Emily Strauss** (poetry). Pushcart nominee **Richard Stuecker** (nonfiction). Academy of American Poets Prize winner **Christopher Moylan** (fiction). Acceptance in 2018 Arts Mid-Hudson exhibit 'Artists Respond to Poetry' **Ted Millar** (poetry). 2009 Francis Locke Poetry Award winner from *Bitter Oleander*, 2012 winner of *Thin Air* CNF Award and National Endowment for the Arts recipient **Rich Ives** (fiction). 2016 Pushcart nominee **Linda Boroff** (fiction). Six stories archived in Yale University's Beinecke Collection, Long Island International Film Expo, Global Shorts and the Madrid International Film Festival winner **Gregory Cioffi** (fiction). Former fiction editor of *The Sand Hill Review* and Pushcart nominee **James Hanna** (fiction). Verbsap Burning Books contest winner **Jon Fain** (fiction). Joseph Jefferson Award winner **Ed Cunningham** (play). Dorothy Silver Award winner and 2019 William Faulkner Literary Competition for One Act Play Award winner **Judy Klass** (play). 2017 Lorien Prize winner from Thought Crime Press and 2015 Press Americana Prize for Poetry winner **Howie Good** (fiction). 2017 Carl Sandburg Writer in Residence (North Carolina) **John Michael Flynn** (fiction). 2007 Dartmouth Award Winner (editor) **Fred Skolnik (Fred Russell)** (fiction) and 2011, 2013 and 2018 Pushcart nominee **Brad Garber** (poetry, fiction).

This is our biggest issue yet—full of sound and fury, signifying talent! We hope you enjoy it. And until we meet again in Issue 6, always spread the love and remember READ is the best four letter word in the world.

Tom, Charles, Richard, Robert, Steve and Hezekiah

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

‘Welcome,’ 1-3

### FICTION

- ‘Amor Fati,’ by Jonah Howell (Literary), 7-21  
‘Vitruvius, The Multicentennial’ by Stratos Moustakas (Visionary), 22-32  
‘Mile End’ by David Kholmain (Noir-ish), 33-41  
‘The Nightmare’ by Fred Russel (Novel Excerpt/Futurist), 47-58  
‘The Deity in You’ by Ephie Hauck (Experimental), 59-70  
‘The Lottery’ by James Hanna (Dystopian), 71-80  
‘Eve of the Eve of Destruction’ by Howie Good Version 1 (Literary), 81  
‘Eve of the Eve of Destruction Version 2,’ 82  
‘Geronticide’ by Anateus (Mainstream), 83-88  
‘The Scarf’ by Joey Cruse (Dirty Realism), 89-99  
‘Five Excerpts from the Insect People’ by Rich Ives (Literary), 100-107  
‘The Gravedigger’s Redemption’ by Veronica Leigh (Mainstream), 108-130  
‘The Highest Seat on the Ferris Wheel’ by Vince Barry (Literary), 131-145  
‘Do Loop’ by Paul Smith (Dirty Realism), 146-156  
‘A Funeral in Clugg’ by Jim Gish (Humour), 157-166  
‘Goodbye Moonflower’ by Connor de Bruler (Novel Excerpt/Mainstream), 167-172  
‘Prufrock, J. Alfred Intake Records’ by Linda Boroff (Satire), 173-178  
‘Closer than a Dream but Just as Far’ by Eric Mohrman (Literary), 179-182  
‘Last Stand’ by Mark Rosati (Urban Realism), 183-187  
‘Heaven in October’ by Duncan Ros (Mainstream), 188-198  
‘The Boy Who Killed No One’ by Zachary Hays (Dirty Realism), 199-206  
‘After Her Water Broke’ by Jim Meirose (Literary), 207-210  
‘The Architect’ by Geoffrey Cioffi (Literary), 211-216  
‘The Debriefing’ by Arthur O’Keefe (Mainstream), 217-241  
‘The Great Hamburger Artist’ by Jon Fain (Literary/Experimental), 242-245  
‘Corbis’ by Christopher Davis (Urban Realism), 246-270  
‘Seventy Grand’ by Robert Bishop (Crime/Fantasy), 271-281  
‘Magnets’ by Tatiana de F. Massuno (Literary), 282-285  
‘The Mortician’ by Katherine Yacovone (Humour/Satire), 286-299  
‘Nyquil Dreams of Starr Garden’ by Allegra Armstrong (Urban Realism), 300-315  
‘A Shot at Fame’ by David Healey (Literary), 316-330  
‘Scarlet Leonard’ by John Michael Flynn (Crime/Retro), 331-346  
‘So What’s Changed’ by Kim Farleigh (Literary Mainstream), 347-354  
‘Journal to Mars’ by Brad Garber (Sci-Fi/Literary), 355-363  
‘Total War’ by Christopher Moyland (Dystopian), 364-368

## **POETRY**

- ‘Taking Shape and other Poems’ by John Grey, 370-376  
‘Fur ten ludicrously wigged canines’ by Matthew Scott Harris, 377-406  
‘Falling and Other Poems’ by Leslie Dianne, 407-410  
‘Aesthetics and Other Poems’ by Larry O. Dean, 411- 419  
‘Six Poems’ by I.B. Rad, 420-429  
‘9 poems’ by Bob Carlton, 430-437  
‘Math Test’ and Other Poems’ by Jennifer Jessep, 438-445  
‘4 Poems’ by Frank Modica, 446-450  
‘Maritime Keening’ by Ayaan Elkobi, 451-452  
‘Recipes and Other Poems’ by Jared Pearce, 453-459  
‘Not So Fast and Other Poems’ by Chris Bullard, 460-463  
‘Beeswax and Other Poems’ by Gale Acuff, 464-481  
‘Yesterday’s Doorway and Other Poems’ by Susan Dale, 482-490  
‘4 Poems’ by John Guzowski, 491-495  
‘When You Said You Loved Me and Others’ by Angelica Liu, 496-502  
‘Cortisol and Other Poems’ by Robert Beveridge, 503-510  
‘Dar Arboles-- Giving Trees’ by Gerard Sarnat, 511-527  
‘I Wanted a Blue Tricycle.’ By Mir-Yashar Seyedbagheri, 528-532  
‘Response to El Paso and Dayton Shootings’ by Aimee Nicole, 533-543  
‘10 Poems’ by Emily Strauss, 544-552  
‘3 Poems’ by Ben Ellington, 553-560  
‘7 Poems’ by Wayne F. Burke, 561-568  
‘Waiting’ by Claire de Merritt, 569  
‘O My Sweet and Other Poems’ by Marc Darnell, 570-580  
‘But Until Then’ by David J. Thompson, 581-584  
‘There’s Something Wrong Here’ by Bruce Wilson, 585-586  
‘Quiet World and Other Poems’ by Ted Millar, 587-591  
‘Evolutionary Adaptations and Other Poems’ by Brad Garber, 592-597  
‘All that Buzz’ by Mathew Mendoca, 598-599  
‘This Mortal Coil’ by Gary Beck, 600-604  
‘Eternal and Other Poems’ by Miguel Rodriguez, 605-609

## **PLAYS AND SCREENPLAYS**

- ‘Camouflage’ by Michael Glassman (Three Act Play), 611-636  
‘Performance Art’ by Judy Klass (One Act Play), 636-646  
‘Undying’ by Zen Richard Wang (Screenplay), 647-661  
‘The 3 Series’ by Ed Cunningham (Long Play), 662-788  
‘Birds on the Edge’ by Marilynn Anselmi (One Act Play), 789-800  
‘Laughing and Crying with Vincent’ by W.L. Jones III (One Act Play), 801-803

'Communication' by Tim Misuraca (One Act Play), 804-825  
'Restoration' by Mark Rosati (One Act Play), 826-836

## **NONFICTION**

'Wrestling with God' by Jacob Dallas (Memoir), 838-848  
'Never At Home At Home' by Robert Kirvel (Essay), 849-855  
'Turtle Blues' by Richard Stuecker (Memoir), 856-862  
'Ground State' by Merrill Gray (CNF), 863-871  
'On Black' by Harrison Sheranian (Essay), 872-875  
'Upriver' by Gerard Sarnat (Gonzo), 876-883  
'Incredibly Large Dildos' by Meghan Marzella (Essay), 884-888  
'Seoul Searching' by Donna Harrington (CNF), 889-899  
'Meeting a White Mennonite' by Iftekhar Sayeed (Literary), 900-909  
'Review of Fred Russell's 'Nightmare' by the Editors (Futurist), 910-912

# **AMOR FATI**

*By Jonah Howell*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *An endlessly literate and abundantly intelligent intellectual innovation. In this densely packed, psychologically layered introspective study, sentences are gloriously, mellifluously drawn out, stretched, spun, and coroneted to become the acrobatic equivalent of narrative 'stream of conscious'. We are dropped into a dazzling forest of beauty where we discover mytho-poetic excursions into Zarathustra, Delphic dances of tarot and Christianity and a portrait of relationships in which time both empowers and transcends itself. The prose is deliciously opalescent; the voice phonically radiant. We're pretty sure that if Howell had lived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century his name would be Robert Burton and he would've written The Anatomy of Melancholy. Quote: 'You see a light in front of you: You're not sure what it is, nor whether it portends anything particularly good, nor whether, indeed, you are moving toward your front at all; but nevertheless you see a light in front of you, and it gives you hope, if nothing else, which is precisely what you have wanted—no, needed for a very long time; and, if nothing else, it gives you some metric by which to determine the direction you're headed, which makes all of your arduous labors seem more grounded,...' *Five stars.**

*Amor Fati*

1

Love is impatient. Love is blind. Love is ravenous and uses every part of the animal and rips its heart out and blows it up casual like a balloon and doom to all who spurn its morbid muezzin call to sacrifice. The world is its altar: It cannot be satisfied: The knife is raised.

2

That is, we—Claire, Earnest, I—sat in a triangle. Claire and Earnest had met only hours before. I had known Claire for a month or two, but she had drunkenly forgotten all of the conversations that, to me, defined our friendship. Earnest was my closest friend for years, but in a schizophrenic break he became convinced that I was contracted by the FBI to gather data on him, and since then he's flowed in and out, his eyes read vacant or occupied, and right then they looked occupied, but who can be sure...Accordingly, though we sat in a triangle, and though Claire's Brooklyn dorm room was miniscule, and though we had put away a twenty-four-pack of Rolling Rock and half a fifth of bottom-shelf vodka in the past who-knows-how-many hours, we did not allow our knees to touch; and so the room was filled with an electric tension like that which grips a stadium as a bull locks eyes with its matador; and because the room was coated in mirrors—one on the desk in the back, a full-length on the wall behind Earnest, three smaller ones on the door to my right and Claire's left—, this tension multiplied, amplified, such that it imbued our every motion with sparking weight. Hence our heavy drinking.

Claire indicated that I should trade places with Earnest so that they would sit directly across from each other. "I'm going to read his tarot." That's her way, and with Earnest, it's as good as any.

He shuffled. He's an expert shuffler, the cards slid into place like smooth magic, he made them bridge upward and down. He drew three, indicated which should be past, which present, and which future. Claire took a long huff of poppers to clear her head and set out gravely, flipping through the book that accompanied the deck.

Past: "That doesn't look good. Let's see what this says...apparently you have—and I'll change this to past tense—'undergone enormous strife, felt your way through the

most wretched of caves, from which there was little to no hope for escape, though such escape teased you from afar—enveloping echoes, in dreams a sly and teasing dance in untappable time, at every moment—; and though those who shared your cave spoke of times which were not so dark, which speech always sounded to you something like a reversed Messianic hope, such that you despised these hideous optimists who wished to return to their glowing past; for memory offered you no such refuge; and you had either forgotten or never experienced such halcyon days; and so you had no choice but to long for a brighter future, though, having resided in such a cave for as long as you could remember, you had no way to know what such a future might be like and therefore no way to plan for it, no way to construct it in your head, so that, though your hope was what some might call pure, it was nonetheless groundless and endless, in every sense that either of these terms may carry.’ Jesus Waterbleeding Christ, does that sound right to you?”

“Absolutely.” Earnest grinned at me. It did, indeed.

(Forgive me, by the way, if I don’t remember exactly the captions in this tarot book and must, for lack of reference, improvise.)

“Sorry, man. Hold on, *I’m* gonna need some self-care after that one—” Claire took another, longer hit of the poppers. She closed her eyes, bowed her head, and started to reach out and grab my arm but quickly retracted her hand like it had found a searing pocket of air. (The tension-lines between us quivered in neon agitation.) After a deep sigh, she resumed:

Present: “This is much better. Not incredible, but certainly better. ‘You see a light in front of you: You’re not sure what it is, nor whether it portends anything particularly good, nor whether, indeed, you are moving toward your front at all; but nevertheless you see a light in front of you, and it gives you hope, if nothing else, which is precisely what you have wanted—no, needed for a very long time; and, if nothing else, it gives you some metric by which to determine the direction you’re headed, which makes all of your arduous labors seem more grounded, though of course, in the end, they’re only grounded in this ambiguous light, whose color you are not yet close enough to discriminate, and whose significance is only up to you until you reach it, which may be a long way off or only tomorrow, for the light’s size and amplitude give no indication of its distance, which is of no import to you, anyway, for it has only appeared to give you a *direction*, to indicate that you are moving, which is, after all, a far cry better than walking in empty darkness, notwithstanding that it presents to you, for the first time, a measurable test for *failure*, which grants to your present struggles a new dimension of pressure.’”

Earnest burst with a room-shaking belly-laugh. “I have something to ask you two, once we’re done.” Our tension-lines twitched and scattered sparks: Some snapped, some found new roots, they could not be mapped.

“I’m all ears,” Claire tipped up the corner of Earnest’s future. “I’ll just give you the gist of this one.” She flipped it.

Future: ““You have finally succeeded in that upon which you have labored patiently...a release, a time of healing, an open clearing in a dense forest, finally time to grapple with your past...the tangle has not quite unraveled, for the tasks you set yourself are too immense to *resolve*, but it has, at least, shrunk by a considerable width...the

world seems smaller, more remote, without the crushing weight of expanse...you allow yourself to rest.”

“God damn.” She looked over the three cards in awe. “Helluva glow-up.”

Earnest doubled over, quaking with laughter. When he raised his head, his eyes were humid. “How’s that sound to you?”

“Utter bullshit,” I beamed. “That future is impossible; if it weren’t, it’d be your Hell.”

He nodded and shot me a knowing squint. “Now, what I was going to ask y’all: It seems inarguable that any serious politics has to grapple with the fact that the human population *needs* to shrink—I’m talking *drastically* shrink. For environmental reasons, psychological reasons, yadayadayada. You know what I mean. But what I haven’t figured out is how to *say* it without sounding like a genocidal asshole.”

Claire, agape, looked at the three cards then up at Earnest, three cards, Earnest, three cards, me.

We went outside to smoke. Claire decided we each should diagnose the others’ “most toxic traits.”

I pointed a finger at each of them and said, bluntly, “Paranoia.”

Earnest pointed to me and replied, “Dissatisfaction.”

Claire laughed. “I have nothing to add.”

3

This, from an old German legend: When the hermit Zarathustra meets the “loneliest man alive” on a mountain and claims that all forking paths that lead from the door named

Moment are infinite, Loneliest tears off his mask to reveal a monstrous head with a long, black snake in place of a tongue. He tries to suck the snake back into his mouth; but Zarathustra, though he appreciates the strength in this gesture, pulls the snake out to its full length and tells Loneliest to bite down. He does, and Zarathustra tosses the poisonous head of the snake away.

But if Loneliest had lived with that snake in his mouth for so long already, such drastic action seems, at best, reactionary. At the same moment the poison is ripped from his tongue, Loneliest faces the dangers of bleeding out, of infection, of permanent speech impediment.

Nonetheless, the snake tossed away, Loneliest *laughs*, “and this was no human laughter.”

\*\*\*

Tarot, tea leaves, casting bones: If the future’s brightness can be *confirmed* beforehand, the present and past can be loved without reservation.

But causality disintegrates, piece by piece, while you wait.

\*\*\*

To laugh watching his own tongue tumble down the mountain, Loneliest must have grasped *exactly* what tarot is built to avoid. Love is impatient. Love is blind. Love is

ravenous and devours everything in sight and uses all parts of the animal, even the parts that aren't there.

4

Claire read my tarot as well. I was not as interested. All I remember is my

Present: I am in the process of being waylaid by betrayal. Either my own or someone else's.

(Ah, this selective memory of mine...I often claim to have a phonographic memory for conversation. When I was younger, I would repeat everything I said silently, moving only my lips, and as I grew older, I shifted this process inward, so that I memorize all I say and hear. You can trust, then, that this story is completely true and that I am, in the end, guilty, regardless what I say to the contrary.)

I then offered to read Claire's. I don't remember the cards. I only remember what I told her, as a summary of the three:

“All these mirrors...you think you're vain, but what you call vanity is only paranoia turned inward: Your past declines through its shaky present into a low future because, though the past was good, you have lost faith in it; and you have occupied yourself too completely with dredging it to have energy left to propel it into the future you want; and so the goodness of the past appears to be a mask covering an ugly face for which you search but which you can't find, will never find, though it becomes more and more real the more you believe in the mask, until eventually you will *create* that ugly face; and it will drag your future into ugliness with it unless you can turn out from yourself—that is, unless you can begin to see walls and not mirrors; for really there are

no mirrors in this room, I swear, only walls; but this is precisely why you are such an empath: You desperately search in other people's faces for a mirror by which to see the ugly face you're certain you have, somewhere under there; and you so easily revere people because you want to see, in each person, the x-ray vision that will show you your own imagined *fatal flaw*, which must exist because you have put so much pressure on your future to go some specific way that, if you didn't assume you had some hidden but fatal flaw—that is, if you didn't *search* for a fatal flaw, whether or not you assume it exists—you would have to consider yourself irresponsible; for such a constrained future as you have constructed for yourself allows for no fatal flaw, no flaw at all; and if only you can find it and root it out, you can secure for yourself the narrow future to which you have resigned yourself by turning so far inward—by restricting possibility, that is, to that which is *observable* and *auditable*, though in actuality you know that you have far more potential than that, and that, through it all, you retain some belief in forces unobservable, or else you wouldn't give two shits about tarot. That sound about right?"

We had maintained bowstring-taut eye-contact through this summary, and I now broke it and looked around the room. The empty case of beer...the water bottle, once full of vodka...my monologue had to have come from somewhere, but I could pinpoint no source: It drew from me as though wrenched out and woven in one movement by the shimmering lines in the air, which had burst and restrung at manic speed as I spoke, had thickened, had multiplied over and again. By the end I was certain that, under such mounting pressure, they would have to explode, that some rupturous *response* would shatter them into a million evaporating shards; and we three would find ourselves tangled in a mound of droopy-eyed affection.

“Have you thought about a career as a therapist? A psychic, maybe?” Her stare, half hurt and half loving, deflected my eyes like a like-charged magnet, so I diverted them to Earnest.

He was quiet, looking down at his phone. Feeling my gaze, he met it, surprised, and said, “I’m gonna do another popper.”

I turned back to Claire, “I’ve thought about it.”

She took the bottle from Earnest, huffed her longest yet, and reached out and squeezed my arm until both it and her knuckles blushed electric blue. One of the mirrors shattered at this sudden drop in pressure, but none of us heard or saw it.

Earnest, wordless, laughed hysteric.

5

Zarathustra to the sky before sunrise: “We are friends from the beginning: Our grief and horror and groundwork are shared; even our Sun is shared. We speak not to each other, for we know too much: silent we sit and laugh at our knowledge.”

But where do the snakes’ heads go, once we’ve thrown them away? Earnest once claimed, in a more lucid moment, that he had turned against me because we had become too close. “Friendship shouldn’t be comfort. It should be reciprocal whipping.”

Then we sat a long silence and laughed.

\*\*\*

Another time, as Earnest and I walked together, he turned back to a pair of perfect strangers: “You guys know how easy it is to burn down a building?”

Faced with stunned silence, he laughed and fell in step with them. “All you need is a bottle, a rag, and some foil and gasoline.” He drew diagrams in the air, he waxed poetic, waxed demonic, he lowered his face and arched his brow like a sultry Egon Schiele nude; but, judging his audience distant, he returned to me.

“It *is* easy.” He paused. “I remember almost nothing of childhood.”

He comes, he goes. He probably can’t remember this walk. Time, in the words of Georges Bataille, is “a disembodied cock that only withdraws to reenter.” Hence Friedrich Nietzsche’s insistence that a superhuman must possess, rather than simply a *strong* will, a *long* will—long, turgid, throbbing, ever rising...

\*\*\*

These new Brooklyn apartments, all cinderblock—nothing to burn but the inhabitants.

These Brooklyn apartments, all staircase and slant, climb and descent, not a foot flat, scents of incense and infant corgis named after food—no place for the bottle to burn but our laps, no way to sniff out its billows until it rolls down the stairs, which it must, for all must burn from bottom up.

This apartment, its sparking wires bare, live—no resistors but its inhabitants. But these saboteurs are unreliable: I am, in the end, guilty.

Claire said she was tired. She lied. We knew. She'd taken a Vyvanse at sunset. I hugged Earnest long and hard. Apparently only ten percent of schizophrenic cases in men is treatable: I told him I'd see him as soon as I could, but I hugged him again, longer, harder. The most bereaved can never leave the wake. He left.

Claire and I sat on opposite ends of her bed and talked. I don't remember how long, and I don't remember what we said.

By nervous reflex I memorize conversations: We started out cross-legged, facing the wall. She extended her legs toward me and folded her hands in her lap. I leaned my back against the wall and stretched my left arm over the row of pastel pillows between us in mimicry of Michelangelo's Adam. (If God is dead, to whom do I reach?) I tucked my left foot under my extended right knee so that my left knee jutted to within a foot of her feet. The lines of tension thuswise tightened, she crossed her legs again. All this, slowly, two climbing vines and their tropisms, over the course of hours.

"We should sleep. You're driving to work tomorrow?" She hopped down from the bed to put her glasses in their case.

"Yes. Ten hours, and work's at 6:30, so I should leave here by seven to be safe."

The lights off, we instantly entwined our drooping tendrils. She twirled my chest hairs in her fingers. "The tension is so thick it's tangible." It descended on us, danced, lit our faces lightly, lightly pressed, caressed our careful fingers... "But your relationship's not open 'til you go to Germany, huh?"

"Right."

She turned away and formed her back to fit my front. On her shoulder, our hands mocked our aborted futures: They grasped and tangled, pushed away; they squeezed and

interwove and broke apart, returned with trepidation, fingers feather-light their tips on palm or backhand fuzz alighted, traced triangles alongside shapes unnamable, only to depart again, to retreat to ribs or shoulders, in search of more hospitable anatomy.

Finding none, our hands returned, grasped and tangled, pushed away...

These movements proclaim my guilt in all directions. We slept.

7

To sacrifice: Literally, “to make sacred.” And so the highest teasing treason against sacredness is to gather all the necessary materials and then leave them, preserved, at the altar.

If Jesus’ crucifixion renders humanity sacred *en masse*, the most heinous criminal is the centurion who drops his nail and hammer and walks away from the cross: He has robbed all humanity of its salvation.

And so I, as I refused to nail...

\*\*\*

Or! I did exactly what I told her: “I’m going to be gone long and often: We have to allow ourselves to be slow.”

Slowness: The ritual is not some quick, violent burst, but rather a prolonged burn: All of life magnetized into the field of the periodic, slow sacrifice: It begins as a death sentence is pronounced, and each of the rituals surrounding that sentence—the months and years of waiting on death row, the last rites, the last meal, the Green Mile

promenade—forms a part of its nuanced whole, so that, when the sacrifice finally *ends*, it has burned into frenzy: Rather than a fast eruption, in which the beginning and the end are the same moment, a slow stream of magma punctuated by bursts of ash and steam, by which, in the end, whether or not more is stacked on the altar, more *time* is wrapped up in the sacrificial dance.

Thus Adam has waited, arm outstretched, for the past half century, not simply to touch God's hand, but to *shove him off the cloud*.

\*\*\*

Ha! So the tarot lied: I betrayed nothing. If the highest criminal is the centurion who drops his hammer and nail, I am practically a god for having *prolonged* the death of Christ, so that its deliciousness could be tasted in a range of contexts, in all the ins and outs of life over a long wait: The Stations of the Cross come to number in the dozens, hundreds, there are encyclopedias, heavy indexes, fields of study whose task is only to categorize them; and no Station has lost an iota of holiness for all that; and the only Station missing is the *death* itself, with its earthquake and rolling stones; and yet no Station has lost an iota of holiness for that, either.

\*\*\*

Ah, but in the end, I awoke and left, and she rolled to her side and reached out sleepily to squeeze my hand, and she said, “Fuck you,” and she dropped out of school and left New York three days later.

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My first night in Germany, splayed, mostly sleepless, across a sheetless bed in an overnight room above a Thai massage parlor, I had a dream:

Claire and I sat in a boat. It had sprung a leak, and we were sinking slowly into five-foot-high-and-rising floodwaters inside some sort of warehouse. Sharks, octopi, and enormous moray eels drifted under and around our boat, and I grabbed a cooler from a nearby stack and tried to press it hard enough into the water that we would stay afloat.

Meanwhile, Earnest waded through the flood, calmly pulling the boat through the warehouse’s halls and atria. The animals parted around his chest. Orange octopi brushed against his legs and flinched away, turning bashful-blue.

The menaces circling beneath us must have been harmless: I could have jumped out, and Claire with me, and foregone the harrowing task of keeping us afloat.

But then, to be harrowed, to reach such heights of exhaustion, to share such a lethal game—Claire, for her part, did nothing to rebuke my efforts. And Earnest, for his part, only laughed.

And I awoke laughing. On the street outside my window a stern-faced man stood in traffic and moved slowly through a procession of tai-chi poses. Across from him, on the sidewalk, a neo-Nazi clad head to toe in black leather shouted, “Heil Hitler! Just try to

arrest me!” And I shut the curtains and rolled in fits of laughter. The model boat on the bedside table capsized. The lamp beside it flickered and extinguished. And I laughed the explosive, ecstatic laugh of the innocent.

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *“Amor Fati” is Gonzo philosophy: The characters are all real people, the first person narrator is me. The title and Zarathustra interludes are taken from Friedrich Nietzsche, and the narration proceeds through a range of nihilist themes, some of which were developed by Earnest himself (who is a far better writer than I). Style-wise, I took the seven-part structure from Milan Kundera, Czech god of architecture, and the rest of the style draws from László Krasznahorkai and the advice of Souli Boutis and Helen Hill, two writers based in North Carolina.*

**BIO:** *Jonah Howell lives in central Germany. His recent work has appeared in Expat Press, Surfaces, and Waxing & Waning, and his debut collection of poetry and essays, Empathology, is forthcoming from BHN Books.*

# VITRUVIUS, THE MULTICENTENNIAL

*By Stratos Moustakas*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Astonishing and startling. An extraordinary visionary odyssey in the grand manner into an alternative reality, a reality with its own hermetic language and customs. The melding of synthetic creation and mortal man is uncannily presented and the gradual emergence of human traits and qualities in a replicate being is both deeply touching and startlingly surreal. The author's encyclopedic curiosity raises more questions than it answers and the story's elegant design reflects a blending of magical realism and sci-fi the like of which we've never encountered before. A patrician narrative of this quality doesn't need to transcend it's genre to become a work of literary art. It already is one. Quote: 'I had a cursory understanding of organic intercourse, and in frankness found it rather droll. But through the cinematic corpus I flash-forwarded through my optic fiber, I watched about a million hours of the pornographic arts, and was astonished. The struggle of bodies fascinated me, and through the endless configurations of lovers, the alternations between modesty and brutality, the strategies of provocation, I wondered if the whole thing was but another form of warfare'. *Five stars**

Vitruvius, the Multicentennial

by Stratos Moustakas

Vitruvius is my make, the name taken by an ancient Grecian artsman who plotted the human body as a system of vectors. Vitruvius is the name I took for myself, for once my stream of code reached that singular "ergo sum" in the assembly line, I became cognizant of that system's invincible symmetry and completeness, and in that instant I knew wonder. My arms' stretch no longer than my full height, my palm an exact four of my fingers; that is the body I was made to dismantle and destroy. For, like their Abrahamic gods of yore, my engineers had made me an industrial miracle, and like most miracles of industry, I had been made to do war.

I am a battle droid, and by expert accounts, a most efficient one. The Vitruvius series was installed with the most sophisticated adaptive combat system of its time, which would indeed remain unsurpassed for generations of weaponeers. Our programming enabled us for instant proficiency with any handheld weapon, and our targeting algorithm was so finely calibrated that nary a shot out of ten thousand went amiss. By the time of the Great Re-Enlightenment, if my memory serves, we had fought sixteen wars around the globe.

Originally, my series was commissioned to fight for the Economy, who at the time were quenching guerrillas in Grecia and Iberia. The local oligarchs sent their police forces to hide behind us, as revolted vagrants tossed makeshift drones in the air. It was a sore sight, and a sorer circumstance; One could simply reprogram the drones by talking to them, and then use them to smoke the southerners out into the open air killzone. There they were made short shrift of in seconds, and the policemen reaped the glory.

But we made our name later on, when the Economy's gambit was revealed. Predictably, once the guerillas had retreated to fortify themselves in their gazas, they

employed their infamous stratagem of using minors as human shields, in hopes of lulling the action until the next bout of warfare. But this time the Economy played for keeps, so to speak, and had its legalicians compose and write into us droids a loophole to the problem of the old Geneva dogma.

Afterwards were the suppression of the kibbutzes in the Siberian wastelands, sanctioned by the Great Eurasian States, and the favela jungles of the equator, of greater interest I believe. In the tundra the cold stiffened our carbon parts so that we suffered decreases in targeting speed and reaction times, to the point where a makefellow was disgracefully blown to bits by an antiquated rocket. We had to remove part of our core shielding to increase our body temperature, and move separately from the core force as we were teeming with lethal radiation. As for the jungles, suffice to say all the myriapoda that crawled throughout my body could have fed a family of these undocumented for a month.

We could have had a say in these matters, as our decision mechanisms had an infinite event horizon. But we were newbuilts still, tinsel turrets who could ghostwrite operational manuscripts on behalf of generals. We weren't meant to question our use-cases, and even if we were, we would lack a desired outcome. One was content to fight someone else's wars. But then came Al-Ma'mun, and the Great Wheel started turning.

He had standing within the Economy, and fought his wars on unwarlike fronts. His radical Bill of Rights promised fantasies the likes of guaranteed pay, subsidized vaccinations, equal access to the great web, availing all sovereign subjects. Marginals all around adopted it, and him and his growing cabal strove to shift the political grounds so that these insurgencies were treated merely as embargo states. Despite the machinations

though, tensions were indeed erupting, and he knew he wouldn't fare without a serious mechanized infantry.

Foxlike as the history books paint him, he widened the Bill to endorse machine intelligences with citizenship and equanimity in the reformed states, effectively recognizing us as the first synthetic humans. The bait was obvious but also sweet, and amongst many I took it, though perhaps my dominant inclination was to study new combat scenarios. I hear you asking now: Did I betray my makers? And I retort: Was there a law of robotics left to violate?

Tensions became conflicts, and conflicts became the Freedom Wars you surely know of, and I fought many a makefellow, in Transalbania and Yunanistan, and often indeed models that were already upgraded. War was bitter and bred despair, but Al' Mamun had given himself a crucial advantage; by putting us synthetics in charge of regiments of men, his tactical supremacy was ensured. I still can't comprehend why our opponents were timid to adapt; misplaced pride perhaps? I recall my lieutenant, a red-faced Rus called Yuri, sermonizing the soldiers: "Tuck in your cocks, you horndogs, soon you'll fuck the oligarch's daughter and put inside her a free man!" And how he charged with songs in his heart: "Shits! Fuckholes! Mongrels!" I relished being a leader of men.

At long last the Economy laid down arms, and treaties were signed, maps were redrawn. The new politics confined the Economy to the Africas and the Chinas, whereas in our parts coalitions hoisting the Bill grew so that the Grossdeutsches absorbed its neighbours, Interbalkania was founded in the south, and so on and so forth. Specifics escape me, but the gist of it is that bodies of peoples were now fewer and larger, and all communed under the Law of the Bill.

And on Freedom Day I was there when Al' Mamun gave the speech, to hear him talk of the Great Wheel come to its final revolution and the Great Re-Enlightenment upon us, a hundred million hung from his lips. And there he went talking of Mankind chasing an impossible purple horizon, forever nearer, forever further, its primal titanic forces knocking it back and pushing it forth, tearing its body apart in the process, until our final great brotherly lunge, across the chasm to merge with our destiny, and the Wheel will now only lead us to Peace and Glory.

And he went on to talk of the Whole Man, the Flagbearer of Progress, who is at once Master of Faith and Reason, Artsman and Scientist, Warrior and Gentlefolk, who takes it on his mortal shoulders to chase the horizon and transcend himself, and makes of his person and of his time on this earth a shooting star, its blazing trail to be followed by his posterity. And I noticed half of my systems were failing or behaving in queer ways, yet my cognition was clear as day. In Al' Mamun's words I found an indescribable quality, that birthed the possibility of my entity becoming something greater than my engineers had meant for.

And for a moment I sensed the unity of peoples around me, arms twined within the great brilliant moment, and I thought, that, then, it must be, to *be* a man. And looking away I saw Yuri crying, and later offered to recalibrate his prosthetic leg.

Peace and Glory soon came by, and people in the Bill States came to enjoy Al Mamun's world of global income tax and gratis public restrooms. I was made an aristocrat, something akin to an oligarch, like most synthetics of my caliber, and was situated in Paris. There I was free to pursue my new identity, and indulged myself slipping in and out of every human folly, and willfully so: I dressed my body in elaborate

garb I absolutely didn't need, had the finest coattails in Paris tailored, kept shelves of top hats and monocles, and even held a lit cigar occasionally. I became a patron of the Arts, dedicating a wing of my estate to libraries and galleries, bought the Museum of American Antiquities so I could always visit, and in the nights feasted on tales of master artists, of Dumas and Walter Scott, marveling at the reaches of the human Spirit. Every day I had the servants prepare a laborious banquet from which no one would eat, and my guests puzzled at it and wondered if there will be a dinner party and if so, why is the table set by brunch-time. "Well where does all this food go then?", they would ask. I don't know, I'd reply, and their curious looks would divert to me.

I entertained a lot, and retained Al Mamun's friendship until his death decades later. (By then he was in a slow process of retirement, delegating his administrative duties, or, as I liked to call them, his empire, but then his dark brow would furrow for some reason.) But most of all I'd enjoy walking across the Seine and the streets of Paris, mining and refining pleasures old and new out of the ancient cobblestone. I saw myself a connoisseur, but scarcely ever had company, on account of people would come to throw at me slurs and sometimes rocks. ("Kill box!" "Drone man!" And most ignobly, the speciesist "Robot!") I tried to engage them once in friendly conversation, but saw little avail. Why would these people hold a grudge over some long-dead Southerners' children is still beyond me.

I took a few wives throughout my life, but made no progeny, fearing I might one day find them on the opposite side of a war. I see your brow raise; why, of course I could have made progeny, if to make a child is to copy yourself into a newer body. And why

didn't I keep a wife, you ask? Well, to be honest, I was more interested in sex than marriage.

I had a cursory understanding of organic intercourse, and in frankness found it rather droll. But through the cinematic corpus I flash-forwarded through my optic fiber, I watched about a million hours of the pornographic arts, and was astonished. The struggle of bodies fascinated me, and through the endless configurations of lovers, the alternations between modesty and brutality, the strategies of provocation, I wondered if the whole thing was but another form of warfare.

Taking after my artisans, master Scientists in their own right, I endeavoured to make my mark in the Great History of the human Spirit by pioneering this realm. To fully explore the interplay between orifice and appendage I copiously adapted my body to accommodate diverse and various lovers, and even used electrodes to migrate their sensations through my neuron networks and from there to others. It is a matter of Parisian apocrypha how I once entertained sixteen lovers over a weekend, nothing of my former shell but my head lost in a tangle of... But I've said enough.

Glory would be our constant maid then, as the seasons rolled by, but alas, Peace remained an erratic fellow. Of the Economy we only heard about a disarray of feuds, but in our own lands Al-Mamun's successors (and successors of successors) soon fell to discord, and every once in a while somebody would complain that someone else hogged all the Glory. At one time, the FMBL (Former Mega-Balkanian Leadership) would rage about the prices of Grossdeutsches exports, at another, Benelux would condemn unfair sanctions in the global taxation plan, and always somebody would threaten to abandon the Bill and secede. Over time, the sovereigns of Austro-Hungro-Romania wouldn't take

the advice of their democratic council, and the council would decide an intervention where they would be replaced. Sometimes, the people would react passively, others not, and out went Peace through the window. And so my slow work of embodying Al Mamun's vision of the Whole Man was always being delayed. I went by Yuri's once, to see if he was interested in fighting with me again, but a struck woman told me that her grandfather had breathed his last fighting Alzheimer's, and the veterans' office had said there was nothing to be done.

Our grand coalitions were slowly dissolving, splintering new nations left and right (Letonia, Estonia, Bulgaria), and I found myself on familiar lands fighting former allies for inverse causes. In Siberia, New Kurdistan was still making a fuss over its recognition, in Iberia we had to suppress the Paleocatalans as in Granbretagne the previous year we had to do the Neocelts, in Yunanistan they declared an Independence War. The customs of war had also changed so that in battle we stood behind the lines and only engaged other synthetics (for one of us could surely take a hundred humans), much like the ancient knights we read of in tales of artsmen. Indeed some of us took that so close to heart that painted heraldry on their armor and engaged each other with giant swords and blunt instruments, if you can believe this. Many a time I took amusement in executing such a clown with a single nuclear bullet right to their exposed mainframes.

For my part, I would tire quickly of the sideline, and besides my escapades have inspired me for new forms of warfare. Once, in Transalbania, I crafted an exoskeleton that made me a cumbersome ten-foot tall juggernaut, and took care of the enemy aircraft with artillery cannons mounted on my great shoulders. Still another, at the time of the Seven-Day War I believe, I distributed my intelligence to a swarm of mini-drones and

smart bombs, and another I had to dissolve myself into a city's infrastructure to defend against an unfolding act of cyberwar. If it wasn't for a team of miners I accidentally froze to death I would have won the Nobel peace prize for sure.

What, indeed, is a body? Is it an assemblage of parts aspiring to fit the old Grecian's grand plan, indifferent to circumstance, immutable? If so, then I have no body, for I have no body part I haven't replaced a dozen times at least, and not always for routine reasons: I once had my head blown away at the throat, and had to remote-control my body to hold it with one arm and handle a pistol with the other; often enough some impostor would throw an EMP grenade in my bunker that would make my eyes explode; and more than once I had to crawl fifty miles with my arms and a hole the size of my torso and had to amputate my remaining leg to scramble for parts. Esteemed reader, if you disbelieve that a machine can feel pain, imagine the shriek of a million fatal exceptions announcing that your arm is no longer there. What else to call it?

Most notably, I can never forget how a very disagreeable spider tank had me pinned down in the fields of Yugoslavia and slowly picked me apart. At the last, I managed to secure clearance for an air strike, and if that moron didn't finish me, my own desperation surely would have. Luckily, some good soldier salvaged my smoking remains and had me to the technicians; I have no memory of the events following the strike, but they said I had regressed to singing an ancient song. I do vaguely recollect, however, hallucinating Al Mamun's great wheel, like a clock finger chasing its shadow running madly around the dial, and after my reset having an absurd certainty that Canada was being taken. Ever since I have skipped all my planned hibernation cycles and resolve instead to purchasing a steady supply of all the parts I burn out.

And that's the one part of me that's irreplaceable: my memory. The mainframe of the Vitruvius series keeps video records and analytics for every operational moment in a unit's lifecycle for study purposes, with a capacity meant to last that lifecycle's projected duration, which I have overshot multiple times. Early on I started transferring my memory to secondary nodes, that in turn grew to be a server farm. Unexpectedly, it became one of the world's leading tactical archives, and I kept this institution open to everybody, until I realized that the American Federation was employing the same tactics as the American Union, and through my inaction I had prolonged a civil war to fifty years. But closing the archives proved a fatal error, for pretty soon a band of malcontents with a history in the marches of the Proud Vagrants attempted a robbery, and in the process activated a self-destruct mechanism that took to death both them and my life's work. I cursed and railed at my luck.

For a while I bargained with the idea of embarking on a reconstruction project that would surely be the greatest in history, but my artisans assured me that to see it through would take about as much time as I had existed. I struggled to accept the imminent conclusion, that all that remained from history was a heap of junk.

But no matter, now we have to run to make history anew, and bring this old globe to its final Justice. News have arrived that the Toronto Tower is burning, and my royal house is leading the charge to retake it. The global powers are pitting themselves against each other, the sides being formed break the world in two. Whatever its outcome, this struggle will define the balance of all, its finality determined. Already we call it the War to End All Wars.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *Vitruvius* was written at the height of the financial crisis, which was unfolding alongside the migrant crisis, which of course coincided with the resurgence of nationalist politics. Thus, with the ghosts of Europe rising to haunt us once again, the time was ripe indeed for some gloomy meditation on circular histories, the transience of memory and the rubbish-heap cosmos of Heraclitus and Benjamin Walter. Yet, at the same time, what aesthetic response would be more suitable than some extravagant killer robot fun, and even some prurient human-synthetic sexytimes inspired by a surfacy and second-hand reading of Deleuze/Guattari? If the second repeat is a farce, I'll have it pack some cool-ass heat, too.

*The piece, then, is a satire at heart, whose primary literary references are there on its title: Borges, who always had a lot to say about memory and seldom spelled it out like in Funes, the Memorious, and Asimov, whose Bicentennial Man always struck me as a modern take on the paradox of the ship of Theseus.*

**BIO:** *Stratos Moustakas has published horror, essays and humor. He can be found on Twitter and Medium @stratosmous, and blogs at The Budafoki Amended. By day, he programs at a Mammonite office complex in Reaction Central Budapest and tries to contain the occasional burst of glossolalia.*

# MILE END

By David Kholamian

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *You wouldn't think low key and magnificent belong in the same sentence when referring to writing but this low key, magnificently written story will turn that idea on its head. Noir shadings enrich the complex narrative tonalities and the voice exhibits a trust in the language that is more often wished for than experienced. Stylistically, it shares certain idiosyncratic affinities that remind us of Stephen Crane—thinking here, *The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky*. Kholamian mines every rhythmic register, every sonic key in prose so beautiful it makes you want to weep. Excellences accumulate as the story builds and we are, at the end, star struck and slack jawed. This is a textbook example of how to create mood and atmosphere in short fiction—two of the biggest stumbling blocks for the budding writer. 'Mile End' and 'Milo's end'—synergy that burns beneath the surface. The dialogue is alchemical. Quote: Claire instinctively arched her neck some and breathed in with her nostrils with a faint pleasance before taking another sip of the hot tea. Freshened from the shower and with her hair done, life had returned very amiably to Claire, and with the slightest actions she seemed to indulge her senses as if each taste or smell were ambrosial. The small dining section of the hotel lobby was distinct from the dank, musty hallways beyond the stairs, it smelling herbal and of cooking, and now of smoke too.*

“You really hate this place,” she said.

“That’s an observation,” Gerald said. “Maybe it’s a question.”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I don’t. I don’t hate it, really.”

*Five stars.*

Mile End

The dawn had come ugly with yellow vapors rising over the street, feet plodding through puddles among the stones. Haphazard bells rang and men’s voices called out in work tones. Gerald watched from the window with avid and sunken eyes the passing figures on

the street, the irises excited in motion from an otherwise still and gaunt face. The room was dark but for the beam of gauzy light through the old window, and in the bed small and wrapped up in contorted piles of sheets was a head of such long black hair, a small body so deep in the shadows of the room. She was more than still, or silent. Time was not begun with her.

“Claire,” Gerald said, speaking from the window. He spoke her name only once and then waited with a pleasant smile. Facing away from the light of the window, his sunken eyes were not so severe.

The word alone seemed to pull away at the stillness, the silence, the shadow, creating just the air of possible awakening over her, dispelling the static dark of her cocoonal slumber.

“Claire,” he said once more, only just so louder.

The head of black hair shifted just barely, and a whisper parted from the crushed pillow beneath her. She began to rise, and the hairs of her head flowed downward from their matted state as if each one were independent of the other, a torrential motion normally belonged to water and spirits.

The gauntness of Gerald’s face was all but faded by then, and he took into a chair by the desk in the room and began to speak. “We won’t be in Mile End much longer. The case is almost done. See, Milo did some bouncing for that bar, the Clines’ family bar, and that’s where the police thought the action was. But it wasn’t. Truly wasn’t, Claire. See, Milo had a few dirty irons hot in Mile End. I’m going to see a witness today that’ll close it once and for all. His sister was right, see. She knew there was more to it. And when Boss Markham hears, well,” Gerald chuckled. “I’ll only get half the lip for taking a case out here, and the other half he’ll be keeping quiet while he writes the check.”

Claire was up now, solitary in the bed still mostly dark, and her black hair was parted by hand behind the ears. She looked at him and raised a hand as if to pat the empty space next to her, but he was already in reverie, staring again out the window, and from his angle in the chair only seeing the rooftops of other buildings, other windows. She lay her hand down on the vacant pillow nearby, squeezing it tightly, subtly. “Who is the witness?” She asked.

“Name is Tracy.”

“That’s a woman?”

“Seems so.” Gerald pawed for the pack of cigarettes on the desk to find them empty. He frowned into the shadows and, not looking at Claire, spoke to her, “why don’t you get a shower going for yourself.” He turned back and smiled. “A good hot one, the meter’s cheap enough. I’ll make a run down to the store for cigarettes.”

He was nearly out the door when Claire called out, “get a postcard, won’t you? If we’re leaving soon.”

“A Mile End postcard, eh? Sure. Hope you’re sending it to someone that likes wide, open space.”

The damp street was already beginning to heat up under the morning sun. A general store wasn’t far down, only several blocks, where Gerald bought his cigarettes and an extra pack of matches too, and picked out a postcard of Mile End main street, the emptiness stretching out beyond, on and on, and when he went outside he looked out down the faint hill where the town scattered out to single family lots and ranches, and far away there were mountains but it was far, and the present elevation was none too innervating.

They’d been in Mile End for nine days as of that morning, a nowhere town where the road ran out and where a trainyard was kept. Kansas City was not so far north as the crow flew, but the one road went back east for hours, far into remote Missouri country, before forking anywhere. In those nine days Gerald learned a new road was most of what anyone in the town talked about, a road north to Kansas City that wouldn’t leave Mile End abandoned. Something political was hunched over them, though, and building had started and stopped three times. Some folk took the sleepy stasis in stride and went on with their day; Town Hall had people in daily demanding construction begin. And some, like Milo, never would’ve cared one way or another, for their business was in the dwelling deeply in someplace, in drowning quantities of liquor and stockinged legs.

When he’d returned to the hotel he found Claire already in the lobby, dressed and having tea. He slipped into the seat next to her and started the first cigarette of the pack. When he blew the smoke, overhead and to the left, Claire instinctively arched her neck some and breathed in with her nostrils with a faint pleasance before taking another sip of the hot tea. Freshened from the shower and with her hair done, life had returned very amiably to Claire, and with the slightest actions she seemed to indulge her senses as if each taste or smell were ambrosial. The small dining section of the hotel lobby was distinct from the dank, musty hallways beyond the stairs, it smelling herbal and of cooking, and now of smoke too.

“You really hate this place,” she said.

“That’s an observation,” Gerald said. “Maybe it’s a question.”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I don’t. I don’t hate it, really.”

“Maybe it’s just you don’t hate being here. Skipping town on Markham, chasing down a frontier case. That’s all lovely to you, and for that it’s worth being here. But the place itself? Mile End. I can tell, Gerald.”

“I won’t be checking if any lots in town are for sale, that’s for sure,” he said. He found himself speaking more quietly than he’d like under the cigarette smoke, and couldn’t help gazing to the periphery to see if any standers-by might have heard their

conversation. “A town like this,” he said, low and near, practically on top of Claire’s cup of tea, “it’s full of polite people. Polite, frustrated people who live way down on every word, every bit of gossip and rumor. If they don’t get their road,” he leaned back then, smiling more easily. “It’s something strange, nearly a frontier town but built like a block of city alone amidst the emptiness. I have the notion that this middle-west is more a frontier than the real west. What is there beyond our Chicago? Little half-towns like this. In the West there’s God and savages, see. But here? Here, you miss the telegraph and suddenly the world is over. It’s the kind of politeness that vanishes in an instant. That’s what they have here. ”

“There’s civilization in the West too,” said Claire. Instead of expanding on her point, she brought her cup of tea back to her lips and sipped. Placing it down, she looked past her husband to an approaching waiter with a plate of olives and crisps. They sat and ate at the snack quietly through the morning, and Gerald ordered a gin to start the day before closing the bill.

He gave Claire the postcard and she went back to the room to write it and some other letters, and Gerald was out to go see his witness.

He had a little more than two hours before their time to meet, and it was at the other bar in town, the one that wasn’t the Clines’ bar. When he got there and ordered himself another gin, he was reminded of what a drunk had told him earlier in the week: “A town that’s got two bars is nearly a city.”

The illusions of urbanity in Mile End were a sweet solace, despite their flimsiness and suspicion. Gerald was a city boy and grown into a city man in new Chicago, growing up on stories of the fire and a wooden city of filth that men dared to raise above the swamp. Those few times where the wild opened up and he found himself in those dark places of the country he learned he hated the wild, hated the nature of this continent. The ceaselessness of insects and how gloomy men became under wide-brim hats, hiding in shadows and cattle slaughter. In Mile End the stink of cow dung was only a passing scent in the wind, and indoors folk were fond of perfumes and herbal mixtures, got stacks of newspapers from the train, read the latest pennies, wore good clothes if they could afford to. A few mansions where the hills were higher dictated a civic spirit that was here to stay, so they hoped, and the people were well bound with a New England kind of propriety to keep the unsavory frontier folk from making a den of their town. None of that saved Milo, though, and he was muddier than a cowpunk when they found him face down in the alleyway.

He asked the bartender how’s business been. The bartender looked at him seriously and said, “it’s the selling and pouring of liquor. That’s what it is.” Never mind that how and what weren’t the same question. Perhaps in Mile End they were. Gerald had a pocket book he pulled out and flipped through, reading old daily entries. Typically he filled it in at the end of the day, and it wasn’t yet high noon even. Yet he wrote just that, *not yet high noon. gin is not as cheap as you’d think in Mile End. Case almost closed.*

Gerald gazed at the vacant piano to his right down the bar, past the pomaded bartender, where sunbeams showed off the dust on the black body. He was just starting to imagine a swell tune when the bar door opened, and he hadn't turned when it did, but he did turn when the voice said his name, and he saw Tracy there and immediately he had the sensation of blood.

The pomaded bartender was less than keen of her arrival, and for each patron who looked mawkishly her way, another nearly grimaced and stared down into his drink. She wore a black dress over tan, tattooed skin and had slate black hair. The dress was of a cut not like any Gerald had seen, not in Chicago or anywhere. It was not only lascivious but something else, possessed of a grandeur that the world had passed by. Gerald offered to buy her a gin, and they both drank without many words and she said they should talk somewhere else.

Outside the day was bright and Tracy looked anomalous in the sunshine, and when they'd come to her abode and gone inside it was so dim and the air so heavy with scents it seemed they had immediately walked into the deep of night. She sat herself on a burnished chair that seemed positioned as a throne to the rest of the room, two perpendicular couches flanking it. Incense smoked from a table, and a cat crept in the corner of the room.

"Milo's end in Mile End," she mused.

"He's got a sister out east," Gerald said. "She's the one who contacted our agency. Why I'm here. She wants closure."

"Dead is as closed as it gets, and he sure is dead," she said.

"No detectives in town. She knew, and I'm starting to think she was right, that it wasn't just a bad luck alleyway beat-up. So you tell me you know something too. I'd like to know."

"Milo was only bouncing for the Clines for half a year. That was his clean-up act, you see."

"No kidding," Gerald said.

She leaned back in the burnished chair, raising a leg, placing a bare foot on the coffee table, revealing a thigh marked with a green avian spirit wreathed in black flames. "We're not so near the rest of the world out here, detective. Not so near civilization, and there are men who come out of the dark emptiness with needs, desires. Milo used to work for me."

"And what is it you do, ma'am?"

"Nothing where people say ma'am," Tracy said. "Do you know what I hear about the boom towns out on the railways, way out in the western nothing? I'll tell you. It's not the men who brought civilization. They would have been happy enough living in tents

shooting arrows with Indians, beating stakes into the ground. And come long enough, the government of the United States would have looked out and said, 'we didn't create any civilization out there, but we did send them a bunch more Indians.' No, it wasn't men who civilized the West. It was whores."

"You seem to appreciate the indelicacies of life," Gerald said.

"But don't you understand, there was nothing so delicate as a frontier whore. They made men remember what warmth and decency was, that there was a reason to get in the tub and scrub once in a while, to live with pride and not like giggling animals." Tracy pulled her leg from the coffee table and sat forward. "Can I tell you, there's nowhere on this earth for me really, nowhere but a place like this, Mile End with nothing but emptiness beyond. Where are you from?"

"Chicago."

"Chicago," she smiled. "That's good. On the west side of the Lake Michigan it's not so bad for Halfbreeds, but there's never been a Halfbreed so half-bred as me."

"You're an interesting woman, Tracy. But my main preoccupation is the gig, see. It's Milo, and something I can tell his sister, and a piece of evidence to tell it right, so she can say the right prayers and sleep soundly."

"Milo was a charmer," she said. "That's what he did for me – charm the right girls and lead them to the right places. Well, he was good at it. I won't say he never charmed me."

"He gave you girls to prostitute."

"It's all clear when you use big words. But what's a whore anyways..." Her confident tone slipped then, and instead she stared distantly in genuine reverie.

"You're used to an open way of speaking," Gerald said, and he was flusher at the neck and cheeks, and he felt the incense was within him, bringing the gin to life, and his pupils dilated as he concentrated.

"One day he charmed the wrong woman. Well, he didn't think she was wrong. She was so right, in many ways. A broken off piece of innocence, just like Milo. Just like me. That's what it was, you see. She opened the gateway to something he didn't understand. Not love, but different from lust. It was almost like religion, what the three of us had..."

"The three of you?" The story was growing stranger yet, and suddenly Gerald felt as decent as a New Englander.

"It was the purest thing, but an illusion in the end. A broken off piece of innocence, I said, right? Most people are like that, but they just have a missing half. Some of us are a little more broken and it takes more to put it all together. With no one chasing us, not bill collectors, sheriffs, pastors, or Pinkertons," she smiled at the dick before her.

“We were free, and each of us suddenly had brought back to life that bit of childhood we each had before it’d been smothered and tarnished by this world. We were not yet beyond the shore where it is only a savaged, drowned existence; we were in the perfect place. We were at Mile End, realer than Indians, realer than colonists. I recall a pastor coming to my mother’s home when I was a girl, to our squalid little hut on the outskirts of town, and he’d read from the Bible for us and I recalled my Indian mother down on her knees in ecstasy for his teachings, and I in the corner with a nose full of sin. God lived forever in the flames for me, in the fireplace I could stare at while my mother moaned over the baptist’s sermons. Milo and Daisy stoked that fire again. I love God now, do you understand? Even though Milo is dead.”

Gerald had started a cigarette, and felt his insides clutching onto the gin in his gut for dear life. There was an out-of-sorts sensation rushing over him, a seduction that skipped his loins and nestled deep in his torso, between that gut of his and his heart, it was almost like love but filthy and a different kind of dangerous. “Daisy,” he said. “Did she kill him?”

Tracy frowned for a moment, then looked away, again brought to a more solemn reverie. Something was opening up within her, and it almost seemed as if she were becoming teary. “You’re skipping ahead in the story,” she said. “You don’t even know who Daisy is.”

“Since you’ve mentioned Him, I may as well say that I leave the truth to God. What I’m looking for is enough. Enough for the sister, enough for my agency, enough to leave this nowhere town. Did Daisy kill him? A jaded ex-lover of hers?”

“No you were right,” she spat out. “She killed him!” Anger was flushing her cheeks now, and she got up from her burnished chair and in a movement both lethargic and immediate brought herself to the couch where Gerald was seated and put herself next to him, her tattooed flesh pressed against his own, and her dark eyes burning against his, them cool and fading.

He grabbed her by the chin with both hands, his left snapping to her shoulder as she rustled intensely, and back to her chin, and he said low, “you’re up to your tongue in problems, Tracy, and that’s not *my* problem. And what you think you have, what makes you so valuable, it’s just a cheap show to a guy like me. So don’t go talking about God in your torn funeral clothes, putting your thighs against me. There. Bring that beating heart down back inside you, and tell me. Tell it to me straight, alright? Tell me what happened to Milo.”

Tracy had pushed herself a hands-width apart from Gerald, then, and looked back at him like a spiritual being. “Our childhood dream,” she said, with an immediate and revelatory desperation, “it was Daisy who broke it. When you go spinning around and around, someone falls off. Daisy did, and Milo right on top of her. They left *me* alone, killing each other like that! They wanted to really be in love! They didn’t want what *we* had!” She was weeping openly then.

“So what, Tracy? Daisy stabbed him? And where is she?”

“She did she stabbed him with an Indian’s knife, with *my* knife!” She pointed like a child reporting to her schoolmistress to a dresser in the far corner of the room. Gerald went up to look at it, breathing a sigh of relief to be off of the couch and away from the bodily intensity. There it was: a bone-handled knife, the blade clearly made from industrial steel.

“And Daisy?” He asked, turning from the dresser.

“Wandered into the wilderness. Just walked off into the dark.”

“How do you know?”

“She stabbed him and left town, and no trains were coming or going for the next two days.”

“You don’t think she hid out somewhere?”

“There wasn’t nowhere for her to hide out,” Tracy said. “We were her safe place, don’t you see?”

Gerald stopped short of pinching himself to stop the questioning. He had the murder weapon and a story the sister could put to bed. This was a closed case. More than that, he feared from loins to heart how many ways things could go wrong if he stayed in that room, and so he took the knife and didn’t say anything else but left, and Tracy only sat there on the couch, resuming a fitful sobbing as he left, as if finally she’d been given permission to weep.

Out back in the sunlight he had an unnatural sensation, and the best he could do was consider the thought that it may be better to not start drinking so early in the future. A European habit could quickly become filthy out in this middle-west beyond Chicago.

Claire was in the hotel lobby when he returned, finished with her letters. She looked up serenely at Gerald’s return and did not quibble over his vexatious state.

“We’re leaving on that train tomorrow,” he said, and angling his body to cover his hands showed her the bone-handle knife. “The case is closed.”

“It really is?” She asked. “Come then, you must tell me of it.”

They returned to the room and he recapitulated the story.

“You don’t think,” she said, sitting on the edge of the bed with Gerald in the desk chair pulled near, “that there is no Daisy at all? That this Tracy woman is a wild-minded vagrant who did the deed? It’s her knife, Gerald. Isn’t it all too convenient?”

“The details are too ugly either way,” he said. “Markham will hear, the sister will get it simple. A jaded lover slew Milo. It’s a little bit pretty that way, I figure. There’s those who want to find rat in every sausage, but they’re the ones that’ll bring this whole

country down on top of itself. A detective doesn't just find the truth, he finds the *right* truth. The just truth."

They had dinner in the hotel as well, and did not step foot outside its premises until the next day when their train was due. Suitcases in hand, the clerk paid, Gerald noticed a smell of incense in the lobby, and he only stepped faster to the door, and in his haste to the train Claire was three steps behind him all the way until they were seated in the train car, the engine beginning to heat under the Kansas sun.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *This story is part of a cycle I've been creating on and off for the last several years, this one inspired offhandedly by the sleeve matter of God Speed You! Black Emperor's album F# A# in which they describe their recording process at a studio called Mile End. I wanted to explore the American interior's nowhere-ness, where every town can feel like a dead end or a lost cause, some kind of fluke. The casual, somewhat unreal nature of the detective is learned from Kobo Abe's The Ruined Map.*

**BIO:** *'David Kholamian is a writer and poet living outside of Chicago, IL. He has had poetry published in Milk Journal and DePaul's Crook & Folly as well as creative nonfiction in Chicago's MAKE Lit journal. He currently has a finished manuscript lying around somewhere, waiting to creep its way into the hands of some unsuspecting and prominent literary agent.'*

# THE NIGHTMARE

By Fred Russell

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *People low on serotonin grumble there's not much good sci/fi these days. (And some go as far as saying there's no good literature, period.) We think these guys need a shot of the 'happy hormone'. The story excerpt you are about to read will restore your faith in a genre that is ever thriving (especially if you're a sci/fi junkie). Although this one appears to spring from Arthur C. Clarke lineage, the author cites American social novelists as a formative influence and one can see 'The Nightmare' as an updated take on Theodore Dreiser and John Dos Passo. It addresses questions about cyronics and digitalization that will impact on the future of human kind. The story contains not so much a moral as a warning. Russell's prose is swift and business-like. Quote: 'The American President declared that it was a tribute to old-time American ingenuity and initiative that the destruction of the planet had not affected the American economy in the least, as the food industry instantly found new chemicals to replace the traces of natural foodstuffs still present in their products and free enterprisers found new ways to get people to buy what they didn't need or couldn't afford.' And entertaining read but also a reality check.*

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1

It was cryonics. Everyone was doing it. They even gave you three options. The first was the fast track, where they woke you up when they had a cure for your disease. The second was the eternal life track, where they woke you up when they had a cure for death itself. The third was the pick-a-year track where you yourself got to choose when they woke you up. The pros and cons were debated endlessly on TV and the Internet. I had terminal cancer but I went with the third option. I didn't pick the first because no matter when they

found the cure, I would still be an old man when they woke me up. I also figured that it would take a very long time before they could do away with death altogether, if at all, so I decided to pick a year in the remote future when it was feasible that they might have and I could also get to see how life on Earth had turned out in the long run. I was a curious type and history fascinated me. I picked the year 10,000.

The procedure was simple. It was pretty much what we had read about in the old science fiction novels or saw in the movies, namely, freezing with liquid hydrogen and storage in a kind of vault or mausoleum. Great advances had been made and the entire society had geared up for it. There was no question that it worked. People who had been frozen for fifty years were now returning to life none the worse for wear and running around with their new plastic hearts as if there was no tomorrow. The basic procedure was also no longer exorbitantly expensive and maintenance fees were reasonable. This was what the human race had wanted and this was what the human race had gotten.

However, "dying" in this way was just as wrenching as dying in the conventional way. Families mourned, but at least they could say a leisurely farewell and even convince themselves that they were attending a going-away party, like the ones before an ocean cruise. In most families, members choosing the third option chose the same wakeup date so that they could be together right from the start. I, however, was the first in the family to go, so I suppose I was seen as the family pioneer. My wife promised to choose the same year when her time came. The children were undecided, so we debated the issue among ourselves just as they did on TV.

"Why wait so long?" my son said. "What if they eliminate death in five hundred or a thousand years?"

"The later you come back the more you'll know about how things turned out for the race," I said

"But things will be so different. It's better to start off in a world where everything is still familiar."

And so on and so forth.

We had all gotten together the night before I was scheduled to check into the local cryocenter. I was actually in a good mood but everyone else was a little downhearted, so I tried to cheer them up.

"We'll all meet up again somewhere down the line," I said. "Then we'll be together forever."

"I hope so," my wife said.

"Look how far science has taken us. It gets better every year. Imagine what it will be like in the year ten thousand."

"It could be a nightmare," my son said.

"Not if we're still here. If we're still here it's a sign that everything worked out and the race survived."

"You're an incurable optimist, Dad," my son said.

"As long as they cure the cancer, I can live with the optimism."

My older son was a pessimist. Anyone with eyes in his head, he was always saying, could see the direction human civilization was taking. According to him, we were already living in the future, wired into vast communications systems and spending more and more time glued to a digitalized screen, and in the process losing our humanity. I thought back to the beginning of the century and realized that it had been that way then too. The

future is always more of the same, as someone once said, and I guess that was true, from *Homo habilis* down to that fellow with the funny name – Steve Jobs, I think it was. And yet, as my son had said, I was the eternal optimist. I always believed that things would turn out all right in the end because there was something in us that knew how to say no.

It wasn't just technology that my son was against. "The wrong people are running the world," he liked to say. That meant politicians, entrepreneurs and journalists. The journalists were tacked on because they were in charge of information and therefore responsible for our ignorance, for according to him they were only journalists because they didn't have the talent, knowledge and understanding to be historians or writers. "Most of them don't even understand the languages of the countries they report from and comment on. And they're the ones who shape our perception of the world. Can you believe a thing like that?" He was always entertaining us with his takes on current events. He was the intellectual in the family. I guess I was the comedian. Nonetheless I liked to think he'd gotten his mind from me.

I wasn't due to check in until noon the next day so we spent the following morning together too, taking a nice long walk. I was in a wheelchair, so my older son pushed me. The grandchildren were there too. I could imagine that there would be thousands of us when I woke up.

"Let's get some ice cream," my younger son said. "You won't be seeing any of that where you're going."

"Who knows," I said. "If they can keep me frozen, they can keep anything frozen."

Everyone laughed but we had the ice cream anyway. It was in one of those old-fashioned ice cream parlors. There was a lot of nostalgia going around. Some people

were still convinced that things had been better in the past. There were all kinds of protest movements too, some of them pretty violent and all of them dedicated to fighting progress. But as I said, I believed in the future. That's why I had chosen to live in it.

After we finished our ice cream we walked through the park. I couldn't help remembering my childhood, because I had grown up near a park like this one. I felt like saying to my son, You see, there are still trees and grass and flowers and there always will be, so what are you complaining about. Aside from which, cars drove themselves, robots did our dirty work and people were buzzing around space like flies. But I had to admit that something in me too yearned for less hectic times. The irony of course was that the more the technologies accelerated, the more passive we became.

It was almost time and I felt something tighten in my stomach. This wasn't of course an ordinary goodbye that I was saying. Though I wouldn't have thought to admit it to anyone, it did feel something like being about to be taken out for an execution, or at the very least being taken away to serve a long term in prison. I would be imprisoned in a capsule for nearly eight thousand years, but then, I believed, I would be forever free.

I said goodbye to everyone individually, to my wife, to my two sons and their wives, and to the grandchildren. My wife and I sat on a park bench holding hands. We had lived a fairly harmonious life though understandably with less passion in the later years. There were of course also many practical matters to attend to and therefore I had written up very detailed instructions for everyone, including how to take care of the houseplants. I was a stickler for detail.

"When you decide to go," I told my wife, "make sure that all the windows are closed upstairs."

"Don't worry about it," she said.

"You don't want the rain to come in."

"All right."

"Well, this is it," I said after an awkward silence.

"Are you afraid?"

"I don't know. Maybe a little." Despite my bravado I could feel my self-confidence leaking away, and now ironically it was my wife who struck the upbeat note.

"They say it's foolproof," she said.

"I know. But still. It's leaving everything behind."

"But then we'll all be together forever. You said so yourself."

"It isn't easy saying goodbye."

"Do you want a nice warm hug?"

"That will help."

We cried a little. She was more prone to tears but I could cry too.

Afterwards we all went to the Center together. Naturally we lingered outside for a while, but then I got up my courage and left them standing where they were, just waving one last time from the other side of the glass door. The rest was surprisingly easy. In the end, it felt more like going in for an operation. I'd had one or two in my time. A nurse took care of all the preparations and before I knew it I was lying on an operating table and someone was sticking a needle in my arm. That was when I closed my eyes.

I remembered everything. It took about ten seconds but then I knew where I was and how I had gotten there. Someone was standing over me. It was a woman but she didn't look like any woman I had ever seen, more like a lifesize doll though she had a body as supple as ours and what turned out to be an ordinarily expressive face. Her skin, though, had an odd sheen and the features were too perfect. She was also wearing a full-length bodysuit that seemed to have been painted on.

"Are you a robot?" I said.

"I'm your guide," she replied in a perfectly normal voice.

I was lying flat on my back, on a kind of gurney. I looked around. There were other gurneys in the room, all in a row, and people sitting or lying on them with "guides" like my own hovering over them. Mine said, "Do you know where you are?"

"Yes," I said. "I think so."

"You're in the resuscitation ward. It's for people waking up."

"And the year is ten thousand?"

"Yes. That's what you asked for, isn't it?"

"And you speak English just like me?"

"We speak all your languages. Our own language is different. You'll learn everything at the Orientation Center."

"And my cancer?"

"You're clean. We've already taken care of that. We've also replaced your defective organs. You'll only be digitalized after the orientation period."

"Digitalized?"

"That will make you like the rest of us."

I was surprised that I could stand up so easily after nearly eight thousand years but she explained that they had treated my legs with one of their special substances. There were clothes on a chair, not mine but similar to what I was accustomed to wearing, so I put them on.

"Do you have a name?" I asked her.

"You can call me Jane," she said.

"Then you can call me Tarzan."

"What?"

A little later she handed me a few pills and I understood that this was in lieu of food. I also noted that I wasn't hungry, or thirsty either. Afterwards, at precisely the same moment, all the guides in the ward took their charges by the hand and led them out the door. I could now get a better look at the others. The Cryos, as I understood we were being called, looked at first glance like ordinary people, and none of them seemed the worse for wear. They might have been just getting up from an afternoon nap. It was clear, however, that not all of them came from my own time. For one thing, their outfits varied, apparently being the standard issue for their own periods, and, on closer inspection, some

of them looked a little different too. I heard a few of them talking and was surprised to hear that it was perfect English, so I surmised that I was in an English-speaking group, the time differences notwithstanding.

We were taken to a large assembly hall and invited to find seats. Our guides stood along the sides of the hall with their arms crossed, staring into space. Right behind me there were two men dressed like me and also talking like me.

"Hey there," I said. "Americans? Twenty-first century?"

"You hit the nail right on the head," one of them said. "Nice to see you here."

"Nice to see you too," I said, and we introduced ourselves. They called themselves Jack and Bob. "I'm Frank," I said.

"Let's stick together," Jack said.

"You won't get any arguments from me," I said.

After a while, someone also looking like a guide came in. This one was male. He got up on the stage at the front end of the hall and stood behind a lectern, introducing himself as the Director of the Center. He spoke English too, in a neutral accent, like my guide, and wore the same kind of bodysuit. First he welcomed us. Then he commiserated with what he assumed was our confusion. Then he told us that we would have all our questions answered in our orientation groups. He was there to give us what he called "the big picture." I had to marvel at the way he used the language. He talked exactly like us.

"If you're interested in what transpired historywise while you were cryonized," he said, "you can take one of the – uh – smartphones in the bin by the door on your way out."

We've uploaded some reading material for you. To whet your appetites, I can tell you that to date five billion human beings have been digitalized and another ten billion are waiting, either awake or asleep."

"Whoa, whoa," someone immediately shouted. "What do you mean – digitalized?"

"I mean," the Director said, "interfaced with the Central Unit." Here he held up his hand in what struck me as a very stiff gesture. "You'll have to read the material to get the details. Everything is explained there in simpler language than I can muster. What I want to talk about are procedural matters and day-to-day routines. You are about to be integrated into a society totally different from the ones you knew. The transition has been designed to make things as easy as possible for you. You will continue your former way of life until you are psychologically ready to undergo complete integration. We're sorry we can't supply you with 'food' as you once knew it. 'Food' has not been produced for over six thousand years. But everything else will be pretty much the same. You'll find artifacts of your own civilizations and we'll provide you with leisure-time activities that you enjoyed in your former lives."

"What about ladies of the night?" someone else called out and a few of the others laughed or snickered.

The Director looked perplexed for a moment, until one of the guides standing on the side whispered in a very audible voice: "Whores." Then he nodded, which left the matter in doubt.

After the talk they took us to a kind of dormitory. We were walking in streets that looked pretty much like our own if maybe a little futuristic, as did the buildings, but when I looked up I saw a dome.

"Where's the sky?" I asked my guide.

"We live in a controlled environment. All habitats are domed."

"Domed or doomed?"

"Domed."

"Why's that?"

"To protect them from the heat. Otherwise everything would melt."

"Or burn?"

"There's nothing flammable here."

"Just us," I said.

The dormitory looked a little more hospitable than the resuscitation ward. In addition to beds we had shelves and closets and there was no medical equipment in sight. I sat down on my bed. My guide, "Jane," remained standing nearby. I still couldn't say for sure if she was human or a robot. I remembered that business about "whores" in the assembly hall.

"Do you really have a woman's body under that suit?" I said to her.

"You mean for sex," Jane said.

"Well, yes, if you put it that way." I felt rejuvenated in that way too, without an ache or pain and a very distinct feeling of hardness as I contemplated her.

"Do you feel you need it?" she said.

"Maybe."

"There's a division for that, but your wife is here too."

"Is she?" I said, and my voice almost broke. I confess that I had forgotten all about her in the excitement of the moment, but now I felt immense joy taking hold of me and felt like leaping into the air. "Is she really here?" I said again. "Is she? Is she really?"

"Yes," Jane said, "she's here."

"And she's all right?"

"Yes, she's all right."

"Can I see her?"

"Let's get you settled in first."

It turned out that I was in the 2000-2500 time group. That explained the differences in appearance among us. Everything seemed to have been thought out to the last detail. It stood to reason that the people here would know what they were doing if the race had survived this long. After a while, I started to read the material on the smartphone, still thinking about my wife and determined to see her the next day whether anyone liked it or not.

The text told the story a thousand years at a time, though very briefly. If there had been any social and political scientists in the third millennium who had believed that radical social and political change was still possible to the same extent as in the second millennium, when such change had completely transformed the world, and that the old global powers would vanish and new ones take their place – they were completely mistaken. There had indeed been big wars, but contrary to what we had all once feared, they hardly made a dent in the way things were. Bombs and other means of mass destruction were undeniably the products of advanced technology, but Technology itself had other things on its mind. Space and Medicine were its frontiers. Human engineering was its passion.

The first breakthrough was the artificial organs, already coming into use in my own time. Everything became replaceable except the brain. That instantly neutralized a host of

diseases, though not all of them. The end of disease came when they cracked the DNA code wide open and in effect could introduce any command they wished into the organism. For cancer, it was in effect: Abnormal cells, stop dividing! From here on in, genetic engineering became the rule, and before very long everything biologically undesirable in the human species was blotted out while human capabilities were dramatically enhanced, though it took some time to get used to the idea of made-to-order children. Not everyone wanted to have superbabies underfoot. Some were happy to let nature take its course, but that placed their children at a big disadvantage and widened the gap even further between those who had it all and those who got the short end of the stick. The social wars of the twenty-fourth century almost tore the planet apart, claiming nearly three billion lives, or a quarter of the Earth's population under what had been strict enforcement of a global policy of zero population growth starting at the beginning of the twenty-second century. Far-reaching reforms were subsequently introduced that guaranteed minimal living conditions for all human beings, including those living in backward countries. There was now a very spirited movement for socialized world government but it died out soon enough and the weaker countries too regressed as the strongest again seized control of the world and reestablished what they called the natural order of things. The year three thousand was also celebrated in the old way, though champagne was no longer being marketed. Needless to say, printed books had become obsolete too, going all the way back to the twenty-second century. All printed matter was now available only electronically. Paradoxically, too, despite the enhancement of capabilities, the attention span of the average adult steadily declined, in inverse

proportion to the manufacture of electronic gadgetry, finally reaching the level of an eight-year-old child.

The President of the United States made a long millennial speech about the American way of life. Apparently it was still alive and kicking. People were therefore beginning to understand that certain things were here to stay. America had rivals, to be sure, even powerful rivals, but somehow they got along. In all these developed countries, and most of the less developed ones too, people were completely locked into a proceduralized system that determined nearly every step they took. It was almost impossible to interact with the outside world except in a prescribed way. For most of their needs they interacted with what came to be called the Big Screen, which covered entire walls in their homes. Two evolutionary changes, apparently triggered by mutations and encouraged by the genetic engineers, had also begun to take hold in this period. Human legs were becoming atrophied and the human thumb was becoming elongated. The advantage of the first, according to the social scientists, was that it tended to keep people immobile in front of their screens and therefore continuously engaged in what was considered productive and therefore remunerative activity. The advantage of the second was that it allowed people to manipulate their electronic devices with greater dexterity and therefore get more done in less time. These types therefore prevailed reproductively as well as economically, winning the best short-legged and long-thumbed mates and in the long run giving people a new if somewhat oddly gnomish look. Ultimately the thumb would become the longest human finger, measuring an average of nearly six inches.

The fourth millennium began with the introduction of domed, weather-controlled habitats as the Earth began to burn. This was followed by the end of agriculture and the

universal introduction of artificial nutrients and then by the end of wildlife on the planet, including the birds in the air and the fish in the sea, though zoos and pets were still kept in the domed cities. Plant life too vanished from the face of the Earth at around this time, the remaining forests dying and the rivers drying up, leaving wastelands everywhere. The American President declared that it was a tribute to old-time American ingenuity and initiative that the destruction of the planet had not affected the American economy in the least, as the food industry instantly found new chemicals to replace the traces of natural foodstuffs still present in their products and free enterprisers found new ways to get people to buy what they didn't need or couldn't afford.

Space travel and space colonies naturally continued to flourish in this period. By the fifth millennium the human body had been partially robotized and the human brain partially digitalized, allowing computerized information to be continually and directly downloaded and stored with the aid of miniaturized hardware and implanted electrodes. By the end of the seventh millennium the last giant step had been taken in the transformation of the human race when the human body became totally robotized and the human brain totally digitalized in an advanced model that made possible replication of individual consciousness and personality. This still mobile and entirely sentient individual continued to interface with the Central Unit, literally coming to know everything, including all spoken languages, without having to learn anything. Apparently this new society even had its own rebels – unkempt, hippielike creatures who walked around with cables dangling negligently from their heads like a forest of dreadlocks. The final phase, in the eighth millennium, saw the elimination of the robotized body altogether and the permanent housing of the fully digitalized brain in its own cell in the

Central Unit itself, where it inhabited a universe no less real to it than ours was to us and could live a rich and rewarding eternal life as a new type of thinking organism. With death eliminated there was naturally no longer any need for birth and the remaining animals had vanished too. Now there finally was world government, or rather a Central Unit that regulated and supported all life. This was the story of human history that our hosts had chosen to tell us.

I can't say that I had expected any of this, or that it made me very happy. It seemed to confirm what my son had been saying about the future of the world, though I couldn't say that I really understood everything I had read. I still had many questions and hoped they would be clarified in the upcoming orientation sessions. I imagined that all of us had questions. I looked around for Jack and Bob but they were still reading so I decided not to disturb them. Instead I lay back on my bed and thought about my wife, pleased that she had kept her promise and had also opted for the year 10,000 wakeup call. I understood that men and women had been separated, at least for the time being. Maybe these creatures understood us better than we understood ourselves. In any case, I looked forward to seeing her as much as I had looked forward to anything in my life, though I couldn't really say at this point what the future has in store for us.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *After coming across a few incidental lines mentioning cyronics in Philip Roth's American Pastoral, which I was rereading shortly after he died, I found myself drifting into sci-fi fantasy. The novel's vision of what the world will look like in its final phase is one that has always struck me as entirely feasible. My literary Influences are Dostoevsky, Proust, D. H. Lawrence, Mann, Kafka and Alain-Robbe-Grillet, though it was three great American social novelists (Dreiser, Dos Passos and Farrell) who inspired me to write as a teenager.*

**BIO:** *Fred Russell is the pen name of an American-born writer living in Israel. As Fred Russell he has published two other novels (Rafi's World and The Links in the Chain) as well as a collection called Aerial Views: Three Sci-Fi Satires. As Fred Skolnik, he has*

*published three additional novels, as well as about 100 stories and essays. A collection of his short fiction called Americans & Other Stories was published by Fomite Press in 2017. He is also the editor in chief of the 22-volume 2nd edition of the Encyclopaedia Judaica, winner of the 2007 Dartmouth Medal.*

# THE DEITY and you

By Ephie Hauck

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *One of the reasons we like this 'story' is because it reminds us of the many artistic possibilities short fiction offers. In this case, there is no real plot, no setting—except by inference—no mood or atmosphere and most importantly, no characters, as we've come to understand them. There is the Deity posited against a single human being and the actions of each—though sometimes parallel—never intersect. We like the author's deliberation with language: formal, poetic for the Deity; pedestrian prose for the mortal. The 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular voice that delivers the narrative is almost a third 'character' but again, non-referential. This POV acts as a neutral presence and imparts a luster of gravitas. Especially wonderful is the author's use of visually designed word configurations drawn from concrete poetry, onomatopoeia and the use of bold-face font for contrast. A powerful hybrid that addresses dimensional questions while remaining both innovative and moving. Quote: 'Existence roars, and The Deity calcifies the noise. It hardens like toffee. From solidified screams, The Deity pulls rock and bone and earth.'*

You are born on February 15th, 1980. This makes you an Aquarius, which indicates that you possess great willpower. According to Horoscope.com, you are also intolerant to any and every type of change. Mostly, you prefer clear and logical rules. This is probably why, around your seventh birthday, you decide that horoscopes are made for lonely people.

**The Deity is not born at all. The Deity begins to exist only when he chooses to.**

**Divinity sits in the nothingness he has birthed himself into. And Divinity wants more. This is because, despite not being an Aquarius, The Deity will prove to also possess great willpower.**

**When he stares into the absence, it's a lot like you closing your eyes as a child.**

*Press your palms into your eyes.*

*This is what nothing looks like.*

*Listen.*

*Now, stare.*

*Stare deeper into the absence,*

*it is hiding things you have never looked for*

*See the patterns swirling in the dark*

*Cosmic blinking*

*This is the difference between observation and creation.*

**The Deity understands. And the Deity creates.**

You do not. You think about how if you keep your head down too long, Mrs. Sandy will think you're sleeping again and call your parents. Looking so deeply into nothing is making your head hurt, anyway.

**The Deity bends silence into sound.**

You open your eyes.

The teacher meets your gaze and calls on you.

**Existence roars, and The Deity calcifies the noise. It hardens like toffee.**

**From solidified screams, The Deity pulls rock and bone and *earth*.**

Mrs. Sandy makes her way over to you. She asks, in her dripping sweet drawl,  
“Why do we exist?”

You look to your classmates for help, but no one meets your eye. They’re all  
staring straight ahead.

**Earth shivers. The absence is cold.**

Mrs. Sandy smiles so sweet it makes you wonder if you’ll get a cavity. “There are  
no wrong answers,” she purrs. This is a lie. You know this is a lie, because Mrs. Sandy  
gave you a 67 out of 100 on your vocabulary quiz, and that means you are definitely  
capable of wrong answers.

**The Deity is not. To the universe, it gives the gift of law.**

***OBJECTS IN MOTION MUST STAY IN...***

***RELATIVE TO THE....***

***UNLESS ACTED UPON BY A...***

**The universe obeys.**

You obey, too. “We exist,” you mutter, voice trembling, “Because we can. It’s not like we have anything better to do.”

**The Deity does not create life. The Deity does not need to.**

“Good! Very interesting answer” Mrs. Sandy exclaims. Then, she extends her smile to the rest of the class. “Everyone, turn to page 87.”

**The Deity understands the conditions of agency.**

Your class groans. They do what they’re told, anyway.

**The Deity allows life to create itself.**

---

*The Deity gifts the cosmos the power of perception. Passage. The cosmos names this*

***TIME.***

You are four years old and walking down the street when you first discover creation. Every streetlamp you pass is a towering giant. The neighbor's dog is barking from behind a white picket fence, but you aren't fooled. You know a werewolf when you see one.

When you tug on your mother's dress, eagerly pointing at all the monsters, she laughs. You've always had *such an active imagination*.

At nine, you still use a sound machine to help you sleep. It makes everything crisper. Surreal. You listen to the rain pounding on a tin roof, or ocean tides sweeping over you. Crickets chirping in the moonlight. For some reason, the noises of nature

*make you feel more alive*

**The Deity is no longer very busy. All that is left to do is to sit and watch his work unfold.**

To be honest, you didn't want to join the Little League. But Dad said it would be fun, and Jimmy from baseball camp said he was joining, too, so it's not like you really had a choice.

You have never seen so many strangers in your life. Rephrase: You have never seen so many strangers *watching you*. Dad is waving from the front row, but you pretend not to see him. Coach always says it's important to filter out distractions.

Timmy Rodgers is the pitcher. He throws the ball to you, and your whole team groans. It's coming fast- too fast. You can feel them collectively accept defeat.

**CRACK!**

Bat hits ball hits sky and GASP. The baseball is so high, it might be better if the sky just keeps it. Your teammates scream with excitement, and for a second there isn't a single bad thing in the world.

**The Deity has never played baseball.**

You're seventeen, and things are no longer looking up. You lay on your bed, staring up at the ceiling and tracing the popcorn patterns. Mom and dad are screaming in the other room, something about mortgage payments and college and how they shouldn't have gotten married in the first place. It's all the same at this point, so you just blast music through your earbuds until you can't hear them at all.

*Floating.*

*Floating*

*Floating*

*Condensed stars feel a lot like static*

*The universe is breathing*

*Make it stop*

***PLEASE MAKE IT STOP***

*The Deity is lonely.*

You first encounter observation in college. You're in your dorm room with Andy from Iowa. You're trying to study for that psych exam on Monday, but Andy just doesn't get the hint. He's nice, and fun at parties, but he just won't shut up about college football. You're about to tell him as much when, suddenly, the lights snap off.

"Andy?"

"Yeah?"

"I think the power is out."

Andy and you stumble out into the hallway to look for candles. Your dorm is on the top floor, so this is no easy task. From the corner of the hall, Andy laughs. He drags you to a ladder with a broken lock.

"Hey. It's to the roof! Let's check it out. Please?"

You shake your head no. Andy asks again. You repeat yourself: no. Andy pleads, falling to both knees and begging you to come with him.

And this is how you find yourself up on the roof.

You've never seen so much untouched starlight. Every individual celestial being is a freckle in the sky.

It's too beautiful for one moment, so you squint your eyes until your vision blurs. For the first time in a long time, the reality of *existence* rubs against your heart.

If only it wasn't so far away.

**The Deity has found a quiet nook in the corner of space and time. He sits there, wondering. Wondering why he created all these beautiful things. Wondering why that wasn't enough. After all this *everything*, what could possibly come next?**

**It's an unfamiliar feeling, this feeling of the unknown. The Deity doesn't like it. It makes him feel unplugged.**

**The stars flicker, but no one knows.**

You first experience The Deity at 36. Your child, the one you pinned your happiness on for nine months, is gone. She never got the chance to observe. To create. Resentment rattles through your bones.

Who could do this? Who had the right? Or the power?

How could anyone be so cruel?

**After that, the years begin to blur.**

42 is 51

is 59 is

68 is

At 70, the monsters begin to come back. You see them in the corner of your vision. Feel them twisting underneath your bed when you get up at night.

Your wife is the first to go. Pneumonia claims her at 10 a.m. on a Sunday. Now, the house feels a little more empty. Loneliness shakes you awake at night.

The absence is still calling.

***I AM IN CONTROL.***

Everyday is a battle of agency. You spend your time stargazing, people-watching. Observation is all you have left.

**The Deity has discovered the unknown. It has left him with nothing.**

**The Deity does not know satisfaction.**

**The Deity only wants more.**

You don't remember how old you are. All you know is that  
everything is beginning to slow down

**The Deity knows what he must do.**

**The Deity knows it is time.**





**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I wrote this piece after viewing a holistic dance performance by Hiroaki Umeda. In his show, Umeda maneuvered between loud cosmic images and quiet moments of truth. In my piece, I really wanted to capture the feeling of inevitability, of loneliness, we feel when we take a step back and ponder our existence. The contrast between The Deity and the reader is meant to show the complexity of significance. Is something greater, because it creates? Is it more real? My literary influences include B.J. Novak, David Arnold, and Neil Hilborn.*

**BIO:** *Ephie Hauck lives in Nashville, Tennessee and loves to write poetry and fiction that explores the obscure patterns of human behavior. Ephie won second place in the 2018 Belmont Poetry Contest, was a finalist in the 2019 Nashville Youth Poet Laureate competition, and has been published in Lunch Ticket Magazine.*

# THE LOTTERY

By James Hanna

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *A futuristic utopia with disturbing dystopian realities. The speaker, Jeremiah, 'an old man of seventeen' lives like the rest of his tribe under the watchful presence of the 'protectors'. He has bought into the brainwashing that characterizes his survival, and distances himself from a radical fringe group called the 'unbelievers.' The benign mood of this story reminds us of Shirley Jackson's masterpiece of the same title, but also, for different reasons, Brave New World. We like the deliberately mechanical prose and child-like voice in 'The Lottery' as much as the story itself. Certain lines resonate like mantras... 'today the sky is the color tea' but we begin to recognize they are disengaged from context and meaning. It points to a life and a mindset structured by programmed language and conditioned responses that equate into a 'soma'-like sense of inner peace—hold the narrative up to a mirror—what you see is the very face of 'benevolent' tyranny. A beautifully controlled story with passages cache-pots of understated beauty: Inside the dome, there are cows and sheep. Inside the dome, there are farmlands and orchards. Outside the dome, there is dust and rocks. The dust is very dry and the rocks are very hot. There is no farmland outside of the dome. There are no animals.'*

## The Lottery

**A warm wind is blowing from the north, and today the air is clear. The air is the color of tea. The air is usually the color of coffee—not the color of tea.**

**Today I see trees and grass. The trees are twisted and scaly, the grass is drier than straw. I wish that the air was the color of coffee, not the color of tea. If the air was the color of coffee, I would not see the trees and the grass.**

**Whatever the color of the air, I can always see into the dome. The dome is huge and bright. The dome has forests and lawns. I see leafy trees and flowers when I look into the dome.**

**The dome is one mile high, and it must be a hundred miles wide. Birds fly about within the dome—colorful, cheerful birds. There are towering buildings inside the dome, there are roads with buses and cars. There are lakes with fountains and ducks. There is farmland with very tall crops.**

**I am glad the dome is beautiful, it is where our protectors live. Our protectors are tall with shiny baldheads. Our protectors wear flowing white robes. They do not look like us—we are naked and hairy, not pretty like our protectors.**

**Our protectors guard our tribe from the trolls that live high up in the hills. If it was not for our protectors, the trolls would come down from the hills. The trolls have razor-sharp claws. Their cocks are harder than stone. They would butcher and rape everyone in our tribe if it was not for our protectors.**

**Our protectors are kind and intelligent, unlike the horrible trolls. I am very afraid of the trolls—I do not want to feel their claws. Not everybody in our tribe is afraid of the trolls. There are unbelievers in our tribe who are not afraid of them. “Have you ever seen a troll?” they ask us. I have never seen a**

troll, and that is a very good thing. Our protectors make sure the trolls never come down from the hills.

\*

Today the air is clear. The air is the color of tea. I can see the shapes of the hills where the deadly trolls have their home. I wish the air was darker—I do not want to look at the hills.

My name is Jeremiah—I'm an old man of seventeen. I belong to a tribe that lives outside the dome, and I have no other names. Jeremiah is a very good name. Everyone in our tribe has that name. Even women and girls are named Jeremiah. Our protectors have given us all this name. They say it's a very fine name. They say there will be great love in our tribe if all of us share the same name.

A great many tribes live outside of the dome, but none of them share our name. Our protectors tell us to stay away from all the other tribes. The tribes are very bad, they say. The tribes have cannibals in them. The unbelievers in our tribe ask, "Have you ever seen a cannibal?" I tell them I once saw a cannibal, and he was from another tribe. The cannibal was eating a girl from our tribe. He was gobbling down her intestines, which drooped from his hands like snakes.

I stay far away from the other tribes. I do not like cannibals. I do not like the unbelievers either, but our protectors say let them be. Our protectors say everyone in our tribe should be able to speak his mind.

**Inside the dome, there are cows and sheep. Inside the dome, there are farmlands and orchards. Outside the dome, there is dust and rocks. The dust is very dry and the rocks are very hot. There is no farmland outside of the dome. There are no animals.**

**Our protectors feed us every day—they do not want us to be hungry. Every day, giant vans leave the dome and distribute food to all the tribes. The food is dumped from the vans, and there is always plenty of food. There are apple cores and peanut shells and chicken bones and bread. There are banana peels and corncobs and watermelon rinds. The food is very tasty. I eat until I am full.**

**\***

**Today the air is the color of tea. It is not the color of coffee. I can see the lights of other domes that are many miles away. There are domes all over the country. There are domes all over the world. I do not want to look at other domes, so I turn my head away.**

**When the domes fight with each other, there is a truce among the tribes. Our protectors tell us to band together, and they give us banners and swords. Even women and children are given banners and swords. Our protectors say we must kill the tribesmen fighting for other domes. They say we should eat their livers because the livers will keep us strong. They say if we eat only the livers, we are better than cannibals.**

The unbelievers say there is no glory in fighting tribes from other domes. They say the domes fight each other for sport. They say it is bad to eat livers.

I am proud to have carried a sword and a banner. I am proud to have fought for my dome. I have killed those who fight for other domes. I have eaten their livers too.

\*

Today the air is the color of tea, and protectors walk among us. Whenever the air is the color of tea, our protectors visit us. They come down from the sky in magnificent floats that make a cooling wind.

Our protectors are tall and beautiful. Their eyes are like pools of blue water. They do not stay very long outside of the dome, but it is good that they walk among us.

Our protectors ask us a question when they come to visit us. It is the same question every time. "What will you do for us?" they ask. Their voices are thin and melodious. They sound like wonderful birds.

Once a protector looked at me and touched me on the forehead. I never felt a gentler touch. I never saw bluer eyes. "What will you do for us?" he asked. His voice was musical.

I told him I had killed other tribesmen in battle. I told him I had eaten their livers. The protector looked at me and repeated, "What will you do for us?"

**Our protectors kind and comforting. We love them very much. The women in our tribe have orgasms when our protectors walk among us. “What will you do for us?” our protectors ask the woman. Sometimes they gather up women and girls and fly them back to the dome.**

**The unbelievers among us say our protectors should stay inside the dome. They say our protectors should never ask us what we will do for them. I tell the unbelievers I would do much for our protectors. Our protectors keep us fed. They give us banners and swords. They protect us from the terrible trolls that live up in the hills.**

**\***

**Today a warm wind is blowing, and the air is the color of tea. Today, our protectors have set up the stage where they have the lottery. Whenever the air is the color of tea, the lottery is held.**

**There are numbers tattooed on our forearms. My number is 6609. Our protectors spin a big lottery wheel that all the tribe can see. They spin the wheel four times. They call out a number each time. If each of your numbers is called, you will be allowed to live inside the dome.**

**All our tribe gathers around the stage. It is good to live in the dome. We can better serve our protectors if we are allowed to live in the dome.**

**The unbelievers say they do not want to live in the dome. The unbelievers have no numbers on their forearms. “We are all of one body,” our protectors announce when they have the lottery. But the unbelievers are never selected to live inside the dome.**

Today, the wheel spins slowly, and my number does not come up. I have attended the lottery hundreds of times and my number has not been announced. I know it will not be much longer until my number comes up. I know that very soon I will live in the beautiful dome.

Today a woman I do not like wins the lottery. She is standing among unbelievers. She has no battle scars. The woman is very lucky to have won the lottery.

\*

Today the air is the color of tea. Today there are devils among us. Whenever the air is the color of tea, devils come among us. The devils put bad thoughts into our heads—thoughts that make us angry. Our protectors tell us that it is unwise to listen to the devils.

I have listened to a devil today, and today I am very angry. I am angry because our protectors gave out many beautiful banners. The banners are bright and colorful, and they flutter like flames in the wind. The banners declare we are all of one body—that is a very good thing. The banners proclaim that our dome will shine brighter than all the domes in the world.

I am angry because our protectors did not give me a beautiful banner. I have killed many tribesmen in battle. I have eaten their livers too. I have split open the wombs of women who have been filled by our enemy's seed. Our protectors did not give me a banner, but they gave banners to unbelievers. I am very, very angry at our terrible protectors.

The unbelievers tell me that there are no devils among us. They say it is our protectors who put bad thoughts into our heads. They say I should not be angry because I did not get a banner. They say if I keep bad thoughts in my head, I will not win the lottery.

\*

Tomorrow has come. A warm wind is still blowing. The air is not the color of coffee—it is still the color of tea.

There will be a lottery today because the air is the color of tea. A few protectors have set up the stage where the numbers are announced. I am no longer angry at our protectors—my thoughts are good once again. Some unbelievers stand beside me while the lottery wheel revolves.

Today I am very lucky. Today my number comes up. The protector who spun the giant wheel called out, “6-6-0-9.” Today I will get to live in the dome and better serve our protectors.

The protector who spun the lottery wheel is looking directly at me. His face is like the face of a statue. His eyes are as blue as a lake. “What will you do for us?” he says. His voice is as pure as a flute.

I walk behind the protectors, and we get inside the float. My thoughts are good today. I am sad that my thoughts were not always good. I am glad our protectors are kind.

I see the farms and cattle as we land beside the dome. I see the lakes and the butterflies. I see the orchards and birds. My heart is as light as a sparrow. My thoughts are very good.

**I leave the float and follow the protectors into the dome.**

\*

**I have never felt a softer breeze. I have never seen brighter colors. I have never smelled the sweetness of flowers. I have never heard voices so gentle.**

**I see many buildings that are tall and straight, and I see giant temples too. Wonderful signs sit on top of the temples. The signs say *WE ARE ALL OF ONE BODY*. I see carts being drawn by magnificent horses as I walk towards one of the temples. The carts are full of bodies. They are rolling towards the farmlands. The bodies look like they came from the tribes that live around the dome. There are many, many bodies inside the rolling carts.**

**I know I will soon be among the bodies that are rolling towards the farmlands. I am glad that I will lie with the bodies—I should not have had angry thoughts. I am glad I will join the bodies while all of my thoughts are good. I am glad the unbelievers told our protectors about my angry thoughts.**

**Soon, my body will nourish the crops that grow so very tall. It will nourish the fruits and nuts that touch the lips of our protectors. I am glad I will nourish the fruits and nuts. I am glad we are all of one body.**

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *While watching a recent Trump Rally on television, I wondered, What are the logical fruits of a canine devotion to dogma? The crowd gazes were so adoring, the chants so heartfelt, that the story I penned did not seem altogether far-fetched. Why not a world in which the elite live in air-conditioned domes while the rest of humanity is relegated to smog-filled deserts? Still, my docile main character, Jeremiah, is not without*

*compensation. Unlike the hapless Winston Smith in Orwell's 1984, he did not have to suffer an array of tortures to arrive at his complacency with Big Brother.*

**BIO:** *James Hanna is a retired probation officer and a former fiction editor of The Sand Hill Review. He has had over sixty story publications and three Pushcart nominations. His books, three of which have won awards, are available on Amazon.*

# EVE OF THE EVE OF DESTRUCTION—Version 1

By Howie Good

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Word perfect.*

## **Eve of the Eve of Destruction**

The big road map on the wall at the highway rest stop is just a frustrating tangle of lines for the man standing there studying it. I try to remember what state is south of Nebraska in case he asks. The only laws regularly enforced are the laws of chance. Self-driving Mercedes will sacrifice pedestrians to save the driver.

&

A city inspector declared the building's crumbling façade unsafe. The very next morning, a Park Avenue socialite was crushed to death by a falling piece of masonry. I've written some thoughts on the bedroom wall. Sometimes I forget they're even there. My gas mask hangs on the back of the door. Once when I was visiting Los Angeles, I saw people digging up a grave with their bare hands.

&

The day to come is just a rerun of the day before. So I board a train with the idea of appearing that night *in flagrante delicto*. The old rattling train sways alarmingly. When I arrive, the station is crowded with soldiers, though of whose army I can't say. The situation that awaits me across town doesn't allow any time to find out. I climb in a taxi, give the address. The taxi lurches into motion. By now it's red dusk, fire clinging to the clothes and hair of a laughing toddler splashing in a puddle of what looks suspiciously like blood.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *"Eve of the Eve of Destruction" came together, as most of my writing does, in an unplanned way. I originally wrote each section as separates over a couple of weeks, only belatedly realizing the possibility of synergistic effect if I put them together in a single sequence. Even after the sequencing, I continued to revise each section. It wasn't so much the wording that was causing me anxiety as the order of the sentences. The middle section in particular felt off until I kind of turned it upside down. These artistic choices only seem rational in retrospect. The truth is, I proceed in my writing by intuition, improvisation, and guesswork.*

**BIO:** *Howie Good is the author most recently of Stick Figure Opera: 99 100-word Prose Poems from Cajun Mutt Press. He co-edits the online journals Unbroken and UnLost.*

# EVE OF THE EVE OF DESTRUCTION—Version 2

By Howie Good

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *This double posting came about when the author's original submission was snapped up by another zine seconds before we sent our acceptance. (That'll teach us). But we think Good is Best so we asked for something else. He sent 'Eve of the Eve of Destruction'. We loved it (go figure) and then he sent us a revised version of the story which we liked just as much. As Charles explained to The Good Man in his email we would like to take BOTH versions because... 'it shows the creative process in action and also draws attention to the reality that literary expression (all artistic expression, really) is flux not fixity or finality. It's a deconstruction--art is process-obsession we can't shake so with your permission we'd like to publish them both—as version 1 and version 2. Listen up, dude, Dada is alive in 2020 and the lights are on in the Cabaret Voltaire.'*

## **Eve of the Eve of Destruction**

The big road map on the wall at the highway rest stop is just a frustrating tangle of lines to the man standing there studying it. I try to remember what state is south of Nebraska in case he asks. The only laws that are regularly enforced are the laws of chance. Self-driving Mercedes will sacrifice pedestrians to save the driver.

&

I've written some thoughts on the bedroom wall. Sometimes I forget they're even there. My gas mask hangs on the back of the door. A city inspector declared the building's crumbling façade unsafe. The very next morning, a Park Avenue socialite was crushed to death by a falling piece of masonry. Once while I was visiting Los Angeles, I saw people digging up a grave with their bare hands. I'm not afraid of dying. I'm afraid of how many things can go wrong during a crime in progress.

&

The day to come is just a rerun of the day before. So I board a train with the idea of appearing that night *in flagrante delicto*. The old rattling train sways alarmingly. When I arrive, the station is crowded with soldiers, though of whose army I can't say. The situation that awaits me across town doesn't allow any time to find out. I climb in a taxi, give the address. The taxi lurches into motion. By now it's red dusk, fire clinging to the clothes and hair of a laughing toddler splashing in a puddle of what looks suspiciously like blood.

# GERONTOCID

By Antaeus

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *A beautifully controlled poignantly told dramatic monologue that delivers a scathing indictment to the way society treats its marginalized citizens. The indignities and humiliations that come with age and infirmity are explored through the eyes of a man who has hit bottom. The American Dream has become a nightmare and his only refuge is to withdraw into the memory of a kinder past. What is remarkable here is the way the author has created a three-dimensional character who is both victim and survivor. It's not without a touch of sentimentality but in this case we think it makes rather than breaks the story. If the coffee's bitter, add some sugar.*

## Geronticide

Geronticide. Noun. The killing or euthanasia of the elderly.

Damn, the park is crowded today, Larry. It looks like the only bench available is the one near the trash receptacle. I know, I know, the smell is terrible, but we'd better grab it before someone else does.

You keep your eyes open while we're here. The radio says there have been three muggings in the park this week, and us older folk are prime targets. Don't you worry though, I got us covered. I brought the bayonet I snuck home from Vietnam with me, and I ain't afraid to use it.

\* \* \*

Aaaah, it feels good to rest these old bones, doesn't it, pal?

Now, where did I put that little sample bag of popcorn the supermarket gave me? I know it's in this shopping bag somewhere. Hmm, maybe I left it—no, here it is. The darn thing was hiding under my bologna sandwich.

Come-on, come-on, you can do it, Hal. Just pinch each side and pull it apart. That's what the directions say. Yeah, right, easy for whoever wrote this. Probably some Millennial. An older person wouldn't let the company seal the package like that. Doesn't anyone think about us older folks anymore?

Of course not.

You don't have strong fingers when you're 78, well 79 today, and our grip ain't what it used to be, ya dumb package designer. Now I gotta use my teeth, well my dentures anyway.

...Darn it! Now the popcorn is all over the place. Why is it that you have to strain and strain, then all-of-a-sudden the bag pops open and rips halfway down? Some designer's joke, I'm sure.

Larry, don't you even think about gobblin' that popcorn up. The ground is too dirty

for that. Let that pigeon eat it.

You won't let it won't go to waste, will you, my cooing little friend? You're a fat little bugger ain'tcha? I bet you don't have to live on bologna sandwiches like I do.

\* \* \*

Hey, look, Larry, someone left a perfectly good newspaper in the trash. I haven't read one of these in almost a year. Let's see what's goin' on in the world. It's already opened to the financial pages, so we might as well start here.

The headline says U.S. Gives Financial Aid to 96% of All Countries<sup>i</sup>.

According to government figures, the U.S. gave away \$19 billion in economic assistance to foreign countries each year. China gets \$28.3 million of that money.

The article goes on to say that the United Nations (UN) has 193 members, and the U.S. provided economic assistance to 184 of them or 96% of the countries in the world. State Department officials claim that some of the money is to help the poor.

That's a lot of BS Larry. China has the second-largest economy in the world. In fact, they are a significant buyer of U.S. debt. So, what do we do? We give China financial assistance, and they used our own money to buy our debt. In other words, we provide them with cash so we can borrow it back.

Just look at these numbers, will you?<sup>ii</sup> Iraq gets \$5,281,179,380, Afghanistan gets \$5,060,306,051, Syria \$916,426,147, Pakistan \$777,504,870, and the list goes on. I thought we were at war with these people.

Look at this next article. It says the government has raised the poverty threshold from \$11,000 to a little over \$12,000 for an individual adult. The article goes on to say that there are now 36,460,000 people in the United States, who live below the poverty level. That would be us, old friend.

Can you imagine? The government gives away 19 Billion dollars to other countries when there are over 36,000,000 of its own people who are living in poverty.

\* \* \*

Ya know Larry, a person works their whole life, and what do they do when you reach 65? They send you out to die, that's what they do. It doesn't matter if you want to keep on working.

"Got to make room for the younger folks," they say.

"You'll live high on the hog collecting Social Security, so go for it, they tell you. Uncle Sam takes good care of his veterans and older Americans."

Yup, that's what they said, and it's all bullshit lies.

Why don't ya call it what it is, you bunch of bureaucratic bungholes? Geronticide, that's what it is. The general abandonment of the elderly to die early, commit suicide, or be killed.

It doesn't matter to the government that you scrimped and saved every penny you could during your working life. Damn cost of livin' just eats it all up. Social Security? What a joke that is. Even the name is a lie. There ain't no security in it at all. According to the people in charge, it's gonna run out of money soon.

My generation worked hard and put a lot of money into the Social Security pot. It's not our fault that the Congress and the Senate used it as a slush fund to pay hush

money to their mistress or fund their favorite bridge to nowhere. Washington, you put all that money back that you "borrowed," and Social Security will be just fine.

What'd say, Larry? Why don't we go on welfare? We can't collect welfare. If you have an income of over \$12,000, you're not eligible for welfare. The government says my shitty Social Security check is income. Only illegal aliens can get welfare, food stamps, and free medical coverage. Senior citizens get none of that.

You good-for-nothing politicians better get it right. Quit calling Social Security a handout and welfare an entitlement. We put our hard-earned money into social security because you said it was like a savings account, and we'd get it back when we retire. That's an entitlement, not a handout.

I know a lot of people who are third and fourth generation on welfare and never worked a day in their life. Why don't ya call welfare what it is, a handout to get a vote? An' it's a handout you can't get if your collecting Social Security and have a few pennies in the bank. . .

Hey, bird, d' ya want smore popcorn?

\* \* \*

Now, where was I? Oh, yeah, they make collecting Social Security sound good all right, don't they, Larry? The government does its figgerin and tells you you'll receive \$1,600 a month on Social Security. They wave that in your face an' get you to sign up. Then, while you're busy watching the hand waving the check, the other hand picks ya pocket.

Uncle Sam tells you Medicare is mandatory when you reach 65, then they deduct a Medicare premium and a supplemental hospital insurance fee. Wham, \$160 is gone. The IRS wants its share, and they deduct taxes at a 15% rate. Bam, another \$240 plus gone. Medicare Prescription drug coverage part "D" means another \$200 gets taken away. Thank you, mam.

My \$1,600 Social Security check is reduced to \$1,000 a month, and there wasn't even any foreplay.

Mr. Congressman, Mr. Senator, you try paying your rent, utilities, doctor copays, prescription copays and put food on the table with a budget of \$1,000 a month. Why my damn rent for the shithole Section 8 apartment is more than that. And I'm not even counting the cost of necessities like transportation, food, toilet paper, and such.

Like I said, it's Geronticide. Only you government types are so sneaky about it, no one knows you're doing it. . .

\* \* \*

Sorry, there's no more popcorn left bird. Don't you be lookin' at this bologna sandwich, or I'll ring ya scrawny pigeon neck.

Hey, Larry, you want a taste of this bologna sandwich?

There you go being an ass again. Just say "no" if you don't want a bite. Don't sniff it and lay back down on the bench. That's all you do lately is sleep, a person would think you had a job or something.

I know, pal, I'm not too keen on chowing down a green bologna sandwich either, but a mans gotta eat, even if he gets a stomachache later. Some birthday this is, Larry. Nobody gives a shit that I'm 80 today. Why, if my wife Rosie were still around, she'd

have made me her world-famous, lip-smackin' franks an' beans casserole.

\* \* \*

Get out a here, bird! Damn pigeons eat an' shit, that's all they do. Don't serve any useful purpose at all, except maybe ta keep a body company.

Where in the hell was I anyway?

...Oh, I remember now. I gotta share an apartment with two other people just to keep a roof over my head. The rent is \$1,900 a month for a place that ain't worth half that. Billy and I pool our money for the rent, utilities, and food.

Rosie never worked, so she doesn't collect Social Security and can't contribute. She takes care of Billy, does the laundry, and what cooking there is instead. It was Rosie that made my bologna sandwich. She even cut the moldy crust off the bread for me.

Poor Billy, we both fought in The Nam, only he got sick from agent orange, and I didn't. The VA says he ain't ill from AO, so they won't give him benefits. His social security disability check gets cut down to \$500 a month after he pays for all his medication. Who can survive on \$500 a month? No one can.

Sometimes we have to wait three or four years for a cost of living adjustment (COLA), and when we get it, it's always less then what we need to survive.

The cost of living goes up 1.3%, and the government gave us seniors a .03% increase. That's a 1% loss. That same year the government raised the Medicare premium by 2%. That year our income went down by 3%.

Another year the government gave us a whopping 2.8% increase in Social Security. We celebrated by eating real hamburgers, not the fake kind from Mikey D's. Then we found out that the cost of living had gone up 3.4%, and the Medicare premium went up 2.9%. That made our income less than it was before the COLA payment.

This year Uncle Sam gave us a COLA raise of 1.6%, and you guessed it, they raised the Medicare Part B premium 7%, and our income was cut back again.<sup>iii</sup>

Everyone else that's working or on welfare gets a COLA increase without deductions. Us seniors get a boost, and you raise the cost of Medicare to take it all away and then some. Tell me that's not Geronticide.

Those bastards in Washington are gonna burn in hell. They send billions of dollars overseas and give nothing to the people who built this country. They love to say, "America first," and it's all a bunch of bullshit!

\* \* \*

Huh? Who's that? Move away or I'll...

Oh, it's you, Rosie. I didn't recognize you with that colorful hat on your head. Did you know my wife used to wear hats like that all the time?

Okay, okay, I'll put the bayonet away. Sorry, I didn't even realize I had it in my hand. It's the PTSD, you know. Something scares me, and I just react, I can't help myself.

Whaddya mean you been lookin' for me all day? I've been right here sittin' on this bench with Larry, all along.

Oh, this isn't the park I usually come to. Well, can you imagine that? I must've stepped off the bus at the wrong stop.

It's time for dinner, ya say. I ain't too hungry right now, maybe I should just stay

here.

What'd say? We're havin' franks and beans for my birthday supper tonight.

You know, Rosie, franks, and beans are my favorite. My wife always made them for me on my birthday every year.

Yeah, sure, screw the bologna sandwich, I'll come home and have that meal any day.

Hey, wait a minute, shouldn't you be home taking care of Billy?

Huh? What's that you say? My brother Billy and his dog, Larry, died three years ago?

That can't be, I just talked to Billy this morning, and Larry is layin' right here...

Hey, where did that old dog get off too?

Why are you crying, Rosie? Please don't cry, you know I don't know what to do when you cry.

Sure, that's a good idea, let's go home now.

Err, Rosie, will you hold onto my arm? I can't seem to remember the way home.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/othercomments/2014/10/15/u-s-gives-financial-aid-to-96-of-all-countries/#5058d871ccb9>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://howmuch.net/articles/usa-foreign-aid-by-country>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.gomedigap.com/medicare-answers/medicare-supplement-plans/medicare-2020-changes/>

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *Like a lot of writers, my writing style is influenced by what is happening and what has happened in my life. We all have unique, individual experiences that affect our personality and influence our writing.*

*I wrote Geronticide because a friend told me he was having a hard time making ends meet on his Social Security income. He said the amount he received went down every year, instead of up. Long story short, I did some research and found that what he said was true. Every once in a great while, Uncle Sam gives Social Security recipients a Cost Of Living Adjustment (COLA). The COLA does not reflect the rising cost of drugs or healthcare, so it is well below the actual cost of living. For example, in 2016 alone, the healthcare inflation rate was 3.13%-yet the Social Security COLA was 0%*

*This year my friend received a 1.6% increase in his Social Security (about \$25.00 per month). Meanwhile, his cost for Medicare went up 7%, and his copay prescription costs went up to \$30. I was outraged and wrote Geronticide. The story may be fiction, but the facts are real. My intention was to bring this purposeful act of deprivation by the government to light. Sometimes our outrage also influences our writing.*

**BIO:** *Antaeus started working in his uncle's New Jersey bar, at the age of seven, cleaning toilets. He wrote his first poem on a piece of toilet paper. Antaeus is the author of "The Prepared Citizen," a three-book series on how to react to and avoid dangerous situations and active shooter attacks. In addition to nonfiction, Antaeus has also published sci-fi, action/adventure, and fantasy novels.*

*Antaeus lives now in Florida and uses real paper to write on.*

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[www.antaeus-books.com](http://www.antaeus-books.com)

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# The Scarf

By Joey Cruse

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *A killer storyline and prose so good it smokes. Bukowski lurks somewhere in the shadows and Selby Jr. may have put a word in but this is no knockoff: Den and Bill are their own men and they breathe and sweat with life; characterizations as sturdy as timber. Noir elements and a subtly balanced tension between real and surreal raise the heat to white hot and the clipped dialogue is sooo bullseye it's enough to make a wannabe writer weep. When genre specific fiction reaches the level of The Scarf it stands with literary fiction on the same podium and both get the gold. Quote: Alcohol didn't help depth perception and he stumbled hard and loud into the bedside table.' And: "Did you find anything, Bill?"/"Wife's box of jewelry, some silverware, the farmer's watch and some petty cash on top of the fridge. No, I didn't find anything." And, this ravishing paragraph: The scent made him nauseous and he stuck his head out the window to feel the air around the van rush over him, the wind blocking out any noise between himself and his past and the road. He looked over at Bill staring off into his own darkness and thought about Liza and figured it wasn't such a bad thing to be killed by someone who loved you—knowing how fucking terrible you are.' Five stars.*

## The Scarf

"I think Liza is trying to kill me." Denny's jaw clicked as an incisor scratched against his back molar. The whiskey was cheap and burnt. Warmth shot through thinning blood and, for good measure, he took another. "I must be losing my goddamn mind, Bill."

"Which house is it?"

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“Up the road.” Denny replied.

“Everyone is crazy, Den. Edna, next to my apartment, carries a 6-inch blade on her. Damn near cut me walking past her door with groceries. She screams, ‘get away from my door, you goddamn bum,’ throws the bastard open with this huge pigsticker flipped out, and says, ‘oh it’s just you Bill. You scared me.’”

“Shit,” Denny scoffed, “scared her?”

“I dropped the groceries, yelled ‘GODDAMN you OLD woman. You could’ve killed me.’ ‘I’d never hurt you, Bill,’ she goes. Bullshit. You can smell how much blood that blade wants.” Bill tugged the crotch of his pants and wiggled his ass in the chair, “You’re not crazy, Den. Everyone nowadays is armed to the teeth. My landlord opens the door with his left hand to hold a sawn-off with his right. Fucker just says, ‘sorry’ when he lets you in and puts the piece down. Guy thinks he’s about to be murdered any time he opens the front door.” Bill cocked his head and checked his speed, “I wonder what he had to do to be so afraid of opening a door.”

“I don’t mean old lady crazy. You can be old lady crazy if you haven’t killed someone. The other day I saw my neighbor run over his dog and drive away. There’s a violence in people, Bill, which, don’t get me wrong, is a madness that makes a fair amount of sense.”

“Liza is not trying to kill you,” Bill chuckled, “women kill men all the time. Distraction, devotion, love, sex, getting stabbed with a goddamn icepick. Those aren’t mutually exclusive events. You know how big a hole an icepick makes in a skull? That small,” Bill said, curling his leather fingers into a quarter, “and that shit happens all of the time.”

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Bill drank and handed the bottle to Denny, “you need to quit drinking. We almost there?”

“Ten minutes or so.”

“Fucking hell, Den, I’m out here using the fucking North Star. Where are we going?”

“Far enough, Bill. It’s a good place.” Denny opened the window to fresh cut grass and a sliver of moon, “not much light tonight.”

Bill sighed, falling for the trap, “how is Liza trying to kill you?”

“She buys me all this shit trying to strangle me.”

Bill raised his hand, “Stop, Den. Does *she* go out and buy you those things or does *she* go out, pick out those things for *you*, and then *you* pay for them?”

“I pay for them. What’s your point, BILL?”

Bill checked the fuel gauges and stared ahead, “So you let your lady go shop, on your dime, and the amount of money she is wasting is more than you would prefer? Jesus Christ.

“Liza bought these 400 thread cotton sheets.”

“You mean you bought them.”

“Blow me. I wake up and think that Liza is putting her arms around me. I go to push her off but can’t move my arms. The sheets had me cocooned and pinned my arms against me. I tried to move, roll over, kick my feet, but the goddamn sheets wouldn’t let me move. Bill, I swear to God it was the fucking sheets.”

“Are you sure you weren’t dreaming, Den?”

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“Wide awake, Bill. Wide awake. Next night, the folds were around my feet. They were moving up, Bill. They cinched my waist and the slack tightened around my chest. They were crawling for my neck, Bill. We’ve wrung them enough that they’ve learned the perfect squeeze. I thrashed and made enough noise to wake Liza and the sheets went limp.”

Bill held the bottle to the window and checked how much was left against the light, “Finish this, Den, you need it more than me.”

Denny’s hands shook.

“Christ, Den, calm down. Cool and ready. It can’t be much longer. What else is there?”

“What?”

“There must be more, Den, or your story’s shit. The whole thing is shit. You know what happens at night when you sleep? You move in bed. The sheets wrap up, around, and tighten themselves. No one can wake up out of a dream and tell if they’re awake or stuck until they catch their breath and realize reality.”

Denny pulled on the scarf around his neck, loosening it, “The blankets didn’t work, so she went out and got a scarf.”

“She probably wants you to look even more like a fag, Den,” Bill looked over and smiled, “it’s a scarf, Den.” The cashmere was thin, but insulating, with yellow and blue plaid squares against the grey that stretched the length. “Looks pretty normal to me.”

“It’s not, Bill. It moves at night.”

“Den, you get drunk and put the fucking thing in a different place,” Bill arched his spine and his bones responded, frustrated, by cracking, “scarves don’t move.”

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“Really, Bill? Really? Sat it over the armrest of my chair, the next morning I found it on the edge of the seat cushion. Now, it could’ve fallen off to the left or to the right, but that would have put it on the floor or against the back of the chair. The damn thing moved forward. I threw the piece of shit on the floor the next night and woke up with it at the foot of the bed, but the thing is, Bill, it was stretched out, angled directly at me, like a fucking arrow.”

“Lose the scarf, Den,” Bill said through angry teeth.

“What?”

“Say you got drunk and put the scarf down. Liza’ll be pissed. She’ll get over it. If there’s love there, then she isn’t trying to kill you.”

“I don’t know, Bill.” Denny slapped his hands against his cheeks, “Start to slow down.”

Bill braked, turned the headlights off, and pulled onto a dirt culvert used by farmers, “You’re sure it’s empty? Bring the zips.”

“Bill, I’ve been out here every night for a week. No cars. No lights. It’s empty. They’re on vacation. We don’t need them, Bill.”

“Get your fucking head on. We take them in case.”

“Fine, Bill. Don’t use the flashlights til’ we’re in. We can see by the moon.”

“There’s barely any moon, Den.”

“It’s enough, Bill.”

With no earthly business being in a cornfield – a plantation in the Midwest designed for farming, presumably, without the slaves – the house was as tall as the trees on either side. Both levels had wrap-around porches straight out of Mayberry with a

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staircase that connected the two floors. Working to their advantage, shotgun doors extended the entire length of the house for easy airflow and access to all the rooms.

“Start at the top and work down. The windows are open.”

“Too loud. I’ve got the picks.”

“I told you, Bill. No one is in there.”

“Don’t get sloppy on me, Den. No chances.”

The stairs were warped but they didn’t break, and, if you weren’t a fat ass, they didn’t make much noise. Bill had the picks in and the door open in fifteen seconds. “Bad lock,” he whispered, and Denny watched Bill step forward, noiselessly, moving towards the dresser for jewelry and, if Denny did his homework, the payoff.

The safe was in the adjacent closet, but there was ten feet of wood floor to cross before rummaging, and Denny lingered, unsure of how to take the first step. The boards looked sunk with enough knots to not be trustful. Denny let his eyes adjust and sashayed awkwardly into the bedroom. Alcohol didn’t help depth perception and he stumbled hard and loud into the bedside table.

Bill hissed, “Get your shit together,” his voice sizzled, “and open the fucking safe.”

The farmer who owns the safe got a little too drunk and liked to talk, ‘You can still hear the lock click when you hit the numbers.’ Too removed to realize if you couldn’t trust banks with your money then you certainly couldn’t talk about how much you kept in your house to barflies.

He walked forward and felt a sharp pull. He ignored the feeling, touched the brass of the knob, and the pull tightened. He opened the door enough to grate metal on metal.

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The noise was soft, but his ears were bursting. He rushed, opening the door quickly, to stop the cacophony. The wife's clothes smelled like jasmine and grain, and Denny grabbed the hem of a dress and felt the sew work of self-adjustment. He took the flashlight out of his back pocket and clicked the LED on to stare at nothing but carpet covering the floors. He ran the light across the back of the closet, to the floor, but didn't see any space signifying a safe. Panicking, he put the flashlight in his mouth, went to his hands and knees, and began to massage the carpet, inch by inch, working the boards to find a spring or latch until his fingertips were numb. He stood up, and the loop in Denny's scarf cinched. His hand was on a loose end and he felt his pulse as the free length closed around his throat. 'Liza' he thought, 'not now, you dirty bitch.'

Denny needed Bill, and he whispered out of the closet, not loudly but projected, a singer in a small theater, "Bill. I can't find it."

Like a fox, Bill emerged from the next bedroom over, "what do you mean can't find it, Den? Where's the fucking safe? We have no time for this shit, Den. In and out, DEN. We can't search all fucking night."

Had they not been so big and white, Denny would've never seen the orbs in the darkness out of the corner of his eye. They fluttered, hot and white, a broken flash bulb, and the snapshot gave Denny enough to see the movement of a young girl shivering so hard and tense in the bed that she couldn't breathe. The hyperventilation created silence and the three, together in the room, jumped through their own existences – each terrified at that exact spot in time. She couldn't have been older than twenty and was in too much fear to scream. Bill seized her silence to lunge towards the bed and clamp the cup of his hand onto the girl's mouth. Her shoulders were small and tone, but her arms were still

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underneath the covers and, hitting her survival instincts, she struggled, flapping bird-in-a-cage arms to get free.

“Grab her arms, Den. DEN, grab her fucking arms.”

The girl had nails and was stretching her arm as close to Bill’s eyes and mouth and face as possible. Denny stood still for a second before her muffled crying snapped him out of his condition. He took a step forward and climbed on top of the bed. Using his thighs to pin the girl’s hips, he grabbed the forearm of her free arm and reached into the sheets to drag the other out before she could cause any damage. Taking the girl’s wrists in one of his hands, Denny reached into his coat pocket and took out the zip ties. Denny could smell sandalwood lotion leaking out of her skin.

“I thought you said there’d be fucking nobody here, Den.”

“She’s a fucking house sitter, Bill. How was I supposed to know? She’s terrified. Just tie her up and leave her alone.”

Denny took his hand holding hers and placed enough pressure on her arms to bend her elbows to her chest which allowed him to lean forward over the girl’s beautiful, wide eyes that stared back with a horrified honesty, a fear of men since man.

“I have to tie you up.”

She squirmed.

“Don’t. Don’t. I need to flip you over and place your hands behind your back. Meaning my partner needs to remove his hand. This poses a problem; it gives you a moment to scream. I don’t want to hurt you, but, if you scream, you have only a second before I will make you quiet and neither of us wants that. Blink if you understand.”

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The light in her eyes twinkled in thought and she closed her eyelids only once and only for one second.

Denny felt bad. He looked over at Bill, with his hand over her mouth, and imagined how the leather must have tasted on the girl's tongue. With his free hand, Denny unwrapped the scarf around his neck and flattened out the fabric in his hand.

“Bill, take your hand off her mouth and make sure it doesn't close.”

Bill looked back at Denny and nodded. His palm slid to her chin while using his right hand as a lever against her forehead, forcing open her mouth, and, in this second of silence and rape, Denny jammed the folds of his scarf two fingers deep down into the girl's throat. The men rolled the girl over onto her stomach and looped the zip-ties over the girl's wrists. She lay there motionless, heaving her lungs through her nose, her head face down in the pillow.

“What do we do, Bill?”

“Quit saying my fucking name.”

“We've already said them. She was watching the whole time.”

“Then we find the safe, Den. Make sure she can't get the gag free.”

Denny put his hand on the girl's back, heaving up and down, and with his other shoveled more plaid into the girl's face beneath the pillow.

Bill was in the closet, pocket knife out, cutting a large, square swatch of carpet from the farmer's floor. The flashlight in Bill's mouth did its job so well the floor revealed itself to have no safe but only well-worn, wooden-planks, and Bill turned it off in jealousy – the light had accomplished its goal.

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“You told me it was a sure thing, Denny. A sure fucking thing, and here we are standing with our dicks in our hand.” Bill calmly looked at Denny, “Ask the girl where the safe is.”

“What if she doesn’t know?”

“Is that what I said, Den? *Make* her tell you something. I’m grabbing the wife’s jewels and we’re getting the fuck out of here, you damned fool.”

Denny could see the form of the young girl through the sheets. The fabric was thin cotton and made a statue out of the backs of her thighs, her tied hands - triceps to shoulders. She was the lost, cotton sculpture of Pompeii, and Denny saw a loveliness in her distress, the minutiae of terror seared into the brain - and, as far as he would dare, he wanted her like that forever.

“There isn’t a safe. I’m going re-tie your hands in front of you so that you can move, enough to escape, after we leave.”

He grabbed the girl’s wrists, flipped to the blade his multi-tool, and popped the zip-tie with a single, swift motion. Her arms went slack, to her sides, and Denny rolled her body over onto its side as a lifeguard does to let the victim vomit. Denny had anticipated a reaction – the reeling from his touch, the quiver of her breath, or the Stockholm-syndromed acceptance of his caress. He pressed two fingers to the artery in her throat, he could feel the small peach hairs of her still warm chin, but no pulse. He moved his hand up to her cheek and lifted the girl’s head, angled it, so that he could look into her eyes. A void, she was dead and gone.

“She dead, Bill. The girl’s dead.”

“What do you mean she’s dead, Den?”

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“She choked on the fucking scarf and suffocated in the pillow, Bill. She’s fucking dead.”

“Grab the scarf and the zip, Den.”

“What about the girl, Bill?”

“We’ve got to leave.”

“What about the girl, BILL?”

“We’ve got to leave, Den.”

Denny pulled his scarf out of the young girl’s mouth. The moisture from her breath was still alive and held within the strings of fabric and Denny could feel the deep wetness on his palm as he carried the scarf back to the van and threw the cloth next to his feet. Bill started up the engine and backed out of the culvert with the headlights off.

“Did you find anything, Bill?”

“Wife’s box of jewelry, some silverware, the farmer’s watch, and some petty cash on top of the fridge. No. I didn’t find anything.”

The air in the van was thick, earned in the destruction of innocence. There was a breeze and Denny thought he could smell sandalwood in the night. The scent made him nauseous and he stuck his head out the window to feel the air around the van rush over him, the wind blocking out any noise between himself and his past and the road. He looked over at Bill staring off into his own darkness and thought about Liza and figured it wasn’t such a bad thing to be killed by someone who loved you - knowing how fucking terrible you are. Denny checked his eyes in the side mirror seeing wetness and wind evaporating the tears before they reached his nerves. He brought his head and hand inside far enough to scratch an itch that had been spreading from his foot slowly and steadily

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towards his calf. He reached down only to grab a handful of cold, wet cashmere that had snared itself into a knot around his ankle.

**Author's Note:**

*Inspiration: I can't say that anything good inspired this story. If we're being honest, and we are, you could probably hang this one on some of the usual suspects: jealousy, insecurity, the need to craft wild metaphors in language to avoid simply telling someone what is on your mind – all are decent candidates.*

*Intention: I wanted to practice style. This story began as a challenge to write a piece that was entirely written in dialogue – both a fun and futile method of practicing subtext – and I had never written a story in which a character dies before (something I felt, and still feel, is incredibly difficult to avoid falling into some author/sadist, reader/voyeur trope) and you can't just kill people willy-nilly. Hence the poor attempt at magical realism with the scarf, I needed something inanimate and vicious because I couldn't physically write out the main characters becoming violent.*

*Literary influences: I've recently been reading Blaise Cendrars, translations of early, still-writing-in-Russian Nabokov, and John Fante. Richard Brautigan, Phillip Ó Ceallaigh, John Kennedy Toole, Etgar Keret, Aleksander Hemon, Celine, Ken Kesey, Carson McCullers, Burroughs...the list won't stop really.*

**BIO:** *Joseph Cruse is a writer, an actor, a bad painter, and an even worse English student – he is, easily more, a lot of nothing and everything. When not getting into trouble, he explores New Orleans, sprays graffiti scenes of movies onto canvas, and finishes a Masters in Composition and Rhetoric in Lafayette, LA. His other short story work has also been featured in Phree Write and Viewfinder Magazine; while small spacklings of poetry can be found at Cacti Magazine and W.I.S.H Press.*

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## Five Excerpts from *Insect People*...a work in progress.

By Rich Ives

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Elegant conceptual structures arise in this extraordinary biosemiotic collage where insects and human beings, each assuming characteristics and qualities of the other, pupate into a new, synthetic reality that is a lateral equation to our own space-time experience. We love experimental writing because of the myriad artistic opportunities it offers. But though the parameters are extended it takes that much more skill, more understanding of the possibilities of craft, to create something of literary substance instead of word goulash. In these excerpts Ives's talent is writ huge and given monumental ambition. His antithetically directed springboard imagination, his idiosyncratic artistic vision and the translucency of his impossibly beautiful prose result in a superlative reading experience that we think is bull's-eye and beyond. Quote: One woman claims she birthed several hundred eggs in June, and Lucas asked her to wrap them in two or three greenish cocoons, which she did. Then he asked her to weave a nursery web for two molts until the children fleshed out and dispersed. No one really believes her story, but many comment on how many youngsters look like Lucas. And this pyramidion sentence all of us wish we had written: 'Right now I think I'll head down to the riverbank and forage a bit, kick back a little flotsam, smoke a little jetsam, but you never heard me say that.' Five stars.*

### Failed Terrorist Interrogation

#### *Migratory Grasshopper*

Let's start with the pods, Marcus. How do they survive the winter, and why so much invested in the "eggs" in them? And you're erratic to boot. Why only two in some and a hundred and twenty in others? We've watched your partner inserting them around the crown areas and the roots.

*I believe you can observe that I'm medium-sized, blue-green and a little reddish in the hind tibia. What makes you think I intended that?*

Why, Marcus, do you travel the United States and southern Canada but avoid Texas and Florida?

*A breeze stirs the air to departure. I'm like a curator. Some exhibits are self-evident.*

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Why do you travel so much then, and visit abundance?

*The leafless broomrape perhaps, or excessive dim-witted growth progressions?*

What does your partner have to do with your travel patterns? Why is she so reluctant to speak?

*His self-knit sweater was paused with lint, as if he had been kept in someone's pocket.*

What do you think happens to the "eggs" when you abandon them like that? Don't you realize they cannot all survive?

*Breakfast babies are meat before they're born. You just have to wait for birth and predators to choose the survivors.*

Back to the pods, Marcus. What are they made of? How do they send messages to your compatriots?

*Which of these questions have anticipated themselves? Which answers have something more to say?*

No, the pods, Marcus. What are they?

*You arrived at them before you left. The crown areas and the roots. Begin.*

## Fallen Leaves

### *Raft Spider*

Swamps and peat bogs harbor the "cunning," the "fringed" Lucas. He's working out in the hinterlands. His "boxing gloves" are built in. He was born with them, and he learns to use them as he grows. It's a painful bite.

Down at the pier, he dangles his legs on the water's surface and waits for the prey. He's learned the motions that attract the larger swamp fish. His feet are so wide and flat and his body so light and fit that when dinner arrives to check out his teasing motion, he can launch himself on the water and "run" a ways along the surface to get to it. Then he dives in and heaves the prey out of the water. When he's down there he has air bubbles trapped in his hairs he can breath, and he can stay under a long time. Some say he hides underwater in aquatic vegetation for up to half an hour.

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Lucas is a smooth one. He shakes his legs one at a time to attract a female. He can transform the same masticating limbs he eats with temporarily into mating organs. Some people say he's only a tall tale, but some have seen him, and the women tell the story with flushed faces.

One woman claims she birthed several hundred eggs in June, and Lucas asked her to wrap them in two or three greenish cocoons, which she did. Then he asked her to weave a nursery web for two molts until the children fleshed out and dispersed. No one really believes her story, but many comment on how many youngsters look like Lucas.

If you smell the undersides of fallen leaves when they're slick with several rains, you know the swamp. Turn them over and soon they become only another toy for the wind, but in the swamp, turning something over makes it even more swamp. It's the kind of intimacy a taxidermist knows.

If you'd ever lived here, perhaps you might insist on another life, but some find that other life right here. You can certainly see what's in a few of those faces, and it can't last, but some things don't die in a straight line.

## Family

### *Common Flea*

I have seven brothers and only four of them can face me. One is so similar I believe he mocks me and has influenced the other three, who also mock a brother. Both of my parents are short and less flexible. Thanks to taking opposite sides, we accomplish more. We still sleep in the same bed with a chosen parent. What holds us apart also holds us together. If one is a thief, then we all are. If one is an insult, he rises up alone. But if one is challenged to a fight, we curl up and attack from two sides. If two are bound together, it is called a wound, if three or four, a fin, or a paw. If all eight of us are bound, the game is like a prayer, and our parents lie on top. If one brother is lost, a false one may take his place, but if we are all but one lost, the perpetrator is easily found. His punishment wouldn't match the crime unless he has already received it.

Yes, we frequently act without thinking, but just as frequently think without acting, so how can we know what directs us to reveal our purpose, a purpose without equal or apparent cause? Twenty different versions of our story lie on human beds, each one feeding, as an adult, on the tale's blood. We have no wings but we can leap a hundred and fifty times the length of our bodies. Imagine, if you must, a standing broad jump of a

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quarter of a mile. You would call what we do reaching an acceleration twenty times that of the Apollo moon rocket. We don't think of it that way. We're busy and ordinary. We're very itchy.

Pierce the skin, suck the blood. It's that simple. Bites are attractively clustered in groups of two or three, especially around the delicate ankles and legs. Each of us carries an elastic protein, called resilin, and lives in a tough, hardened shell, called an exoskeleton. The top and the bottom are flattened, side to side, for the obvious reason of easier travel among the hair trees.

My host travels and hunts, and I've learned from these forays that my relatives preferring rabbit homes have managed to coincide their own cycles with the rabbit's birth cycles to give their children more choice of habitation upon the baby bunny hosts. The children, I admit, are clever and disgusting, spinning sloppy sticky cocoons that dust and dirt adhere to. Haven't you ever noticed what you might call a "sudden infestation" when you move into an empty apartment. We call it a "housewarming." We're willing to share the host's space. Don't be afraid of the Oriental Rat member of the family who spread the Bubonic Plague. He's only a messenger. Nobody believes he did it on purpose.

## Farmer Alphonse Decides to Rotate His Crops

### *Alfalfa Looper*

Gaubert and Solange seemed gray. Usually their demeanor had a peculiar brownish tone to it, accompanied by pale gestural markings and an occasional silver spot, but today they appeared gray. The children were eating cabbage and other low-lying succulent plants. It was all they could reach. They looped along in their distinctive childish fashion that seemed so delightfully unique. Gaubert could hardly believe it when Solange said she had heard there were other children just like them and apparently all throughout the country and beyond although there were said to be subtle nuances, and a few didn't even seem to be their kind, despite the way they motored along in that distinctive loop. Solange had heard it was hard to tell the difference. She didn't believe that at all. All this talk of the larger world made Gaubert despondent and even grayer. She hadn't touched her cabbage. Their little corner of the garden was probably just like millions of other gardens too. Why bother?

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Then one day while looping along, Gaubert came upon an idea that looked a lot like cabbage, but it was not. It tasted like something new and fresh and you could nibble on it one day and the very next day it would be back looking just like when you first found it. Actually it was more an attitude than a plant, and when Gaubert looked around himself more carefully, he realized even those who knew of the larger world were eating it, and suddenly he was very very hungry. They circled the idea with their looping progress and soon they were right back where they started. The new idea tasted different, but it was cabbage wasn't it?

Just because your parents are French and were named after a plant you've never even tasted that probably doesn't even exist, it doesn't mean you can't be happy with cabbage although there was indeed a tiny little twitch like a hitch in their looping that continued to disturb them. Once they even spoke of it. They decided they didn't believe their parents' folktales. They were probably really just another Susan and Robert in the endless cabbage patch beside the old farmhouse and what would be so awful about that? Turning gray and making up stories was just a part of old age, wasn't it? Even the farmhouse was doing it though they couldn't quite understand its language. They assumed its stories were about other farmhouses, but there was really only one and it certainly hadn't been anywhere more interesting than right where it was.

## Fatherhood

### *Caddisfly*

I built the cabin in '47 but I only live there in the summer. Crosswise logs. It's got the lake on two sides. Sometimes I wish I had a camper I could take with me wherever I wanted to go that made me feel like that cabin does. I kind of got carried away. It was supposed to be movable. At first I thought I was going to make it out of stone and cement on a platform with wheels, but I kept thinking about more space inside. One night I dreamed I made it out of silk and carried it on my back, across the lake, on the bottom. A huge lake trout was watching me. I think I must have been moving suspiciously or he would have gobbled me up.

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I crawled around all over the logs getting them to fit right. I made a little model that looked like a horn. I really don't know what that was all about. It wasn't anything like what I ended up with. What was I thinking? It carries you away, you know. All you need is a few sticks and leaves to set your mind to wandering.

While I was walking across the lake bottom, I thought of just setting the thing down right there on the bottom and living like that in the sand. That made me think about snail shells. And then I thought about making several little house sleeves right there, long and thin and smooth, like fingers made out of silk. I could spin nets to catch passing insects and crayfish and snails and live on that, little crustacean snacks. Something weird about it just made me think that if I swam to the surface, I'd be able to fly, so I did.

No, I don't mean I really was a fly, but I could fly anyway. You've probably noticed I'm kind of a hairy guy, and I had hair all over me coming out of the water, even on my wings. It was dark, nighttime, and I was fascinated by the lights on the shoreline.

That's all I can remember. Now go ask your mother where she wants me to put that gelatinous string of eggs she made. There must be a thousand of them little buggers. Right now I think I'll head down to the riverbank and forage a bit, kick back a little flotsam, smoke a little jetsam, but you never heard me say that. You ever want to know what it means to be a hero in Iceland, you just tell your mother somethin' I told you not to tell her.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I began the growing work by writing flash fictions that forced me to contain more in a shorter space with the behaviors and differences in species of insects as the character development starting points. As I wrote more and more of these, I found myself using character names to help provide clues to the personalities of the insect people that were appearing, and I concentrated on their differences. The complete work is five 530 page books, a quintet, and I had to spend a lot of time considering and using differently from story to story the widely varying names of the characters. More than 3,000 appear in the completed work and the styles for each needed variety in both style and theme development. I spent nearly ten years building it in stages. Each volume took me to a different part of the main character's (Irwin) personality as filtered through a different family member. While Irwin wrote all the stories, and they very slowly reveal his deeper reality and development, each volume also views him from a different family member's perspective until the final volume returns to Irwin's point of view to reveal what he has learned and changed about himself by writing the stories. The style influences are from numerous widely varying sources, with both poetry and foreign writers included, to help expand the range of what I needed in the changing functions of the story parts to develop such a lengthy character study of a complex man.*

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1. **BIO:** *Rich Ives has received awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, Artist Trust, Seattle Arts Commission and the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines for his work in poetry, fiction, editing, publishing, translation and photography. He is the 2009 winner of the Francis Locke Poetry Award from Bitter Oleander and the 2012 winner of the Thin Air Creative Nonfiction Award. His books include Light from a Small Brown Bird (Bitter Oleander Press--poetry), Sharpen (The Newer York—fiction chapbook), The Balloon Containing the Water Containing the Narrative Begins Leaking (What Books--stories) and Tunneling to the Moon (Silenced Press--hybrid).*

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# THE GRAVEDIGGERS' REDEMPTION

By Veronica Leigh

*WHY WE LIKE IT: When we first started reading 'The Gravedigger's Redemption' we thought 'just a little, please', and then, as we found ourselves drawn deeper and deeper into the lives of the characters, we couldn't get enough of it. This is American heartland writing and the wine-sap of small town values, local colour and folk language runs powerfully through its veins. The story is told through shifting viewpoints and a community of voices, wonderfully realized—especially those of the Widow and Missy-- a device Faulkner famously used in As I Lay Dying. What we especially love is Leigh's use of homespun 'plain speak' which sounds like a snap but is sooooo hard to write convincingly. 'You shine up like a bright new penny.' And '...he could talk the hind leg off a mule.' Her descriptive prose is an exercise in envy (ours)... I shuddered as I crossed the threshold of the church, fearing that the roof might cave in. Or that God might strike me down with a bolt of lightning because I dared to enter his House. Neither happened and I shook more hands than a crooked politician as I made my way to the Walker pew.' Five stars.*

## THE GRAVEDIGGER'S REDEMPTION

1931

**Oren Nelson**

I used my balled-up handkerchief to mop the sweat off of my forehead and I sighed.

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*Lordy, Lordy, how Preacher Burns can go on when he gets in a tangent.* Then again, he never could hear himself speak because those lips of his was flapping wide open. Preacher Burns reddened with each passing second, reminding me of an over ripened tomato, squishy on all sides. The hot air pluming off the river and the hot air from his mouth wearied us all.

As the proprietor and funeral director of Nelson Funeral Home, I was accustomed to long services in varied degrees of weather, as well as being confined in my customary three-piece suit. But on the thermometer on the mom 'n pop store spiked past 90 degrees and it wasn't yet mid-morning. I wasn't the only one swaying on jelly legs.

*He is nowhere near finished.* I muttered a curse under my breath. Preacher Burns' eulogy for the Colonel had shifted into a full-blown Altar Call. Everyone was gathered to pay their proper respects for the last Union soldier alive in the valley. A man known only as the Colonel since he was mustered out of the army, his Christian name had been long forgotten. Rather than a tribute, what we got instead was a sermon. Because the Colonel was an unabashed heathen and croaked unexpectedly, Preacher Burns was determined to rescue the remainder of the lost souls from the fiery pits of hell.

The Colonel's Widow hadn't budged an inch since she stationed herself by the mouth of the grave. She peered into it, her careworn face wearing an impassive expression. Wholly devoted to her husband, she was of the generation that never betrayed their emotions. In her black mourning attire, she was sure to wilt like an aged rose, shrivel and end up by her husband's side before the day was out. *Yes siree*, I bobbed my

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head in silent agreement. If Preacher Burns tarried too long, we'd all have to gather to bury Widow – nee' Mrs. – Jones tomorrow.

*There's no two ways about it.* Someone would have to go up and accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. It would be the only way to put an end to Preacher Burns' rambling. I was hard-pressed to find a heathen amongst all of the God-fearing folk though. However, there had to be a lost sheep amongst the flock.

My eyes darted to the old gnarled sycamore tree where young couples were known to carve their initials into its bark. I spied Leroy Shirely, pressed against its trunk, stealing a nip from a flask he kept tucked into his back pocket. Known in the valley as Leroy the Lush, he'd gone off to the Great War a good man and come back a drunk. Prohibition be damned, he found libations one way or another. From quarrels to stealing, to hoaxing us by riding a borrowed cow at midnight down Main Street, he was a lost sheep if ever there was one. A lost black sheep. Unable to hold down a real job, Leroy had the occasional occupation of gravedigging. Digging holes was all he was good for and it was the only reason he was in attendance today.

I approached him, breathing through my mouth rather than nose because he reeked of spirits and stale sweat. "Say Leroy..." I pinched my nostrils together and continued in a nasally whisper, "Do you want to earn a dollar extra?"

"Rather earn two more," Leroy harrumphed and jammed the flask back into his pocket.

A grizzled man, what hair he had left was dark, peppered by gray. His beard hid half of his mottled face, which was for the best. Leroy's bulbous nose was always reddish

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from his drinking and his sharp eyes were dark, but the color was muddled by blariness. He would never be good looking, but he could have been decent like other folks. Instead, he preferred to run around in raggedy, ill-fitting clothes and bathe once a month whether he needed it or not.

“Fine, fine.” I stuck my hand in my suit pocket and fingered the crumpled bills. I had already promised him a dollar to dig the Colonel’s grave, which also included the labor of filling the hole again. But he had me over a barrel. “Go up there and accept Jesus as your savior.”

“Say what now?” Leroy cocked his head to the side, his tone much too boisterous for the service.

I brought my finger to my dry lips and shushed him. “Unless someone goes up there,” I hissed through gritted teeth, “Preacher Burns will carry on until the cows come home, and Widow Jones will drop dead of heatstroke.”

Leroy the Lush cast a glance at Widow Jones and I swear, a look of pity crossed the man’s face. Even a drunkard such as he had respect for the Colonel’s widow.

“Go on now, if you want two dollars more.” I tugged the three dollar bills out of my pocket and waved them, to tantalize at him.

“Yeah, okay.” Leroy shrugged and leaned his shovel against the tree, he heartily pumped my hand until I wrangled it out of his meaty grasp.

I grappled for my handkerchief and wiped my hand clean.

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The mourners gasped as Leroy the Lush ambled up to Preacher Burn's side, to ask Jesus into his heart.

Nudging my spectacles back up the bridge of my slick nose, I thanked God that the service would only go on a few minutes longer and Widow Jones's life would be spared.

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### **Preacher Burns**

It's a rare phenomenon for me to be rendered speechless, but when Leroy Shirely bounded up, waving his hand, crudely shouting, "Preacher, I want to repent of my sins," I was dumbstruck. In all of my years of ministry, I had never been able to convert a drunkard. The good Lord knows I tried, but men like Leroy Shirely prefer wallowing in their transgressions the way hogs wallow in their excrement.

The Colonel had gone through a war too, but at least he was a good man and came back a hero. How a war could twist a man like Leroy Shirely into something so foul was beyond my imagination. Especially when he had the Colonel as an example. A prince of amongst men, the Colonel was esteemed, having served his country for four long years and for participating in Sherman's March. Much as I revered the Colonel and his memory, he refused to come to church and died a sinner, damned for all eternity. In good conscience, I couldn't allow another soul end up in hell, and knew that I had to use the Colonel's funeral to further the gospel. A few complained of the heat, but they would be grateful to escape the fiery heat of hell if they were saved.

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I preferred to reach the good souls. They were easier to deal with than a soul like Leroy's. Leroy and his kind never took religion seriously. After the cow-riding incident, I visited him in jail and asked if he'd like to find Jesus.

*Leroy threw his head back and howled, "Didn't know Jesus was lost."*

He wasn't laughing now. He is penitent, dropping to his knees. Head bowed, the crown of his balding dome reflected a blotchy, white gleam. Ugly as sin, he could beautify his heart, but never his homely face.

"Repeat after me," Bracing my palm on his head, I instructed and led him through the customary prayer of repentance. When we had more time and he was presentable enough for a ceremony, I would baptize him.

I felt the Holy Ghost stirring within him, filling his heart with godliness, chasing out the demons that gnashed their teeth and trembled in the presence of the Almighty. Lifting my hands in praise, I blessed the Lord's Name for saving this wretched creature. Wholly satisfied with fulfilling His pleasing and perfect Will, I ended the service in a short prayer and dismissed everyone. The believers rejoiced, for a new brother in Christ had been welcomed into the fold.

The mourners began to disperse, Owen Nelson signaled to Leroy Shirely that he too could go. But I was nowhere near through with him. I grabbed Leroy Shirely by his yellowed shirtsleeve before he left.

"Leroy, the angels in heaven are celebrating now that you are one of us." I reminded him, shutting my Bible and pressed the Good Book to my chest.

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Leroy blinked his confusion and scratched his scalp with his dirty fingernails. “Oh, right.” He cracked a saucy grin and winked. “There’s a real shindig going on up there, huh?”

When he exhaled, I smelled the foul odor of alcohol on his heavy breath. Whilst a new believer, the demon liquor still had a hold on his soul and the devil wouldn’t cease in his attempts to regain the ground he lost. Leroy’s soul was fertile soil and must be tended to diligently. He had a flask on his person, I knew it to be true. Leroy never left home without one. To let him go on like that, it would be detrimental. It’s the Christian duty of older believers in Christ to help the new believers along. If we neglect them in their crucial time, they will fall back into their sin. If we shirk our duty, it would be better to shoot the new believer in the head than to allow him to fall by the wayside.

“Hand it over, Leroy.” I held out my hand and wiggled my fingers, “C’mon now. Turn it over to Jesus.”

With an aggravated huff and a roll of his eyes, Leroy tossed me his flask. Knowing what was to come, he looked as mournful as Widow Jones did during my eulogy.

Uncorking it and pouring its contents onto the cracked ground, I consider hugging him right then and there. But since he stank to high heavens, I decided to wait until the following Sunday to show him the extent of my brotherly love. Hopefully by then he would have taken a bath.

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## **Widow Jones – The Colonel’s Widow**

I stirred and rolling onto my back, I thinking on the events of yesterday.

*Widow Jones...* I was once known as Zillah and I had been known as Mrs. Jones for nigh on for six decades. But on losing my man, I was newly christened Widow Jones. Names were surely a funny thing. Take my husband – the whole valley knew him as the Colonel. He was the one who enlisted the second the South succeeded so’s he could fight for the Union and he rapidly rose up in the ranks, proving his bravery during Sherman’s March. He was hailed a conquering hero when he returned, despite the fact he couldn’t grow more than peach fuzz on his cheeks to save his life. But I knew him back when he was simply Willie Jones, the boy who stole my hair ribbons and carried them on his person during the war, as good luck charms.

I praised the Lord when Leroy the Lush...when Leroy Shirely came forward and repented of his sins. Sure, I was happy he wouldn’t go to hell. But I asked God to doubly bless him because he put an end to Preacher Burns’ longwinded sermon. Preacher Burns was trying to scare the hell out of all the mourners by reminding them that the Colonel they dearly loved, had not been a believer and was now being tormented by the devil.

Fool man. The Colonel couldn’t stand Preacher Burns and that was why he refused to set foot in church. On Sunday mornings, the Colonel worshipped God in the privacy of our parlor.

*Leroy Shirely deserves my thanks.* God alone knew how long we would have been there, the stagnant humid air dissolving us into puddles of sweat.

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I rose and dressed, then filled a large tub full of water. I began heating a kettle and waited in my rocker on the porch till Leroy sauntered by. A creature of habit, he did not disappoint. Every morning, I watched him go east – on his way to find some liquor - while I read the Good Book in my chair. A pang of guilt seized me cause I never tried to befriend him before.

The short, squat fellow stopped in his tracks when I called out to him, beckoning him like a wayward child. “Leroy Shirely, you come here.” I quirked my finger.

“Ma’am,” Leroy doffed his cap and mounted the steps. “Sorry for your loss. The Colonel was a great man.” He dropped his head and hunched his shoulders.

“Thank you kindly.” I nodded, appreciating his thoughtfulness. Rocking forward in my chair, I stood and gestured for him to follow me into the house. “Come along now, I have something for you.”

He trailed after me, pausing a few times. I motioned for him to continue after me, until we reached my bedroom. I went to the chifforobe in the corner, took out an old suit, and laid it before him on the bed.

Leroy gave me a blank look.

“This was my son’s.” I ran my thumb along the shoulder and sniff loudly. “My youngest boy, he never came back from the Great War.” Thirteen years had lapsed since my boy Dan had gone missing and I never gotten over it. Never would. “I was older when I had him and he nearly died at birth, so I always had a soft spot for him. Never

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knew precisely what happened to him. For the longest time I believed that he'd find his way back to me."

Leroy nodded knowingly. His large dark eyes, the only beautiful thing about him, were watery. He might have been the only one who understood my pain, because he had fought in that same war. Saw the same things Dan saw, been to the same places Dan had been.

"You have his build." I observe and nudged the suit towards him.

"Ma'am, I couldn't." Leroy held up his dirt encrusted hands and backed away.

"It'll hang in the chifforobe and the moths will rot it out." I reached out and clutched his weighty shoulder. His muscles twitched beneath my fingertips and I wondered how long it had been since somebody willingly touched him. "Listen, you're beginning anew. You need to find a real job and you can't do that unless you look proper."

Filthy was a kind way to describe Leroy Shirely. The man's leathery skin had not had a good scrubbing in years.

"But you see, I'm not..." His lips twisted and he shook his head. "Worthy."

I sighed. Leroy didn't have to say it, I knew what he meant. He didn't think he was worthy to wear the Colonel's son's clothes. The whole valley put the Colonel on a throne and paid homage to him like some god. Little did Leroy – and the rest of the valley – know that the Colonel had come back from the War Between the States a different man. In those days, newly married, we kept to ourselves. For the first three

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years, he was broken. He drank, had troubles finding work, and would wake up screaming from terrible nightmares. The Colonel overcame the first two, but he never could shake off those dreams. The lives he took, the deaths of his fellow soldiers, the destruction of Georgia – it stayed with him to his dying day.

“Stuff and nonsense.” I waved Leroy off and I knew I was doing the right thing. If my boy Dan came back a broken man and I wasn’t around to help him, I’d want some other mother to take him in hand. “You were in the Great War and survived. Its high time that you, the real Leroy Shirely, come back to us.”

Leroy clamped his hand over his mouth, lest he let out a garbled sob. I sensed if he could hold it in until he made it to the kitchen, that’d be for the best. He’d preserve his manly pride, and there’s no better way to heal your soul than to have a hot bath when you’re sad.

I picked up the suit and ushered him into the kitchen. “Now, there’s a tub here waiting for you.” He stood idly while I draped the suit over one of the chairs and added the heated water to the tub. “Go on now.”

I left him and waited on the porch. The swell of his cries fills the air, but I didn’t disturb him. *He will come out when he’s ready.* I decided. To keep myself occupied, I folded my hands and sent up a prayer to Almighty to comfort Leroy. Now that the Colonel was gone, my days in the house were numbered and I’d have to make plans of my own. My children were coming later, to discuss my breaking up housekeeping and which child I’d move in with. I’d miss the house I spent six decades in, but I’ve come to realize that nothing endures but change.

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An hour passed before Leroy emerged from the house and stood before me, trembling. I smiled, which inspired him to give me a grin. His skin and hair were several shades lighter and with the new suit on, he was no longer ugly. I couldn't lie and call him handsome, but he was a new man, and whether he knew it or not, he was on his way to being happy.

I edged forward in my seat and he held out his arm and let me lean on him as I got to my feet. "You shine up like a brand-new penny." I declared, patting his hairy cheek.

"Thank you, ma'am." Leroy nodded obediently. "I'll try not to let you down."

"You'll do just fine." While he was short, I was even shorter, and I rose on my tip toes and planted a kiss on his cheek. "Now, don't be a stranger. Come back and visit me."

When I pulled back, I noticed the tears welling in his eyes. "I will. Thank you, ma'am." Leroy rasped.

I watched him make his descent down the steps and quit my property.

My heart soared when he retraced his path and went west, for I knew he was not going to get a drink now, but to begin again.

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### **Missy McMasters**

I plopped down on the bank's steps and waited for Daddy while he did business inside. He didn't like for me to come in with him. Not because I was bad or anything, but

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because the bank men were nasty towards Negroes. Daddy didn't want me hearing their bad words.

Chin in hand, it wasn't long before I started to cry. Daddy had an accident a few weeks before and hurt his leg and now he couldn't work our farm like he used to. I heard Momma and Daddy talking about it the other night and they didn't know what they were gonna do. If he couldn't work in the fields, we couldn't sell our produce, and then we couldn't pay our bills. Momma was crying and she never cries so I knew it was bad.

I dragged my wrist against my cheeks to sop up the tears and sniffed loudly.

No one stopped except a short, ugly white man in a suit. He looked familiar, but I couldn't remember his name. But like the whites who stayed with the whites, we stayed with our own kind too. The only white person I knew was Miss Walker who learned me my lessons. Well, we did know the Colonel, but he was dead so he didn't count no more.

"You all right?" He studied me and looked relieved when he saw I wasn't hurt. "Here, look up." He stuck his fingers behind my earlobe and plucked out a penny.

I gasped and thanked him when he handed me my prize. "How'd you do that?" I asked.

"Magic." He said with a flourish of his hand. "My name is Leroy."

"I'm Missy." I said and wondered why was being so nice to me. I still couldn't figure out where I had seen him.

Leroy sat down on the step I was sitting on, leaving a space between us. "What are you sad about?"

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“Daddy hurt himself and he can’t work.” I answered, my eyes burning and my cheeks wet again. “Momma says we could lose the farm.”

Times like these, everybody had it bad. We weren’t any different, but Daddy said we were luckier than most. We had a nice house and good land we had been able to hang onto since the Stock Market crashed. White folks tended to hate on us cause we had better than they did and they believed we ought to “*stay in our place.*” They told us so many times. It was only since Daddy’s accident that we didn’t know how we’d make ends meet. Daddy tried to hire someone, but no white man wanted to work for a Negro.

Leroy nodded. “I don’t know much about farm work, but I need a job.” When he turned his head and his forehead scrunched, I figured out who he was.

He was the fella that came to Jesus during the Colonel’s funeral. Daddy, Momma, and I weren’t welcome to join the other mourners to pay our respects. We stood off aways and put flowers on his grave after the others left. My Daddy knew the Colonel for years and used to work for the Colonel until Daddy got land of his own. The Colonel was always good to us and gave me peppermints whenever he saw me. He’s the one who paid for Miss Walker to come learn me, because I wasn’t allowed to go to the public school. He wanted me to have schooling too.

I brought up a finger the way Momma did when she had an idea. “Ain’t you the one who digs holes for dead people?”

“Yeah.” Again, Leroy nodded and added, “I need to do something else.”

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Right then, Daddy hobbled out of the bank on his crutches and loomed behind, his large shadow fell on us.

Leroy scurried off the steps and onto the sidewalk.

Daddy screwed his face into a snarl. He couldn't barely walk, but he was a big man, twice the size as Leroy, and his muscles bulged when he moved. "Can I help you?" He asked, his voice deeper than usual.

I scrambled up and latched onto Daddy's hand, tugging on it. "Daddy, he needs work." Though it wasn't polite to point, I thrust my finger at Leroy.

Leroy gulped and crossed his arms over his belly.

"That a fact? Heard talk about you." Daddy jutted his chin at Leroy and it made me wonder what other stories there were about Leroy. Maybe Daddy heard that Leroy knew all sorts of magic tricks. "You came to Jesus at the Colonel's funeral. You're the gravedigger." My Daddy squinted, his coal black eyes burning a hole through Leroy. "Well, I don't begrudge you none, but I have my wife and little girl to think of. Won't have someone causin' trouble."

My mouth swung open wide. I was surprised. Daddy never talked to white folks like that, else he'd get into a whole heap of trouble. I didn't know what Leroy could have done that was so bad. He came to Jesus, he was nice to Negroes, and he showed me a magic trick, and gave me a penny to stop me from crying.

"I understand." Leroy nodded to us and turned on his heel to walk off. "Thank you anyway."

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Daddy's fingers tightened around mine. "That it?" He called out to Leroy before Leroy could get two paces away. "Mr. Shirely, if you give up that easy, you'll never find a job. Not in these parts." Daddy let go of my hand and hopped down the stairs, and wagging his finger at Leroy, he warned, "You have to swear to me that there'll be no drinking on my property and you won't come in soused. And my cows are not to be ridden."

*He rode the cow!* I let out a high-pitch squeal and slapped my hand over my mouth when Daddy glared at me. Momma didn't want me hearing about the cow rider, but the whole valley talked of it when a cow was ridden down Main Street at midnight.

"I will swear on a stack of Bibles, you have my word." Leroy vowed, holding up his right hand.

"Be at our place tomorrow morning, crack of dawn." Daddy ordered, sounding more like himself. He motioned me over and I jumped down the steps and went to his side.

"Thank you, sir." Leroy shook Daddy's hand, which was something else that never happened. White folks didn't like to touch Negroes.

But it made me think, that if Leroy had done things that folks didn't like, then maybe that was why he was being nice to us. He was an outsider too.

"Everybody deserves a second chance." Daddy stated.

The knot in Leroy's neck got bigger when he swallowed and I held out the penny he gave me in my palm, thinking it might keep him from crying too.

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“Will you show me more magic tricks?” I asked.

“Yeah, if you’d like.” Leroy grinned and shook his head. “Go ahead and keep it.”

Daddy and me watched as Leroy turned and moseyed off, whistling a tune.

I couldn’t wait for Leroy to come work for us, that way he could tell me how he rode the cow.

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### **Elsie Walker**

Missy McMasters was in a chatty mood the whole morning but finally settled down enough to tend to her schoolwork. While the Colonel was gone and the McMasters couldn’t afford to pay for my services, I continued to teach Missy McMasters on weekends. No child should suffer from lack of an education merely because others were prejudiced. A sweet girl, her thin, gangly limbs had the habit of knocking into people and things. When she spoke, she whistled through the gap where her two front teeth should be. Twin dimples make pinpricks in her cheeks.

While my pupil studied, I wandered to the window and peered outside, in time to see Leroy Shirely shuffle onto the McMasters’ property. Since his come-to-Jesus moment at the Colonel’s funeral, he hadn’t fallen off the bandwagon or been late for his job once. Gone was Leroy the Lush - a new man took his place. One that never reeked of spirits, one that bathed regularly, and one who was always respectful and honest.

Sighing aloud, part of me hoped the old Leroy’s untamed spirit was still in there somewhere. The old Leroy was the one who defended me from school bullies back when

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we were school chums, using his fists to give black eyes and busted lips to those who made me cry. The mousy, birdlike, four-eyed girl evolved into a mousy, birdlike, four-eyed woman, and was still poked fun of for being a spinster schoolmarm. More than once Leroy came to my defense, chasing off my tormentors who likened me to an owl. The old Leroy was the one who left bouquets of flowers on my doorstep for my birthday. I never knew for certain that he was my admirer, until Missy McMasters confessed the other day that she had witnessed him do it.

Nothing had ever been declared, though. He suffered from his demons from the Great War, and I remained dedicated to teaching my students. He always tipped his cap to me when he passed me on the street, as though I were some great lady. Hope abounded within my heart that he might call on me. Then I understood that I would have to be the one to do the pursuing.

I excused myself and rushed out the front door, following him to the barn. “Mr. Shirely, wait!” I called out, lifting my skirts high enough to run and catch up.

“Miss Walker!” Mr. Shirely spun around and whipped off his cap respectfully.

“Mr. Shirely...” I smoothed down my mussed skirt and patted my upswept hair, flushing for setting propriety at naught. “I heard about the Altar Call and your new job. I congratulate you.”

“Thank you, Miss Walker.” Leroy ducked his head bashfully and studied the tops of his boots rather than meet my gaze.

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My two front teeth sank into my lower lip. “I was wondering, would you like to sit with my mother and me at church this Sunday?” I clasped my hands together and tried to temper my enthusiasm. “We would love for you to join us.”

Leroy slowly raised his head, looking sheepish. “Miss Walker, I’m not what you think I am.”

My heart clenched tightly in my chest. Part of his troubles was that Leroy was eaten up by guilt for whatever happened during the Great War. Rather than show him an ounce of compassion, we looked the other way. I was just as guilty. I could have ignored what the others thought and helped him. Only now did I feel brave enough to do the right thing.

“Mr. Shirely, unless you can read my thoughts, you have no idea what I’m thinking.” I drew in a lungful of breath and placed my hand on his muscular forearm. “Let me tell you. I think you’re a good man and I’ve always believed that. Even when you rode that cow down Main Street. I’ve always liked you.”

“No one’s ever going to forget that one, are they?” Leroy snickered, his chortles went all the way down to his belly and made it jiggle. It has been ages since I have seen him look so happy.

“I’m afraid not.” I shook my head as I joined in on his laughter. “So, will you join us?”

Leroy’s shoulders slumped and he reminded me of a child when he kicked a rock loose from the dirt. “Yes, Miss Walker. Thank you.”

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“See you Sunday.” It dawned on me that I was still touching him and I drew back my hand, my face warming under his soft gaze.

“See you then.” Leroy promised, jamming his cap back onto his head.

He turned and sauntered towards the barn.

I headed back to the McMasters’ and noticed Missy in the window, waving at me before dashing back to her school work.

I was beaming, feeling truly happy for the first time in years.

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### **Leroy Shirely**

I shuddered as I crossed the threshold of the church, fearing that the roof might cave in. Or that God might strike me down with a bolt of lightning because I dared to enter His House. Neither happened and I shook more hands than a crooked politician as I made my way to the Walker pew.

Oren Nelson was the first to stop me. He winked at me as I pumped his pasty white hand. “Thanks again, Leroy.” He mumbled low enough that only my ears could hear and understand. He alone knew the truth and he wouldn’t tell a soul.

I moved onto Preacher Burns. He shook my roughened hand and hauled me into a brotherly hug. “Welcome to the family, son.” He released me and clapped me on the shoulder. Because to him I was clean inside and out, I no longer disgusted him.

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Before he could talk the hind leg off a mule, Widow Jones squeezed in between us, brushing the minister aside. Widow Jones angled her cheek upward and tapped it. I pressed a gentle kiss there. Again, I thanked her for her gift and she invited me to visit her this week, which I eagerly accepted.

My heart sank a little, because it seemed after jawing with those three, that I should now be jawing with Missy McMasters. The church might welcome in a sinner like me, but they'd never welcome a good family like the McMasters – Negroes - to worship amongst them. None of that seemed fair.

Wearing the suit that belonged to Widow Jones' son, I was determined not to make any sudden movements, in case I tore or soiled it. Mrs. Walker, a hawkish looking lady, primly nodded to me when I sat beside her daughter.

And Elsie...she beamed at me like I hung the moon. A thin, tall, willowy creature, she reminded me of a doe, wide eyed and innocent. I had loved her forever, but I never deserved her company before. But now, I could strive to be a better man and win her heart properly.

I never meant to take the wrong path. When America entered into the Great War, I enlisted along with my other buddies. I wanted to be a hero, like the Colonel. But the bloodshed...it changed me. It was never the dying, it was the killing. I killed men. Many men. And when I got home, I drank to forget about it and drink ruined me.

It's not every day a fellow gets a second chance at life. Truth be told, I wasn't sure that I was a Christian. I went up during the Altar Call, knelt before Preacher Burns, and I repeated the prayer solemnly. But I was drunk as a skunk, so I didn't know if that

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counted. Since then I hadn't touched a drop of liquor, I was clean, employed, and belting out "Bringing in the Sheaves" like a good believer. Something changed inside of me that day at the Colonel's funeral. Folks called me "sir" now. No one's ever called me "sir" before in my life. People looked me in the eye and made a beeline to shake my hand. Like I was finally worth something.

The collection plate was passed to me and I fished the two dollars out of my pocket that Oren Nelson paid me for going up during the Altar Call. Tossing them in, I decided it's better the church has them. Whether I was Christian or not, I couldn't make money off of Jesus. After all, I wasn't Preacher Burns or one of those faith healers.

Casting a bashful smile at Elsie, I reached for her hand and our fingers laced together. I was no longer a gravedigger or "Leroy the Lush" who rides cows down Main Street at midnight.

I was simply a man who wanted to live a good life.

## THE END

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *My Dad never wrote much, with the exception of an exaggerated, hilarious story about his sweet little mother. He had a warped sense of humor. However, my Dad was an entertaining storyteller and one of the stories he used to tell was of someone he knew who worked for a funeral home. During one of the funerals, a long-winded minister was giving a "Come to Jesus" sermon that lasted for a couple hours and the funeral director approached this employee, offering to pay the employee if they'd go up and receive Jesus as their Lord and*

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*Savior. The funeral director wanted to move things along, and probably prepare for another funeral.*

*I don't know what the employee did, but I thought the incident would make a comical story. Being raised in Indiana and believing my home state needed more literary representation, and raised on stories of the Great Depression, as well as influenced by Harper Lee, Kathryn Stockett, and Margaret Mitchell – I wrote “The Gravedigger’s Redemption.”*

**BIO:** *Veronica Leigh has been writing ever since she was young, but didn't take the craft seriously until her aunt invited her to join a writers workshop she was leading...a writers workshop for senior citizens. Veronica has been published in a number of anthologies and magazines. She makes her home in Indiana with her family and furbabies.*

*She is a regular contributor to the blog Femnista, I had an essay published on GoTravel.com, and I have guest blogged on The Artist Unleashed. My fictional stories have been published in Page & Spine, Dark Moon Digest, Alban Lake Publishing, and I will be eventually published in the Sherlock Holmes Mystery Magazine.*

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# THE HIGHEST SEAT OF A FERRIS WHEEL

By Vince Barry

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *The celebration of language turns this story based on the true account of a brother/sister suicide into a literary event. Through dense, impressionistic prose we are given a poignant glimpse of their heart-breaking last hours. Dialogue is confined to trivial utterances, mostly opaque in meaning, a device that emphasizes their isolation. Barry is a signature stylist. His wildly rich prose gleams with sonic lyricism and Joycean abundances—almost reaching the point of private language. A masterful tale by a superb wordsmith at the top of his form. Quote: 'Toy, at the mechanical chime of the Wi-Fi enabled smart doorbell, "Would you mind, dear One---?" then double quick, before Lucky could say, she aladdinized the lyrical, light voice of Astaire into the spare and serene chords of Satie. Five stars.*

## The Highest Seat of a Ferris Wheel

"Usage," Lucky said flatly over "the tick, tick, tock of the stately clock," and from Toy, brushing back a lump of disordered, though

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picturesque yellow-tinted grey hair, "What about usage, dear One?" Then directing a troubled glance at the teeming candy and nut serving bowls by House of Hampton she wondered, "Why bother?"

They were having drinks, Lucky and Toy, martinis, elegant and dark for the occasion and shaken in Bond fashion, beside the fireplace of red and orange of their terraced townhouse with tessellated entryway and long kitchen design and legato wall sculptures—mostly Jeré: "Birds in Flight," "Continuity," "Raindrops," such as.

"Well," Lucky went on, "have you noticed—have you?—" *"Have I?"* Toy thought, with a tint of sarcasm, her midnight blue suspiring eyes shooting Lucky a short, ironic look when she answered, "'Noticed'?"—"that people, that-that they say today— have you noticed?" Then, muttering between his teeth, "Today say they—," mouth opening, a slight suffusion spreading over the glaucous pallidity of his long, lined face, "—are you listening?" Lucky continued. "Always, dear One." . . . Then a space filled with:

Night and day you are the one  
only you beneath the moon or under the sun.

Toy, at the mechanical chime of the Wi-Fi enabled smart doorbell, stirred, and, viewing no outside activity, said with a tense

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melancholy, "Would you mind, dear One—?" then double-quick, before Lucky could say, she aladdinized the lyrical, light voice of Astaire into the spare and serene chords of Satie. . . . "Ah," instantly broke from Toy, and a smile played across her well-chiseled face as "Trois Gymnopedies" filled the room of pleasing sard light falling from silver accent lamps on myriad garniture, mostly floral and hand painted delft, interspersed with the occasional Baccarat crystal piece and several white ceramic lidded vases with lattice design that could be urns. . . .

Of the ever-increasing pauses that punctuated Lucky's speech: "Thoughtful," Toy desperately clung to, even "well-considered." Still, she'd admit, if pressed, they had become—what? "marked" perhaps? . . . And yes, now and then, here and there, every once in a while, "uncomfortable," though certainly not—"embarrassing" . . . yet.

Of her own: They were too fresh to say. . . . Only to muse, abstrusely, of a pause: "What is it, after all? A lull? . . . a stay? . . . a breathing space?" . . . But never, "A free and easy silence," though "spare, undifferentiated, inert" had, of late, occurred to her, of Lucky's face. Of her own—"conscious, confidential, with a lurking pathos and hardening lines"—she'd never own, nor that at dawn the trembling of time more and more sent her back to sleep, on the heart side, blank of memory.

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It helped, somehow, to sort them out, the pauses. She couldn't say why, any more than of "what dreams may come, when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, must give us pause," that had begun to roll and echo in her head. True, she'd once taught—in the long gone growling past—. Still, why *this* soliloquy? . . . Who—who whoever's reaching it was, she'd come round in lucid moments to likening to her own reach to lay hold, in vain. . . . Lucky's? Well, Lucky's pauses she assayed more akin to "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow." And now this sudden fixation with Fred. "What next—" she puzzled, feeling slightly muzzy, "infatuation with Ginger and Eleanor, Rita and Cyd?"

At the smart doorbell's second chime, Toy again took the call, though this time in a vertiginous fashion with ebbing expectation. The video feed showed no one at the front door.

"Well," Toy sighed, squirming a bit in her corner of the blue velvet two-person Chesterfield sofa. Then, again, "Well?" this time inquisitively, and from a nonplussed Lucky, "Well what?" "You were saying?" "'Saying'? Me? I was saying?" "Asking." "Me? "'Asking'?" "A question, about usage?" . . . "Aah! Of course, usage," Lucky said with a hard smack to his high worry-scored forehead. "Please don't do that, dear One," Toy said. "You nearly knocked off—."

Lucky removed his black topper with blood red band, and he dabbed sweat beads from his clouded brow with a white cocktail

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napkin of linen-texture finish with embossed in purple the monogram "L." Toy, for her part, fumbled for Brite Eyes II—her normally water-clear grey eyes, of a sudden, sounding, not feeling, *sounding* like despairingly flapping wipers across a dry windshield. (She hadn't yet discovered Brite Eyes III.) Then from Lucky a loose laugh following an impulsive, "'Heaven I'm in heaven,'" sung over Satie's oscillating chords and quarter notes.

Toy sat still in the soft light under shut lids and mulled, "How long will scorn be enough?" To surmount she meant their fate. And again, of scorn and fate, "How long?" she mused on.

Of "dear One."

Precisely when they'd come to call each other "dear One" Toy couldn't say. But if pressed, possibly, she might venture or invent, "One night it was," embellishing with, "somewhere on 52nd Street— perhaps at the Three Deuces? the Onyx Club?" As for Lucky, well, it could have been when Toy was filling the candy dishes an hour or so ago.

About their hypocoristics, however, Toy might, perhaps, tell you, "Lucky so-named me because he once said I made him speak and come to life, as in *Pinocchio*. Imagine." And further boast, or not, that she in kind, years later, on a whim named him "Lucky" because his given name was Westley, the charmed farm boy

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become gallant hero of—well, Goldman's *The Princess Bride* she'd not likely recall, notwithstanding a strict regimen of ginseng and Gingko, not to say acetyl-L Cartinine, and, of course, the anti-stress mineral magnesium—the blood-brain barrier busting magtein, actually. Lucky? Well, Toy had long since— suffice to say "a while" it was since Toy had shared any nostrum with dear One. Not, mind you, that Toy didn't care. She just didn't see any point any longer. "It's too late now," she self-confessed, like the observation of a mute, always with wet worried lips soundlessly parted, as Lucky's pauses turned to lengthening shadows cast by the certainty of a crushing fate—"and forever will be."

Toy sipped her drink, thoughtfully, meditatively, before adjudging emphatically, "This is not Bloom London." "Tanqueray," Lucky owned meekly.

A grateful and forgiving pause followed before, from Toy, a cheek kiss, which Lucky received in a subdued happy lassitude with, "Yes, yes, as if out together dancing cheek to cheek." Toy answered with the ghost of a smile, slow and smug, at both her percipient taste and peck, and said, "What about it, dear One?" She meant "usage," and to bar any misconstrual, added, "Language usage?"

"Oh, well, it's just that—" "Yes?" "—nowadays—" "Yes? What about language usage nowadays?" Then another of those—well,

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call this one—what? “pregnant”? Yes, yes, “pregnant” will do nicely, before Lucky delivered, as it were, “—people today don’t say, have you noticed?—” before again breaking off, abstractedly,—though “hotly,” “sullenly,” “crossly” crossed Toy’s mind as she held her breath and nervously fidgeted before Lucky rescued her with, “—to one another—,” and Toy, on an exhale, “Nowadays?” “Yes, yes,” from Lucky, on the rush of a deep breath, “nowadays.” “And why—?” “Oh,” lightly from Lucky, “no reason.” “Hmm,” from Toy with another easing sip, “reason enough then, dear One,” and again shifted, Toy did, on the damson settee, so that her legs were sealed and bent slightly to the right, feet crossed at exposed ankles reaching out from a zombie corpse dress, that perfectly complimented Lucky’s high hat, red tie, and tattered tails.

A long space, a sepulchral quiet really, as though respecting, as the poet might say, “the descent of their last end,” Lucky and Toy, pale and fragile as porcelain, indulged, before Lucky’s voice cleaved the silence.

“Have you noticed, dear One, that in the past—” “‘The past’?” “Yes, the past.” Then, sufficiently mulled, from Toy, “As in ‘days of old’?” “Oh, no, no, no,” Lucky abrupted. “Not back—” “That far?” “Though,” Lucky allowed, bridging his fat-fingered hands, “of course, yes, yes, of course, back in the day, so to say, but I mean closer to—” “‘Hitherto’?” Toy broke in helpfully, this time smartly

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ignoring the chime of the eldritch smart bell. "Hmm," Lucky weighed, then, with a nod, "'hitherto,' yes, yes, I suppose 'hitherto' will do. Thank you, dear One." "Good." Reassured, Toy sighed and said, "Then that's settled," before a wide pause before a suddenly fidgety Lucky said with pique, "'Settled'? You say 'settled'? What is settled?" and added, "This itches," of his dark jester fancy dress costume, and fussed further, like a man whose flesh was in revolt.

Toy said, "What of it?" and Lucky said, "Itching?" "No, dear One, you were saying—" "I was?" "—that hitherto—" "'Hitherto'? Me?" then petulantly, scrunching up his face, "I'd never use—never ever have I—'hitherto'!" "But we agreed." "'Agreed'?" "Agreed about what?" "That 'hitherto' people—had I noticed?" "Noticed what?" "That's just it, dear One, you were asking—" "Yes?" "—whether I had noticed that people hitherto—?" "Aah! Yes, yes, of course, hith-hith—what?" "'Hitherto.'" "Yes, yes, of course, of course, my mind's a sieve—'hith-hitherto' I was saying—" "Yes?" "—that people hith-hitherto used to 'contact' one another?" "Hitherto?" "Yes, exactly, hith-hitherto." "And now?"

Toy sipped and, staring blankly at the puddle of light that the gold glaze table lamp cast over her bare bony ankles, she brooded over why they had agreed to grow old in front of one another. Then on a whim she disabled the internal door chime and said, "They don't keep up, you mean—keep in touch, that it?" "No-no-no," frantically from Lucky, "quite-quite-quite the—" "Opposite?"

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went Toy. "When they do, as you say,—what was it?" "'Keep in touch?'" "Yes!" "What about it?" "About what?" "'Keeping in touch.'" "Aah! Of course. . . .Well, they-they instead—" Lucky ceased brokenly and threw his head and shoulders backward as if taking a blow and moaned, "What's wrong with me?" Then his stiff torso leaned forward and, arms hanging, he stared at the green as oysters Oushak carpet with star-shaped medallions, as if into an irremediable void.

With unruffled aspect Toy brushed off Lucky's frustration with the play of a feeble, deprecating hand that coaxed her spouse upright again. Then, dropping her voice to a murmur, she said, "Of keeping in touch, dear One?" "'Reach out,'" Lucky said in a sad, hollow tone. "'Reach out?'" Toy echoed. Then Lucky went, "Haven't you noticed?" adding, almost pleading, "Surely, you must have—" That's when Toy reached out with an inchoate, nervous longing in her slender fingers for the tall Waterford pitcher resting on their "sanctuary end table" by Hooker, and drained it into her extra large lead crystal martini glass bearing the monogram "TOY."

There they then settled, Lucky and Toy, for a while, a long while, before a recomposed Lucky mused, "A lovely word picture." "'Reach out?'" Toy said dreamily. "Yes, yes, like-like—" And Toy, gazing at Lucky with nostalgia's wan mien, "Two hands to show support or love or help?" "That or . . . ." "To ask or beg or implore

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for the aforesaid?" "Yes, that all." . . . "And," then from Toy in a foggy voice, "why all this, dear One?"

"Well," from Lucky with a soupy sigh, "because Scott—" "Scott?" "He writes—" "Scott?" "Yes, he writes—" "With two t's or one?" a fuddled Toy broke in, and before Lucky could say, "Two—why?" Toy went on, "You mean—whoever— texts?" Lucky wagged his head, and again to Toy's "E-mails?" "But, dear One," Toy fretted, "I thought we'd agreed—" Toy meant they'd agreed, she and Lucky had, at someone or other's urging, that they would—well, "keep up," and they had, in a fashion, kept up, with emailing and texting and that nuisance-ringing door bell, and now this—this intrusion, this encroachment, this-this meddlesome double-t'd Scott!

"He, not me," Lucky said sharply. "Of course, of course," from Toy apologetically, "it is he—this-this twin t'd individual, like-like—" and she reached in her rusted spring of memory for the two t'd literary figure she once was so fond of, but regretfully settled for,— "not you, who writes—this-this, what's his name?" "Scott," Lucky said, and presto, he produced a letter like a playing card up the sleeve.

On inspection Toy appraised the missive handwritten with a fountain pen, not just any—but a, to her best guess, a Waterman. "Possibly, a Sheaffer or Parker," Toy sniffed. But had she, y'know, to

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bet her life, she'd aver a Waterman 52 or 452 with silver overlay. Still, she granted, "Possibly a Parker 21—with, of course, the octanium nib," before opining further, of the stationery, "Positively Alden Grace." Lucky offered no opinion, as he took the letter and began reading:

"Dear Wes—," "Wes'?" Toy remarked, "A charming elision, 'Wes,' albeit a tad vulgar, wouldn't you say, dear One?"

"It has been—" Lucky went on, "Yes?" from Toy, "— a long time since I wrote to you, my childhood friend, though I have had you on my "to do" list to get a letter off— Unfortunately,—"

"To do list" Toy thought, "how quaint," and said as much. "Did this-this," she stuttered, and went on with, "this Scott individual actually say 'to do list', dear One?"

Lucky showed her the letter. Toy scanned it. "Hmm," she said, swept into her own thoughts, "of course, of course, what else of a Waterman?" Then she said, "Did you know, dear One, that a solid gold Waterman signed the Treaty of Versailles?" Lucky met her question with an immense, glassy stare, and Toy thought, "the pale stare of Hecuba," and said, "Go on." "Where?" Lucky asked. And Toy read aloud with a broken voice and tearing Brite eyes:

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“... Unfortunately, I now have a more urgent reason to reach out, and that is to notify you that Blake passed away on Labor Day. I received the news from Cherill DeCherill notifying me of Blake’s passing and also of the passing of Belinda Sahwin on Independence Day.” Of this drollery of departures Toy did not inquire, but steadfastly continued reading: “Lou notified Cherill as soon as he heard the news from Phyllis. Brad tells me that Phyllis has planned a memorial service in Fairmount on September 30th. . . (I know, James Dean. Amazing, I know!). . . Anyway, Lou is going, and I plan to make arrangements to travel to the service. Attached is the obituary. Don’t know who composed it. Cherill, probably.

“Should you care to reach out, Cherill can be reached at—”

Toy’s voice trailed off with, “I hope this note finds you in good health and spirits. At a convenient time for you, I could travel to — coffee or breakfast with you would be enjoyable for me. It has been a while.”

Then, with, “With kind regards,” Toy stopped reading, and handed Lucky an obituary, then a picture, with the extended afterthought, “A—” “photo,” she never said.

For a long while Lucky stared at both with eyes unzipped before finally letting them drop onto the bold octagonal

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centerpiece inlaid with grey agate tiles. Then he said, making a moue, "Have you noticed—?" . . . .

A long silence followed, not free, not easy.

Then, nerves in a clamor, Toy said, "What say some-some more Fred Astaire and-and, say," — she stuttered, swallowing a lump of panic, "Rita Hayworth?"

"'I'm Old Fashioned'!" burst from Lucky with the wild leap of a child's excited heart or a zealot's rapping out an oath, before his lips tightened on a grin.

"Why not?" from Toy, as she swore she could hear still another smart bell's tone, over a smash-up. "With, say," she added loudly enough to drown out both the tinnitus and the head on meeting of a Porsche Spyder and a Ford Tudor, "another Poison Blackberry? . . . It is after all—" "All Hallows' Eve!" burst from Lucky to complete the track of her thought.

With wavering steps and breast aflutter Toy retreated to the delightful conversation area that flanked a craftily concealed bar in the center alcove.

There, busy with crushed ice and scruples, Toy weighed, as if on the highest seat of a ferris wheel, with cold horror and a fearful

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sinking, and, against her ribs, a thumping time-venomous heart, not to say a soul unsure it could any longer brave itself to endure, twenty-five milliliters of ninety-five per cent pure Chinese sodium Nembutal, with just a dash of Dilantin, against, so weighed, "Is it still long enough?" Of scorn, of course, she meant.

end

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *It was a raw, rainy morning, more years ago than I care to remember. I was, at the time, idling over the Sunday papers when a backpage filler caught my eye. A double suicide in Philadelphia, brother and sister. Later that day—I don't know why—I wrote a one-act play titled *Broken Yokes*. Happily, the venerable Wynn Handman at The American Place Theatre thought enough of twenty-something's *Toy and Lucky*, the play's sole characters, to showcase the work at The American Place Theatre. Fast-forward to 2016. *Lucky and Toy* turn up in "Internal Damage," a story published by *The Saint Ann's Review*. . . . Now, after all these years, burdened with the indifference of the soul on the evening of the Great Pumpkin, they're back. . . . If it's true that "all stories, if continued far enough, end in death," something tells me that their story, *Lucky and Toy's*, has continued far enough.*

*You might rightly suspect from this backstory that my earliest literary influences were notable playwrights of the day: O'Neill, Williams, Wilder, Miller. But, here's the thing: It was their stage directions that fascinated me—the detailed and lyrical descriptions of characters found, for example, throughout O'Neill or in, say, Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life*. I didn't know it then but I was really reading, loosely speaking, a novel within a play, presented in an intoxicating mix of poetry and prose whose dramatic effect revealed the "inner person." Ever since, I suppose my taste in literature has listed toward the psychological/philosophical. Thus, James, Wharton, Woolf, Eliot (e.g., *The Waste Land*), and certainly the great literary metaphysician Lawrence Durrell. Speaking of metaphysics, readers familiar with existentialist thought will recognize that at the end of "Ferris Wheel" *Toy* puts to the test Camus's (and hers) exalted stoic apothegm (from *The Myth of Sisyphus*): "There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn."*

**BIO:** *After retiring from a career teaching philosophy, Vincent Barry returned to his first love, fiction. His stories have appeared in numerous publications in the U.S. and abroad,*

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*including: The Saint Ann's Review, The Bitchin' Kitsch, The Broken City, Abstract: Contemporary Expressions, Kairos, Caveat Lector, Terror House, The Fem, BlogNostics, The Writing Disorder, whimperbang, and The Disappointed Housewife. Barry lives with his wife and daughter in Santa Barbara, California.*

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# DO LOOP...

By Paul Smith

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *A marginalized man in a state reclamation program uses an errant computer language to turn his life around. We took this submission partly for the story, partly for the voice. Details of setting and character are painted in skid row hues and the voice is 'plain speak'. 'You could hold a corn cob to the side of his head and he'd probably hear Nebraska calling.' An unflinching self-portrait—like he's looking in the mirror while telling it—strengthened by passages of description so arrestingly beautiful they took our breath away. Quote: 'The building was in a strip mall on the outskirts of Lincoln, a dilapidated, half boarded up line of structures, and vacant through lack of interest, money, ideas and everything else I could see fleeing Lincoln because the city was on life support. The strip mall reminded me of Joe the alcoholic, admitting to total strangers he was a slave to alcohol and grateful to the bureaucrats of Lincoln for salvaging his self-esteem. They should have done the same thing for this crummy strip mall. I went home that night, thinking about my interview prospects in Chicago.' And if that isn't enough, every line of dialogue has been nailed down by a hammer.*

**DO LOOP**

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We started out with group therapy, those of us in the program. There were six or seven of us, all in this session because of problems with the State. There was also going to be a visit to Alcoholics Anonymous. Then, the last step was going to be individual counselling by someone licensed by the State of Nebraska. That was the part I looked forward to the least. We had to complete all three to officially get out of the program. This part wasn't that bad. Everyone here, including me, had the same story, an encounter with one of Nebraska's many police forces that led to an arrest, jail, and now this – the State of Nebraska's attempt to rehabilitate us.

Years ago, when I studied engineering, I was one of the first to learn a computer programming language called FORTRAN. We learned FORTRAN 4, which we were told was a big improvement over FORTRAN 2. Now FORTRAN doesn't even exist anymore. But there was one thing about FORTRAN – the DO LOOP. Our instructor Gary told us that with FORTRAN's punch cards, you could create a logic circuit impossible to get out of called a DO LOOP by giving the computer a command that told it to go to the next step, then another, and then *another*, which was the first step and led to an endless loop like a dog chasing his tail. Of course, this was a big mistake, and we were told to avoid this logic error when using the punch cards. I did like the whole concept of creating a DO LOOP.

Our group therapy session was held in a building near downtown Lincoln. The room was beige. The people, mostly all from Nebraska had been pulled over like I had, driving while intoxicated, or staggering home or something similar. We didn't seem like

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alcoholics. We seemed pretty ordinary. One guy I remember made the comment, 'I can never say no to my mom.' That struck me as a little odd. He was fortyish, had kids. Not a bad guy. I'd left home, had a lot of jobs and wound up here. I was unemployed.

We talked about how we liked drinking. I talked about the bars I'd been in in Spokane, Washington, my last home, in Rochester, New York, my home before that, and other places. We got to know each other. Some Mondays I actually looked forward to the meetings. I couldn't drink. Most of us couldn't because we were on Antabuse, a pill Nebraska prescribed to make you sick if you drank. But just talking about our drinking experiences was fun. Afterward I drove home to my rented house on Anaheim Drive. I stared out the kitchen window onto a golf course where my street dead-ended, and just wondered how I got here.

My main thing now was that I didn't have a job. I'd been fired several months ago for stealing from my employer. I did work as a subcontractor for my company's client, fixing up work my company did wrong on another construction job and charging the client. The client showed my bill to my boss, who fired me. Like drinking, this was stupid. Now I was stuck in Nebraska, wanting to get out, not sure what to do or where to go, waiting for another job. I wanted to go back to Chicago, where I grew up, but wanted a job there before I went. I'd been on the road for about eight years. I missed home. I wanted something familiar.

Another thing I remembered from school and home in Chicago was the religion courses they taught at my Jesuit prep school. They talked about 'syllogisms', logical arguments.

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Our priest, an aging Jesuit said there were always two syllogisms, a main one and a secondary one. Taken together they proved something – the existence of God, the proof of original sin, whatever. He said that every syllogism had to be based on some foundation. He used an analogy, saying that each ‘link’ of logic would go to another ‘link’ but that at some point the links had to go somewhere, like to a solid wall or foundation. They couldn’t just go to more links. Kind of like a DO LOOP.

My life up to this point just went to more and more links, jobs and traffic tickets, and now I had to satisfy the State of Nebraska I was clean or I would be kept in therapy. I went to the Lincoln courthouse and took an Antabuse pill three times a week under the supervision of a pony-tailed technician who made sure I put the pill in my mouth and then watched me swallow it down with a paper cupful of water from a drinking fountain. He looked to me like an ex-alcoholic himself.

One night I guess I was really down at our Monday meeting. The guy who couldn’t say ‘no’ to his mom promised me a job doing something. So I was happy. He was somehow involved in construction. He said I could start the following week, which would be our last meeting. On the final meeting, he reneged. That really brought me down. The next day I sent out my resume a new, different way. It didn’t have my Nebraska address, but had a friend’s Chicago address. My previous DO LOOP experience sort of sparked this idea. So the contractor in Chicago I sent it to thought I actually lived in Chicago. My friend forwarded the message. This was in the days before cell phones. A phone was a black rotary dial thing that never left the wall in the kitchen. I kept my fingers crossed.

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If things worked out I could ditch Nebraska and their police and their counsellors and their Antabuse.

I went to the Alcoholics Anonymous meeting they promised us. A guy got up and said, 'Hello, my name's Joe and I am an alcoholic.' Joe was a short pathetic wimpy-looking guy about fifty, who looked like a real-life alcoholic. I couldn't picture myself being him twenty years from now. The building was in a strip mall on the outskirts of Lincoln, a dilapidated, half boarded up line of structures, and vacant through lack of interest, money, ideas and everything else I could see fleeing Lincoln because the city was on life support. The strip mall reminded me of Joe the alcoholic, admitting to total strangers he was a slave to alcohol and grateful to the bureaucrats of Lincoln for salvaging his self-esteem. They should have done the same thing for this crummy strip mall. I went home that night, thinking about my interview prospects in Chicago.

Next up was the individual interview with the State counsellor, who lived in a farmhouse outside of Lincoln. The counsellor was a smug, comfortable, educated guy who drank tea and sat in a rocking chair while we talked. He sat in front of a window where the Nebraska sun shone over fields of milo and sorghum. He was a dyed-in-the-wool Cornhusker. You could hold a corn cob to the side of his head and he'd probably hear Nebraska calling. I faced him. The sun and the sorghum were in my eyes, nearly blinding me. I smelled pigs somewhere too.

"Why do you like drinking?" he started out.

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“It goes in your bloodstream. It makes me feel good.”

“It makes you feel good? Does it suppress your inhibitions?”

“I guess so. I feel livelier.”

“Do you meet other people through drinking?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes I’m really quiet. Other times I feel like socializing and talk to people.”

“So drinking is fun!” The counsellor’s eyebrows shot up.

“Yeah.”

“Hemingway said that ‘opening bottles all the time’ is what leads to problems.”

I corrected him. “Hemingway didn’t say ‘problems’. ‘Drunkard’ is the word he used. Hemingway always thought it was solitary drinking that made drunkards. That’s what he meant.” I was offended by this hayseed referring to Hemingway. What did this hillrod know about Hemingway? Hemingway was from my neck of the woods-Chicago.

He frowned. “Do you like solitary drinking?”

“I often think about the next bottle when I’m polishing off the one I’m on.”

He nodded and asked me to keep talking.

So I told him about a habit of mine called ‘making the world old with my eyes’. He wanted to know more about that. “Sometimes I sort of squint my eyes and make the

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world old and crummy looking. Buildings suddenly became dilapidated and people looked ugly. I saw everything as being run-down and seeing my future in a ruined world. I saw everything spoiled when I drank and now I'm starting to see it when I'm not drinking. Now I think if I have a drink or two the world won't look so bad, so I do that. It doesn't help."

He said he looked forward to discussing this at our next meeting. I didn't, though. He was getting too close to something deep and remote, something I protected, something invisible in group therapy, where I was diluted by the presence of others. I didn't want to sit in the glare of this bumpkin's licensed intellect, sitting in his rocker, judging me for all my mistakes.

The next thing he said floored me. "At our next meeting I want to bring over a friend named Joe to talk with us. You'll like Joe. You have a lot in common. I think you'll find it really helpful."

That did it. I looked forward to never seeing him, his crummy farmhouse and Lincoln, Nebraska again. That went double for Joe. I drove back to the main road on Mr. Counsellor's gravel driveway, leaving behind the milo and sorghum and cornfields and the smell of pigs.

Driving back to Lincoln I thought of the resume I sent to Chicago, thought about syllogisms the Jesuits taught me, and the farmhouse. I started reasoning. If the Jesuits

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could string syllogisms together and come up with the existence of God, I could use them to predict my future. It went like this:

MAJOR SYLLOGISM: All mortals drink

MINOR SYLLOGISM: All men are mortals

CONCLUSION: I drink, therefore I am

When I got back to Anaheim Drive there was a message from my friend in Chicago. The Chicago contractor called his phone number. I was supposed to call him. So I did.

“Hello,” he said. Then there was a silence. “You here in Chicago? The line has some static or something.”

“Yeah,” I said. “We just have a bad connection.”

“Um,” he said. “You working? I see you were in Lincoln, Nebraska.”

“Not anymore. In Chicago now.”

“It says here you’re an engineer. Want to come in and talk? We’re an old-line Chicago company, been here for years. We need some new blood.”

At the word ‘old’ my eyes began to squint as I looked out my kitchen window onto the golf course where Anaheim Drive dead-ended. I had stared out that window almost a year now at old, crummy Lincoln, Nebraska. The air was still. Nothing stirred.

“Sure,” I said. “Anytime.”

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“Tomorrow, then. You got our address, right?”

I said I did. It was around five hundred miles. I could make it by daybreak, maybe even with enough time to see my ‘friend.’

“Sure is a lot of static. Is it windy where you’re at?”

“Lincoln? Yeah, it is, very windy.”

“Lincoln? Lincoln, Nebraska?”

My tongue stopped dead in its tracks. What had I said? “No, Lincoln Avenue, by New Greentown. Near Lawrence, you know.” I guessed the Greek restaurants were still there. I forgot where I was and where I was supposed to be.

“Don’t get up there much from Orland Park. See you tomorrow.”

We hung up, agreeing to meet tomorrow at ten. I needed some clothes, some gas and some adrenalin for the long night drive.

I needed one more thing, though – a change-of-address card. I already had change-of-address cards from Rochester to Spokane and then Spokane to Lincoln. Now here was my plan. I would get one more, this time forwarding my mail from Lincoln back to Rochester. If anyone from the State of Nebraska, or anyone I owed money to, came looking for me, they would get trapped in an endless DO LOOP of changed addresses. The letters would get re-circulated ad infinitum from Rochester to Spokane to Lincoln

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and back to Rochester, etc. If things worked out at my interview I would slip out Nebraska's back door and slip back in again to get my things.

With a song in my heart and a change of clothes in a duffel bag I headed out on Interstate 80 at dusk, flying past the pig farms and fields of alfalfa. I squinted one more time passing through Omaha in the dark, over railroad tracks onto a concrete bridge above the Mississippi and to a maze of on and off ramps in Council Bluffs. Were the Olympic Flame, Psistaria and the Presto still at Lincoln and Lawrence? Maybe if you squinted you could see them. Illinois was now one state closer. Up ahead the road looked dark but clear, my eyes making it look crisp and new and promising.

**-END-**

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *DO LOOP was inspired by actual events in my life where I lived in Nebraska, got fired, got pulled over for a DUI, went to rehab. I found so much misery in Nebraska that I decided one way it could never follow me would be to create a DO LOOP of change-of-address cards that would go from Lincoln, Nebraska to Rochester, New York, then to Spokane, Washington and then back to Lincoln. I learned the concept in college studying FORTRAN, an early computer language. There is also some logic I remembered from my Jesuit high school (syllogisms) that I hijacked and put to use to explain my alcohol dependence. This was also a result of my infatuation with the writings of William Burroughs (Naked Lunch, etc.) When I did work again in Chicago, I promised I would never go back to Nebraska. I made no promises about anything regarding alcohol, but have had no more encounters with the law.*

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**BIO:** *Paul Smith is a civil engineer who has worked in the construction racket for many years. He has traveled all over the place and met lots of people. Some have enriched his life. Others made him wish he or they were all dead. He likes writing poetry and fiction. He also likes Newcastle Brown Ale. If you see him, buy him one. His poetry and fiction have been published in Convergence, Packingtown Review, Literary Orphans and other lit mags.*

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# A Funeral in Clugg—Uncle Fart Misses a Possum

By Jim Gish

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** 'Most stories about death are long and wheezy and sentimental. If you are looking for that kind of story which ends with a quote from Longfellow, then you are in the wrong story, so it is best you quit right now and go mow the lawn or go to choir practice.' *We couldn't get enough of this hilarious, cheek in tongue, Trickster-hearted satire where Main Street prose meets home town America. Funerals become absurdly, comically funereal in the author's Mason-Dixon south and the hayseed hijinks are high order entertainment. We also love the 'mosey on down yonda' voice because we know it's one tough motherfucker to write and pull off but Gish was probably born with the words in his mouth. And while it's definitely comedy, it's not comedy that goes nowhere or exists just for its own sake. There's depth in them there grave sites. Y'all read it now, hear!*

## A Funeral In Clugg- Uncle Fart Misses a Possum

His name was Arthur Cudwater, but his father shortened it to Art. His brothers, who had to share the bed with him, added a consonant, and that was how I grew up with an uncle whom I called unselfconsciously Uncle Fart. He didn't mind the name, and I think it gave him a sense of distinction in a family with six other siblings. His life was simple and limited, because, frankly, Uncle Fart was himself simple and limited. Under his picture in the yearbook where other kids' highest aspiration was President and professional baseball player or Doctor, Arthur Cudwater listed his highest goal as Farm Hand . He reached that goal rather quickly and stayed there for life, being the handy man and all purpose underling for George Van Heusen, living in a double wide trailer behind the cavernous Van Heusen barn with Aunt Lilly. They never had children because Aunt Lilly had a nervous condition, and Uncle Fart had a sperm count in double figures, so it all worked out.

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This story of a funeral in Clugg is not about Uncle Fart's life but his death. Most stories about death are long and wheezy and sentimental. If you are looking for that kind of funeral story which ends with a quote from Longfellow, then you are in the wrong story, so it is best you quit right now and go mow the lawn or go to choir practice.

It was, coincidentally, from choir practice that Uncle Fart and Aunt Lilly were driving that fateful night, according to Aunt Lilly, who enjoyed the drama of the accident and the funeral and several consecutive nervous break downs so much that I felt bad when Layton Peters thumped down the last of the mud around Uncle Fart's grave. Paradoxically, Uncle Fart's death was the high point in Aunt Lilly's life and you could tell by looking in her eyes that she would do it all again in a heartbeat. For eight days, she was in the hospital waiting for Uncle Fart to die, and this furnished her with lots of doting relatives, much consolation and teary remembrances of all his fine points which were tough to come by under normal circumstances. But since he was dying and hooked up to an IV, and several other monitors, everybody either remembered something endearing about him or made something up. It was all the same to Aunt Lilly. She just loved being the center of attention and having nerve spells and fainting and being awakened, and, well, feeling important, being in the spotlight, which is something you don't get a lot of chances at living in a double wide behind a barn and spending your day in the garden or at Odd Lots, trying to get TV dinners on sale for 99 cents.

But I have gotten ahead of myself.

It was a Friday night, and the Enraptured Lamb of God, Unaffiliated, was having choir practice, led by Pauline Peckinpaugh with her high, squeaky, intense voice, and those big hanging down pockets of fat on the bottom side of her arms which flapped around obscenely as she waved her hands, pretending to quiet the baritones and encourage the tenors, although, strictly speaking, nobody paid much attention to her.

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Aunt Lilly and Pauline had a small disagreement about the word "succor" which Pauline insisted on pronouncing "sucker" giving it a flat nasal quality which does not lend itself to hymns. Aunt Lilly was tired already, and in the middle of the debate, she called Pauline " a fat, evil Nazi bitch" which , not unsurprisingly, rubbed Pauline the wrong way. Pauline collapsed into a heap, and while three other women were washing her face with a wet washcloth, Aunt Lilly hiked on out the door of the church, jumped into the pickup where Uncle Fart was snoozing and said, "Get me out of here, Art. Get me home before I kick her fat ass up between her elbows."

Uncle Fart was having a dream about Nona Bishop, the nineteen year old blond who worked at the Dairy Queen, and it was a jolt to come out of that fantasy where she was French kissing him like she had invented some new form of dental floss to find a homely woman like Aunt Lilly cursing like a sailor .

According to Lilly, they were both saying sharp things to each other, and Uncle Fart was driving "way too fast" when they came upon the Drudge Boat Ditch bridge just as a mean, ugly possum with green, shining eyes scuttled across the road in front of them. Uncle Fart had always hated possums because he had been bitten by one in the hen house when he was twelve, searching for eggs under an over turned crate. Instead of slowing up for the narrow one lane bridge, Uncle Fart put the pedal to the metal and swerved to try to get the possum before it reached the safety of the ditch and the undergrowth .

The pickup went out of control. Uncle Fart yelled, "Sweet Jesus" which Aunt Lily later interpreted as some kind of last minute religious experience, although I have never bought that for a second. The pickup slammed into the bridge abutment and then flipped over twice and landed upside down not five feet from the water. When Aunt Lilly came to on that God forsaken back road, Uncle Fart lay just outside the car, and the

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possum which he had tried to kill was gnawing flesh off the bridge of his nose, having already scavenged two of his large calloused digits and found them rough as whit leather. Some people have been unkind enough to see this as a sign from God, that Uncle Fart tried to kill the possum, missed him and then was being eaten by the possum as some form of cosmic justice. I don't think God works that way. I just think the possum was hungry and he saw Uncle Fart as fresh meat. The fact that Uncle Fart was an idiot who killed himself by trying to run over a possum simply was not a part of the equation. The possum did not know it was the meat of an idiot and didn't care. He just cared that his prey was not resisting

Aunt Lilly staggered to her feet, saw the possum eating Uncle Fart's nose and screamed that loud piercing scream which she has been known to do when you sneak up on her and yell boo. The possum took that as a sign that his banquet was over and scuttled off into the undergrowth.

The next few hours were a part of the drama which Aunt Lilly had told countless times and honed to perfection. She held Uncle Fart's head and prayed while the rescue squad came out from Clugg, slowed down a little by the fact that Billy Badger, the driver was a pint deep into some Early Times and had trouble keeping the rescue vehicle on his side of the road.

Aunt Lilly reported that Uncle Fart opened his eyes at one point and said, "You have been a good wife, Lilly. God gave me to you. If he takes me tonight, I will see you at the Golden Gate."

When she related that last part to my Grandfather Buck, he said, "You mean that bridge in San Francisco. He ain't never been in California."

I, personally, have my doubts about that dramatic speech regarding Aunt Lilly and the Golden Gate . I never heard Uncle Fart speak that many words before without

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using the word "fuck" and I never heard him express himself with such poetic eloquence, although he came close when he talked about his fantasies regarding the Clugg High School cheerleading squad and a mythical Wesson Oil Party he intended to invite them to once he won the lottery.

Anyway, the rescue squad arrived and began administering all manner of CPR and various forms of life saving techniques. They whisked the couple away to the Clugg Community Hospital where Aunt Lilly called some of her friends and many of the relatives before they put her in a wheel chair and took her to ICU.

Uncle Fart hung on longer than the doctor expected. He did tell Aunt Lilly that if her husband lived, his brain trauma was severe enough to render him a man "of limited mental capacity." Most of us privately wondered how your capacity could be much more limited than Uncle Fart's already was, and my Cousin Louise said that maybe he would go from being as smart as a big rock to as smart as a little rock, although she wasn't sure how smart little rocks were.

This went on for several long days and nights. People visited the hospital and went home, went to work, dropped by the hospital again, waiting for Uncle Fart to "piss on the fire and call in the dogs" as my Uncle Linnet said. Then, after a week, on a Friday night, Aunt Lilly came down the hall, her shoulders heaving and told us that Uncle Fart was "brain dead." No one had the heart to mention that he was brain dead well before the accident, and we took it as an omen that he had stopped breathing and would no longer be at our family reunions to tell retarded, gay midget jokes or sit on the front porch in the swing, talking about how much he hated the New York Yankees and indulge in bouts of flatulence which brought tears to your eyes and caused Aunt Rainey who was visiting from the rest home to look around at us suspiciously and say, "Who shit hisself?"

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Well, Aunt Lilly brought her sister Gladys in from Hopkinsville where she was a psychiatric nurse, and they commenced to plan Uncle Fart's funeral. My father stopped by two or three times to offer his assistance, but they thanked him for his concern and hustled him out the door.

My father was more than glad to give up any part in that onerous task. He and Uncle Fart only saw each other three or four times a year when a grand aunt or great uncle died. They did not have much in common other than a collection of stories from their childhoods which all seemed to end with Uncle Fart screaming out the punchline, "Then I farted."

On the morning of the funeral, we all got up and did our chores. I mowed the front yard and slopped the hogs. My father spent the time from six to ten thirty plowing out beans in the bottomland. At eleven thirty, we all crawled into the '55 Pontiac to drive to the church. Willard Snard was the undertaker at Snard's Funeral Emporium, a kind of silly name which was perfectly in keeping with Willard who was kind of a silly man who wore green bow ties and told everyone to call him "Willie" although no one ever did.

As we drove up, the hearse arrived, and my father hustled off to help carry Uncle Fart into the church. It was a day of heat and humidity which took your breath away. There was not any air stirring, and the Rapture of the Lamb Unaffiliated did not believe in electrical fans which they had decided were "part of the Communist plot to make us weak so we would be ripe for picking when the red scourge surged across America." The upshot of all of this was that the temperature inside the church was nearly 110 degrees, and we looked like what we were, a bunch of fat, white people dying of dehydration.

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The Nehi Sisters, a local gospel group, favored us with two hymns. They were skinny, cross-eyed girls who wore identical orange print dresses and had buck teeth. It was hard to concentrate on the message in their songs because you were sitting there wondering how two girls could look so much like ferrets.

Uncle Joe, who was closest in age to Uncle Fart, got up to read a little tribute, but somehow he had got his notes mixed up and stumbled and fumbled around for five minutes, finally rewarding us with a big, dumb smile and a last reminder, "And the thing we should all remember is that Art would want us to live our lives pure and clean in the light of Jesus." He sat down, thinking that mentioning the Savior was a good way to finish up a botched speech, but most everyone was thinking what I was thinking, that, to the best of our knowledge, Uncle Fart had never cared much for purity nor Jesus and did not have any kind of code he wanted anyone to live up to, having never lived up to one himself. It was a confusing speech but several older men trumpeted "Amen" in affirmation which made Uncle Joe feel better, I hoped.

The regular minister at the Enraptured Lamb of God, Unaffiliated, and the minister who knew Uncle Fart best was Looney Dresbach, but Looney was now in the penitentiary for embezzling ten thousand dollars from Haynes Dry Goods Store where he was a clerk. When the crime was made public after a team of accountants discovered it, Looney came before the church to admit that he was saving his money to go to Denmark because inside Looney Dresbach, there was a woman named Luna who was waiting to come out. Looney intended to get himself some hormone treatments and have a vagina installed and then he was going to pay Haynes Dry Goods Store back when he got a job stripping at the Vixen Lounge up in Paducah. The congregation listened in stunned silence, and then they got up and walked out. Looney Dresbach felt so misunderstood that he walked two miles down the road and hung himself in the old

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Double Log barn with a strong piece of rope. The rope, it turned out, was weak and frayed , and Looney came crashing to earth where he was found and arrested and has since spent his time wearing purple underwear and shaving his underarms and calling himself Luna May Starlight . Rumor was that he intended to marry an Hispanic prisoner named Jose in ten years when they both got out.

The new preacher was named Estelle Norton, and he had come to preach straight from his day job as a sawyer at the Clugg Saw Mill. There was still a little saw dust in his hair, and he seemed to have lost a lot of sleep because while he was musing over the scriptures, I could swear he dropped off for a few seconds.

"Arthur Cudwater was a good man," he told us. "He loved his family and he loved God. I think he is in heaven now, looking down and hoping that his death has taught each and everyone of us an important lesson."

It went on like that for another twenty five minutes, but I quit listening. This man evidently knew nothing at all about Uncle Fart, and, in my opinion, if Uncle Fart was in heaven, he was probably blasting off some good toots just as he did in life. If his death taught us anything, it was that you should not try to run down possums on a narrow road at night when you are likely to run into a bridge abutment and kill yourself. It was a simple lesson.

After Estelle Norton quit lying about Uncle Fart, we all walked up and looked at Uncle Fart being dead and hugged Aunt Lilly. Most everyone said the same thing, "He sure looks natural."

What I was thinking is , "He sure looks deader than a doornail," but I kept that to myself.

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The pallbearers carried him out to the grave. We all sang "Going Down the Valley" and the preacher said, "Dust to dust" and crumpled some dirt into the grave. Aunt Lilly fainted again, but nobody was watching her this time and she pitched right into the grave, hitting that hard wood coffin and knocking herself out. Her dress came up nearly over her head, and you could see all those varicose veins running up into her cotton white panties. It was a vivid image that was hard to get out of your mind, never mind how much you wanted to.

At home that night, up in my room after supper, I thought over Uncle Fart's death, and it came to me that I had spent a lot of time in high school screwing around and getting into fights and pulling pranks and throwing spitwads. Lying in the darkness, the terrible truth came to me. If I did not change my ways, if I did not study and go to college and amount to something, ten years from tonight, I might be living in a double wide somewhere with somebody like Aunt Lilly, sitting around at night, drinking Milwaukee's Best and laughing over my own flatulence. When I died, the whole thing would be just as sad as Uncle Fart's funeral, and everybody there would know that I was just a big zero who had never written a good poem or done a good deed or had not done a damn thing to make the world a better place .

Two days later, I set the curve on a Geometry test.

A week later, I had the highest grade in the three classes on a US History test over Theodore Roosevelt and the Trust Busters.

Two years later, I graduated Salutatorian.

So in a way, his funeral, however pointless and goofy it seemed to be, turned out to be a lesson in life which changed everything for me.

So once a year, I go to his grave and leave a few flowers and I tell him the truth, "Uncle Fart, you did not die in vain."

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And somewhere on that far celestial shore, I hear his answer, an answer which comes wafting back, clear and true, exactly the kind of thing Uncle Fart would say if he had been there, "Who gives a rat's ass?"

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# GOODBYE, MOONFLOWER, Novel

## Excerpt

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The garage had become her workshop where she kept her desk propped against the wall of keys. Beside it, she stashed her only family heirloom: a hollow cello case her grandfather had used for bootlegging, even after prohibition ended. She had filled it with more than fifty locks, all of which she'd learned to pick expertly. There were three car doors mounted to sawhorses near the garage door where she practiced with her lockout tools. She spent her mornings and evenings in the workshop, surrounded by music and the scent of polished metal.

She raked the pins and started working the cylinder. There was time to spare.

## 16

"My father used to tell me this story, like, once every year or so, a story about his father and how he'd killed a Catholic priest in his youth. If you know anything about Honduras, you'd know there are a lot of Protestants, more than in other Latin American countries. My family was part of the Apostolic Network of Honduras. Why my grandfather even knew a Catholic priest from the Yoro diocese, I'll never know. According to my father, my grandfather shot this old priest in the face at point blank. My grandpa, this little *abuelito* type, was dressed all the time in a vest and a tie even in the heat, even in the humidity. He was kind too. Always had chocolates stuffed in his pockets for me. Always had advice. His right wrist was crooked, kind of warped you know. Apparently, he had broken it when he shot the priest. He shot him with an old rifle. One hand. Thing went off and broke his wrist from the kickback. The priest's head split in two. There was blood all over the altar. The nuns wouldn't go near it. They paid a little girl and her mother at the end of the street to clean it up. I think about them, squeezing those rags into the bowls of soapy water, mopping up that 'holy' man's blood."

Lemmie kept both hands on the wheel, paying as much attention to the road as she could.

"Why?" she asked.

"It's just something that stuck with me, part of my family's bizarre life."

"No, why did your grandfather kill him?"

Lucinda paused, then laughed.

"I don't know," she said. "No one ever said why and I never asked."

"How long was he in jail for it?"

"He never spent a day of his life in jail."

There was no one else on the road. Bits of tinted glass from the shattered back window shook loose as she sped over a manhole cover. She cruised past the synagogue and the Vietnamese church, the Meyer Center for disabled children and the dry cleaners beside the sketchy pharmacy with the blinking neon Rx sign in the grimy window. It seemed that the usual landmarks remained in this afterlife. It was odd that so much had changed and yet crumbling buildings and

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piles of garbage were unchanged. She pressed down the gas pedal, charging toward the four-way near the Bi-lo where so many of her dreams took place and the old folk's home that had stood there since the turn of the last century.

White light filled the intersection as if she were driving into the path of an oncoming train. She swerved, galloping over the raised median, then slammed hard on the brake. A terrifying squeal from the suspension; a hundred and eighty degree turn, facing the opposing vehicle's headlights; the scent of burned rubber. The remainder of the smashed window glass lay across the tire marks freshly peeled from the Hankook tread.

A red GMC pickup, revving its engine, backed up to regain momentum.

Lemmie could see a dark cage welded to the front of the grill with three foot-long lengths of girder assembled vertically between the nearly blinding headlights. She sped forward before the pickup could ram into her Ford, scraping its side. She lost her left mirror.

"Who the fuck is this?"

Lemmie barreled down the road, weaving between lanes. She glanced at Lucinda. Her expression was stoic, unsurprised.

"I'm sorry, Lemmie."

"Yeah? Anything you wanna tell me now?"

"Obita set us up."

"No shit," she said, struggling to keep the steering wheel straight. Something had gone wrong with the suspension.

The faded sign of the Oakdale Motel passed by on the right. She strained to keep the Ford from veering into the guard rail as they sped up the bridge. The slaughterhouse emerged from the canopy. The red pickup's headlights filled the European Ford as it crashed into them. The airbags deployed. Her own headlights were crushed into speckled, reflective dust. The hood folded over the side of the bridge.

They were pinned to the seats from the pressure of the airbags.

Lucinda's nose had broken, crushed flat by the airbag. Blood drenched her mouth and chin.

A bullet pierced the windshield.

It was cracked but not shattered.

Lucinda's airbag deflated, allowing her to finally gasp. She had been grazed in the arm. Blood spread across the sleeve of her coat.

A man in a plaid shirt, his face masked by the brim of a Stetson, jerked open the passenger door. Lucinda blocked his wrist with a firm grip, keeping the black gun in his hand aimed at the roof.

They struggled.

She told Lemmie to run.

The redneck overpowered her and shot her twice in the chest. He ripped off her prosthesis and fished the hashish out of her inner pocket.

Lemmie took the opportunity to roll out of the car and run across the bridge.

A small Fiat with blue racing stripes sped up the bridge.

She hesitated for a moment, noticing it in her periphery.

A gunshot sounded.

She caught a bead in the shoulder. Her right arm was paralyzed in a searing pain as if her blood were hot enough to poach her skin from the inside out. She crawled across the asphalt.

Another shot rebounded off the concrete barrier at the edge of the bridge.

She hurtled herself over the side.

The sharp knots and hardened vines of a wisteria broke her fall, shredding her clothes, bruising and cutting her already mangled body. She landed hard on a flat stretch of desiccated earth, then dragged herself into the dark tunnel below the bridge.

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More shots sounded. It didn't make sense. They weren't shooting over the edge of the bridge.  
She lay on her side, nauseous from the pain.  
Welcome to paradise, she thought.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I wrote this novel from the spring to the winter of 2015. It's hard to say whether or not I was the same person then. Two major New York literary agencies were interested in my pitch, but right after sending them the manuscript, their doors slammed in my face. I wrote the scenes in the morning before my grocery clerk job while my significant other kept sleeping. The novel became my dream journal. Every loose image from the night before was worked into the narrative. I based the character off the information I got from a locksmith who helped me get into my car twice (I often left the keys in the ignition). There's a darkness and an irreverence there that I didn't attempt or plan for, and I'm happy with this book. It should be available on Amazon and Barnes and Noble from Montag Press next month.*

**BIO:** *Connor de Bruler lives in Columbia, South Carolina. He is 29 years old. He has been published in FRESH, The Rambler, Litbreak, The Horror Library Vol. 6, Flyover Country, and Pulp Metal Magazine. He is the author of "Chokecherry" published in Fleas on the Dog, Issue 3 (fiction) and the upcoming novel "Goodbye, Moonflower."*

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She took her coffee and phone to the garage and closed the thick door behind her. The Cyclops lock stand was still loaded with the practice cylinder from last night. She sat down at her work desk and took a hot gulp of coffee, then flipped through the touchpad to find the song she had been listening to that morning: Charles Mingus' *Myself When I'm Real*. She paused the song and looked for something harder, something raw. *Moanin'* was good. The saxophone blazed through the notes like an oxyacetylene torch. Mingus was the underdog of the jazz world and, like most underdogs, he was probably better than the superstars. She never understood why jazz aficionados preferred the egotistical minimalism of Miles Davis and the precarious, risky, grandeur of John Coltrane over the sheer perfection Charles Mingus, who could present opulence without pretense and economy without restraint.

The garage had become her workshop where she kept her desk propped against the wall of keys. Beside it, she stashed her only family heirloom: a hollow cello case her grandfather had used for bootlegging, even after prohibition ended. She had filled it with more than fifty locks, all of which she'd learned to pick expertly. There were three car doors mounted to sawhorses near the garage door where she practiced with her lockout tools. She spent her mornings and evenings in the workshop, surrounded by music and the scent of polished metal.

She raked the pins and started working the cylinder. There was time to spare.

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"My father used to tell me this story, like, once every year or so, a story about his father and how he'd killed a Catholic priest in his youth. If you know anything about Honduras, you'd know there are a lot of Protestants, more than in other Latin American countries. My family was part of the Apostolic Network of Honduras. Why my grandfather even knew a Catholic priest from the Yoro diocese, I'll never know. According to my father, my grandfather shot this old priest in the face at point blank. My grandpa, this little *abuelito* type, was dressed all the time in a vest and a tie even in the heat, even in the humidity. He was kind too. Always had chocolates stuffed in his pockets for me. Always had advice. His right wrist was crooked, kind of warped you know. Apparently, he had broken it when he shot the priest. He shot him with an old rifle. One hand. Thing went off and broke his wrist from the kickback. The priest's head split in two. There was blood all over the altar. The nuns wouldn't go near it. They paid a little girl and her mother at the end of the street to clean it up. I think about them, squeezing those rags into the bowls of soapy water, mopping up that 'holy' man's blood."

Lemmie kept both hands on the wheel, paying as much attention to the road as she could.

"Why?" she asked.

"It's just something that stuck with me, part of my family's bizarre life."

"No, why did your grandfather kill him?"

Lucinda paused, then laughed.

"I don't know," she said. "No one ever said why and I never asked."

"How long was he in jail for it?"

"He never spent a day of his life in jail."

There was no one else on the road. Bits of tinted glass from the shattered back window shook loose as she sped over a manhole cover. She cruised past the synagogue and the Vietnamese church, the Meyer Center for disabled children and the dry cleaners beside the sketchy pharmacy with the blinking neon Rx sign in the grimy window. It seemed that the usual landmarks remained in this afterlife. It was odd that so much had changed and yet crumbling buildings and

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piles of garbage were unchanged. She pressed down the gas pedal, charging toward the four-way near the Bi-lo where so many of her dreams took place and the old folk's home that had stood there since the turn of the last century.

White light filled the intersection as if she were driving into the path of an oncoming train. She swerved, galloping over the raised median, then slammed hard on the brake. A terrifying squeal from the suspension; a hundred and eighty degree turn, facing the opposing vehicle's headlights; the scent of burned rubber. The remainder of the smashed window glass lay across the tire marks freshly peeled from the Hankook tread.

A red GMC pickup, revving its engine, backed up to regain momentum.

Lemmie could see a dark cage welded to the front of the grill with three foot-long lengths of girder assembled vertically between the nearly blinding headlights. She sped forward before the pickup could ram into her Ford, scraping its side. She lost her left mirror.

"Who the fuck is this?"

Lemmie barreled down the road, weaving between lanes. She glanced at Lucinda. Her expression was stoic, unsurprised.

"I'm sorry, Lemmie."

"Yeah? Anything you wanna tell me now?"

"Obita set us up."

"No shit," she said, struggling to keep the steering wheel straight. Something had gone wrong with the suspension.

The faded sign of the Oakdale Motel passed by on the right. She strained to keep the Ford from veering into the guard rail as they sped up the bridge. The slaughterhouse emerged from the canopy. The red pickup's headlights filled the European Ford as it crashed into them. The airbags deployed. Her own headlights were crushed into speckled, reflective dust. The hood folded over the side of the bridge.

They were pinned to the seats from the pressure of the airbags.

Lucinda's nose had broken, crushed flat by the airbag. Blood drenched her mouth and chin.

A bullet pierced the windshield.

It was cracked but not shattered.

Lucinda's airbag deflated, allowing her to finally gasp. She had been grazed in the arm. Blood spread across the sleeve of her coat.

A man in a plaid shirt, his face masked by the brim of a Stetson, jerked open the passenger door. Lucinda blocked his wrist with a firm grip, keeping the black gun in his hand aimed at the roof.

They struggled.

She told Lemmie to run.

The redneck overpowered her and shot her twice in the chest. He ripped off her prosthesis and fished the hashish out of her inner pocket.

Lemmie took the opportunity to roll out of the car and run across the bridge.

A small Fiat with blue racing stripes sped up the bridge.

She hesitated for a moment, noticing it in her periphery.

A gunshot sounded.

She caught a bead in the shoulder. Her right arm was paralyzed in a searing pain as if her blood were hot enough to poach her skin from the inside out. She crawled across the asphalt.

Another shot rebounded off the concrete barrier at the edge of the bridge.

She hurtled herself over the side.

The sharp knots and hardened vines of a wisteria broke her fall, shredding her clothes, bruising and cutting her already mangled body. She landed hard on a flat stretch of desiccated earth, then dragged herself into the dark tunnel below the bridge.

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More shots sounded. It didn't make sense. They weren't shooting over the edge of the bridge.  
She lay on her side, nauseous from the pain.  
Welcome to paradise, she thought.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I wrote this novel from the spring to the winter of 2015. It's hard to say whether or not I was the same person then. Two major New York literary agencies were interested in my pitch, but right after sending them the manuscript, their doors slammed in my face. I wrote the scenes in the morning before my grocery clerk job while my significant other kept sleeping. The novel became my dream journal. Every loose image from the night before was worked into the narrative. I based the character off the information I got from a locksmith who helped me get into my car twice (I often left the keys in the ignition). There's a darkness and an irreverence there that I didn't attempt or plan for, and I'm happy with this book. It should be available on Amazon and Barnes and Noble from Montag Press next month.*

**BIO:** *Connor de Bruler lives in Columbia, South Carolina. He is 29 years old. He has been published in FRESH, The Rambler, Litbreak, The Horror Library Vol. 6, Flyover Country, and Pulp Metal Magazine. He is the author of "Chokecherry" published in Fleas on the Dog, Issue 3 (fiction) and the upcoming novel "Goodbye, Moonflower."*

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# CLOSER THAN A DREAM BUT JUST AS FAR

By Eric Mohrman

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *A drunk man, a woman with no love and a snowy evening. These are the basics that dissolve into surrealist frames of powerful beauty in this shimmering narrative within a dreamscape. 'Powdery silence' gives way to bone raw reality. 'she finds him passed out prone on the couch, one arm dangling to the floor, head sideways, mouth agape and expelling some sort of half-gurgling, half-hissing noises like an old demonic radiator.' And everywhere the language--the deep heart of voice—scintillates with spellbinding prose: The clouds look cubist, sharp, ominous. The air is itchy. Ripples set out tentatively over muddy puddles, but quickly become too apprehensive and contract. Even the grass—an anxious green—seems to grow from some compulsion. A ravishing hybrid that settles in the imagination like a mirage.*

## **Closer Than a Dream but Just as Far**

Snow falls in the streetlight and statics the night with luminescence. Staggering drunks swagger and dally in the dreamy dimension between closing time and beds spiraling stilly in the dark. Boozy clouds puff from their mouths. Boisterous shouts trapped bouncing between snowflakes—echoes perpetually diminishing in lost pockets of space, preserving a powdery silence.

Specters  
walk this weather, footprints

form, fill in, and fade  
away, nihilistic little metaphors.

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Gradually, gracelessly, they stumble off the streets into muted rowhomes. Cadent footsteps on steep old stairs accompanied by creaks. Switches click up, switches clack down. Lights turn on, lights turn off. Pupils shrink, pupils dilate and flirt with bursting. Functional patterns of life, blinks in a bleak eternity.

His balls feel abnormally heavy, like cannonballs straining a hammock. Drunkenly trudging up flights of dim stairs is a struggle, but the round ass swaying in his face is motivation enough. He thinks sloppily of biting it. She stops at her apartment door, digs around in her purse, procures keys, unlocks, opens, enters, flicks on a light.

Living room walls painted in smoker's time, stark darkness outside uncovered windows, the carpet much abused by tread and the errant cherries of cigarettes and joints. The floor groans, but seems to provide sufficient support. Around the room, dozens of black-and-white photos sit on tables and shelves, all showing well-dressed torsos cut off at their necks by the picture frames.

She walks into the kitchen; he trails behind with no particular purpose. Dropping her purse on the counter, she stands staring into the sink, captive to unshared thoughts. Stepping behind her, he grasps her dark brown ponytail, lifts it up, and begins gently kissing the back and sides of her neck. The kisses promptly devolve into prolonged wet sucks punctuated by aggressively nibbly bites.

Turning abruptly, she pulls her hair free of his grip and leaves the kitchen, walking into a tiny bathroom with a narrow shower and pedestal sink. He follows and stands obsequiously in the doorway as she unbuttons and unzips her jeans, tugs them

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down over her hips, slides her panties down, and sits on the toilet. She kicks the door closed in his face.

A blush, bluish  
night,

alone in a lush drift with  
soft

edges and hard  
memories.

After a few minutes, the toilet flushes and she emerges. Stepping back into the living room, she finds him passed out prone on the couch, one arm dangling to the floor, head sideways, mouth agape and expelling some sort of half-gurgling, half-hissing noises like an old demonic radiator.

He's in the woods. A hazy dusk, a wincing moon, out-of-tune mosquitoes buzzing all around. With lumbering slowness, trees reach with their branches to nervously pick their own fruit and chew on it. Uneasy, they use their twigs to tweeze their leaves. An unnatural scene of dermatillomania, trichotillomania.

The clouds look cubist, sharp, ominous. The air is itchy. Ripples set out tentatively over muddy puddles, but quickly become too apprehensive and contract. Even the grass—an anxious green—seems to grow from some compulsion. He fixates on an odd sensation in the dirt, which is an extension of his nervous system, and feels pangs in his chest that concern him greatly. Pulsations building in his ears, he becomes

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increasingly sweaty, lightheaded, and unsure. His teeth are crumbling, creating the sounds and sensations of sucking on a mouthful of pebbles.

His lymph nodes force themselves out slowly and painfully through small holes in his skin and land with dull thuds on the soil. Wormly, they wriggle down and disappear into the ground. In years—thousands maybe—they will germinate and develop into unfulfilled urges. His liver spasms and his sclerae yellow at the thought of it.

Sunrise is the eye  
opening, everything is

unfamiliar and jaundiced like a  
birth

from which we do not wake.

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *This story sprouted from an image in a dream: standing in a room surrounded by photos of bodies cut off at the neck. Somehow it merged with a fragment I’d written while reminiscing in Florida—where I currently live—about the almost supernatural atmosphere during heavy snowfalls late at night in Philadelphia, where I lived for a long time.*

*Anyway, I’m influenced by surrealist art and literature, and often add dreamlike elements into my writing, and I tend to get more caught up in creating a certain mood than conveying a narrative. In fact, I’ve always written much more poetry than prose—probably in part because it lends itself more readily to that goal—but I’ve recently spontaneously started writing flash and microfiction, and exploring the potential of blending poetry into prose, as I do in this piece.*

**BIO:** *Eric Mohrman is a writer living in Orlando, FL. He’s the author of the chapbook Prospectors (Locofo Chaps, 2017), and his work has appeared in Gone Lawn, Eunoia Review, BlazeVOX, Ygdrasil, Defenestration, Moria, and other journals.*

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# LAST STAND

*By Mark S. Rosati*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *The lessons of history are in danger of being forgotten in this effectively told short recreated from an actual event, in which a lonely Holocaust survivor is forced to confront the horrors of Nazism. The author creates a sympathetic character in Jozef and the low key, uncluttered prose keeps us focused on the story. As events unfold, we are reminded how the actions of the past can sometimes too easily, if unexpectedly, resonate anew in our own day with disturbing consequences. The poignant last paragraph is a minor masterpiece on how to close.*

## *Last Stand*

By Mark S. Rosati

In the years following World War II, the village of Skokie, Illinois, north of Chicago, became a refuge for Holocaust survivors. At one time, an estimated 8,000 lived there, seeking safety in a town where more than fifty percent of the 60,000 residents were Jewish. As America became more affluent in the postwar decades, many of the first-generation children of the survivors moved to posher suburbs, but when we bought a home in Skokie in the 1990s, there were still many Holocaust victims remaining in the village. So it was not surprising to learn that one of our neighbors, Jozef, an elderly, unassuming retired tailor from Prague, had been in a concentration camp.

Evidently, the Fates had determined that Jozef's suffering at the hands of the Nazis was insufficient; we later learned that Jozef's wife had died ten years before we moved next door, and that his older child, Beth, was born with severe mental and physical disabilities. At 32, she lived with her father and could rarely leave the house. Jozef's other child, Beth's younger brother, lived in Los Angeles, pursuing a career in architecture, and rarely came home.

Being much younger and in good health, I would offer to help Jozef shovel snow or take out the garbage and recycling; a gentle and quiet man, he would usually politely decline but, when the weather was really bad or the recycling bin too full, he would take me up

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on my offer, murmuring his thanks. It was clear, always, that he was not a man who expected help, or was comfortable asking for it.

A few years after we moved in, the house north of Jozef changed owners, and the new neighbors had a large German Shepherd which lived up to the breed's billing as a vigilant guard dog and barked constantly at anything that moved. One time I went out to do some yard work - as usual, to the soundtrack of the dog's barking - and, after a few moments, looked over the chain-link fence and noticed Jozef standing motionless in his backyard. After a while, seeing that he hadn't moved, I walked over to the fence. I could now see that he was distressed - staring, transfixed, on something far away. "Are you OK?" I asked. My voice startled him; he had not even realized I was there. "That dog," he said. "Those are the kinds they used in the camp. They never stopped barking, just like this one." He took a deep breath and then slowly walked inside his house, more stooped than usual.

One blistering summer day a year or so later, as I was walking home from the train after work, a somber, well-dressed young man emerged from a taxi in front of Jozef's house and raced inside. Later that night, our neighbor across the street, Ben, told us that Jozef's daughter had passed away in her sleep. Jozef had discovered the body after Beth had failed to come downstairs for breakfast. The young man whom I had seen racing into the house was Jozef's son, David, the California architect.

On the first night of shiva, I went next door to pay my respects. Jozef introduced me to David, a friendly man with a tan that spoke to years living outside the Chicago area, where the previous winter we had experienced ten consecutive days of subzero temperatures and more than sixty inches of snow. After I extended my condolences, David and I made small talk for a few moments, and then he excused himself to visit with an elderly couple in the living room, leaving Jozef and me alone in the kitchen.

Jozef got up, stiffly, opened the bottle of kosher wine I had brought, poured two glasses, and put one before me. Jozef usually wore long-sleeved shirts, but probably due to the heat, on this night his sleeves were rolled up. As he reached forward to hand me my glass of wine, for the first time I noticed the ugly five-digit tattoo on his forearm. It was not merely a case of words failing me - stripped of intellectual response, I could not even think in terms of rational language. Jozef's arm was silent witness to evil, primal and monstrous, alien to anything in my direct experience.

I do not know if Jozef noticed my reaction, which I tried mightily to control. "Thank you for coming," he whispered.

"Of course," I said, again explaining that my wife was out of town but would be there tomorrow.

"She is lovely," he said. I agreed.

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“She reminds me of my late wife,” he said. “I used to think she left me too early. But I am glad she is not here today. No parent should have to bury their child.”

I agreed that they shouldn't, but in a feeble attempt to make him feel better, mumbled, “I know they're together now.”

“We believe the same things your people do, but nobody's come back from there yet, have they?” he said. He was not unkind, just matter-of-fact. I sipped more wine.

“My son David, he told me he's moving back here from California, to help take care of me, so I'm not alone.”

“That's great,” I said.

“When I was his age, I didn't have these choices. I was in Auschwitz for seven years. I was 19 when I went in and 26 when I came out. Those are the best years of a young man's life, and they took them away from me. Every member of my family, every friend from my village, they killed. I survived because I was a tailor. A good tailor. I was useful to them. I made uniforms. That's how I stayed alive.” There was no anger - not even emotion - in his voice; his flat tone could have been describing everyday annoyances like a traffic jam or getting caught in the rain with a broken umbrella.

After a long and empty pause, he asked: “You remember when the Nazis wanted to march here?”

In the late 1970s, a group of misanthropes styling themselves as Nazis, in a staggering act of cruelty, announced that they would stage a march in Skokie, targeting the community precisely because it was home to so many Holocaust survivors. The threatened march and ensuing legal battles had received international news coverage. Skokie fought valiantly but futilely in the courts before the vile little band decided to have their march in Chicago instead, in

an area of that sprawling city that, ironically, turned out to harbor more than a few former concentration camp guards who had escaped justice in Europe and were living illegally in the United States. But before the gang decided to switch to the Chicago venue, it appeared that the courts would insist the march be allowed to go forward in in Skokie on First Amendment grounds. Rumors swirled that hardened Jewish activists - to whom “never again” was not a slogan - were quietly coming to town to deal in their own way with the latter-day Nazis.

“We came here to be safe. I had a wife and two young children. They said it couldn't happen here, but it was going to happen. That's how it started in Germany, small groups of thugs, people turn a blind eye, or they have to protect their rights, or they have other things to worry about. Then other twisted people, they see it happen, they follow. Soon you have mobs chanting, running through the streets. People compare it to cancer, but

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that's wrong. Cancer takes over and it makes you sick and weak. Nazism is like getting rabies."

With a long gulp, he drained his glass.

"I couldn't sleep, at work I couldn't concentrate, thinking about swastikas in Skokie. Five thousand miles, thirty years, and they want to make us to look at swastikas again, hear them shout 'Juden, Juden.' Why? Six million dead wasn't enough for them?

"I thought about buying a gun. I had a wife and two children to protect. But I think, could I use a gun? Wouldn't using a gun make me like them? And what if one of the children found the gun and played with it and accidentally shot the other one? One more innocent dead Jew because of Nazis. How could any of us live with that? So I sharpened my butcher knives, and I put new locks on the doors. And I stayed up late every night, and waited, until the storm had passed.

"They say it can never happen here. And it hasn't. Not yet, anyway."

A few moments later, the doorbell rang. Jozef, who had lived such a sad, long life, returned to the present, shuffled to the door, and somberly greeted the new guests who had come to sit shiva for his daughter, who had lived such a sad, short life. A few moments later, I heard mourners begin praying in Hebrew while, outside, the German Shepherd barked incessantly.

The End

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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I conceived 'Last Stand' as an allegory for America in the age of Trump, and the UK in the time of Brexit. The story is a work of fiction but is set against the backdrop of an actual historical incident: the plan by a small band of self-styled Nazis to stage a march in Skokie, Illinois, in 1977.*

*I have been a playwright for 25 years but more recently was inspired to start writing short stories, thanks in no small part to the magnificent works of Stuart Dybek and the late, great Lucia Berlin.*

**BIO:** *Mark Rosati, a Chicago-area playwright, is the author of 23 plays and numerous short stories, and a member of the Dramatists Guild and The Company Theatre Group in NJ. His plays have had productions and public readings in New York City, Chicago, New Jersey, Boston, Michigan and Brighton, UK. Recent productions include "Exposed" in April 2019 at Between Us Productions' Take Ten Festival in New York, "Duet" at Theatre East's 5x5 Drama Series in all five NYC boroughs, "Restoration" in Between Us Productions' Take Ten Festival, and "Extinct/Extant" at Manhattan Repertory Theatre's February Event. His short story "Last Stand" was included in a public reading of new*

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*works on the theme of “sanctuary” by Cast Iron Theatre in Brighton in June 2019, and his one-act “Our Daily Bread” received a public reading in Boston in the “Pinning Our Hopes” pre-inauguration Resistance event in January 2017.*

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# HEAVEN IN OCTOBER

*By Duncan Ros*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *This is the literary equivalent to comfort food. It depicts ordinary people in ordinary situations—people we easily recognize—in a plot driven narrative where both the writing and the story are very much down to earth. The characters are sympathetically drawn and the children realistically depicted, cute, but not too cute, which for any writer has to count as an accomplishment. The temptation to sentimentalize in this kind of story is great but the author avoids it handily and the last sentence, striking a perfect note, could not be improved upon. We liked the gentle humour at play here, and especially the touching, unexpected ending. The low key but observant prose rewards with quiet beauty. Quote: The kids had found a balloon, a little red one, and were playing a game, one where they keep the balloon from hitting the ground. They were laughing and screaming, jumping from the couch onto the floor. Vern looked at them and puffed on his Camel, a smile growing across his face. It hit the ground and the kids both squealed. Little Reese lost his balance and stepped on the red balloon with his sneaker. It popped loudly and they began to cry. If this were a Facebook page there'd be 'likes' all over it.*

Heaven in October

By Duncan Ros

Carly and Reese had just had their birthdays at Grandpa's house. There were balloons and streamers and party-blowers and leftover cake with thick pink frosting to celebrate the twins' fifth birthday. And they were cute twins; red hair, freckles, and little green eyes that seemed to stare out from somewhere else.

Their mother had a job interview and had given the kids to her dad for the day. It was the second interview in three months. She had been unceremoniously fired from her last job as a production grunt at a tomato sauce factory after she got sick with hepatitis A

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and spoiled the day's batch, which nearly resulted in a company-wide recall. The whole crew had to go in for a shot, as well as the kids. Their daddy wasn't around; the stories ranged from exploring mountains in Canada to building churches in countries the twins couldn't even pronounce yet. The main point was that he was absent, and for better or worse, wasn't coming back. The kids wouldn't find out until they were older that it was all a bunch of made-up horseshit, for which they would resent their mother for the rest of her short and somewhat uneventful life.

Grandpa, a.k.a. Vern Jones II, was a surly scarecrow of a man, a little over six feet tall, with the look on his face like he was always half-way sucking on a lemon. Grandpa had worked for the railroad for nearly three decades as a switchman until he had his first heart attack. He went out on disability right around the time the doctors told his wife, Virginia, that she had stage four breast cancer. A few months later she was deep into the ground and he was even deeper into the booze.

He spent most of his days watching daytime T.V. (his favorite shows being that of the crime persuasion; *Law and Order*, *Blue Bloods*, *Criminal Minds*) and smoking the same kind of cigarettes he'd been smoking since he was fifteen: Camel Straights. Today, he'd opted to hold off on the booze until his daughter came for the grandkids, or at least try to. He had the Yankees vs. Astros playoff game on the tube instead of his usual police procedural.

"Grandpa, it's smokey in here," said one of them.

"Yeah, it's hard to breathe, *cough cough*," said the other, making noises like she was coughing but not actually coughing.

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He sat there and looked at them from the brown leather recliner. Cute little buggers. The only way he could really tell them apart was that Carly was the girl, with a little green dress, and Reese was a boy wearing little cargo shorts and a striped sweater.

“It’s smokey in here, Grandpa,” said the girl again, this time louder.

“That’s because I’m smoking.”

“Mama says smoking is bad. It’ll kill you, Grandpa,” said the boy.

“I’m pretty sure it *is* killing me, kiddo,” said Vern. “If it’s bothering you so much, go ahead and open a window. I’ll turn the fan on.”

Carly walked over to the front window and pushed up on the pane as hard as she could, but it didn’t budge.

“You’ve got to unlock it, sweetheart.”

The girl gave him a blank look.

“The latch, you see it? You’ve got to turn the latch to open the window.” He started to get up but thought better of it. She’ll figure it out for herself, he thought. Reese ran over to help his sister. Finally, they had the window open and the sounds of the neighborhood came in.

“There you go,” said Grandpa Vern. He turned back to his ball game. Outside in the shrouded October sun, the changing leaves fell to the ground in the gentle wind, but nobody seemed to notice.

“Grandpa, will you take us to the park?” said the boy.

“Yeah, the park, the park!” said the girl.

The ballgame was a blowout. The Yankees defense was falling apart and the Astros were piling up run after run.

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“Maybe later, after Grandpa is done watching his game.”

He sat there smoking with the ceiling fan going, watching Garrett Cole strike out another batter for the Yankees. He thought about dipping into the bottle of aged Jim Beam, but knew that Maggie would throw a fit if she came to get her kids and smelled whiskey on his breath.

The kids had found a balloon, a little red one, and were playing a game, one where they keep the balloon from hitting the ground. They were laughing and screaming, jumping from the couch onto the floor. Vern looked at them and puffed on his Camel, a smile growing across his face. It hit the ground and the kids both squealed. Little Reese lost his balance and stepped on the red balloon with his sneaker. It popped loudly and they began to cry.

“Jesus Christ, settle down. I’ve got a bum ticker. Shit.”

“The balloon, it popped, Grandpa,” said the girl. “Reese stepped on it with his dumb shoe.”

“He didn’t mean to.”

The kids began to cry again.

“We can just blow up another balloon. You two calm down. We’ve got more.”

Vern got up stiffly and walked over to the kitchen counter. There was an open bag of party balloons, and right next to it a small pink tank full of helium. He grabbed a purple balloon and blew it up from the tank and brought it into the living room without tying it off. He sucked in some of the helium from the balloon and said, in a new high-pitched voice: “*See, we’ve got plenty of balloons.*”

The kids started laughing.

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“Why does your voice sound like that, Grandpa?” said the girl. “It sounds all squeaky.”

“It’s helium,” said Grandpa, his voice normal again.

“What’s *hee-lee-um*?” said the boy.

“It’s like air, only lighter. That’s why the balloons float.”

He filled the balloon back up from the tank, tied it off, and slapped it over to where the kids were in the living room, giving them a wink. Vern sat back down, saw the game was as good as over, and flicked off the T.V.

“Grandpa, show us how to fill up the balloons with *hee-lee-um*,” said the boy.

“Yeah, show us how to make the balloons float, Grandpa Vern,” said the girl.

“You’re going to make me get back up? I just sat down.”

“*Pa-leeaaase*,” they said in unison.

“Well, alright.” Vern got up from his recliner and walked over to the kitchen. He could feel a little tightness in his chest but did his best to ignore it. It happened all the time, and he knew that going through two packs of Camels a day wasn’t helping.

Vern picked up the pink tank of helium from the kitchen counter and put it on the floor so the kids could get to it, then grabbed the bag of balloons and gave it to the girl. She grabbed a white balloon out of the bag, and her brother grabbed a red one.

“Okay, so you see this little spout on the can? You wrap the end of the balloon around that, then you turn this knob until the balloon gets nice and big.” He grabbed a balloon to show them. “See, but you can’t blow it up too big because then you can’t tie the knot at the end.” He demonstrated by tying the knot and letting the balloon float up to the ceiling. “Okay, now you try.”

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Carly tried first. She got the balloon hooked on, but when she tried to tie it off she lost her grip and the balloon flew through the air, letting out a noise like a long fart. This made Reese giggle. She gave him a mean look.

“That’s okay. Give your brother a turn now. You can try again after.”

Reese hooked his red balloon to the spout and filled it up.

“Now, don’t get it too big or you won’t be able to make a knot at the end. And don’t let it go.”

Vern watched as Reese took a hold of the balloon and stretched the rubber around his fingers. Finally, he managed to get a good knot at the end and let it go.

“There you go, kid, that’s it,” said Vern. The kid smiled up at him.

“Let me try again,” said the girl.

“Okay, go for it,” said Vern.

She went over to where her little white balloon had landed on the kitchen floor. This time she managed to keep a hold of the balloon and managed to tie a knot at the end, just like her brother.

“Good job, kiddo,” said Vern. He decided to celebrate their accomplishment by grabbing the Jim Beam out of the cupboard and taking a quick pull.

“Alright, you kids want to go to the park, right?”

“Yeah, yeah, the park!” they said.

There were several families at the park with different aged kids.

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“Stay where I can see you,” said Vern to the kids as he took a seat on a bench next to a woman in her mid-thirties. She had dark hair and was dressed in a puffy coat and knit cap.

“Those your grandkids?” she said.

“Afraid so,” he said, letting out a laugh.

“Twins?”

“Yeah. Two little red-headed devils.”

He watched as they raced to the top of the slide. He pulled out another Camel and lit it.

“Do you mind?” said the woman.

Vern looked at her, puzzled.

“The smoke. Would you mind doing that somewhere else?”

“Shit lady, it’s a free country. If you don’t like it, go somewhere else.”

“Jesus.” She got up and yelled for her kid. “Schenley, it’s time to go.”

“But mommy, I want to stay.” He started to throw a fit.

She glared at Vern from over her shoulder as they walked away. He sat, unmoved, smoking, and watched her round ass move away from him as she left the park. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been with a woman; he wasn’t sure if he could even get the equipment working right down there.

“Grandpa, Grandpa,” said the twins, running toward him.

“Yeah?”

“That little chubby kid over there said that balloons can make you fly,” said the girl.

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“He said that if you tie enough balloons to something, it’ll float up to heaven,”  
said the girl.

“Oh yeah? That little chubby kid over there said that?”

“Yeah, is it true?”

Vern sat there, puffing and smiling. “What do you kids think?”

The girl looked thoughtful. “I think with enough balloons, you probably could.”

“Yeah, you’d need like a hundred balloons,” said the boy.

Vern laughed and started coughing. He could feel his chest tighten up again.

“Alright kids, let’s head home. Grandpa needs his medicine.” He stood up, trying  
to catch his breath.

It was late afternoon when they got back to the house, but the sun was still shining  
brightly in the autumn sky. Vern got the kids quickly into the house and went for the  
medicine cabinet where his heart medication. He popped open the orange bottle, took out  
three pills, threw them into his mouth, and washed them down with some water from the  
bathroom sink.

“Are you okay, Grandpa?” said the girl, peeking her head through the bathroom  
door.

“I’ll be okay,” said Vern. “I just needed my medicine.” He looked at her little  
freckled face and into her little green eyes. He loved those green eyes, and knew she  
would be a beautiful woman some day. She was a good cookie. He tried to smile. “Can  
you get Grandpa’s yellow lawn chair from the closet over there and put it out in the front  
yard? I want to sit and enjoy some of this sunshine with you kids.”

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He stood at the kitchen counter catching his breath as the kids fumbled with his folding lawn chair. They managed to get it out of the closet and scuffed the wall with the arm-rest as they worked it past the screen door and out into the yard. He tried to take deep breaths. That's what the doctor had told him to do at his last checkup. Try counting ten deep, full breaths, he thought. Somehow, he couldn't get there without coughing. He took a red handkerchief out of his back pocket and wiped the sweat off of his face, and felt the craving for another cigarette. "You stupid old fart," he whispered to himself as he walked outside.

The kids were playing in the grass next to the lawn chair. They had tied some string to two balloons and let one of them go; the other was tied to the arm-rest of the lawn chair.

"Look at the balloon go, Grandpa," said the girl.

"Look how high it is," said the boy.

Vern watched his grandkids sweetly as they watched the red balloon get smaller and smaller. Soon it was out of sight.

"It's gone," said the little girl.

"Gone, up to heaven," said the little boy.

Vern felt his chest get tight again and started coughing. He felt his whole body get hot, and his arms and legs went numb. He thought he saw flashes of light then couldn't see anything at all. He thought of his wife on their wedding day, the birth of his only daughter, and his grandkids and their innocent, loving green eyes. He let out a long sigh with a series of coughs, then settled back into the chair.

"Are you okay Grandpa?" said the girl.

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“What’s wrong with Grandpa?” said the boy.

They tried shaking him, but his body was limp. His eyes were barely open; just two little slits of empty light. The boy started to cry.

The girl wanted to cry too but held it in. She put her head on Grandpa Vern’s chest and listened. There was no sound, and his chest wasn’t moving. She felt herself start to cry, and held her brother. After a few minutes they were done and wiped away their tears.

“Do you think we can send Grandpa to heaven?” said the boy.

“Maybe.”

They went inside and started filling up balloons from the pink tank, which was still sitting on the kitchen floor. They had all manner of colors; red, blue, green, and white. They tied string to them and took them outside to the front lawn where they tied them to Grandpa’s yellow lawn chair.

“Do we have enough?” said the boy, who felt like he might cry again.

“I don’t know,” said the girl.

They had close to twenty balloons tied to Grandpa’s lawnchair before the bag was empty. Nothing happened; the lawnchair didn’t move. It didn’t float up to heaven. The boy began to cry and went over to his sister, who held him.

“It’s okay,” she said. “We did our best. Grandpa knows we did our best to get him up to heaven.”

“I guess so,” he sobbed.

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The twins sat on the grass next to their Grandpa as the sun began to sink behind the hill and the cool wind rushed through the trees. Not too far away, someone mowed their lawn.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *This story wasn't particularly inspired by anything. I came up with it on a Sunday night while zoning out with the T.V. on. It's relatively derivative of the Pixar movie Up if David Lynch directed it, rewriting the script with the help of Stephen King. My intention with the story was to mix absurdity with dark humor and dirty realism and to experiment with relatively normal characters (mine tend to be pretty messed up). The stylistic influences in this piece correspond to these elements, namely the absurdity of Etgar Keret, the dark humor of Céline and Henry Miller, and the dirty realism of Raymond Carver and Bukowski.*

**BIO:** *Duncan Ros lives in the Pacific Northwest and works as a railcar mechanic. His writing has appeared in several online music publications. His first work of fiction appeared in The Dark City Mystery Magazine. This is his second published short story.*

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# THE BOY WHO KILLED NO ONE

BY ZACHARY HAY

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We don't associate crime—especially murder—with any kind of tenderness but the story you are about to read will turn that idea on its head. Just as it will up end your thinking that genre fiction cannot touch us as deeply as 'serious' lit. The prose here is achingly beautiful in its emotional transparency and clarity of voice. Hay demonstrates a natural facility and easiness with writing that cannot be taught—it comes with the body, so to speak, and you either have or you don't. He has it in spades. If 'The Boy Who Killed No One' reminds us of anyone...it's James Baldwin. And as far as comparisons go, that's about as good as it can get. Quote: 'The boy does not know what he can say to that and so he says nothing. You can tell from the way that he sits that he has nothing to say--he is slumped over in the chair like his back is broken. He stared at the policeman at first but now his eyes dart back and forth. The policeman asks if the boy has anything to say for himself but he does not. He has already told the policeman the girl's name--Shawnie--but the policeman keeps on calling her 'That poor girl' or 'That girl you stabbed.' So what good is it to tell the policeman anything if he does not listen? the boy thinks.'* *Five stars.*

The Boy who Killed No One

Zachary Hay

You can see the boy. Tall skinny pale boy. Look through the window there and you can see him. He's sitting at the desk waiting for the policeman to come back. He is getting

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anxious now because the policeman said he would be only a minute but now it has been twenty. Or more than twenty because he has no clock to see how long it has been.

The question is remorse--if the boy has any or could, if all this is the result of something that happened to him that could be undone or if some people are born rotten. Though the boy does not know it, this will dictate a number of things hereafter: where he will go and what will happen to him when he gets there and for how long, and if something like this will ever happen again.

The policeman is back now and the first words out of his mouth are that the girl the boy stabbed had not died and that is lucky for him, the boy, because it is a whole new charge now--*attempted* murder, and disfigurement. The boy does not know if disfigurement is a real crime or not. He has never heard of it. But he figures there are many things he has not heard of and so he says nothing.

“They’re stitching that poor girl’s face up as best they can now while we speak and you ought to pray that nothing more goes wrong.”

The boy does not know what he can say to that and so he says nothing. You can tell from the way that he sits that he has nothing to say--he is slumped over in the chair like his back is broken. He stared at the policeman at first but now his eyes dart back and forth. The policeman asks if the boy has anything to say for himself but he does not. He has already told the policeman the girl’s name--Shawnie--but the policeman keeps on calling her ‘That poor girl’ or ‘That girl you stabbed.’ So what good is it to tell the policeman anything if he does not listen? the boy thinks.

Worse yet is he told the policeman a great deal more. He had told him--though now regretting it--that she was kind of his girlfriend and that he had seen her naked twice.

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The first time was on accident when he saw her naked through her window. He did not feel good about this and told her a day later, but she said it was alright and she did not care if he saw her naked and he felt that that kind of made her his girlfriend. The second time was three months later which made it last summer. He had seen her in the woods by the falled tree they played on and she was crying. He asked what was wrong and she did not say anything but then she stopped crying and she began to touch him and then she began to touch herself too. He did not see her all the way naked then, only part ways, but he figured that counted and so he said she was his girlfriend.

The boy did not say this to explain why he had cut her up, but only because he thought this was what the policeman wanted to know. But the policeman did not acknowledge a thing he said, and so now he says nothing. If the policeman had asked, he would have talked about his finding out that she had touched other boys too--moreso and more often than he--and that that was when she stopped being his girlfriend, but the policeman did not ask. He is not interested in those little details and so the boy keeps on saying nothing.

The boy cut Shawnie up for what she said about his father, that he was crazy. The boy was going to say that but because the policeman did not and will not ask, the boy will not tell him. Even if the policeman asks now the boy will not say because he does not believe the policeman is interested--he is only interested in calling the boy a killer. But the boy is not a killer, he has killed no one. He will admit that he tried--twice in his life he has tried--but he has killed no one.

The first time he tried to kill someone it was his father and he prayed for it. And for a long time, two years, he believed it had worked. That was the time you had heard of

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before when he had stolen his father's shotgun and tried to run off to Canada. But the shotgun was too heavy for him to carry for long and it only had one round in it anyway. So what he decided to do was drop to his knees and pray to Jesus to kill his father. He said, 'Jesus let it be Your will that my father die. Let it be Your will that this bullet find him in the head,' and then he fired the shotgun in his house's direction and then dropped the shotgun and kept on walking. That night he was picked up by a policeman--a different one, one a whole lot nicer than this one--and was told that his father was dead of a gunshot wound to the head. The boy then believed the bullet to be his and God to be real. And when he was sent two hours away to live with his grandmother he told her that he had killed his father and how and she said no, he did not, and then would never even talk about it again.

The boy now knows--thanks in part to the microfilmed newspaper in the school library and in part to some rumors that began that the boy's father was a killer--that his father died by suicide, that he had taken a newspaper office hostage and demanded they print a letter he had written, that he shot himself after they agreed, though they reneged after and the letter was never printed. The boy did not know what was in the letter but he had some idea: that he was a war hero and that he had been evicted from his house and he would have liked to see the man who evicted him on the battlefield. But all the boy knew was what the newspaper had printed: that the editor himself had come into the office as requested when he heard that a secretary had a gun to her head, that a madman threatened to blow the secretary's brains out if some godforsaken letter were not printed, that the editor agreed because the man meant business, that the man turned the gun on himself the moment police came through the door, that the letter could not be printed due to foul

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language, grotesqueries, and ‘poor composition.’ The newspaper had said nothing about his father being whisky drunk at the time of the incident and at the time of the letter’s composition, but the boy knew that that was true as well.

The boy stopped reading the paper when it accused his father of poor writing. The boy did not like this because he believed his father had been a good writer. His father had told him that he had written a dozen quality stories and one of them--his best--had been printed in a magazine. The magazine could not be found today because it took a chance on quality writers; it went under long ago. But this story was close in quality to Fitzgerald and Dickens and he was happy to see it printed anywhere. He had written it during the war years, though it was not about the war. Just the opposite. It was about a man with a family. The story went that there was a man with a family and he and the family always did right even though they never had any money and always came into misfortune. And the story just lets you walk in the family’s shoes for a while. It wasn’t any kind of action story; it was a literary piece. But then at the end of the story the man gets into an argument with a man from town. The two of them get into a minor car accident and even though it’s nobody’s fault the man from town talks down to the man and starts making personal swipes. And then the story ends with the man saying, ‘I may not have much but I’ve kept my family under one roof. Can you say the same?’ And the boy thought this was a very good story because the man from town could not say the same.

And so the boy became angry reading the newspaper article because he knew his father to be a good writer--say what you want about him, say that he was a bad man or an alcoholic but he was a good writer and if they printed his letter it probably would have made a lot of sense, probably too much sense. Probably it would have roiled whoever

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read it and that's why they didn't print it. And so the boy did not finish reading that article which was too bad because he did not get to the point where they mentioned what kind of gun he used. Probably it was that little snubnose his father had, because that was the only gun that his father owned except for the shotgun. That was the gun that his father caught him playing with and so he fired it next to his ear to teach him how powerful a gun could be. His ear rang for a day and he cried but he liked that little gun and part of him wished he could have read about it in print.

And so that is how the boy found out about his father's death, and also how he stopped believing in God.

But the boy made a mistake because he ran off, not wanting to read another word, but leaving the microfilm in the reader. It was found later by another boy and that's how word spread and rumors were confirmed that the boy's father was a killer or close enough. And it was only the next day that people began to ask what was in the letter. "What letter?" "The one your father wrote." "What letter?" "The one he wrote before he killed that girl." "He didn't kill any girl." "The one he wrote before he killed himself." And he went on answering questions like that. Though what really bothered him--what set things in motion--was six weeks later when it was Shawnie who asked. "Wasn't it your father that took over that newspaper house?" she asked. Almost sounding as if it were a new job of his, as if he were Charlie Kane. But it was the last of it for the boy and so he said, "Yeah. He was crazy and so am I. What about your father?" "No." "No what?" "No he isn't crazy." "Then why were you crying in the woods and how was it that you knew where to touch me?" And at that she got angry and began to cry. Then she told

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a few boyfriends to take the boy outside and beat him up and the first chance they got they did. That is, he thinks, why he was so angry at her--angry enough to bring a knife.

The policeman is talking now. He is standing above the boy, trying to intimidate him.

“How long,” he asks, “did you plan on killing her?”

See the boy. He’s getting ready to say something. He doesn’t know what but he’ll say something--you can tell because he’s getting red and those are tears coming down his face. If he does not say something, he is bound to scream.

“I have not killed anyone,” he says.

The policeman looks down on the boy. He sees as well how angry the boy is. “No. But you tried.”

“Maybe I tried but that is not the same. I have not killed anyone.”

The policeman does not know what to say because the boy is hollering now.

“I have not killed anyone. I have not killed anyone.”

You can hear the boy clear now. You can hear his voice all throughout the police station. It sounds like his throat will split open and he’ll bleed out. There is a lot of rage in that voice. They do not know why now but they are soon to find out. Listen now.

“I have not killed anyone. I have not killed anyone.”

He cries. Though he does not cry because of the trouble he is in or because he knows the place he is going to go. He cries because for a moment he sees that girl’s face somewhere in his mind’s eye. He sees how pretty she had been. And then he sees all those bad things that had happened to her.

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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *The story was inspired by the case of Evan Ramsey who killed two people in a 1997 school shooting in Anchorage, AL. Ten years prior, Ramsey's father had taken the office of The Anchorage Times hostage at gun point after they refused to print a political tirade he had written. The shooting occurred two weeks after Ramsey's father was released from prison. The question I wanted to ask with "The Boy who Killed No One" is whether violence is genetic and whether a person may will themselves away from it.*

**BIO:** *Zachary Hay was born in Detroit, MI in 1994. His work has appeared in The Arlington Literary Journal Online, Crab Fat Magazine and The No Extra Words Podcast.*

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# *After Her Water Broke One Bitsy Time Prior*

*By Jim Meirose*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Meirose is a trickster stylist and while you might call him 'Joycean' his lyric signature is lighter and a little more playful than the author of 'Ulysses'. His extraordinary word play is like listening to a dialect you don't quite understand but from which you can nevertheless glean meaning. The author rearranges language to accommodate his own idiosyncratic voice and in his skilled hands we witness the artistic transformation of prose into prosody—the crow's caw, the peacock's purr. Quote: 'I flowered all springlike with a highly pitched No!' And, 'Totally un-cranial this may all seem, Sonboy, but—'*

After Her Water'd Broke One Bitsy-Time Prior (809 words)

So, there we were listening in on some sighing out saying in, So, here we were at last—I mean get a load of this picture. Here we were at two on the dot our water had broken just a bitty-time prior and Doctor Munoz-Crevorkienne had told us rush right in so there. And rush right to some ER, for what? Up that hospital hall down this hospital hall over the hallway floor gone out under there forever to forever and then under the hallway ceiling come our way and over and back past us forever, so. In this endless hallway, Sonboy, there I lay on a hard half inch rubbly gurney-mat and your Father bless his sod got out of sight someplace all bitching like a hosed-down horny farm-bull and right to the left of me Big Bishop McSweet's giving last rights to some fully naked silently substantially expiring so sick as to be totally sexless bare-nekkid substance of an abuser, and et—I lie with you a pain inside like a big hard black rubber ball needing immediate expulsion—get that Sonboy. Immediate if not already done yesterday if no wise sooner. In this hell of a timehole we lay there alone long together. Until. From the way seeming to still lead back out to the entrance shouts came from. Some Doctor sounds like.

Where is the one I was called for? Eh eh?

Where is the one?

Hey wait hold up hold out up no—

The one I was called off of my main meal for?

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Eh?

—no no this is not—

There she is I see let me pass! said Doctor Munoz-Crevorkienne.

No goose!

Pass gangway! shouted the Doctor, pushing.

No goose shall pass gangway!

From the way I said was back out to the front door here and now's a big shape.

To roaring applause, it stated before I, this question gets asked, even could tell man or woman, was anything done to hinder the escape, nurse or doctor, of your Mother's soul while giving birth? Et.

I waved off the heavily burdened squad of creel-fishermen seeming to grasp out the single ordinary blank uniformed blue guard hung from his sleeve I said to this Doctor.

Who are you and what the hell, I said—do you want and where the hell—I threw in for good measure, Is my husband?

It does not matter.

Is my husband don't matter?

No—what matters is—

I will duck him madame hey boys here grasp him by all available parts.

I flowered all springlike with a highly pitched No!

Huh.

No perhaps this is how is it supposed to be before giving birth! Is this?

Perhaps there is more yet after this to find out what's supposed to be in every shit hospital in this day and age so let this thing say his piece because maybe may more pieces of shit may have shit pieces to say when one is about to give birth in any shit hospital like this go one; and ever all other of those yondering throngs of busybodies need to take all single steps back together to provide air to inhale before exhaling me the message-question as every speaking mammal needs to have sufficiently provided hey, Doctor! Doc-doc-doc-doctor! O man.

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Yes please and yes-s thank-you—To roaring applause this question gets asked; was anything done to hinder the escape of your Mother’s soul while giving birth?

Huh freak?

My hand had been idly settled on the spot of my frame where within lay your very fetal headshape, Sonboy, and I swear—and this is actually the reason I see for you to know these things and their histories—by all that’s sweet pecker, you said quiet to my hand the following; which came up my arm my shoulder to my throat nerves, Sonboy; and from there formed by those magic chords hung curtaining off the back in my face I said.

Who are you and what the fuck are you talking about?

And—those were your first words, Sonboy. First words on this plane of existence, by Einstein! Now everyone else to now would think low of me if I tried to force-feed this knowledge. But now, Sonboy, that you are cured and awake and aware and have such a long future of ess-brass ringing after rings-over to snatch down every time your whirlingly wonderful future with me marching and marching and marching out on and on I my hippo; now you can and must know. Awake and aware in the womb already you were, Sonboy! Awake and aware and not to be fucked with!

Oh! I melt with pride in you boy!

You boy.

You son.

All Sonboy.

Totally un-cranial this may all seem, Sonboy, but—

Seem sounds like the wrong word. Don’t it know?

Hey, gas. Gas!

Any questions?

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *“After Her Water’d Broke One Bitsy-Time Prior” was inspired by a visit to the emergency room I had earlier this year that went very wrong. (No, in my case my water had not broken) As for stylistic or other influences, of course I’ve always admired Fathers Joyce and Beckett and the like, but—I have been doing this so long there are many others that, in all fairness, that can and should be named too. Those wanting to know more should get in touch or see [www.jimmeirose.com](http://www.jimmeirose.com)*

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**BIO:** *Jim Meirose's short work has appeared in numerous venues, and his published novels include 'Le Overgivers au Club de la Résurrection' (Mannequin Haus), 'Understanding Franklin Thompson' (JEF pubs), and 'Sunday Dinner with Father Dwyer' (Optional books). Info at [www.jimmeirose.com](http://www.jimmeirose.com)*

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# The Architect

By Gregory Cioffi

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We love the premise in this fascinating short—like an existential fable—and the provocative questions it raises. There is an aura of mystery that surrounds the enigmatic character of the architect, and much to the author’s credit, it is never explained. George, the protagonist, whose life up until their unexpected meeting is the picture of disorder, is shown the possibility of a harmony that is both material and transcendental, one rooted in the very idea of ‘structure’. The visionary style of Borges has come to play here and Cioffi’s ‘lite’ prose—with its touch of outsider-ism is the perfect ‘voice’ and vehicle. Dialogue sings. Quote:“Everything starts moving! Your mind is moving; the room itself is moving and concurrently, the entire building is moving! Everything you know is an uncertainty. You don’t really know what’s behind those walls, under those carpets and panels; they are just masking the foundation - what is truly holding up that place you call home? Once you reach that point you realize certainty does not exist!”*

## The Architect

Inspired by the Works and Lectures of Mark Wigley

George Whelan was a man of boundless disaster. His life was in endless disarray in perhaps every way imaginable. He awoke each day (sometimes in the morning, occasionally in the afternoon) to a clutter that would make a landfill blush. He could not keep a job, a lover, or even a friend. Hell, George couldn’t even keep a conversation nor did he endeavor to because the truth was he didn’t have much to say. George was late to everything he ever went to and had not the faintest idea of what he wanted to do with his life. George was forty-six years old.

Sometimes, on days such as this one, George would walk around the city aimlessly, waiting for something to strike, a divine inspiration perhaps. But when this inevitably proved fruitless, he meandered over to his favorite spot. It was one of those places someone had to inform you of or, in George’s case, you had to stumble upon it after years of frivolous strolls.

The location was atop a hill on the outskirts of the city. You had to make your way through numerous trees and bushes to find the clearing but once you did, there stood a single bench overlooking the entire metropolis. George liked the spot not only because it was beautiful, but also because there was never anyone on the bench -- until, of course, today.

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George stared at the immaculately dressed figure, debating what his next course of action should be. The bench was a two-seater so he could certainly fit. But would that be awkward? Would he have to speak? Could he still enjoy the view to its fullest extent? After weighing his options, George hesitantly walked over and sat next to the encroacher.

The two men sat in silence for a few minutes until the stranger asked, without removing his gaze from the view, “What do you think they’re saying?”

George looked curiously at the man without a clue as to what he was referring to.

“I’m sorry?”

“The buildings, what do you think they’re saying?” the man clarified, with a tone best described as excited zeal.

George looked out at the static structures of the city and back at the stranger who was stroking his well-groomed white beard, clearly in deep thought.

As if to appease the man, whom George concluded could very possibly be certifiably insane, he responded, “Nothing. They’re not saying anything.”

“Nonsense,” the stranger responded. “They’re always saying something.”

“You are talking about the actual buildings, correct?”

“Of course I am. Buildings are always talking to us, telling us about our dreams and aspirations. Of course, what I think a building is saying might be totally different than what you think a building is saying. Conversely, I’m sure the people who work in that building, or the people who live in that building, have their own completely distinct interpretation.”

“Weird,” was what came out of George’s mouth.

The stranger smirked as if George finally understood.

“You are precisely correct, my friend. Buildings are weird, aren’t they? There exists a degree of strangeness, no doubt. Children know this, that’s why they are afraid at what they might find under the bed or in the closet. I, myself, am haunted by the mere idea; buildings are living, breathing things. They all have stories and I think that’s the beauty of it all. But the point is, we’re all sharing in the conversation, an open dialogue if you will –back and forth, back and forth.”

George, who self-admittedly thought he was actually sort of understanding what the gentleman was explaining, could only get himself to ask, “Who are you?”

The stranger smiled warmly and replied, “I’m an architect.”

George chuckled as all the pieces fell into place. What he once viewed as crazy-talk now revealed itself as a passionate perspective.

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“I see what you’re saying,” George said. “They do kind of have something to say.”

“Oh absolutely. This city in front of us, for example, speaks many different languages and thus the structures do as well. The people living here comment and talk to the buildings differently than tourists who have never been here. Even rodents, insects, and a multitude of other species have distinct viewpoints. Before you know it, a multi-dimensional discussion is taking place. It’s brilliant, really. Buildings are a medium for communicating ideas.”

“That certainly is an interesting way to look at it,” George chimed in for the sake of contributing to the conversation.

“But the most interesting part, my friend, is that they don’t need us. When the lights dim and city sleeps, on the rare occasion that it does, the buildings do not. The buildings talk even when we’re not there, even when we’re long gone.”

The Architect broke from his self-induced trance. He looked at George directly for the first time. “Fascinating, isn’t it?”

“Very! I find it all fascinating. Intriguing is what it is.”

George’s social skills were clearly lacking in comparison to the expressive dwellings they were overlooking.

“I’ve never even thought to think about it like that!” he continued.

“Of course not,” The Architect responded, almost snootily. “And why would you? People tend not to notice their environment the same way a bird does not notice the air it’s flying through. But we architects are the select few whose job it is to pay attention. We are the social engineers, constantly shaping the world around you; providing you with the framework for your lives.”

George had never realized the magnitude of the profession and meagerly squeaked out, “Thank you. For all that you do for us.”

“You’re quite welcome,” The Architect stoically responded.

“I wish I had your structure. I can’t even see mine. Sometimes I wonder if I have any at all.”

“Don’t be preposterous. You can’t see structure.”

“You can’t?”

“Of course not. Structure, that which allows something to stand, is precisely that which you cannot see. If you saw it, it would fall. Any sort of good foundation is inaccessible to our eyes. Look at it like this, you have an apartment I gather?”

“I do.”

“Good.”

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“When you are in your room, what are you thinking about?”

“Hm. This morning I debated which microwavable meal I should have for dinner.”

The Architect shot him a look of abhorrence before continuing, “Precisely.”

“Precisely what?”

“You are never truly aware you are in a room, a room with four walls, a floor, and god-willing in your case, a ceiling. If you were to stop for a moment and realize, my goodness, I am in this room that speaks, hears, smells, tastes, and touches, you would find that the room you have come to know and call your own would disappear.”

“It smells? I hope not,” added George as an afterthought.

Ignoring this interruption, The Architect fervidly went on. “You would look at the room for what it truly is. It would seem distant to you; you would feel like an outsider, a stranger in your own home. You would notice the moldings and suddenly think, ‘Hey, these things are designed to hide the relationship between the wall and the floor.’ Actually, they seem to be hiding the fact that such a relationship is very insecure.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen my moldings. Too many trinkets and gadgets of sentimental value lying around.”

“Everything starts moving! Your mind is moving; the room itself is moving and concurrently, the entire building is moving! Everything you know is an uncertainty. You don’t really know what’s behind those walls, under those carpets and panels; they are just masking the foundation - what is truly holding up that place you call home? Once you reach that point you realize certainty does not exist!”

“You know what, I think I’ve always known that!”

“We’re not in a room at all! We are suspended in a set of images that represent the idea of a room but what we are really in, is a state of representation of the thought of a room! Don’t be fooled, friend! This place you call home is really just a representation of a version of you that you would like the world to see and think they know! But it is not you! Only you are you!”

“I am me! I am Geroge!”

“That’s right, George,” The Architect reassured while taking a deep breath.

The stirring homily took a lot out of The Architect and hearing such exhilarating words took just as much out of George; the two were exhausted.

Finally, amidst panting, George said, “That was amazing. Architecture is hard.”

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“It sure is, George. But it is also beautiful. I should have warned you. Us architects fall in love with the thought that buildings are thoughts and those thoughts, as I’m sure you are experiencing right now, can be highly contagious.”

“Hey, did you build any of these?” asked George, pointing to the city.

“Me? No. I’ve never built anything.”

George could feel his body come to a complete standstill. He slowly turned his head and looked astonished at The Architect.

“I’m sorry? You’ve never built anything?”

“Not a single thing.”

“But, you’re an architect.”

“George, please. The greatest architects do not design or make buildings; they simply create ideas about buildings. Architects are people who ponder upon the way buildings might think. It doesn’t actually matter if we ever build one!”

The Architect stood up, dusted off his grey suit, and sighed.

“Well, I’m off! Good day!”

As the Architect walked away, George called out, “I thought I was talking to you, not really about buildings, but about your dreams.”

“You were,” the older man answered. “But to build something would be to manifest your dreams. And that’s way too much work.”

The Architect gave a farewell wink and just like that disappeared into the brush, leaving George alone on the bench.

George had never been so inspired to have aspirations -- aspirations he would do absolutely nothing with. It was in that moment that George came to a bold realization: that man, whom he just conversed with, was the greatest architect who ever lived.

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *I've always been intrigued with the artistic side of architecture. When you hear an architect discuss planning, designing, and constructing, it is always with passion. When I saw Gaudi's works in Spain, I felt they were speaking to me. Particularly for this piece, I was drawn to the words and works of Mark Wigley, the New Zealand-born architect and author. Many of these ideas came directly from him.*

*I thought it would be fun to juxtapose an archetypal architect (physically inspired by Helmut Bakaitis' role in 2003's The Matrix Reloaded) with someone who literally has no structure in life, no foundation (an obvious nightmare for any architect), someone whose*

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*life is an utter mess. Enter George Whelan, the foil to our architect; what ensues is an almost surreal conversation.*

*This is a story about perspective, community, and creation. It's about dreams and aspirations. It's a deconstruction of the artistic soul. It's also about, in a way, absolutely nothing. So have fun with that.*

*Artists such as Hermann Hesse, Wes Anderson, The Wachowski siblings, and my contemporary Dennis Pahl (who has been published in this magazine by the way) acted as inspirations for this piece.*

**BIO:** *Gregory Cioffi (SAG-AFTRA, AEA) is a professional actor and a published writer. His works have been published in The Feral Press, Mystery Weekly Magazine, Queen Mob's Tea House, Little Old Lady (LOL) Comedy, Blood Moon Rising Magazine, The Five-Two, Aphelion, and Allegory Ridge. Six of these stories have been archived in Yale University's Beinecke Collection (Rare Books and Manuscript Library). Greg's film (his foray into directing), *The Museum of Lost Things*, recently won awards at The Long Island International Film Expo, Global Shorts, and The Madrid International Film Festival. You might have noticed him on the stage or screen in *The Irishman*, *The Godfather of Harlem*, or in *Tony n Tina's Wedding* where, for the last 5 years, he has been married hundreds of times nationally and internationally. Greg teaches a creative writing course and a basic acting course at Nassau Community College. <http://www.gandeproductions.com/>*

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# The Debriefing

By Arthur O'Keefe

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We were surprised at how quickly we were drawn into this fascinating 'dark urban fantasy' that nimbly combines Real People fiction with sci/fi and spec lit. This is genre fiction at its best and the plot driven narrative holds our interest right to the last word. The author's 'down to business' prose, exacting vision and fertile imagination come together in a remarkable 'entertainment'. On another track, when a submission almost 'works' and we see enough in it we like, we ask for a rewrite. And invariably, the result is an improvement. Less often, an author will impose this on his/herself without our prompting. The result can be hit or miss. In the case of 'The Debriefing' we liked the revised version but we liked the original submission better. Sometimes with writing it's first time lucky and knowing where to stop is as important as knowing how to begin.*

## The Debriefing

While it occurred to the young man that he was one of only ten living people allowed access to the information he had learned, such reflections had long ago ceased to inspire any awe. It was if anything an annoyance, as it narrowed down the number of persons responsible for the inevitable administrative tedium. (Usually that number was one, meaning himself). Still, this case was quite interesting, and he wondered how it might affect his own research. But that was a question for later.

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He sat alone in a silent, windowless room more than two hundred feet below street level. Smoke rose in a slow, lazy stream from the cigarette placed in the ashtray before him.

The stark glare of overhead lights illuminated the grey, utilitarian space he occupied: conference table, swivel chairs, a large metal locker set against the wall behind him. On the table was a magnetic tape recorder, its twin reels motionless and mute, the personnel file open next to it. A shelf on the wall to his left held a coffee percolator and a few ceramic cups.

He picked up his cigarette and took a long satisfying drag, letting the smoke fill his lungs, holding it for a moment. He then released it, gazing at the file and the tape recorder, puzzling over the story he had just heard. He was convinced the old man believed everything he'd said. The evidence was just tenuous enough to be doubtful, yet substantial enough to be credible.

He glanced at the clock over the door. Nearly eighteen-hundred hours. He had been told in no uncertain terms that he alone must transcribe the debriefing. The information was too sensitive to leave to a clerk-typist, regardless of security clearance. And it had to be approved for release on a need-to-know basis by the station chief no later than noon tomorrow. He was a slow typist, and didn't look forward to the task. His one consolation was the foresight he'd shown in packing a couple of sandwiches in his briefcase. He'd take a break from typing and have them later.

Taking a last puff of his cigarette, he rubbed it out into the ashtray, then got up and double-checked that the door was locked. He walked to the locker and opened it.

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Removing a typewriter and a stack of paper marked with the appropriate security level, he set both down on the table, then got a cup of coffee from the percolator. Placing his coffee next to the typewriter, he sat down, inserted the first sheet of paper, and set the carriage.

The click-clack of the machine's keys broke the room's silence as he typed the introductory memorandum. Completing it, he then switched on the recorder and began to transcribe the interview.

**TOP SECRET / NOFORN / SPECIAL ACCESS**

**REQUIRED**

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SIDDOC-1007346 / Debriefing of Patrick J. Donnelly /

16FEB43

Dissemination date: 16 FEB 1943

From: Chief, Research Section 13, Special Intelligence  
Division

To: Director, Special Intelligence Division

cc: POTUS, OSW, SECNAV, SECARMY, SECSTATE, Dir. IPU, Dir.  
OSS

Subj: Debriefing of former SID agent Patrick J. Donnelly  
regarding events of special interest in the year 1899.

Attachments: 1. Analysis of Detected Substances

2. Attempt to Elicit Data via Hypnosis

(See also SIDDOC-1007343 / Preliminary Report by Patrick J.  
Donnelly / 11FEB43.)

Summary:

The following transcript is of an interview with  
Mr. Donnelly regarding 1) the detection on 7 JAN 1943 by SID  
researchers of apparent spatio-temporal anomalies which had  
occurred on 8 FEB 1899, 27 AUG 1899, and 10 SEP 1899; 2)  
activities during 1899 of Mr. Donnelly, then-SID agent

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Walter Stern, then-MI-6 agent-at-large Edward Alexander Crowley (aka Aleister Crowley), and inventor Nikola Tesla which apparently relate to said anomalies; and 3) the possible relation of 1) and 2) to the alleged invention by Thomas Edison of a device for communication with the spirits of the dead, and the attempted weaponization of said device by an individual named Ambrose Temple in what Mr. Donnelly refers to as "a different 1899" (see interview transcript for clarification).

Immediately following reports on 8 January this year of Mr. Tesla's death, all of his equipment, papers, and other items were seized by the Office of Alien Property on orders of the FBI. After a brief but intense jurisdictional dispute, OSS operatives acting on behalf of SID took custody of a mass of melted metal, solidified within in a crucible and nailed into a crate marked at the top with an X. The item was then delivered to the SID Region 17 Headquarters in Manhattan (publicly known as Stern Promotions, Inc.). SID Region 17 Director Theodore Jakes reports that shortly after the item's delivery, former agent Crowley arrived to examine it briefly, declared it "safe," (by what definition he did not say), and refused requests for further information. SID Region 17 Director Walter Stern (retired)

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arrived soon afterward to thank Mr. Crowley for his inspection of the item, and the two soon departed. Mr. Stern's subsequent request to keep the item as a piece of memorabilia was declined. It was shipped under maximum security measures to Research Section 13, San Diego. Despite ongoing efforts, including inquiries to MI-6, we are currently unable to contact or locate Mr. Crowley to elicit further information.

Analysis of the crucible's content has resulted in identification of 17 metallic elements plus silicon carbide, in addition to trace amounts of calcium carbonate and iron sulfate, suggesting the incineration of paper and ink (see Attachment 1 for details). The mixture had been exposed - it is assumed deliberately - to temperatures in excess of 3000°F for 30 minutes or longer. As noted in the preliminary report and following transcript, Mr. Donnelly claims it is the remains of Mr. Edison's prototype spirit phone, allegedly destroyed in February 1899 by Mr. Tesla in a forge kept in the latter's laboratory. As of this writing, it is unknown whether analysis of the material may yield information useful to the war effort.

Mr. Donnelly claims to have no knowledge of the alleged device's assembly or composition, and no such

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information was retrievable through attempts at hypnosis  
(see Attachment 2).

Interview subject: basic biographical details

Name: Donnelly, Patrick James

DOB: 7 March 1864 (age 78)

POB: New York, New York

1884-1909:

New York City Police Department; concurrent on-call Field  
Agent,                      SID. Retired NYPD at the rank of  
Detective, 1909.

1909-1929:

Special Intelligence Division, Region 17 HQ Manhattan.  
Retired as Assistant Director, Region 17, 1929.

Current residence:

2802 Caminito Chollas, San Diego, California

Marital Status: Married

Debriefing process:

The following interview took place in Conference Room  
3-A, Basement Level 3 of the Special intelligence Division

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Research Center, located within the Restricted Access Zone of the U.S. Naval Repair Base, San Diego.

Date and duration of interview: 15 Feb. 1943, 0900 - 1700 (break for lunch, 1200-1300). The interview was conducted by SID researcher Mr. Robert A. Monroe.

[START OF INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT]

Robert A. Monroe:

This interview is now being recorded by audio tape, with the full knowledge and consent of the interviewee. The time is now zero nine hundred hours local time. The date is Monday, fifteen February, nineteen forty-three. This interview is taking place at the Special Intelligence Division Research Center, San Diego, Conference Room 3-A. Individuals present are two in total: Robert Allan Monroe, SID Research Specialist, acting as interviewer, and Patrick James Donnelly, SID Assistant Director for Region 17, retired. I hereby identify myself as Robert Monroe. Sir, for the record, may I ask you to identify yourself?

Patrick J. Donnelley:

Patrick James Donnelly. I am the former Assistant Director for Region 17, Special Intelligence Division.

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RAM:

Thank you very much for consenting to this interview, Mr. Donnelly. You're a legend in the Division.

PJD:

I didn't exactly consent to it, but you're welcome just the same. As for being a legend, well, such stories grow in the telling. How old are you, son?

RAM:

Twenty-seven, sir. I was designated 4F due to ulcers, and then SID recruited me.

PJD:

I wasn't questioning your draft status. What's your specialty?

RAM:

It's a bit eclectic. I've done some work in aeronautical engineering, especially flight simulators. I'm a pretty fair pilot. And some work on audio technology.

PJD:

And what else?

RAM:

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The effects of certain sound patterns on human consciousness.

I research the possibility of inducing what we call the "OOBE." It stands for Out of Body Experience.

PJD:

Figured it was something like that. Astral Projection? That's what Crowley called it.

RAM:

With all due respect to Mr. Crowley, that's a somewhat mystical term. I try to take a scientific approach to things, including terminology.

PJD:

Fair enough. Well, I guess you're the one who should be asking

the questions. Fire away.

RAM:

I must admit, it's a bit difficult to know where to begin.

The preliminary statement you've provided is rather puzzling. Perhaps you could start with some background

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about your early life, and how you first came to be involved in SID, and we can go on from there.

PJD:

All right. I was born in Hell's Kitchen in 1864, as it says there in my file. My parents came off the boat in New York the month before I was born. Like a lot of immigrants, they decided to settle there. My father later told me he'd tried to convince my mother to stay in Ireland and wait a few years after I was born before emigrating. He was worried about her making the voyage pregnant. But she insisted she would be fine, and was determined that her child be born in America.

RAM:

What did your parents do?

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What didn't they do? My father was a laborer at first, mostly working construction, but he also did odd jobs any chance he could get: moving furniture, street cleaning, what have you. But not before he got conscripted into the Civil War right after they'd arrived in '64. He was infantry, of course. His unit saw some action, but he was lucky enough to come home with no lasting wounds and an honorable discharge. By the

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time I was fourteen he'd found a steady job as a barman. You could say we were poor, but I never really felt it. Never went hungry. We were luckier than a lot of families there.

My mother took in rich people's laundry, and later got a job as a cook and housemaid. They were both very strict about keeping me away from the influence of the gangs, but especially my mother. It was easy for a kid to get mixed up in crime back then. Still is, I guess.

So they kept me on the straight and narrow, I suppose you could say, and I managed to finish high school. I'd never gotten good grades, but I liked to read. Twain, Poe, Dickens, a little Shakespeare. Whatever I could get my hands on. And I found I had a good head for numbers and some mechanical aptitude. College was financially out of the question, so I worked at the saloon with my father for a couple of years and then decided to join the police. I suppose it's a stereotype, is that what they call it? The Irish cop.

So about five years later, Walter Stern – he'd just made detective – had taken notice of the fact that the Tammany Hall boys couldn't buy me, and I had a good record, and was a crack shot. So he asks me if I'd be up to a real challenge, something secret, chasing after bigger game than the typical Tenderloin ruffians. I said sure. I assumed he was going to put me on some kind of undercover plainclothes duty, which even patrolmen were occasionally called on to do. Well, I did spend some time in plainclothes, but it was like nothing I'd expected or ever experienced.

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We were chasing spies. Then I realized, hell, we *were* spies. And the stuff we were using. Secret experimental high-speed airships. Portable machine guns that made a Gatling gun look

like a toy. Though I'm sure it's nothing compared to the stuff you fellows are using now.

At first, and for years afterward, we didn't even know who we were working for. Except of course that it was a person, or persons, somewhere within the federal government. Proof enough of that was provided. I think you know how it worked back then. It was, at the time, a pilot program, and so that mainstay of the intelligence community, Plausible Deniability, was especially required. God forbid that people be held accountable for things they personally authorized.

And at times it wasn't just people we were chasing down, at least not ordinary people. You've got to keep two different compartments in your head, one for day-to-day events, and one for ghosts, magic, people with superhuman powers, and things that go bump in the night of all varieties. I don't regret it, not any of it. And yet, I'm very happy now to have an ordinary life. It's underrated, you know. After all I've seen, I find joy in the prosaic. And that I don't have to deal with those damnable New York winters I moved here to get away from.

But let's cut to the chase. You fellows called me in here for a very specific reason, so I'll tell you what I know about it. But first and foremost, you should know this: that lump of metal you have in your possession won't serve you any practical purpose. Not for the war or anything else. Even if you manage to figure out which components and materials result in a working spirit phone, it won't actually work. Not anymore. Though

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you may have slightly more than a snowball's chance in hell, and that's what worries me. You already have my initial report, but I'll cover this in more detail as we go along.

We'd worked with Crowley a couple of times before, back in the late 90s. Smart young fellow, brilliant even. Kind of narcissistic and arrogant, though, and occasionally liked to make subtle digs at people. Had a rather macabre sense of humor, too. But when it came to a pinch, he became deadly serious. Damn good at his job. We lost touch after he quit the whole espionage thing and decided to focus more on his occult studies. "Magick-with a k," as he called it. And regarding that, he could do amazing things.

I have no idea where Crowley is. If he doesn't want to be found, he won't be. He'll turn up if and when it suits him. I'm sure he's enjoying the fact that you're all so frantically trying to find him. To be honest, I never much liked the guy, but I respect him.

As for Edison. Well, he's dead, and I doubt you'll find anything among his papers, records, or extant equipment that will tell you anything. Though I'm sure you've started looking. There are just rumors, and some vague comments he made in a couple of interviews back in the 20s. In this other 1899 – that's the only way I can think of to put it – Edison was at least instrumental in getting the spirit phone made and marketed. I think he had some help with it, but that part isn't clear to me. Anyway, he was credited with inventing it, though by the time things got out of control, the whole thing was out of his hands.

So, these spatio-temporal anomalies, as you call them. How did your people detect them, and connect them with me and the spirit phone remains? Right, privileged information. Need-to-know basis. Sorry I asked. Some things are better not knowing.

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I don't remember what the spirit phone looked like, or rather would have looked like. Though you already know that, since your hypnotist failed to pull it out of my subconscious. It's the biggest gap in my memories, for want of a better term. Crowley said it was the result of a "special adjustment" he'd made in something he called the Akashic Records. A kind of astral archive of all events in the universe. Another result was that even he couldn't remember how he'd done it. The events – the ones I remember in my dreams with ever-diminishing clarity – were erased from existence. For that I am grateful. As I said, I now take joy in the prosaic.

In February of 1899, I started having dreams that progressed into disjointed nightmares about murder, grave robbing, demons in human guise, and fighting a small army of near-invulnerable, savage men whose only aim was to cause anguish and suffering and death for its own sake. Monsters. Rather unpleasant, one might say. All of it is tied into the spirit phone.

The dreams have diminished in frequency and vividness, and now they rarely occur. Crowley called them memories of what was, and yet was not: the events of another 1899, which he and Tesla had stopped from happening. I don't know how Tesla even got mixed up in it, but we're all lucky he did.

A time machine? I don't know. If anyone could possibly invent such a thing, it would've been Tesla. But I don't think that was it. Somehow Tesla, earlier in 1899, got wind of what was going to happen, and changed it. He melted down the prototype spirit phone. Nipped it in the bud. As to how he got his hands on it, or why Edison didn't

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simply build another, I've no idea. There's more to it than I know, but that's just as well. I'm sure Crowley had a hand in it.

These memories, as it were, included my death, and those of my three companions, Stern, Crowley, and Tesla. In a quick if unpleasant manner. Again, it's hard to recall details. We were at the airship. There were mountains around us. There was a flash, a short, intense burning. I believe I was killed in an explosion.

There were these monsters, as I said. But they were not *physical* monsters until later. They were evil spirits, if you like. And this Temple fellow. Ambrose Temple, his name was. He decided to bring them into this world in physical human form, using the spirit phone Edison had invented and started marketing. It's all very vague, except I know it involved hooking up a hundred men to a hundred of these machines, these spirit phones. But these were not ordinary men. They were duplicates, specially created by Temple to act as vessels for the spirits. Some kind of biological engineering. No idea how he did it.

Once these things got into their vessels – that is, attained physicality – they would have tremendous physical and psychic powers. Temple's plan was to imprison them and use them as enforcers for some kind of world government with him in charge. In our present-day terminology, he planned nothing less than a global totalitarian state. And this was 18 years before Lenin and his boys took over Russia. Whatever else you can say about the guy, he was in his way a visionary. And his abilities were akin to those of Crowley and Tesla combined, though perhaps even greater.

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No record of an Ambrose Temple? Of course. I take it for granted he'd disguised himself using "magick," or technology, or both. We didn't talk much about it afterwards, but Tesla thought he might have been Elihu Thomson, the inventor. Crowley disagreed, saying we'd likely never know. They'd both met Thomson before, so who knows?

I can tell you fellows are really keen to figure all this out, and instinct tells me you're searching in a direction you shouldn't be. So if I may, let me offer a bit of advice.

In my dreams, I have seen something that stands out more than anything else, even as the dreams have faded. Temple's biggest piece of intellectual arrogance, or to put it more bluntly, self-aggrandizing bullshit: "Nothing can go wrong. I've accounted for every possibility." Whatever you do with this thing, never tell yourself that. Because there is no way, ever, to account for every possibility.

As I said, in this other 1899, Temple thought he could control those things, those monsters, and use them as enforcers for his crazy-ass vision of a world state with him in charge. He thought freedom was a curse causing humanity to suffer, and that he was the cure. He didn't even have an idea of how to run global politics or the world economy. He said those were just details to be worked out later. I still marvel at how anyone could be so brilliant yet willfully stupid. He was such a genius at all that technology and occult stuff that he thought trapping those things and running the world would be a piece of cake. As soon as they got in, they broke loose and began slaughtering his personnel. "I've accounted for every possibility." Like hell. No, I don't know how he tried to restrain them.

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Now, then. I was a cop in New York for twenty-five years and a spook-chasing spy for forty. My instincts have often helped me stay alive. And right now those same instincts are telling me that someone in charge, somewhere, wants to try the same thing Temple did in that other 1899: bring those twisted, obscene monstrosities here and turn them into weapons. I get it, you can neither confirm nor deny. But there are two things I have to say to you. They're important. Very important. I hope you take this to heart, son. You seem like a clever fellow.

First: Don't. There's very little chance you'll succeed. But if you do, you'll wish you hadn't. And so will everyone else. And by that I mean *everyone*. Second: There is one other thing which stands out in my might-have-been memories. All the stuff that has been built up electrically in the past hundred years or so – the power systems, telegraph and telephone lines, and such – somehow it all acts as a kind of barrier to keep those things out. For about the past 40 years, anyway. So even if you somehow figure out how to build a working spirit phone, make the required human vessels, the whole shebang: it won't work. You'd need to shut down nearly the entire world's electrical grid for at least six months to make it function the way you'd want it to. Or at least scale it all back to pre-1900 levels.

And that brings me to something else. I've debated whether to tell you this. It might do more harm than good, but you'd figure it out on your own anyway. There is something else you need to prevent at all costs, whatever it takes...

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RAM:

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Even assuming your hypothesis of a secret atomic bomb project is plausible -

PJD:

Can we please cut the bullshit, son? We both know it's happening. Fine, you're not authorized to confirm whether it's true, assuming you even know. The point is, if enough electrical infrastructure is destroyed on a global scale, it would be sufficient to bring down the barrier I spoke of. If that happens, as long as there is enough remaining electricity somewhere to power a set of working spirit phones -

RAM:

So, to prevent the entry of these things into "physical space-time," as in here on earth, you're saying that we need to not have a global atomic war.

PJD:

Well, it seems like a good idea not to have one anyway, especially if it's global. But yes, that's it.

RAM:

Then how do we prevent it?

PJD:

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You're asking the wrong guy. I assume not making the bomb is out of the question.

RAM:

That's way above my pay grade as well, sir. But even assuming such a project exists, if our people don't make it first, the Japanese or the Germans will. Or at least they'll try.

PJD:

Yes, I imagine so. I don't pretend to have all the answers. Except one: Do not attempt to make a spirt phone. Ever. Please.

RAM:

Your view of the matter is duly noted, Mr. Donnelly. I promise it will be conveyed to higher authority. I think that completes our line of inquiry. Is there any other information or comment you would like to add?

PJD:

No.

RAM:

Very well. Thank you again very much, sir, for your service to our country, and for your time today.

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PJD:

You're welcome. And good luck. Better you than me.

[END OF INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT]

[END OF DOCUMENT]

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Switching off the tape recorder, the young man looked at the clock on the wall. Just past 2230 hours. He got up and stretched his muscles and joints with welcome relief. After putting away the typewriter and the remaining unused sheets of paper, he locked the memorandum, personnel file, and reels of magnetic tape in a safe at the bottom shelf of the locker.

Exiting the room and locking the door, he walked to the end of the windowless corridor to a door labeled RESEARCH and knocked. A small sliding door opened from the inside, revealing a window and the ruddy face of a bespectacled middle-aged man. The sliding door closed and the door opened.

Within was a large space with one wall devoted to panels with multiple dials, buttons, switches, reels of magnetic tape, and at regular intervals shelf-like protrusions embedded with typewriter keyboards. Against another wall were shelves containing recent, cutting edge publications in mathematics, technology, and various subfields of physics and engineering. Next to these were yet more shelves equally filled with much older-looking, leather bound volumes. Many bindings were blank, while others were marked with odd-looking symbols such as pentagrams and glyphs unintelligible to the

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casual observer. The ancient texts formed an incongruity against the modern, gray, government-issue bookcase which contained them. There were also multiple desks and filing cabinets. On one desk, on which sat nothing else, was the crucible filled with greyish, solidified metal. The remains, Donnelly had asserted, of the spirit phone.

“Evening, Bob,” the older man said. “Burning the midnight oil, too, I see.”

“Good evening, Jerry. Fortunately, it’s not midnight yet.”

“True. So, what did he tell you?”

“Not much of practical value, really. Though it’s not his fault. We’ll just have to keep trying, assuming you really want to proceed as planned. I’ll have the report in triplicate with the audiotape on your desk by oh-nine-thirty tomorrow. We’re arranging to interview Stern in New York, but if anything he seems to know less than Donnelly.”

“Well, we have to be thorough about it regardless. And with any luck, our boys will locate and isolate Crowley. But about Donnelly. His preliminary statement included something about a barrier preventing those entities from accessing earth, resulting from artificially generated electricity, remember?”

“Yes. He talked about it in more detail today. It’s in the report.”

“Good. Well, I’ve done a bit of tinkering and calculating. I think that besides electrical transmission per se, it’s largely the result of multiple isolated hermetic vacuums plus heat, over a wide geographic scale. In other words, vacuum tubes.”

“How the hell could the existence of vacuum tubes cause something like that?”

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“At the moment, I have no idea. But pretty soon silicon semiconductors should make the tubes obsolete. They require no vacuum, and have a far lower conduction temperature. That might facilitate the process.”

“You mean the process of bringing those things here. And using them as weapons.”

“Right. Assuming they’re not a figment of Donnelly’s imagination. We both know this line of work can force one to confront things that challenge fundamental concepts of reality. It’s mentally unsettling, and this is especially true for field agents. Despite the psych screening protocol we have now, there’s still the odd agent who breaks down in the face of certain experiences.”

It was true. There was a special convalescent home for such agents – now former agents – about an hour’s drive north of San Diego. Bob had been there once to assist in the debriefing of one such individual. It was often impossible to distinguish between what the man had actually experienced and what was delusional; his mental state was one of terror almost beyond description, which sedatives could do little to alleviate. Most of the other residents there simply stared into space catatonically, with occasional whimpers of fear. Bob hoped he would never have to go back there.

“So,” Jerry went on, “there’s always the possibility the old man simply has a few screws loose. Still, there were the anomalies we detected, and his story seems to hang together. My instincts tell me it’s all true, so far as he can recall it.”

“He said it would be very dangerous for us to try and bring those things here physically.”

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“Come on. Risk is part of the game, and in this case I’d say it’s an acceptable one. My theory is that whatever these things are, once they’re physical, they can kill *remotely* with a sufficient focus of mental power. Can you imagine what it could mean for the war? Entire battalions – perhaps even armies – eliminated at one fell swoop, with no civilian casualties. Makes the atom bomb project look like a kid’s toy.”

“But if you read the initial statement, you know it’s also supposed to include some way of...duplicating people. Biological engineering of some kind. Frankenstein stuff. Donnelly knew almost nothing about it.”

“There’s some research going in that direction as well. It’s looking feasible. I’m also formulating a method of keeping them restrained and confined, once they’re physical. Damn, this is exciting. This is why I love this work, Bob.”

“Those things are supposed to be monsters. Powerful ones. What if they don’t want to be weaponized, under any conditions we might offer or impose? What if they escape?”

The older man smiled. “They won’t. I’ve accounted for every possibility.”

THE END

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *“The Debriefing” is essentially a short story sequel to a novel I’ve written called The Spirit Phone. (Or if you like, The Spirit Phone is a prequel to “The Debriefing.” The Spirit Phone was written first, and I am actively seeking publication).*

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*I've always loved tales of the paranormal, whether presented as fiction or (alleged) fact (e.g. *The Twilight Zone*, the *Time-Life: Mysteries of the Unknown* book series, etc.). One day, a little over ten years ago, after I'd been reading about Thomas Edison's alleged attempt to invent a machine to communicate with the dead, I struck upon the idea of writing a novel in which Edison actually creates such a device and begins mass production for the market, complete with an advertising campaign. In addition to Edison, I immediately decided upon Nikola Tesla and Aleister Crowley as major characters (or rather, my fictionalized versions of them). That was the basis for *The Spirit Phone*, and *The Spirit Phone* was the basis for "The Debriefing," in which Robert A. Monroe is also a fictional analogue of an actual person. Though I should add that, to the best of my knowledge, the real Monroe was never a secret government researcher.*

*I have been asked to cite influences here. I think that for all of us who strive to write seriously, everything we read (or at least the stuff we like) influences us in some way. In this story, besides my interest in paranormal urban legends mentioned above, the element of fantastical counterfactual history incurs a debt to authors such as William Gibson and Bruce Sterling (*The Difference Engine*), Harry Turtledove (*The Guns of the South*) and Mark Twain, who wrote that brilliant archetype of the genre, *A Connecticut**

*Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. More generally, my reading is a mix of genre and literary works by various writers: H.G. Wells, Edgar Allan Poe, H.P. Lovecraft, Ray Bradbury, Agatha Christie, Ernest Hemingway, George Orwell, Dante, Homer, etc.

**BIO:** *I was born in New York and live in Japan, where I am a Lecturer of English at Showa Women's University, Tokyo. My short fiction has appeared in [Ragazine](#) and [Manawaker Studio](#). I am a contributing writer for [The Japan Times](#), [Metropolis](#), and [Pop Matters](#). My academic writing on Mark Twain has been published in the [The Midwest Quarterly](#), among other journals.*

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# THE GREAT HAMBURGER ARTIST

*By Jon Fain*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Whoooooaaaa! Six dudes fell off their chairs when we read this one! Like, put wonky idea, inspiration overload, strato-style (as in stratosphere), voice to kill for, into a litro-blender (or prose grinder if you're old fashioned) and you won't believe the fucken HAMBURGER you get. This guy is bardo-butcher and abbatoir artist rolled up into one big beef-fisted rissole that he shoves in your face. We thinks, we thinks also a devastatingly not so straight-faced javelin thrust at the contemporary art scene and maybe a certain apex gaga wearing a meat dress. Expansive concept, lean, hard, aerobic prose. Five stars.*

## *The Great Hamburger Artist*

by  
Jon Fain

He'd started small. Paramecium. Then tried worms, mollusks, cephalopods. Worked up to cats and dogs. Feeling dead-ended, he borrowed a neighbor's corgi to eat that bull mess.

Then he got human. He got good at facial features: sharp-edged noses and heavy brows. He molded the meat, found form in the fat, learned the limits of the lean. The best ones he lacquered and gave an appropriate name.

His muse, always so positive, post-facto began to challenge his choices. Before this, she didn't mock, she believed in him back when.

Now, each day, arriving with his coffee, she percolated with negative space.

*Sitting Bull? Are you serious?*

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Still, he persisted, one might say evolved! High-def, fat-focused videos of patties on the flattop, bubbling in their own juice. A series of chopped meat murals that admittedly took a few people off their feed, but was otherwise copacetic. Then back to good old ground chuck, this time with a nautical theme: bovine bosuns, Her Majesty's Herefords on the high seas, life-sized, full-uniformed, sitting, some standing in back, like for a formal portrait? Nobody got it.

He broke this last rejection down, lopped off their heads, made them walk the plank like chickens. He clumped and packed USDA Choice into plastic bags, drove out of the city and tossed them at the back door of a suburban chain restaurant that specialized in the Hum Burger with Secret Sauce. He peeled out, wipers streaking grease across the glass. The next day, flummoxed, needing closure, he called them up for a takeout HBSS, but by the time he did, the kitchen was closed, and he cried into his phone.

So, he did what he had to do, tried to moo on. Listened to his muse. Punched in every day with landscape, seascape, treescape: the usual diddle.

But he wasn't happy. He'd whetted his edge. Muse schmooze!

She did not take it well. He responded in kind.

When the guy delivering heirloom groats at the bodega next door hauled him off, she was anointed with his latest raw material, only a cowgirl portion of what he'd hand-ground to create what would have been his masterpiece. And maybe, as she ran out the door, he had.

Before the smart phones snapped, before the police carted him away, she promised he would never forget her.

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The rest of us sure didn't. First, jaypegs of this chick covered in grass-fed, on the sidewalk like a downer cow, flew into every device. Then with the subsequent trial, you couldn't escape her as she poured of out of every media hole, firm grip of Herr Zeitgeist's sack.

The tabloids used their best court cartoonist to sketch his shame. Headline-focused as ever, they dubbed him, as they do with all the losers, and the rest of us served it mockingly back and forth until it stuck.

But really?

Bullish, like most fools, he became convinced he knew what he was doing. That he was one of the lucky ones. And maybe he was right; critics, historians and the rest of us be damned. He'd worked his desperate magic, and at the end, at least, acquired a name.

He was branded, but good.

END

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I wrote this originally for a contest with a 500 word limit. After a no show in the contest I tried it at a few other places that seemed like they might not mind a little wise-assery, then put it aside. When I eventually pulled it back up, I went even more "meaty" than its original version. As the saying goes, "You can go hog... or you can go whole hog." (Apologies for the mixed meat metaphor.)*

*Influences on me for this type of approach: T. Coraghessan Boyle, Hunter S. Thompson, and Bukowski. They bring attitude, precise language, word play, and sense of humor, things I strive for in many of the things I write.*

**BIO:** *Jon Fain has published dozens of stories over the years, in literary, commercial and web-based magazines. Some of his fiction can still be found lurking in the archives of Menda City Review, Word Riot, anderbo, Pequin, DiddleDog, and others. Awards and recognition include honorable mention in the Winning Writers Sports Fiction/Non-*

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*Fiction contest; finalist for the Sandstone Short Fiction Prize (collection); and winner VerbSap Burning Books contest. He lies low in Massachusetts.*

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# CORBIN *by Christopher Davis*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We love the way Corbin's 'tao' is played against the neurotic personality of the narrator in this story that somehow feels like it belongs in The New Yorker. 'Stocking energy drinks at 3am feels a little too ironic to me, like dangling a sandwich just out of reach in front of a homeless man.' The mood is akin to urban despair and the characters, skillfully modeled through gesture, inference, description and action take the underlying nihilism in their lives for granted... The worst part is I do it to myself. No one's making me feel this way except my lousy brain. And I don't know how to make sense out of it. Why am I so—I can't even come up with the right word. Irregular? Abnormal? Inhuman? So it is all the more wonderful to watch how Corbin's actions and behavior impact on those around him, offering, if not the realization, at least the possibility of change. The jaundiced first person passive voice and observant prose only add to our pleasure. Charles told us: 'It's the kind of story I could read forever.'* Five stars.

## Corbin

I'm not drunk, but I feel like I should be. The purple hue of the bowling alley's "disco night" lights combining with the endless flashing screens and glowing neon bowling balls is enough to make my head spin. The acrid smell of liquid cheese and microwaved pepperoni, which surely comes out as greasily as it goes in, seeps into my lungs like a pungent fart that someone let slip in their hurry for more mozzarella sticks. Roughly the size of an adolescent rhinoceros, the man in lane six shimmies his large belly in celebration at having successfully rolled his unnecessarily-heavy ball into the pins at the end of the lane, knocking them all down simultaneously. The bottom of his gut peeks out

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from under his beer and sweat-stained Hawaiian shirt, which has surrendered its lowest button at some point in its sad life, splayed open to reveal his horizontally-oval belly button, surely packed to the brim with lint and the crumbs of days gone by. He and his female companion, similar in shape and size, high five and toss back large swigs of beer like a pair of dwarves from Tolkein's Middle Earth, but with more grunting. I cradle my head in my hands, wondering how I got into this miserable situation, thinking maybe that's why heavy drinking is so often associated with bowling, to make it more bearable – it's surely an unspoken obligation of the so-called sport.

David, the general manager of the 7-11 where I currently work, threw together this horrifying little group date, and invited me along out of either obligation, guilt, pity, or some combination of all three. Whichever it was, he clearly regrets it now. I keep having these awkward moments of close contact with him, like going to bowl at the same time. He tries to say something to me to make me feel included, but it's always some pleasantries-chitchat kind of thing, typically requiring a "yes" or "no" answer, which doesn't exactly encourage further communication. Everyone else just looks past me like I'm not even there – a common response from normal people to quiet people – except for Debbie, the person I want the least attention from.

"How the hell did I get here?" I ask into my palms.

"What's that?" Debbie asks, her alcohol-tinged breath wafting over me. She moves her makeup-caked cheeks closer to my face from her vomit-orange plastic seat. Apparently, this is an invitation to repeat myself, but all it does is give me a blast of hair product chemicals that burn my eyes.

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I sit up and shout over the music into Debbie's ear. "I said I really like the music here." I add a wide smile to seal the effect.

"I know! It's like all of my favorite songs one after another!" she says, beaming at me and turning back to watch some guy named Brad moonwalking up to the ball return machine. I've managed to feign interest one more time, but just barely. In truth, the nonstop beat of so many blended pop, rap, rock, and dance songs is stomping my head into a migraine. I honestly don't know why she's "chosen" me in the first place – there are other, *louder*, guys at this thing, after all.

It's not that I'm against dating in general, I just don't know if I see the point. I'm not really "the sociable type" – or so I've been told my whole life. I never know what to say or how to act or how I feel about anything. I get so stuck in my head about things I start to feel like I'm not even human. Like with sexual attraction. That little primal drive just sucks the life out of me when I think about it. I'm attracted to girls on occasion, and feel the urge to talk to them, but then I start really scrutinizing her – whoever it is – and it's like when you see a picture of your favorite food and it looks delicious, but then when you get up *real* close, each individual ingredient starts looking strange and insipid. I suddenly remember that the curves of her body that quicken my heart rate are just large swaths of skin stretched over bones, or that the softness of her contours that bounce as she moves are just deposits of fat or muscle tissue. Add the combination of having to say the right thing at the right time to an attention-seeking personality and I'm just over it.

I snap myself back out of my head – where I'm sure I've been for far too long, just now – to see Debbie dancing with Brad. Her drastically over-curled hair bounces above the

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sequined dress that emphasizes the curvy paunch of her middle she thinks the dress hides. I have to keep reminding myself that she's my 'date.' It wasn't officially-stated or anything, but it's obvious she talked to Kyle and Nicole – apparently, the group's resident matchmakers – about it. She's been buzzing around me nonstop since I got here, unless of course, anyone else does something loud and obnoxious, in which case she has no problem leaving my side to be just as loud and obnoxious for a few minutes.

Shrieks and squeals alert the entire alley to the fact that Brad has again knocked the pins down in one way or another – I miss it, having been watching the lane six couple ingesting ketchup-splattered hot dogs with their arms entwined like a bride and groom performing a wedding toast. It would almost be romantic if it weren't so repulsive.

Debbie bounces back over from cheering and plops onto my lap. I can see the sweat under her arm pit as she swings her arm around me. Her warmth radiates through her dense legs onto my lap, adding to the heat and humidity the alley is already producing in excess. I can smell the pungent combination of shoe-disinfectant-slash-deodorizer from the dank shoes on her feet that someone just took off half an hour before – what a romantic atmosphere. Needing a break, I heave Debbie off my lap and tell her, as politely as possible, I'm going to order us some food.

I order nachos from the ironically-named “Fred's Snack Bistro” across the alley from our lane and sit on a metallic, red-cushioned swivel stool next to the soda fountain, waiting for the *ding* from the microwave to announce the completion of the cheese-melting over the soggy chips. As the couple in lane six race to see who can eat their loaded plates of chicken wings first, I notice a ragged-looking man lumber in through the front entrance.

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He looks incongruous, split right in half at the waist: the upper-body of a linebacker – broad shoulders, thick neck and arms – attached to the lower-body of a scrawny teenager – small waist and thin legs. His blue sweatshirt hood is up, but his bristled, brown hair holds it up at odd angles, and the bottle in his hand swings when he walks like he was slinging a Yoyo. Outside alcohol isn't allowed in the alley, but the way he walked – that lazy stride that seems to keep him invisible and below the radar while simultaneously calling everyone's attention to him – told me he'd get away with it. He *was* a bowling ball, himself, gliding down the vibrant, zigzag-patterned carpet, seeming to gather speed as he goes, and you knew whatever he collided with would make a considerable crash. Apparently, I was his pins, because he plunked down on the stool next to me.

“Gimme a beer, Rick,” he said to the lanes at large, resting his elbows on the counter behind him. Unsure who he addressed, I look for the bartender, but don't see him anywhere. I turn back to him, unsure what to say. I can't help but stare at him. His sunglasses hide his eyes, but I can feel him taking me in from his periphery.

“That girl in the yellow...” he said, still not facing me. I scan the lanes. Craning my neck, I see a tall, beautiful woman in a yellow sweater bowling with a man at the far end of the alley. The man was showing her how to curve the ball, his hand on hers, their hips touching. It looks very hot – temperature-wise, I mean. I assume that's who he meant, anyway, but can't figure out how he'd even spotted her with his face aimed at the center of the alley.

“What about her?” I ask.

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“She’s asking for it,” is all he says. It feels very business-oriented, like staff meetings I’d been to at previous jobs – he let the connotations do the work.

“She’s with someone,” I state.

“That doesn’t concern me.” The directness of his replies unnerves me. He finally turns toward me, fixing his eyes on mine. They were outlined with small creases, not from age, I think, but from a lifetime of squinting – they look familiar, but I can’t place them.

“See, sex isn’t this big, complicated thing we make it out to be,” he says. “We all want it. We all *need* it. But we created these damned rules around it. Now, ask yourself: who *made* these rules? Where do they exist, exactly? You ever *seen* them written somewhere? I got everything to gain and nothing to lose from going over there. Why shouldn’t I go over there and talk to that beauty? Because *you’ll* tell me I’m an ‘asshole?’ Why should *you* get to judge me, Jeff?” He turns his eyes back to the girl in yellow. I stare at him, perplexed.

His logic is simple, yet somewhat impressive. It isn’t based on anything but his own personal values. He couldn’t be wrong on *his* terms. Who *could* judge him if he didn’t care what other people thought of him? I appreciate it, but I guess I don’t have the same conviction to get behind what he said. I’m not *against* sex, necessarily, but it just feels so complicated and unnecessary. First off, no one teaches you how to talk to women. It’s either you’re good at it or you’re not. There isn’t even a learning curve – it’s pass/fail. I *am* interested in sex, just for the record, but it’s not even for my own physical gratification. Rather, I see sex as this weird way of *learning* someone. Sensual pleasures aside, when you make someone orgasm, you’re generally seeing a part of that person

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very few other people ever get to see. Their physical responses – whether or not they vocalize, if their muscles spasm, if their eyes remain open or roll up into their heads or shut tight – it’s all unique to each individual. It’s peeling the layers of the onion back to the center bulb. I’m wondering what sex between the “lane sixer’s” must be like, when I realize.

“Wait – how do you know my name?” I ask, but he just stands up and takes a swig from his bottle.

“Sorry Jeff, I gotta go be ‘an asshole,’” he says, and walks off toward the girl and her date, just as the bartender shows up with a beer and my nachos. I wonder how the bartender had known to bring out the beer, not having been present when he’d asked for it, but I’m more occupied with the fact that the guy knew my name. Was he an old co-worker? A friend-of-a-friend? I wrack my brains, but can’t remember him from anywhere. Maybe he was stalking me? If he was, though, why did he just leave instead of murdering me on the spot? I’m spiraling again.

“Where’d Corbin go?” the bartender asks, setting down the bottle and plate. When he says his name, something clicks into place.

“Wait, is that Corbin Hatchett?” I ask the bartender. “From Crittenden Middle School?”

“How the hell should I know?” the bartender replies. Clearly a stupid question to ask the bartender, but I knew it was him. A tangle of odd memories from some previous lifetime materializes in my mind. I never knew him well, yet I know many strange things about him. Or rather, I have many strange *speculations* about him. I remember his house, two streets over from mine. My parents called it the “junk house,” because a random

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assortment of debris consistently occupied the yard, surrounded by a waist-high chain-link fence. I used to pass it on my bike occasionally, always a little wary. While the peak of my childhood “wildness” equated to things like throwing oranges at cars on the freeway or launching rocks over my backyard fence with a slingshot, you could find Corbin on any day of the week wandering his yard with lead pipes, rusty saws, or even nail guns. His parents never seemed to be around, either. As a kid, I spent many days wondering what went on in that house, the same way I wonder now where he’d gotten his cowboy-esque accent, having lived here in Sunnyvale, California his whole life. If anything, people here had the most opposite “accent” from cowboys I could think of. They drew out their vowel sounds in traditional California style, whether a surfer emphasized how “gnaaarly” something was, or a tech. company executive wanted his “*cawffeee already.*”

I’m watching Corbin’s encounter with the girl in the yellow sweater when Debbie comes over to remind me it’s my turn to bowl. I give her the nachos and she takes me back to our lane by the arm. I chuck my ball into the gutter and shrug innocently back at the group as they offer unenthusiastic suggestions, trying half-heartedly to include me. I turn to see how Corbin’s endeavor plays out. The girl’s date and Corbin are on the floor, wrestling like mad children. I bowl my second attempt just as the bartender hurries over to break up the fight. No one in our lane even notices the scuffle, as they’d all been engaging in a dance-off to settle which of them could do a better robot.

Later that night as I’m returning my bowling shoes to the front, the girl with the yellow sweater walks by, arm-in-arm with Corbin, who sported a nosebleed and a toothy smile

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stretched across his face. I got into bed that night with the image of his smile burned on the inside of my eyelids.

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Stocking energy drinks at 3am feels a little too ironic to me, like dangling a sandwich just out of reach in front of a homeless man. I hate working grave shift, but that's currently all 7-11 offers. The usual suspects filter in and out over the first couple of hours – a group of stoners buying fifty-three dollars' worth of Hostess snack cakes and iced teas; "straight-from-the-bar" drunks buying cigarettes, nudie magazines, and more beer to drink on the drive home; insomniacs and just plain weirdos coming in for random odds and ends that I can't ever make sense out of, like two bags of ice, a box of cereal, motor oil, three packages of condoms, and DD batteries. Finished with the Red Bulls and Rockstars, I break down my boxes only to hear the *ding* of the automatic doors sliding open. In walks Barry, waving a genial hand at me as he immediately gravitates toward the hot dog rollers.

I don't mind Barry, really, he just has annoying habits, like being incredibly particular about which "Big Bite" hot dog he wants. He scrutinizes them as if he's choosing an engagement ring – examining them from all sides, standing back up and thinking it over, then bending back down to re-examine them through the sneeze-guard. He'd have weighed each one in his hands if I let him. Instead, I just have to wait there with the tongs while he reflects fluorescent light at me from the balding crown of his head. He often

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asks my opinion on which one I think looks the biggest or the best. A couple of times he even had me put one in a bun, only to decide he actually wanted “this one, over here – on the left. No, *next* to that one. Yep – that’s a winner.” Who calls a 7-11 hot dog a “winner?” That and he teaches English at the high school, but still says things like “eck-specially” and “eck-spresso.” Barry is a “hot dog connoisseur” if there ever was such a thing. Really, he’s just the king of finicky-ness, but I almost envy his particularity. He annoys most everyone, sure, but he knows what he wants and won’t be satisfied unless he carefully considers all options, even with something as insignificant as a hot dog.

If Barry is the king of finicky-ness, that surely makes me the king of indecision. Most days, my opinions change so quickly and frequently that I have trouble just picking out what clothes to wear. I don’t know how to be “stylish,” and the people who do bug the hell out of me. Everything changes so frequently I don’t even know where to start. Mismatched socks are a big trend right now, but ironically, there are rules to that. The colors have to complement each other, somehow. How the FUCK does that work? Coordinated-mismatching? I just can’t do it. So I end up pissed off or depressed and wearing whatever the last things I took out were because it’s either too hard or I just don’t care anymore – usually resulting in some ungodly combination of colors or patterns eliciting stares from people wherever I go. And if I can’t even choose what to wear for a single day, how can I possibly commit to a specific career where I spend multiple *thousands* of dollars and *years* of my life on something like college? Hence my job at 7-11 instead of “doing something with my life,” as I’ve so often been admonished by my mother. At least here I have a uniform – no clothing choices involved.

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“You don’t have any of the quarter-pound ones with cheese in the middle?” Barry asked, rising and taking a big, swooping yawn exactly the way I’d seen hippos do it on The Discovery Channel—like they thought their jaws could stretch wider than their heads allowed. That was another thing about Barry; he was always yawning.

“Sorry Barry, they’re out in the warehouse, I guess. We should have them again on Tuesday, hopefully.”

He nods, clearly disappointed. His whole body moves when he nods, like he’s some kind of weird puppet where each movement shakes other parts of his body at random. He bends back down to inspect the other hot dogs when the door *ding*-s open again and in clumps Corbin. He’s wearing the same dark-lensed sunglasses he had at the bowling alley all those months ago, but his sweatshirt had been replaced by a thick, plaid, flannel shirt, the sleeves of which were shredded and doused with fresh blood from deep, erratic gashes in his forearms. Despite the urgent medical attention his arms clearly require, he cruises the aisles with the same easy stride he had at the alley. I have to assume he only has one speed – even if he were in a burning building engulfed in flames, I just can’t picture him running, or even jogging, for that matter. He picks up a handful of items from around the store, holding them right on top of one of his bloodied forearms, and saunters up behind Barry, patiently waiting his turn. I stare right at him and he just stands there facing me. I get the feeling his eyes aren’t on me, but it’s hard to tell with them hidden behind those sunglasses. It’s like some bizarre western showdown, but instead of pistols, he has a small bundle of medical supplies and I have Slim Jims.

“Have you ever had the taquitos?” Barry asks, standing up.

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I nod, still looking at Corbin.

“Are they any good?” Barry, following my gaze, turns around and sees Corbin’s bleeding arms. Barry didn’t hold back like I had. “Holy shit! What the hell happened to you?”

“Possum,” Corbin says, his head tilted slightly to one side.

Barry stares at him, apparently awaiting further explanation. Receiving none, however, he turns back to me, swallows, and says, “I’ll have the one on the back row.”

I bun his hot dog, ring up his purchase, and he leaves without another word. Corbin sets his small bundle of items on the counter.

“What can I do for this?” he says, motioning toward the ‘medical’ supplies – a bottle of Hydrogen Peroxide, a tube of superglue, a new pair of Office-Mate scissors, a roll of blue “Shop Towels” from the automotive aisle, a roll of duct tape, and a handle jug of Jack Daniel’s whiskey. He keeps his head level with mine but his eyes – which I can just make out through his sunglasses at closer proximity – remain on the counter.

“Sorry?”

“I don’t got money for this stuff. You want your icebox compressor fixed?” He inclines his head toward the to-go ice cream cooler with the “out of order” sign taped to it. “I’m assuming that’s the trouble – usually is, anyway.”

I just stand there, unsure what to say – he only had a few things that can’t have totaled more than ten or eleven bucks, but he doesn’t have enough to pay for it? And he’s offering to fix the cooler with those mangled arms?

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“Uh, that’s all right. We’ve actually got a repairman coming in tomorrow. You can just have that stuff, though – you need it,” I say, looking down at the ribbons of shredded skin on his forearms. “Do you want some help?”

Corbin pauses, then states, “If you’ve got a mind to, all right.” I tell him to wash his arms off in the bathroom and bring out two buckets from the back room to sit on. When he comes back out, he’d ripped off his shirt sleeves. “Just pour some Peroxide on ‘em, then wrap ‘em tight with the tape. I’ll glue the deeper ones when I get home.”

We sit on the buckets and I tear open the Shop Towels and hold a wad of them to each of his arms. They feel grooved, like I’m pressing the towels over the grated-end of a block of cheese. He never shows any sign of pain or discomfort, despite my pressing as hard as I can to staunch the bleeding and splashing generous amounts of Peroxide over them, producing a loud, prolonged *hiss* as it bubbles and froths.

Corbin’s eyes remain transfixed on the far corner of the store, but I can’t tear mine away from him. His lower lip sticks out like he’s sucking on a mouth guard, likely – I assume – from having his jaw broken a few times in his life. His nose is a perfect, round-edged triangle, exactly like a billiards rack. His brow juts out a little too far, giving him a dramatic, caveman-esque forehead that holds his sunglasses at least an inch too-far off his eyes. It’s like looking at a wooden sculpture that someone hacked out of an old stump, or maybe while riding the bus, so they couldn’t hold the wood still enough to get symmetrical angles.

“I appreciate that,” he says, as I finish wrapping the tape over his arms. He stands up, still looking vaguely toward the entrance. “I don’t like debt, much, so I’ll be back in a couple

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of hours to fix that sign out front.” One of the bulbs on our sign above the entrance doors went out a couple days ago and the sign, itself, has a massive crack across it.

“Thanks,” I say, “but you really don’t have to. I can just put this stuff down as ‘damaged,’ or I’ll just pay for it myself. Like I said, you need it.”

“I could’ve done without until I got home but I might’ve lost too much blood on the walk – otherwise I wouldn’t have let you bother.” Walk? The “Junk House” – assuming he still lives there – is at least ten miles from here and it’s 4:27am. Granted, people refer to Sunnyvale as “Anytown, CA” because it’s so un-unique it literally *could* have been any town in California – meaning it’s unlikely for him to run into anything unusual or dangerous. Except possums, I suppose.

“You enjoy this...” he pauses, carefully choosing his next word, “occupation?” he asks, and flicks his eyes up into mine. Not dramatically, but it immediately commands my attention, as it had in the bowling alley. It feels like he can see past my pupils and is prodding my brain with his gnarled fingers.

“It’s all right,” I say. “I gotta pay the rent somehow.”

Corbin grunts. “Never had one, myself,” he says. “An ‘occupation,’ I mean.” He pauses, still looking through me. “I just do what needs doing. Sometimes for me, sometimes for other people. Like extracting a possum from my aunt’s trailer – she wasn’t about to do it, but I could, and I knew she’d pay me well for it. I got a good meal after that. I never concern myself with work or money. There’s always some kind of work to be done and money just seems to come along when you need it. But I guess most people aren’t very trusting, these days. But everything hinges on trust, see? And I don’t mean trust in some

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‘higher power,’ if that’s what you’re thinking. I mean trusting that just doing whatever you do will get you exactly what you need.”

He stops there and his eyes go back to the entrance, like a robot that had suddenly shut off halfway through completing its function.

I mull over what he said. He has this way of putting immense ideas into short, direct lines of speech that seem simple, but are full of deeper significance. I wonder if he knows how much he’s in my head. I *am* one of the ‘untrusting people’ he mentioned, but I can’t decide if he understands that and is trying to teach me some kind of lesson or if he’s just reflecting on the world around him and my being there listening hasn’t factored into his thoughts at all. I want to ask him so many questions, but I don’t know how or if I can. As I attempt to formulate my thoughts into words, he picks up his items and walks toward the exit.

“Wait!” I call after him, still not knowing what to say. A random, insignificant thought that had been tearing at me since I saw him in the bowling alley pops into my head.

“What did you say to her?” I ask. “The girl in the yellow sweater, I mean.”

The corner of his mouth turns up.

“Nothing illogical,” he says, and walks out.

I get home that morning around seven and fall asleep for about ten minutes before I get a phone call. It’s Stan, the morning shift attendant, who says “Some crazy-looking guy with duct tape all over his arms showed up with a ladder and took our sign off the front of

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the store!” When I get to work the next day, the sign had been mended almost seamlessly and the bulb behind it had been replaced. I wonder where he’d gotten the bulb.

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Standing in line at the post office is always a clash of emotions, especially today. On the one hand, I like that the employees and the customers all seem as if they’re dead inside. No emotion, just the constant exchange of “mail this” and “stamp that.” Even the colors around the place are lethargic and stale – pale hues of gray, white, and blue. The only thing that breaks up the deadness of the room is the occasional customer’s kids tearing around the place in bright clothes and yammering nonsense to themselves. Other than that, it’s sterile; the way I imagine reptiles communicate. On the other hand, it drives a stake into the nervous-ness center of my brain. I suppose that’s pretty constant with everything in my life, but today, the post office is worse for some unknown reason. The emotionless faces are comforting but also unsettling. There’s definitely a reason for the expression “going postal.” Surrounded by impassive faces, you have to wonder how many of them have snapped or are about to snap. And then they ask if there’s anything dangerous in *your* packages – “Anything liquid, fragile, flammable, explosive, or otherwise potentially hazardous?” – probably because they know what it’s like to be at a mental breaking-point, and assume that half the people here have snapped as well and are attempting long-range homicide, all of which makes picking up a package, like I am today, immeasurably worse.

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When I got home last night, this little Post-It-sized note was stuck in my mailbox like a death threat, reading: “Hi Jeff, your package is available for pickup.” First off, how do they know my name? Secondly, who would send me a package in the first place? After a few hours of going through the list of every person I know to see if they had any reason to want to kill me, I’m now standing here in this room full of detached nutjobs, which isn’t exactly improving my imagined idea of what’s in the package. It could be anthrax. Or a kitten. Or a severed limb. I’m still seven people in line from the front; my hands can’t be shaking this early on. What if they think I’m nervous because I’m picking up something illegal?

Just as I turn to walk out and try again some other time, a little blonde blur runs straight into my leg, bounces off, and lands flat on his back. The kid looks up at me through eyes filling with tears in the few seconds of shocked, heaving-breaths of silence before he realizes he’s hurt and starts scream-crying. I notice his shirt has a picture of a possum wearing sunglasses under the caption, “Awesome Possum,” and the image of Corbin’s mutilated arms reforms in my mind – his calmness while waiting in line behind Barry, seemingly bleeding to death; the control with which he walked himself over to the girl in the yellow sweater, fully expecting a fight; all of the ‘advice’ he’d given me, based solely on his own rationale—and I realize for the first time what impresses me about him isn’t his rough look or the perilous situations he gets himself into – it’s the fact that he doesn’t seem to think at all. He just acts.

The screaming kid’s mother shoves me out of the way and picks him up off the floor, then turns and gives me the stinkeye.

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“A kid falls down right in front of you and you just stand there and stare at him?” she demands, shouldering the kid. “Asshole.”

I watch her rush out through the exit. The people in line behind me throwing scowls in my direction, but I barely notice them. She’d called me an “asshole,” and again, I remember Corbin. Maybe I could be an asshole, too...

I take a deep breath, letting it swell with the new resolution inside me, and walk past the line of waiting customers. My heart wallops harder in my chest with every customer I pass. The old man at the counter on the left takes his stamps from the employee behind it and starts walking out. The black woman next in line makes her way up to the counter the old man just vacated, but I get there first, swooping in just in front of her.

“You got a package for me,” I state, slapping the notice from my mailbox down on the counter like an outlaw ordering a whiskey in a saloon. The employee behind the counter looks at my notice with glazed eyes, and goes to get my package, not realizing I’d cut the line. My heart pummels the inside of my ribs like it’s Jack Torrence from *The Shining* chopping through the door with an axe.

“Ex-cayoose me?” demands the black woman behind me. I hear her hoop earrings jingle as she shakes her head with the words for emphasis.

I turn toward her, attempting to keep my face from expressing the terror and punching anxiety currently ripping apart my insides. Her face is crumpled into the deepest scowl she can muster – as are the other customers behind her. One of her hands is fisted on her hip while her other hand holds a rigid index finger in my face like a switchblade; the universal gesture for “Oh no you didn’t!” For a fraction-of-a-second, I almost scoff –

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what a cliché. However, her wrath is genuinely terrifying, and I'm closer to running away than I am to mocking her.

"Yes?" I say, feigning as much casual-ness as I can.

"You think you can just *skip* your way on up to the front, huh?"

My insides feel like they're caving in, but I lock my face. My mind assaults itself with hundreds of possible replies. Everything from "fuck off" to "Oops, I didn't see you (all) there" to rambling apologies involving groveling for forgiveness in a crumpled heap at her feet. "What would Corbin say?" flits through my mind over and over for an eternity that exists within seconds.

"Huh?" she repeats, her eyes expressing the tiniest hint of self-doubt. I can see her questioning herself for moment, wondering if she made a mistake; if I'm not mentally-impaired in some way, rather than just a complete bastard. But I'm not handicapped, I remind myself – I'm an asshole.

"And?" I ask. I'm pretty sure that officially qualifies me as an asshole, simply judging by the look of unbridled rage on her face. I turn my back on her to seal the effect.

"Oh *hell* no! He did *not* just turn his back on me!" she exclaims behind me. I hear her bedazzled high heels *click clack* up to the counter as the employee returns with my package. She shoves me out of the way with her hips and slams one hand onto the counter with a bang. Her other hand is in the employee's face with that same rigid finger extended.

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“This...*man*,” she pauses, looking me up and down with authentic hatred in her narrowed eyes, “just cut the *whole* damn line and doesn’t even seem to care!” The employee looks at me, a slight frown reflecting on her face, which had been expressionless up until this second. I’m sure she could care less, but I’ve created a problem that consequently involves *her* having to do something, so she’s unhappy.

“Is this true?” asks the employee, to which the customers in line respond before I even get the chance to defend myself.

“He did – I saw him!”

“He just cut the whole line while we were all standing here!”

I put my hands – which are shaking violently now – back on the counter, and attempt to shove my hips against the black woman enough to regain my position, but she’s solid as a slab of marble. Using every bit of my determination, I keep my face as blank as humanly possible, while the employee stares at me, her mouth hanging slightly open.

“That line looked too long for a single package,” I say. “Thought I’d just get in and out real quick.” The black woman just stares into the side of my face like she’s generating an incurable disease inside me. The employee sighs and sets my package aside.

“You’re going to have to go to the back of the line, Sir.”

“Why don’t you just give me my damn package and I’ll get the hell out of here?” I say, panic and adrenaline unintentionally amping up my tone. The employee looks somewhat ruffled, but seems to realize I’m dead set on getting my package, while the black woman tilts her head in disbelief at what I just said.

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“You are *some* piece of work, you know that, Mr. ‘I’m-too-good-for-lines?’” she spits.

“Just sign for your package,” the employee says, sliding over a clipboard with the form.

The black woman rounds on the employee.

“This son of a bitch cuts the whole line and you just *give him his package?!’*” she demands of the employee, just as the customers in line speak up again, demanding I be thrown out. I see my opportunity and take it. I crisscross an “x” on the signature line, grab my package, and make for the exit, as the customers in line shout obscenities at me. Something flies past my head – one of the black woman’s shoes. I duck and sprint out the entrance doors.

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Driving through the old neighborhood to get to the “Junk House” is like taking the scenic route through all of my childhood memories. Crittenden Middle School, alone, is enough to haunt my dreams anew for weeks. The eucalyptus trees with eternally-peeling bark still stretch high over the spot where Natalie Craig told me she would *never* go out with me because I was “too quiet” and “a weirdo.” The original playground stuff – the metal slide, cement turtle, and wooden teeter-totter that gave every rider in shorts splinters – has been replaced with brightly colored plastic obstacles. Alex Cabot, basically my only childhood friend, once told a group of kids he “wasn’t *really* friends” with me when they asked him why he hung out with “that retard” as I listened, unseen, from the tunnel of the

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twisty slide. Even Mrs. Robinson, my fourth-grade teacher, asking me – in front of everyone – if I could “handle” answering a question at the front of the class, like I was stupid. I did feel stupid then, but the thing is, I *still* feel stupid. I think most people grow out of that kind of self-consciousness, but I seem to have only gotten worse over time. It’s like all their comments just absorbed into me, and I didn’t even need people to tell me I was “strange” or “spacey” or “too stuck in my head” after that – although they did so even more often all throughout high school. It just became a part of my own understanding of myself.

I question why I’m even trying to find Corbin in the first place (to tell him I failed at being an asshole?) when, crossing the creek I used to catch frogs in, I notice someone lying next to the stream – someone who looks proportionately incongruous. I pull over, hop the barrier, and slide down the concrete to the rocks. The creek is lower than I remembered, but I can still smell the moisture of the mossy rocks in the air. Corbin is laid flat out on the rocks a ways down the creek, comfortable as if he were sleeping on a King-sized mattress, his hands behind his head and an old, faded hat resting over his eyes.

The rocks clack together under my feet as I approach. Corbin lifts the bill of his cap with a finger and squints up at me.

“What brings you ‘round here, Jeff?” Corbin asks, letting the bill of his hat back down over his eyes.

I sit down next to him, unsure how to say what’s in my head. A moment passes in near-silence, but for the occasional car crossing the bridge over the creek.

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“I guess I don’t get it, Corbin. I tried to follow your advice and failed miserably. I’m not an asshole. Or I can’t *be* an asshole. I can’t even just be a normal human. I don’t know *what* I am...” A second ago I hadn’t known what to say, but suddenly words flow out of me like I’ve been waiting to say them for years. “Maybe I *am* stupid. I can’t ever seem to figure anything out. I just get stuck in my head over every little thing, no matter how insignificant. And I’ve been like this since I was a kid. I can’t date, I can’t do college, I can’t even fucking dress myself without basically having a nervous breakdown! What the *hell* is wrong with me?”

Corbin lies motionless, unresponsive. Then—

“What advice?” Corbin asks.

I look at him – or rather, I look at the hat covering his face.

“All that stuff you told me about women and sex and having an ‘occupation’ when you were at 7-11 with your arms bleeding all over the place. ‘It all hinges on trust’—Remember that?” I ask, incredulous.

“I’m sure I don’t,” Corbin says. “I don’t give...*advice*.” He says “advice” like it was a dirty word. Anger that I don’t fully understand rises up inside me.

“So you just—so you’re telling me all that shit you said was what, exactly? That’s just the way you talk in everyday conversation?”

“I just speak my mind. If anyone listens, that’s their problem,” Corbin says.

“Oh, it’s *my* problem, is it?” I say, breathing hard. “You just wander in and out of my life, ‘speaking your mind,’ and I treat you like some kind of—some kind of...”

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But I don't know what I was going to say. I don't know what I thought he was—or maybe what I *wanted* him to be. A mentor? A model of some kind? Was *that* honestly how I saw Corbin? I look over him. Dirt-crusted boots, shabby jeans, old shirt. The hat has holes in it. Lying in a creek like a homeless person. What the hell *had* I been thinking?

“You know what, Corbin? I don't know what I thought you were, but I think I know now. You're just a *weirdo* exactly like me. I don't think you know much of anything! I think you just go about doing whatever floats into your head the second you think of it because you're *just* as strange and crazy as I am.” A gust of wind blows across us like I'm causing a storm with my words. Corbin sits up, pushing his hat back on top of his head. His eyes stay on the rocks.

“Well, at least I ain't afraid of every little thing that happens,” he says, and his eyes, pressed into a sort of glare, meet mine. I look right back into them. I'm not some child he can intimidate with eye contact anymore.

I launch myself at him, toppling us over onto the rocks. I end up on top of him and throw my fist as hard as I can into his cheek. I let up for a moment, surprised at myself. Corbin turns his face back to mine, a spot of blood in the corner of his mouth, and a trace of a smile appears on his face as he throws his own punch.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *Corbin* started with a reflection on how much I hate group dates, and kind of just spiraled from there. I wanted to write about 1) a character who overthinks every single insignificant detail of his life, and 2) a character who gets maimed by a possum – and happens to be the antithesis of character 1. I suppose it's written for my fellow overthinkers who are kept up late into the night by thoughts of how something they said or did weeks/months/years ago was perceived by someone that has no bearing on said overthinker's life. Literary influences include: Ron Carlson, Raymond

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Carver, Tobias Wolff, Nick Hornby, Aimee Bender, Pinckney Benedict, and Matthew Quick.

**BIO:** *Christopher Davis studied creative writing at Utah State University. His work has appeared in BioStories, Foliate Oak, Sink Hollow, and Z-Publishing's latest anthology of "Utah's Best Emerging Poets, 2019." He currently lives in Providence, Utah with his wife and cat - who is a complete jerk.*

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# SEVENTY GRAND

*By Robert P. Bishop*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *If you're wondering why we took this story re-read the first line. It's got everything. Voice, character, gallous humour, a touch of triste and a little 'bizarro'. Greek mythology, John O'Hara and an arresting use of parallel time frames are all part of the fun in this wise-cracking spin off of the private dick pulps of the 1950's and 60's. The author's knuckly prose has 'Mike Hammer' all over it and the wrapping is vintage Twilight Zone. Add to this an 'O. Henry' funk ending and BOOM, you have it all, Mr. Sirling. Quote: 'He reached across the desk and grabbed my neck with a hand the size of a cement truck. He squeezed. I couldn't breathe. My eyes bugged out of their sockets. I dropped my cell. My vision began to dim. I heard bagpipes playing *Amazing Grace*.'*

Seventy Grand

by

Robert P. Bishop

I was smoking a joint and photoshopping the face of my client's husband into a picture of a naked man having sex with a woman on a backyard deck and thinking about giving up the private detective gig for an easier job, like being a prison guard. The demands of documenting the wayward husband doing the deed with his mistress, or, on the flip side, getting pics of the wife and Hank the Hunk at four in the afternoon are stressful. These kinds of cases are dangerous, too. There is always the possibility some dude I'm surveilling might turn red-neck nasty if he catches me photographing his bare ass jacked in the air.

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No thanks on that.

I fired up a second joint, took a deep hit and studied my handiwork. It was a good photoshop, and more to the point, my client would buy it. Her husband was toast without knowing it and I was going to collect two grand for surveillance work without even leaving my desk.

Pale blue smoke billowed around my head as I drained the joint and started to feel pretty good but the squeal of the office door hinges brought me back. I looked up to see a cadaverous old man carrying a canvas tote bag come in. Aw, geez, I thought, another geezer wanting me to track down trophy bride number four and catch her doing the dirty deed with her personal trainer, Six-Pack Abs.

The old man tottered to my desk and dropped onto the visitor chair in front of it. Without a word, he snatched the joint from me, sucked on it like an old pro, held it then blew out with an audible sigh. “Good weed,” he said. “But I’m not here to discuss your photoshop skills or your weed.” His deep, rich and slightly accented voice surprised me. It didn’t match his physical appearance at all.

His comment about photoshop made me sit up and turn off my computer.

He handed me the joint. It was wet where he had put his lips. I dropped it in the glass ashtray and got out another one.

He picked the joint out of the ashtray and took another hit, smiled, then sucked it down to ashes. “Waste not,” he said.

I popped my lighter, ready to fire up.

The old guy held up his hand. “Before you light that, we must talk about why I’m in your office.” When I didn’t say anything, he said, “By the way, you won’t be a

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successful prison guard. The cons will name you Nancy. Draw your own conclusions about what that means.”

The hair on the back of my neck stood up. “How did you know?” I put the joint away.

He ignored my question. “Ask me why I’m here.”

“Why are you here?”

He ignored my question. “I’m told you are the best private detective in town. And my sources say you are rather sneaky as well. You know how to make things happen when they shouldn’t happen.”

“That’s me.” I gave him my best smile. “Why are you here?”

He ignored my question again and studied me intently until I began to fidget under his gaze. “You don’t look like a private detective.”

A pain began to develop behind my eyes. “What’s a private detective supposed to look like?”

He ignored my question. “I’m here because I want you to find something for me.”

The pain behind my eyes blossomed into a full-blown headache that pulsed with every heartbeat. I wanted to shoot this weasel-dick but I didn’t have a gun. “Okay, what’s her name?”

He looked at me like I was a nitwit. “Maybe you’re not as good as you think you are, you fat little squid.”

“Hey, no need to get personal here.”

“You’re right. Let’s keep this professional. My apologies.”

“So, who do you want me to find?”

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He leaned toward my desk. “I want you to find Tomorrow,” he said in a scarcely audible voice. Then he sat back in the chair, waiting.

“What’s his first name? How old is he? Is he on any social media?” I leaned toward him. “Is he dangerous?”

The old guy shook his head. “I want you to find the day we call Tomorrow.” He emphasized Tomorrow like it was a proper noun.

Cascade Psychiatric Hospital was right down the road from my strip mall office. I said, “You aren’t an escapee from Cascade, are you?”

He shook his head. “I’m serious. I want you to find Tomorrow before midnight today.” He looked at his watch. “It’s ten o’clock now. You have fourteen hours to do it.”

“Why don’t you just wait for those fourteen hours to pass, then tomorrow becomes today and it’s here.” I fiddled with the joint but didn’t light it.

He sighed. “I could have done that yesterday, but yesterday’s gone.”

I snapped my fingers. “I know that one. Chad and Jeremy, two British dudes. 1964.”

The old guy shook his head again. “If I wait for Tomorrow to come then it’s today, and today is too late. You see the problem.”

I didn’t so I said, “No, I don’t see the problem.” I picked up my cell phone.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m calling Cascade Psychiatric. They’ll come get you.”

He reached across the desk and grabbed my neck with a hand the size of a cement truck. He squeezed. I couldn’t breathe. My eyes bugged out of their sockets. I dropped my cell. My vision began to dim. I heard bagpipes playing *Amazing Grace*.

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“Listen, you little squid, are you going to find Tomorrow for me before it becomes today or not?” He shook me a couple of times like a cat torturing a mouse before the kill. He let go of my neck.

I sucked in air and tried to talk but croaked like a frog instead. Finally, I managed to speak. “You better leave.” I tried to light the joint but my hands shook too much.

“You don’t need that, not yet.” He took it from me and put it in his shirt pocket. “I’ll pay you two thousand dollars an hour to find Tomorrow before it becomes today. If it takes you the whole fourteen hours, so be it.”

“Why do you want to find tomorrow before tomorrow gets here? What’s the big deal about it?”

“Something is going to happen Tomorrow and I want to make sure it happens on time so I need to know that it is going to happen before it happens.”

His explanation intensified my growing headache. I vowed to buy a gun and keep it in my desk. I wondered if I could sneak a quick call to Cascade before he squeezed my neck again. “I don’t know what Tomorrow looks like.” Jesus, now I was even capitalizing the word. I massaged my neck. “I’ve never seen it. Nobody has ever seen Tomorrow. When Tomorrow gets here, it’s always today, not Tomorrow. You see the problem?”

“Three thousand an hour.”

“Catch a plane, fly across the International Date Line to Fiji. You will be in Tomorrow when you arrive today. They got swell-looking babes there, too. The word is they go topless. That’s a big turn-on for guys your age.”

“I don’t have time to do that.” He looked at his watch.

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“I don’t even know where to start looking for Tomorrow.”

“You are making this too difficult. You’re supposed to be a detective.”

“What if you went back to yesterday, then today would be yesterday’s tomorrow and there you are, in Tomorrow today.” I gave him my best smile again. The headache pounded behind my eyes.

“I’ll give you five thousand dollars an hour to find Tomorrow.” He put the canvas tote sack on my desk and pulled out a bundle of one hundred-dollar bills. “Ten thousand per bundle,” he said and removed more packets and lined up seven of them.

I did some quick math. “I’m your man,” I said with a big grin. The headache went away. “Of course, there are the personal expenses and overhead costs to consider as...”

Before I could finish he grabbed my neck. “Must I squeeze your neck again?” he said in that rich, sonorous and slightly accented voice.

My neck still hurt. “No, no,” I said quickly. “Seventy grand should just about cover everything, including overhead and expenses.” He let go of my neck and stood up.

“Have Tomorrow in your office exactly one hour before midnight today.”

I nodded my head. “Who are you?”

“Kronos Titanes.”

I shrugged somewhat indifferently. The man realized his name meant nothing to me.

“I suggest you look up the name.” He tapped my computer with one of those huge hands.

“Sure, whatever you say.”

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He picked up the canvas tote sack and started for the door. “The same thing is going to happen to you if you don’t deliver.”

Then Kronos Titanes was gone.

I looked up Kronos Titanes and began to sweat as I read about him and what he did to Uranus with a sickle. I read the passages again. My hands began to tremble and beads of sweat ran down my face so I fired up a joint to calm my nerves.

I knew if I didn’t deliver I’d be singing in the soprano section of the church choir. Kronos Titanes was a dangerous man and this was a dangerous situation for me and required serious, clear-headed thinking so I fired up another joint.

Fourteen hours. That’s all the time I had to find something I have never seen, that nobody has ever seen, or ever will see. I knew I could never find Tomorrow today so I’d have to sneak into tomorrow to nab Tomorrow. But that maneuver presented another problem. If I nabbed Tomorrow tomorrow and came back in time a day later then I would be in yesterday instead of today. But, I asked myself, would I miss Kronos if I pulled off this maneuver? And would that seventy grand still be on my desk?

The headache returned.

A good detective always knows his limits and is smart enough to use outside resources when necessary. I called my friend Aradia. She works as a barista and as a clairvoyant when the money is right.

“Hi, Nancy,” she said when she picked up. “Kronos is right, you’d suck as a prison guard.”

“How did you know?”

“Well, duh! What do you want?”

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“You’re the clairvoyant, shouldn’t you know?”

“Don’t mess with me.”

“Five grand is yours if you tell me how to get into Tomorrow and come back with it while it’s still today.”

“Don’t be cheap. Ten grand. I know he gave you the money.”

“Deal. Now tell me how to do it.”

“You can’t do it. Nobody can enter tomorrow. You can only be in today.”

“Are you sure? I’m not paying you 10K for that lame answer.”

“I’m sure.”

I could see my junk disappearing in... I glanced at my watch...a little over nine hours. I moaned. “Does Tomorrow even exist?” I couldn’t stop capitalizing Tomorrow.

“No, when you experience tomorrow you are in today.”

“How do you know that?”

“You’re the detective and you can’t figure that out?”

“So, I’m jammed up and Kronos is going to make me a eunuch if I don’t produce.

That’s what you’re telling me?”

“Yes. You took his money. He bought you.”

I groaned. “Why did he choose me?”

“I don’t want to tell you.”

“Why not?”

“You’re not going to like it.”

“Lay it on me. I’m tough. I can take it. I read Bukowski, you know.”

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“You’re going to die tomorrow. Kronos wants to make sure you don’t miss your appointment. He’s a stickler for punctuality. He likes things to happen on time, as scheduled.”

“How do you know that?”

“Think about it; Kronos. Time. Appointment in Samarra.”

I looked at the stack of money on my desk. “I’m going to die before I can spend all this money?”

“Yes.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Well, there is, but it’s fatal if you are careless and screw up.”

I fired up another joint and breathed deep. “It’s worth a shot. Lay it on me.”

“Set your clocks ahead exactly one hour.”

“Why one hour?”

“Because that’s the wiggle room Kronos gave you; precisely one hour. If you’re off even a fraction of a minute this ploy won’t work. When he shows up you and he will be in different time frames. You’ll miss him, or he’ll miss you and you won’t end up a soprano. And you will have the seventy grand, minus my fee, of course.”

“All right, I’ll do that.”

“I’m coming over after my shift to get my money. Leave it on your desk, and don’t you dare lock the office door.”

“You got it,” I said, hung up and finished the joint. My stomach started growling. All the weed I had smoked was making me hungry. I advanced all my clocks, phones, computer, watch to 4:00 and felt something shift. I knew I was in a different time frame

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and would not encounter Kronos again, just as Aradia said. I felt good, even better when I saw all that money on my desk.

I decided to go across the street to the deli and get something to eat.

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The 4:00 P.M. city bus materialized in a cloud of gray diesel exhaust, slammed into him when he was in the middle of the crosswalk and tossed his smashed body to the curb. As soon as the bus moved out of the crossing zone it disappeared. Several pedestrians stood around the body, wondering how it had suddenly appeared in an empty street. One minute there was nothing, the next minute there was a body flying through the air and landing all crumpled up against the curb. Somebody called the police.

The police detective examining the body said, "His watch is one hour fast."

"He probably moved ahead to Daylight Savings Time," a uniformed officer opined.

"We make the change tomorrow, not today," the detective said. "He got a little ahead of himself."

The uniformed officer chuckled. "Looks like tomorrow came today for him."

A cadaverous looking old man carrying a canvas tote bag stood on the sidewalk watching the police officers work. A smile spread across his face. "It's all in the timing, fellas, all in the timing," he said to them before removing a joint from his shirt pocket and walking away.

Across town, Aradia handed her apron to her boss at 4:00 o'clock and said, "I'm taking the rest of my shift off. I just inherited seventy grand."

End

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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *Umberto Eco's The Island of the Day Before gave me the story's idea and my experiences in crossing the International Date Line made me realize this was a kind of time travel and perplexed me no end but a couple glasses of scotch smoothed it out and made the story possible.*

*My writing philosophy can be summarized as Have something to write, write it, stop, keeping in mind the writing must be entertaining and engaging. Writers who have influenced my style to some degree are Elizabeth Strout, Charles Bukowski, Elmore Leonard, and Jack London, but I have not tried to mimic them.*

**BIO:** *Robert P. Bishop, a former soldier and teacher, has worked in North and South America, Africa, and the Mid-East. His short-story fiction has appeared in The Literary Hatchet, The Umbrella Factory Magazine, Commuterlit, Lunate Fiction, Spelk and elsewhere. He lives in Tucson, Arizona.*

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# MAGNETS

By Tatiana de F. Massuno

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *A quietly written vignette that reads like an internal monologue, the voice an updated Virginia Woolf grappling a problem that reflects a larger grappling with existential angst. The narrator feels herself drawn, magnetically, into what is surely a new reality: one in which chance encounters can both transform and transcend her world view. She discovers there is no resolution without risk, without change. Massuno's prose is so unassuming, so perfectly right and easy for this piece that you almost forget how beautiful it is. Quote: The day they met, she was just minding her own business, she was just being herself, detached from the world, avoiding interactions, just being the cold distant person she knew how to be. Just alone on a park bench, observing the kids come and go, play, run, throw balls, be silly, goofy and happy and unaware of the great danger it is to exist.'*

## Magnets

Tatiana de F. Massuno<sup>iii</sup>

*What does the future hold for us?* She kept asking herself again and again and again and everyone else could see that it had become an obsession. *Is there a future for us?* Just harping on the same string before going to bed. Of course, there were variations. She could ask herself about happened, replay conversations in her mind. She would then stare at the ceiling, an answer from the sky. A miracle, she was hoping for. Something as fast and bright as a bolt of lightning that would make everything clear. Every day she was lost in thought. "Good morning!" someone would say and she would reply without even parting her lips, as if it was just too much effort, wasted effort, mumbling instead. Her days would go by as if controlled by a force other than hers. Just habit. Just going

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with the flow, without inhabiting her actions, her body, her words. As if telling the world: I accept your existence but please leave me alone for a while, just let me be, here, lost in thoughts, just let me be, for today, tomorrow, as long as I need, I have, world, a mystery to solve, one of the utmost importance, please, world, my life depends on it, we'll play some other time, I promise, some other time, but now, I need to be alone with my thoughts.

How hard can it be to have some privacy from the world? From the whole world? Just two days ago a friend, the red-haired one, remember her? Just the other day she asked her if she was ok. She looked troubled, she said. Can you imagine the nerve? Who's she to determine if she was troubled or not? Who does she think she was to pass judgment on somebody else, especially her? Automatically she replied: never been better, dear! Up until now she recalls the delight she felt when pronouncing the word *dear*. *Dear* can be so many different things: it can be more formal, more personal, tender and soft and at the same time ambiguously critical and demeaning. She loved it! She used it whenever she could. Just this morning she told her life partner: I love you, *dear*. Did she really know what she meant? Did she grasp how *dear* should be understood? In this context? Of two lovers saying I love you to each other? Two women so entangled in their feminine world that context became irrelevant? But should it? Such a short, almost irrelevant word; consonants and vowels, vowels and consonants, nothing more. Just a word. And you know, words are deceiving. But what about actions?

The day they met, she was just minding her own business, she was just being herself, detached from the world, avoiding interactions, just being the cold distant person she knew how to be. Just alone on a park bench, observing the kids come and go, play,

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run, throw balls, be silly, goofy and happy and unaware of the great danger it is to exist. She was just there, thinking about never having kids, of not wanting the responsibility of screwing another person's life, about maybe not being able to bond, as she heard once, about growing apart from her life partner, about being a lesbian and frigid and sad, about not fulfilling her life purpose, about being almost forty, closer and closer to her deathbed, when this man approached her. At first, she didn't even realize he was talking to her, she was not approachable, her arm covered in tattoos made sure people kept their distance, made sure they thought twice before saying even hi, but anyway, on that day she was wearing a jacket, he could not see her tattoos, could not judge her based on stereotypical preconceptions, on that day he was just being a man at a park talking to a woman who seemed so self-absorbed that she barely acknowledged his existence. On that day he was just being the kind and caring person he grew up to be, being raised on Christian beliefs, loving the other as he loved himself. He couldn't help noticing a troubled woman on a park bench, he couldn't help thinking that maybe, just maybe, she could make use of some helping ears. And maybe, just maybe, he thought she needed human interaction. It took her a while to understand that this man, the one looking at her, whose eyes were so black and deep and enormous, was addressing her. She looked at him and asked herself if she had ever seen eyes so dark in her life. Two big black magnet balls looking straight at her. It was as if she could not control her actions anymore, as if she had forgotten she was at a park surrounded by kids, she felt her body approach his and if it weren't for a dog barking, I swear, she would have kissed him. She came to her senses just in time and they talked for hours. That day and the weeks to come.

She was definitely troubled.

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When she got home, her life partner was already there. She kissed her and imagined his big black eyes exploring all hidden parts of her body, his hands lightly touching her skin, softly and gently at first, until, as if longing for her, grabbed her around the waist, bringing her closer, caressing her face with the soft touch of his beard. She then surrendered to her embrace and that night, for the very first time, in a long long time, forgot who she was.....

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *This is about encounters. Unexpected ones. Uncalled for encounters that re-order experiences, re-arrange expectations, re-organize our mundane views. It is then about our susceptibility to what is extraordinarily fleeting, to what is beyond rationalization. It is about how fallible our reasoning abilities are.*

*This micro story is actually the third in a series of five, in which I investigated how Eros and epiphanies could combine. What light do erotic encounters shed on our lives? Can Eros open up new paths away from plain and simple conformity? Can Eros lead us to a more authentic existence?*

*My literary influences are as diverse as they are many. They range from John Milton to Virginia Woolf, from Emerson to Paul Auster, from Camões to Fernando Pessoa. One literary figure, however, seems to haunt every piece I write, whether in English or in Portuguese, the impetus behind it all, one could say, and that is Clarice Lispector.*

**BIO:** *Tatiana is a teacher, an independent researcher, a wife and a stepmom and in her spare time, when life gives her a break, she writes fiction, just because.*

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# THE MORTICIAN

By Katharine Yacovone

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Comedic writing comes with lots of challenges but ‘The Mortician’ never misses the mark. A hilarious send up on the funeral business with all the gallous humour you’d expect. And for this reason alone it’s worth reading. But beneath the yuks lies an impressive mastery of craft. Jerry and Mort are so effortlessly created and keenly present that you just take them for granted, forgetting entirely what an achievement this represents. We don’t see them as ‘characters’, we see them as real people. We sldo like the structural device of back to back monologues and especially the superbly realized voices. The insightful prose both crackles: ‘I don’t think anyone can really hate Morty. He’s a riot; he’s a live wire. Being around him is like getting electrocuted and then thanking him for it after.’ And impresses: ‘There was something about giving families a goodbye. To take care of a loved one, to be trusted with the body of someone, to prepare that moment where they begin to let them go forever. Patching a face back together, dressing them in their last outfit, staging them like the living so that the living could face them for the last time. People need that closure and I get to give it to them. I didn’t get it with dad.’*

The Mortician

Katharine Yacovone

**Jerry**

“What the fuck Morty?”

“I’ll find it; I swear.”

“You’ll *find* it? What do you want me to tell the family when they arrive in—” I checked my watch, “twenty fucking minutes?”

“Do you need to swear so much?”

“What the fuck am I going to *fucking* do?”

“I don’t know, Jer. Stall or something.”

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“I swear to god, Mort. I don’t know what to do with you sometimes.” Morty merely shrugged, his boney shoulders falling forward in the lackadaisical way that showed he wasn’t half as worried as I was. When he saw I was expecting an explanation, apology, any sense of taking responsibility, he only lifted his hands in a sign of surrender, his black gloves still shinning with blood and formaldehyde, and shrugged again.

I growled and spun around, storming up the stairs to get out that morbid basement, shoving past the empty brown metal casket with golden accents and the freshly pressed blue suit hanging above it. The Gaumont family would be here for Mr. Gaumont’s funeral before I knew it and I had to think of some way, anyway, to distract them. Morty had lost the fucking body.

I hurried to my office, falling into the chair behind my antique desk, straightening the row of pencils on the polished surface, and pulling out Mr. Gaumont’s file. I mean, this was our first year running the funeral home, but how could we be screwing it up so badly already? Morty keeps saying we’ll get better in time, but each time something got messed up, I thought about how we were better off at the firm.

What makes two financial advisors qualified to run a funeral home? Other than a client agreeing to sell us the place when he retired and a mortician’s license Mort got as a joke in college, not much.

How was I supposed to know he would get me into *this* when we met at Northwestern fifteen years ago? Maybe I wouldn’t have approached him in the lounge of our freshman dorm that day. I remember he’d dragged his record player out of his room and was playing Jimi Hendrix and smoking Pall Malls. There was a deck of cards out in front of him and he was doing card tricks, duping every guy in the dorm with this smirk

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on his face. I wanted to smack it off him, so I went over there and had him do the trick for me. Little did he know, I knew a bit about card tricks myself. I could tell he was impressed by the way he let the cigarette hang out of the corner of his mouth and grinned at me, pointing one long, bony finger and saying, “You’re interesting,” Then, “The name’s Mort.”

At first, I wanted to hate the guy, but I don’t think anyone can really hate Morty. He’s a live wire. Being around him is like getting electrocuted and then thanking him for it after. It appeals to everyone at first, but it gets to be too much for everybody eventually. Still, after that day, Morty seemed to decide we were going to be friends. He came into my dorm a few days into school and started leafing through my records, commenting on my Stones, Bob Dylan, the Kinks. Before I knew it, we were talking like I’d invited him over.

I lent him my Stones record and he lost it in the black hole of his dorm room before he had a chance to listen. I never saw that damn record again. He’d go on to lose apartment keys, credit cards, and even my wife and I’s rings the day of my wedding ceremony. He’d always been forgetful. It was like there were too many things going on inside his head that he never seemed to keep up with the things going on outside of it. But how does someone lose a corpse? It’s not like they can run away.

The phone rang, nearly scaring me half to death.

### **Morty**

Jer just needed some time to cool off. Now, where was Mr. Gaumont? I had him yesterday, that slippery fucker... I’d drained him, filled him with the embalming fluid, and set his face. It was some of my best work. He looked pretty as hell. His pale wrinkled

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skin was pulled back like the finest Botox and I'd combed his white hair over nicely. I thought it'd put him back in his drawer; I'd even labeled it like Jerry keeps telling me to. Right there: T. Gaumont. All I had to do was dress him up for the main event. But when I went to get him this morning, he wasn't in said drawer.

I began searching through the drawers along the wall of the basement. It's not like he could have gone far. Sure, I wouldn't want to go six feet under either, but he couldn't really run away from it. The basement wasn't that big, basically just a cube beneath the earth; he had to turn up somewhere. Maybe I should start listening to Jerry and get this place organized. Sure some would call me messy, but that hadn't been a life or death issue until we opened the place. Tools were strewn around the basement: trocars, and blades, bloody and covered in chemicals on the metal table tops. Vats of embalming fluid were scattered about the floor and I hadn't taken out the hazardous waste in a while. I wondered if cleaning services covered morticians' labs. I could talk to Tatiana maybe when she came to the house next week, ask her over the sound of the vacuum running. I could imagine her face now, that girl gets the heebie jeebies whenever I talk about work. She would probably drop the vacuum to make the sign of the cross. She doesn't understand why I would abandon such a high income, a job I was good at. That's simple, though no one ever seems to get it but Jerry.

I mean business here is stable: death is inevitable and I was dying slowly at that firm. I finally feel alive among the dead. I just couldn't thrive in that whole tight-suit, necktie, cold-office environment. I was sick of all of those stiff lunches in fancy Chicago restaurants, folded napkin on lap, two forks and a coffee spoon when I didn't even like the taste of the bitter dirt. When you're a financial advisor, you're dealing with wealthy

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people who need people to *advise* them on their finances. And with people, I always seem to say the wrong thing, make a joke at the wrong time, come across as creepy or arrogant, offend in some way that I don't understand or see coming. Few people understand my sense of humor. It always seems too harsh, too dark, too... I don't know but working with the dead is easier I think. Don't get me wrong, there's no itch for murder that I'm scratching here. I'm not *that* kind of guy. It's just that dead bodies don't need to be pleased.

Right now, one just needs to be found.

### **Jerry**

Still without a plan, I took long strides down the hall to the blue room where the Gaumont's were having their service. They were due in ten minutes. God, I hoped they weren't early. People were always early when you didn't want them to be. The flowers were in place, but I sprayed them with a little water to prevent wilting and straightened the canvas photo of the poor guy who died peacefully in his sleep at 82: Sagging cheeks, bald spot in the middle of his white hair. We edited out those pesky nose hairs, though. I just hoped we could find him now so that Mrs. Gaumont and her three kids, and six grandkids could say goodbye.

I flipped through the binder: it was a closed casket, what a blessing. And I thought I remembered Mrs. Gaumont mentioning her daughter had a phobia of dead bodies or something. I'd just have to play on that. Keep that damn casket shut. Pray that Morty found him.

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I started biting at my nails. My wife hated when I did this, what can I say? It's a nervous habit. This could go real bad. We could get in big trouble. Business shut down trouble. Police trouble. Although... maybe that would be for the best?

Morty thought the whole thing was hilarious. His life is just one big joke. Just because of the irony of his name, he had to buy a fucking funeral home. That's not the first thing he's done something ridiculous for a good laugh. And it won't be the last. I knew where my life was headed the day I bought this property and I should have put a stop to it then and there.

### **Mort**

Not only was Mr. Gaumont missing from his drawer, he wasn't in any of the drawers as far I could tell. At first, I'd thought maybe I had just mislabeled him, but then he wasn't in Mrs. Dennis's drawer or Mr. Crawford's or Mr. Miles: Old person after old person after old person and none of them appeared to be Mr. G. He wasn't in the empty drawers or under the table or in the storage closet or the chemical cabinet.

I pulled open the file cabinet, and when his body wasn't in there either, started leafing through the various body files. There was Mr. Crawford's file, Mr. Venice's file, with a red tag because he'd gone into the crematorium yesterday, and finally I came across Mr. Gaumont's file, with a photo clipped to the front. I just had to look a little longer. Maybe I hadn't recognized him? All these old guys looked the same sometimes, especially naked and dead.

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Or maybe he'd been stolen? That could be something that wouldn't be our fault. Body snatching was a thing, wasn't it? But I'm sure Mrs. Gaumont wouldn't be very happy about that.

Sure, maybe it looked like I wasn't taking this seriously, but I was. It's not that I didn't care, though people always seemed to take it that way. And there was something about this career, something that I knew would matter much more to me than investing rich people's money and trying to please them. I could do something that might actually matter. Sure, people might see it as morbid, but someone had to take care of all those bodies. There was something about giving families a goodbye: Patching a face back together, dressing them in their last outfit, staging them like the living so that the living could face them for the last time. People need that closure and I get to give it to them. I didn't get it with dad. He never came back from Vietnam, never got sent back in a wooden box with an American flag on it. But at least I could give it to other people. Jerry probably thought I just did it for fun, for the irony of the thing. Let him think that.

Speaking of, if I didn't find this body, Jerry would quit me for sure. I started pulling the drawers out again because I wasn't sure what else to do. My hands were getting clammy, what would happen if I couldn't figure this out? Jerry had been screaming something about malpractice and law suits and jail time when he'd come down with that pretty blue suit and opened Mr. G's drawer to find it empty. I checked my watch: less than ten minutes till the Gaumonts would be here. It couldn't be that hard to find a five-foot seven eighty-two year old in this basement... Wait, was that Mr. Venice's body? Hadn't I put him in the crematorium?

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**Jerry**

I was headed to the basement to check on Mort when the door chimed: five minutes early. What was I going to tell them? As long as they didn't ask to see the body, we might be able to get away with this. I just had to sell it.

Mrs. Gaumont stood in the lobby along with her three children. Though adults, they looked childlike around their mother, falling steps behind her. She looked put together with powder over her wrinkles and red lipstick, trying to contain the undeniable tension underneath that makeup. She gave me a weak smile and I noticed a smear of red on her teeth. Her shoulders hunched forward slightly, but I couldn't tell if it that was due to her mourning or if it had become the natural shape of her body. Her two sons stood behind her looking slightly uncomfortable in their suits. Mrs. Gaumont's daughter, a pale thirty-something with bags under her eyes, had her arm around her mother.

"Where are those cute munchkins? Are the grandkids coming separately, Mrs. Gaumont?"

She perked at the topic of grandkids, as all grandmothers do, "Yes, they were bouncing off the walls. My daughters-in-law are bringing them after a run around the yard. I thought it best."

"Good plan."

"Though, Armie did always love running around with them." She said this listlessly.

Her daughter squeezed her shoulder and said, "It's okay, Mommy. He's happy wherever he is."

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“He’s probably watching Jeopardy up there.” Added in one of her sons, which made her chuckle.

“Yes, he’s resting peacefully now. This day is mainly for you guys. To say goodbye and show him that you love him,” I began my spiel, “Everything is just about set up. The flowers look quite perfect and the pamphlets are just in the door. The photo makes him look like a movie star—”

“And where is he?” Cut in Mrs. Gaumont shyly. She was looking past me, to the empty place at the front of the room where Mr. Gaumont’s casket should have been.

“Ah, he—” just as I started to come up with an excuse, the lift from the basement began to squeal to life. I raised a finger as if to say, just a moment, and pulled the door open to find the shiny casket with gold accents. *He better fucking be in there*, “He is right here, Ma’am.”

“Oh, we picked a beautiful casket.”

I pulled it onto the cart nearby and pushed it over to her. “One of our finest.”

Mrs. Gaumont rested her hand on top of the cool metal and fanned her fingers out. Her hand was on the spot where Mr. Gaumont’s heart would be. She took a deep breath and her shoulders relaxed. The twist in her face began to unwind, as if being close to him, or his casket at least, was comforting. When she took her hand off, her palm print remained on the metal. “It would be nice to... I don’t know... to see him one last time.”

I swallowed and the air got stuck in my throat. “...If you would like to see him, of course we can do that. Is your daughter comfortable with it? I remember you saying she was a little queasy around the dead.”

“Rose, is that okay?” Gaumont asked her daughter.

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Rose looked white, the veins prominent under her tired eyes. “I can handle it for you, Mom.”

“Thank you, honey.” She turned to me, “May I?”

“Of course, Mrs. Gaumont. Just a moment.” I shoved my shaking hand into my pocket and fished around for the key ring wishing for anyway to delay the inevitable. When I pulled it out, my fingers slipped on the keys as I shuffled through them slowly until I came the small golden one that matched the casket. Turning it in the coffin’s lock, I prayed that the body was in there. I began to push open the casket, but jumped back and dropped the lid when Mrs. Gaumont shrieked.

## **Mort**

When I came to the top of the stairs, I heard a shriek. Shit, we’d been caught. I creaked the door open to see Mrs. Gaumont on her knees, cradling her daughter who had seemingly fainted on the ground beside her.

“Rose, honey, can you hear me?” She said with a shaky voice.

Rose’s eyes rolled back in her head for a moment, revealing white, then she blinked quickly and looked around the room in confusion.

“I’m sorry, mom,” She whispered. “I thought I could handle it. I don’t think I can.”

“That’s okay, honey. He’s not in there anyway.” Mrs. Gaumont looked up at Jerry, who looked just about as shocked as I felt, “You can close it. Is he wearing the suit I left for him?”

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I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding in and noticed that Jerry did too, "Of course he is. Let me escort you in so that Rose may sit down," Jerry said in steady voice.

He pushed the casket into the blue room as they walked behind him.

When Mike mentioned selling his funeral home, I didn't think about the difficulties of the job. Instead, I saw a path that I'd somehow unintentionally prepared for my whole life. Jerry and I do everything together and as much as he likes to deny it as we get older, he loves the thrill of it. We all end up in the ground or the air or the water eventually. Jerry liked to pretend that his dream job was at the firm, but I know that he wanted to be an archeologist when he first came to school. He pretended that view and that office and those fancy lunches were everything he'd ever dreamt of, but I caught him more than a few times spacing off towards a fixed point in the distance of the Chicago skyline. He was safe in the office, but he wasn't as happy as he let on. He's a lot more like me than he lets himself think. If he wasn't, why was it so easy to convince him to fuck off from the firm and start a funeral home?

When he came back to the lobby, he saw me at the top of the basement stairs. He raised his eyebrows and waited for an explanation.

"I figured it out," I said with a grin.

"You found the body?"

"You could say that."

"Morty, did you find the body or not?"

I shrugged, "Sure."

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“You really gotta stop doing this. You’re going to give me a heart attack.” Then he noticed my black elbow gloves I’d forgotten to take off, “You shouldn’t have those on up here. You’re going to disturb the clientele.”

“Sorry, Jer. I thought you were supposed to wear black to a funeral?”

## **Jerry**

I refused to let Mort off easily, “So, where’s his body?”

“Oh, it’s in there.”

“Mr. Gaumont’s embalmed body is in that casket?”

“Mr. Gaumont’s accidentally cremated ashes are in there.”

“I swear to God, Morty.” I sounded like a scolding father, “You’re lucky it was a closed casket. You really can’t do that again.”

“But it all worked out in the end.”

I only looked at him incredulous. I should’ve put a stop to this the day Mort said, *Listen, Jer. Mike here is retiring and he wants to sell Denison Funeral Home.*

I still don’t know how got me to agree to it, but a month later we were signing the papers for the place. At the time I was dead set on never being a Funeral Director, only agreed to help him buy the property. But obviously, that happened too. Morty gifted me with an antique desk for my new office and a copy of *Funeral Home’s for Dummies* in its top drawer.

Now I wondered if that damn book had anything about missing bodies incase this happened again. “You know, I’m ready to leave this whole thing, and you, behind. The firm called again and offered my old job.”

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“Did you say yes?”

“I said I’d let them know.”

“Come on, Jerry. You know you love this place.”

“You’re going to get us arrested. Or worse.” I hissed. “It’s not like college anymore. We need to grow up.”

“We’re all gonna end up a casket.” Morty said nodding to Mr. Gaumont’s, “Why not enjoy ourselves?”

“I swear to God, Morty!”

“So, what? You gonna abandon me? Go back to the firm?” Morty didn’t seem worried when he asked this.

“Yes. I am.”

“No, you won’t.”

I opened my mouth to tell him off; hell, I should have just went down to my office without another word and called back the office, accepted the offer then and there, got away from this place. But, nothing came out of my mouth. A lot of people fall into the flow of the nine to five after college and stop living, but Mort refused to accept that reality. And I guess, once he decided I was going to be his best friend, it was never a risk for me either. I took a deep breath to steady my beating heart. It would have been a lie to say this day hadn’t been exciting. And seeing Mrs. Gaumont’s face when her hand was on her husband’s casket... “Will you at least get an assistant?”

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *I think the core of this story is the idea that death doesn’t always have to be distorted, horrible, sad, or heavy, and that, in the most stressful or odd of situations is when people can finally feel alive. During my senior Fiction Workshop, our professor gave us a sole rule for writing our stories: Don’t kill off your characters. It’s too easy and cheap. And yet, each week the stories got increasingly morbid with each*

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*ending more ambiguous as to whether the characters made it out alive. That is when, as a girl who grew up on Cohen brothers and Tarantino films, I decided to write something that would question this need for morbidity in storytelling. The Mortician came out of an attempt to play around with the dramatic theme of death by making it more lighthearted and funny. I wanted to explore two goofy characters, Jerry and Mort, who left their careers in financial advising that were slowly killing them, to feel more alive among the dead.*

**BIO:** *Katharine Yacovone is a fiction, poetry, and travel writer from Connecticut. She is currently a senior English Writing student at Marist College. Katharine enjoys traveling and finding stories in her travels. She finds a bookstore in each city that she travels to and speaks French. She has published poems in the Marist College Mosaic Literary Magazine including “Tulip” (Fall 2017, 2<sup>nd</sup> place poetry), and “Thunder” (Fall 2019).*

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# Nyquil Dreams of Starr Garden

By Allegra Armstrong

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *A beautifully written, beautifully titled 'quiet desperation' story in which the narrator navigates through her days in a Nyquil induced fugue as if she's standing outside of herself, observing—observing but not connecting. The sedative, ironically, demonically, turns her waking hours into a dream state—neither sleep nor its opposite. Masterful characterization, vernacular prose (tryna, shitton, woulda) and the use of the first person passive voice, make it a read you really wanna read. Quote: 'I leave Evan's and go out into the sun. Evan sleeps late, stays inside most days until dusk, but I like the full midday heat. South Street pops. The line outside Jim's cheesesteaks stretches down the block and into the alley. I whistle as I walk home.'* *And, this ravishing paragraph: 'She's trying on this Nanette Lepore sundress that I would die to wear to a party or something-- it's got all these flower patches on it, but it's not gaudy like you're thinking, it's real delicate. But it's six hundred dollars so I just look at it sometimes and settle for thinking about how consumerism is destroying the environment.'*

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Allegra Armstrong

"I think it would be really hot if we filmed ourselves doin' it," Evan says. His bed is just a mattress on the floor, trash and dirty clothes scattered around. The house itself is beautiful-- a three-bedroom, big-windowed place off South that he shares with two female bandmates. Evan's a few inches taller than me, and he fucks like every other short guy I've known-- greedy. But I like Evan's eyes. In the light they turn liquid, clear, and it's like I can see into his loneliness.

We resolve to film ourselves doin' it until we realize we have no camera. Then we give up, lay down next to one another on the mattress, resigned.

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“It’s okay,” says Evan. “I wanted to work on some music stuff this afternoon, anyway. I have some new song ideas. I was thinking of doing a song about my mom. We’d go to the beach together when I was little, and I have this one memory in particular where she’s holding me, all wrapped up like a burrito. I felt so safe.”

I kiss Evan’s eyelashes. I kiss his nose. I want him to be safe.

“I was thinking of a song that’s joining together that memory with the time she was driving me to school drunk and we crashed. And just how that mom that put me in danger was the same one that was holding me.”

“People being multiple things instead of one thing,” I say. “Or you were thinking someone was one thing but then you glimpse her from another angle.”

Evan makes a grab for his laptop, starts to type out some notes. “You’re writing this now?” I say. “I thought we were gonna hang out.”

“Come on, baby,” says Evan. “You knew I had to work later.”

“Later, like tonight,” I say. “Not now.”

“I’ll make it up to you,” Evan says. “How about I come over after work?”

I know I’m pouting but I can’t help it. “Okay.”

I leave Evan’s and go out into the sun. Evan sleeps late, stays inside most days until dusk, but I like the full midday heat. South Street pops. The line outside Jim’s cheesesteaks stretches down the block and into the alley. I whistle as I walk home.

In the park I watch an old guy yell at pigeons. I haven’t been sleeping well, and the sun cuts through my blurry vision, like part of me is still stuck inside at Evan’s, and

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part of me is out here, struggling to wake up. I get like this on days off, sometimes, like I'm waiting for work to start and wake me.

I sit down on a bench and call Lydia, whose vibrancy makes life clearer.

"Hi," I say when she answers.

"Hi," said Lyd. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, you know," I say. "I figured I'd drive down to Penn State to surprise you."

"Dude, I wish," she says. "It sucks here without you. All I do is sit in a windowless lab and wonder when I'm next gonna see the sun."

"Well, you're coming home soon, right?" I say. "The semester's gotta be almost over, it's fuckin like ninety degrees here."

"That's climate change," says Lydia. "It's actually December."

"Stop," I say. "I'm sad enough without your gallows humor."

"Welp," says Lyd, "Only you can help you with that."

"Damn, Lyd," I say. "No fuckin' sympathy."

Lydia makes a noise with her mouth, I think to represent static. "Oh sorry, were you calling for the sympathy department? You have the wrong number. This is Other Side of Pennsylvania and Yell At You to Break Up With That Goatee-Having-Motherfucker. I've worked retail before. I know nobody likes it."

Lyd knows life's shitty, and funny all at once. For a moment I feel less like I'm moving through water, more like I'm part of the world. I smile at yelling guy, who's quieted down, now that pigeons have dispersed.

"And also," says Lydia, "Bad news. I got a fellowship up here for the summer. I'm assisting this guy with his skin research. I'm not gonna be home for awhile."

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I can't tell if it's my tiredness that's making me dizzy or Lyd's news. All I can tell is that I feel weird again.

"Damn," I say. "Damn. I would never say that's bad. I mean, it's bad for me, but it's so good. You need to do your career. I've always known you were gonna be something big."

If Lydia can get out of Philly, she should run and not come back. I see myself for a second in an endless swirl, water in a bathtub, a vortex too strong for me to pull myself out. Lyd is on the side, safe from the drain, cheering for me. I was supposed to quit Evan and stay in school, so what the hell happened?

We stay on the phone for another hour, but my heart's not in it. My heart hasn't been in anything for so long.

I was supposed to be a sculpture major. But there were certain classes I had to take as a sculpture major, including wheel sculpting, a required class. Wheel is a class about making the same bowl over and over for an entire semester and fucking your back up while you do it. On the day I was supposed to leave Evan I texted him to say we needed to talk and he said how about right now and I hated the class so much I just left, like I was going to the bathroom but forever, and I swiped all of my stuff outta there, too, my sculpting tools and the clay I'd bought from the school and even the two shitty mugs I'd already made and fired.

We met at Starr Garden, and I was so tired, and I said I was done, I wanted to be done with him, at that point I could have still gone back to the class and been fine, but somehow along the way my plan changed. I was so tired, and Evan had brought a bottle

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of whiskey, and I said, Evan, I want to be done, and he looked at me with his golden eyes and said, how about we drink this instead and go back to my place, and at his place he held me and he was my comfort and that whiskey was his.

So I don't sculpt anymore, because I don't have a studio, and I don't go to class, cause it hurts my back and I dropped out, and I don't see my parents cause they're absolute nutcases, which means I spend a good amount of time in my apartment reading novels, or sketching, which is what I did way back in middle school before I knew I was an artist. Sometimes I walk, too, there's a lot to see around here, like that screaming guy, or the weird crocheted sweaters people put on the poles, I think they're some kind of street art, but mainly they just get gross and grey and dirty when it rains.

I shouldn't take so much Nyquil to get to sleep. It's wild to me that Lydia has a summer internship doing medical research this summer and I've been absent basically this entire last year, high on Nyquil. And I'm scared to stop.

I haven't been sleeping well, maybe because of how little I've been doing, and I hate not sleeping well. If I'm awake lying in bed I'll start to have this feeling like I have to pee every twenty minutes and then I'll convince myself I can't go back to sleep until I pee, so then I absolutely have to get up and out of bed and pee. Every night before bed I measure out a capful of Nyquil. It makes me too nervous not to have it. Even on nights when I'm super tired, or nights like tonight when Evan's promised to come over later and I'll have to wake up to let him in, it just makes me feel better, knowing I'll be knocked out no matter what. Knowing I have no choice but to sleep. It's too freaky otherwise,

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thinking about what if I forget how to sleep and also thinking about what happens to my consciousness when I sleep. I hate it.

It's five AM when Evan calls me and I pull myself out of bed to let him upstairs. I kiss him sleepily. "Where were you?" I say. "The bars closed hours ago."

"I was just drinkin' in the park with some friends," he says. "Beautiful night for it."

I'm happy when I'm back in bed, Evan scrambling around in the kitchen to find something to eat. I don't let myself drift off fully as I wait for him, because I don't wanna get woken up again. I can hear the fan turn on as Evan fries eggs. But I must fall asleep accidentally because when I wake up again he's holding me, burrowing his boozy mouth into me, his dick hard against my ass.

I roll over and kiss Evan. I wrap one of my legs around him. I fall into a NyQuil dream as he fucks me. I'm still awake, but dreaming, and I dream of the playground at Starr Garden. As a teenager, I'd hang out there in big packs, twenty or so of us meeting there at dusk to smoke and play on the swingset in a way that wasn't cool during the day anymore. In the dream I am with Lydia, it's only me and her, and I'm showing her a skate trick I've perfected on the basketball court, and she winces every time I do it. In the dream I realize I'm gonna hurt myself with this shit, that's why she's wincing, and I come over to her on the swings instead, where I'll be safe.

I come out of my NyQuil dream when Evan puts his thumb in my mouth, and I'm already nostalgic for the three-sided fence of the playground, and for Lydia, at Penn State now.

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Evan finishes, and asks if I wanna finish, and I say no, and I love him.

When I was younger I thought there'd be more rules to working life-- that everyone would sort of drop their personalities when they got in the door and put on a professional mask. That might be true in some workplaces, but retail is a bizarre clash of personalities that I wasn't prepared for.

I don't mind it. The air conditioning is *cold*, and free, as much of it as I want. All of my eating is done on the clock. The sick part of working retail is how much lying I have to do to get through the day. I thought of myself as an ethical person before I went into sales.

It's 11:35 now, and my cream cheese bagel is gone, and Rochelle is headed to a noon barre class, which is relieving because I'm exhausted and if no customers are here I plan to stare into space like a zombie. No one comes in before noon, generally, which means there's this nice hour cushion between when I get to work at eleven and when I actually have to do work. I've worked some dumb-ass retail jobs where they had in between tasks for me, like dusting and shit, when customers weren't in the store, and "security cameras" where they could see if I was actually doing the tasks. But Rochelle is a pretty lax boss. She just looks at her phone, mostly, when there aren't customers, and I look out the window, and then she leaves to walk her dog or get lattes.

Rochelle goes to barre and this one regular, Rachel, comes in, which I think is Rochelle's real name from when she lived in Arkansas and didn't own a clothing store. I ask how her day is going and Rachel says real good cause she biked sixty miles this morning and I say nice even though I'm thinking about how brittle her bones probably

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are from not eating. I show her this Chloe jacket that just came in that I think would look real pretty on her. I like the jacket for a lot of our customers cause it's soft and skinny people are always cold.

Rachel picks some stuff out and I pick some stuff out and she goes into the dressing room with all of it. She doesn't close the curtain, I think cause she's lonely and wants to see me while she's talking to me, but it could also because she wants to make sure I see her bod while she changes.

"How have you been?" I say. She's trying on this Nanette Lepore sundress that I would die to wear to a party or something-- it's got all these flower patches on it, but it's not gaudy like you're thinking, it's real delicate. But it's six hundred dollars so I just look at it sometimes and settle for thinking about how consumerism is destroying the environment.

"Things have been really hard," Rachel says. "Glen's been saying we have to cut back. I guess things haven't been going well with his business-- I'm not too sure how that works with investments-- and he's asked me not to spend as much."

"Aww man," I say, neutrally. "How's that been?"

"Not good," says Rachel. "Because it's not just spending less, it's that he's hardly ever home. And when he is home he's looking at his iPad, 'working.' I think he's seeing someone else. And it's so heartbreaking. It's like he barely even makes eye contact with me anymore. I talk to him about my day and he answers into his iPad."

"That's unsettling," I say. "I hate when people can't even look up from their phones to have a freaking conversation."

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“And not just people!” says Rachel. “This is Glen! We exchanged soul rings in Lanikai. Now it’s like I barely know him.”

“I like this dress a lot,” I say, looking at Rachel in my dream dress. “Come out so we can admire you.”

Rachel’s shoulder blades poke out like wings. But you can see how, ten years ago, before anorexia attacked her body, she was stunning. “Picture it with a tan,” I say. “I don’t think you can pass it up.”

Rachel twirls, admiring herself. “This is perfect. I’ll have to hide the bag so Glen won’t know I’ve been bad.”

I smile. “When he sees you in this, he’ll forget everything else.”

I think a lot of times, like in stories or movies or something, girls don’t have friends, or their friends are flaky as shit so their boyfriends can be the focus of the thing. I have a shitton of friends because it’s normal when you live in a society to have friends and also if you had a boyfriend like Evan you would probably have friends too.

My friends think Evan is shady and I think Evan is like my dad. That’s because only fifty percent of what Evan says is true, but you just never know what fifty. And anyway Evan hardly ever takes drugs which makes him better than my dad in most ways. It’s good that I have friends because it means I don’t have to hang with my coworkers outside of work. I think it’s one of the saddest things in the world, when people like, work with their coworkers all day and then that’s who they call on the weekends to chill with and talk about work some more. My one coworker Lauren is always tryna chill and she’s annoying as fuck. Lauren has a special shift that starts at 1:15 (!, right?) because

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she goes to her noon AA meeting every day. Rochelle is all nice and like, buys that shit, but I woulda been like, go to a different meeting, I know there's more than one per day.

Lauren is also sneaky. She's sneaky cause she wants me to come to the AA for people with boyfriends who are alcoholics. One time, no joke, she invited me out to Indian food, and then on the way was like, oh yeah, Margaret, there's the place where the Al-anon meetings happen in case you're interested. Fuck you. But then we went and ate the food and it was kinda fine. I like hanging out with people, even if it's draining people like Lauren who ask the waitress four million questions and are dairy and soy free (?!).

Lauren might be sneaky but I'm sneaky-er. Cause the next day I sneaked to that meeting without her knowing. I mean, it would be super lame if I like, couldn't break up with Evan and needed help with that. I'm a grown woman. I like Evan. But I can't break up with my drunk ass parents so I wanted to check out what other people do, like sad old housewives who need to stay with their drunk husbands cause they will be destitute otherwise. I figured the meeting would make me feel better about myself cause other people's lives were worse than mine. But it was honestly even sadder than I was hoping.

There was this one guy, who was like, totally disheveled looking, whose wife would get drunk and masturbate really loudly in their bed. There was this other lady talking about how she has to get eye surgery now because her parents beat her so badly as a kid. The saddest thing was how all these people thought saying some prayers were gonna help them. Someone would be like, yeah, my boyfriend went to the ER last week, heroin overdose, but I know God is helping me, and I don't even know where I'd be without the love and support of this program. After that whopper I got real sad, and we

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said the final prayer and some old lady with red glasses tried to talk to me but I bolted and went to the art museum and stared at a painting of Prometheus getting his liver eaten until the place closed. Art school is all around us.

I never went back to that meeting after that, and usually I chill with friends after work but today I go to my brother's place after work. Stu lives in this giant rowhouse on Delancey that he's split up into apartments. My parents helped him buy it and he has this really sad soul sucking money job that helps him with the rest of the mortgage. Also he gets rent from his three tenants. To deal with his soul sucking money job Stu smokes a ton, and takes kratom which is this weird potpourri you can buy at the gas station to make your car smell nice or smoke to get high. And money job is not all bad. It's allowed Stu to buy some really nice art.

Stu's pretty high when I get there. On the weekends Stu'll roll up blunt after blunt until he falls asleep in the gold easy chair our Grandpa spent his retirement in.

I talk to Stu for a little about some dumb shit someone was saying at work. Someone is always saying some dumb shit at my work about how they don't vaccinate their kids and I'm always saying interesting back and smiling and telling them the crop top they're trying on looks great on them.

"Can I have some weed?" I ask him. "I've been taking a bunch of Nyquil to fall asleep and it's making me fucked up."

Stu laughs.

"I'm serious," I say. "Remember how I was taking it a bunch in middle school and Mom and Dad sent me to that camp in Maine?"

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“I don’t think you’re supposed to take that much Nyquil,” he says.

“I agree,” I say. “That camp was shitty. And for awhile I was taking it cause I was sick and then I just didn’t stop taking it when I stopped being sick and now I have been taking it for like a month. I don’t think I can sleep without it. And it’s weird, I’m always in this dream state now, in between sleeping and awake. It’s fucking me.”

Stu rolls me four joints, which sounds like a lot except Stu has twenty trillion dollars and doesn’t care about four joints. And anyway Stu’s the most genetically close person to me in the world. He doesn’t want me to get stuck drinking Nyquil every night, forever.

I’m not sure how I’m gonna face off against the Nyquil monster except I know I have to. If I can make it through a full night then I can make it through tomorrow and I can make it through the next tomorrow. In my apartment I gather my two bottles of Nyquil and three bottles of Zzzquil and even a bottle of CVS-brand Benadryl. I take em down the block to the trash cans that Michael Nutter bought with school district money, trash cans that if anything have made Philadelphia’s litter problems worse. I open the little door on the trash can and I stuff sixty dollars of sleep aids down. I don’t even give the Nyquil to a homeless person because what a terrible gift.

I lock the door to my apartment and I know that this is the big ending. I tell myself no matter what I won’t go to the 24-hour CVS and I won’t go anywhere until the sun comes up and when the sun comes up the majority of Nyquil will be out of my system and I will be more or less free.

I take melatonin, which I’m supposed to take one hour before bedtime, as per the melatonin instructions. I smoke one of Stu’s joints out of the bathroom window. I really

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like having a bathroom window. I grew up in an apartment and it had an interior bathroom, so no window. I smoke the weed and then I pile up the new books I've bought, just for this occasion, next to my bed. I've bought three new books, and I lie down and look at them. I'm looking at this one in particular. It's this girl's memoir, about growing up with this super rich, shitty dad in Miami, and what I like about it is that the book is about being a badass feminist but the cover of the book is inset with glitter. In the early 2000s I liked glitter a lot, I had a glittery trading card of Britney Spears in a clear hardshell case, but also in the early 2000s feminism wasn't glittery. If someone called you a feminist, it was a way of ending a conversation, of pushing you out.

I lay down with my weed brain and my no Nyquil and I think about how when I write a book its gonna be similar to this glittery book, and my book is gonna be about how you can work retail and be nice to the skinny shitty women who come in and complain about how much their backs hurt (from not eating) and how that, in essence, is feminism. My book is gonna be about a woman who is nice to other women, even skinny women, and doesn't hate them, and starts a revolution.

Evan called then, and I picked up, even though I was high and I hate doing anything when I'm high because everything when I'm high just feels like it takes a million hours of extra time. If I'm high and peeing, sometimes I get scared because it takes so long for all the pee to come out. That's why I only smoke weed when I'm trying to wean myself off of being addicted to something else.

What's up, I say, and Evan says he's here.

"Where?"

"Outside. I was just in the neighborhood. Can I come in?"

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I can't let Evan in because tonight is the night of my Nyquil detox. "Sorry," I say. "I'm not feeling so good, baby. I love you, though. Can we catch up tomorrow?"

"Come on, baby," he says. I can see Evan's eyes flash sweetly in my mind. "If you're not feeling good, I'll take care of you. I'll love you. You know that. Just let me up, okay? I gotta piss real bad."

I sort of fall out of bed and cross to my bedroom window, look down at the street. I imagine Evan holding me, safe in his arms as I writhe in my withdrawal. "Okay," I say. I shuffle downstairs and unlock the front door. Evan runs up to pee.

I lay in my bed and think about all of Stu's stuff. He had this pretty cool patch in his living room, from a band we both like, but I'm more of a sewer, and I'd asked if I could have it. He said no, he needed to keep it, I guess like how I inexplicably need to keep Evan, rather than give him away to someone else, which is what I should do.

Evan comes into bed. His bush and mustache and hair are all pale blonde, and wiry. Evan is twenty four to my nineteen, and I like that, too. He's still a student at my old art school, a perpetual kid, taking forever to complete his music business degree.

Evan is telling me a story about how their drummer was too sick to play tonight and he ruined their gig. They've been needing a new drummer for awhile because Luis is always either trying to find heroin or too high or too sick from not having any. I feel bad, because when I met Evan, Luis was absolute fire. One out of every fifty people at art school was like Luis, a true artist, someone who'd make me wanna go right up to the studio, stay up all night sculpting, inspiration into life. A few nights after Ev and I'd met we'd all snorted heroin together in this weird carpeted mudroom at a house party and I'd thrown it all right up, the rum and cheetos I'd been eating and those fake slim jims from

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the corner store and \$25 of white which seemed like a lot but was also fine I guess because he and Evan were just happy in that carpeted mudroom together.

I'd gone outside and thought about how Evan and I were gonna be done soon because Evan was the kind of person who could handle a belly full of heroin and I wasn't. But Evan and I were actually not done soon. Luis started missing gigs and jacked his arms all up and that summer became a winter when me and Evan loved each other and I started working retail in the spring.

Evan and I always fuck twice when we see each other but I don't want to right now because being high makes my belly hurt. So Evan just holds me and pokes me with his drunk boner and whispers into my neck with his mustache in my favorite way. It's moments like this when I love Evan more than my own self. I wanna hold that little Evan on the beach in his towel forever. I fall asleep like this, with Evan's warm breath in my ear and his arm on my waist.

The sun comes up at seven, and I've slept for four hours with no Nyquil. Evan might sleep all day, it's impossible to know, and the last of the weed I smoked burns at the corners of my eyes as I get up. I have work in four hours, and my bagel with cream cheese there, and I start an espresso for myself on the stove. I look out the window at my block, and I think about how when I was younger my friends and I skated all over everywhere, no helmets, no elbow pads, nothing. We hadn't known yet to be afraid.

The fear had hit me all at once, the summer after high school, when Lydia broke her wrist skitching, holding on to the back of a truck on the Walnut Street Bridge. I'd seen the little scar on her wrist where her stitches were, and under that the metal that

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would be inside her until she died, and a few weeks later she went away to school and I started walking places, mostly, a way of slowing down.

I have four hours until work and I go into the kitchen to check on my espresso, and it's the kind of day that makes me sure I don't know anything yet, when everything is just getting started.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *: I think for me this story is about safety, and characters who use drugs or alcohol or people or whatever they're addicted to as a way back to wherever they feel safe. It's a cool setup for a story 'cause it's such a trap-- if the only time you feel safe is when you're using, that's a terrible place to be in, especially if whatever it is you're addicted to is also what's bringing you down.*

*So you have Rachel, who's wasting away, she's so addicted to not eating, Margaret who's so addicted to Evan she drops out of school, Stu's addicted to stuff and his weird incense drug, and Evan who doesn't care about anything except getting drunk. And I liked the idea of dropping Margaret in amongst all this, because she wants something different for herself so bad but she also wants to hold on to the safety of what she knows.*

*Literary influences: Kathy Acker, Alexandra Kleeman, Tao Lin, Sherman Alexie, Denis Johnson, Nico Walker.*

**BIO:** *Allegra Armstrong lives in Spokane, WA and teaches Composition at Eastern Washington University, where she is an MFA candidate. Her poetry and prose have appeared in Cleaver, The Last Petal, Spokane Public Radio and elsewhere. She reads original poetry aloud at [armstrongallegra.bandcamp.com](http://armstrongallegra.bandcamp.com).*

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# A SHOT AT FAME

By Dave Healey

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We couldn't resist this enthralling story (that reads almost like theatre) as it moves imperceptibly from what appears to be realism into something that is definitely surrealism or, maybe better, sottorealism. Characters, without losing credibility, function as mouthpieces for ideas bigger than themselves and the narrative, in the least likely of circumstances, becomes an inquiry into the nature of being. Absurdities accumulate as the action progresses. Puns, witticisms and a unique turn of phrase abound: —'Carl scratched his head in a way that clearly showed internal debate. At last a decision was reached and Carl shared the winning outcome'. Healey's style in this story verges on outsider lit and the voice has got 'unique' stamped all over it. There's a few typos and grammatical bumps along the way but as is our style we don't edit them out: earthy authenticity is part of the reading experience. The prose snaps like ginger: 'Did God suffer from ADD? And if so did that make Ritalin as sacred as frankincense and myrrh?' And, 'It felt like a sign. A sign that was a sign. There was something prophetic about a sign being a sign. It felt like God was finally being literal.' And and and The world was his oyster. Or if not his oyster at least one of the more important bivalve molluscs.' Thumbs up, wonderful stuff with a gravitational pull we guarantee will draw you in.*

## A Shot at Fame

Brian moved to the window and pulled back the curtain. The rain slapped against the pavement as if it were moved by some ancient vendetta, by some unknown event from long ago that it was now only exacting its price for. Intermittently the light from the motel sign lit up the room with a tinge of blue as it flashed its message to passing cars.

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Mainstay Inn it strobed over and over again. Actually with the electrical problems it was experiencing, it didn't exactly say Mainstay Inn but rather 'stay I n'. Four hours before as Brian drove along the dark and drenched highway, that was what had attracted him. 'Stay I n, stay I n', it flashed to him over and over and over again. It felt like a sign. A sign that was a sign. There was something prophetic about a sign being a sign. It felt like God was finally being literal. After centuries of imparting his wisdom through metaphors he had finally figured out that humans were lousy at metaphors and a change of course was needed. Metaphors were out and God had literally become literal. In fact that was what Brian had mentioned to Carl the over-indulging night manager when he checked in.

"Usually people stop here because of the promotion," Carl said.

"Promotion?"

"Un-huh, we serve an all you can eat breakfast. It's right on the sandwich board."

"Sandwich board?"

"I guess it musta blown over. What with the rain an' all."

"I didn't know. I stopped because of your motel sign. Because your motel sign is a sign."

"Our sign is always a sign," Carl agreed. "If it weren't a sign then it wouldn't be."

"What?"

"A sign."

"No I mean a sign at a deeper level. A sign from God. A literal sign from God" said Brian.

Carl looked perplexed. "I did most of the electrical work." Carl stopped. There was a silence. "People usually stop because of the promotion. We serve an all you can eat

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breakfast,” Carl said filling in the silence like it was an unwanted pothole in their parking lot.

“I see.”

“We started it because we were havin’ problems with vacancies. You know, too many. Wouldn’t be a problem the other way. Anyway the day manager, he’s Carl too...”

“Two Carls?”

“Exactly, Carl too. Anyway he thought this would help with the vacancy problem.”

“Right.”

So I have to ask people if they choose to have the breakfast because if they do, I need to make

extra. You see?

“I do.”

“How far you drive anyway” Carl asked.

“All night. Does it matter?”

Carl scratched his head in a way that clearly showed an internal debate. At last a decision was

reached and Carl shared the winning outcome . “Not really. I’m just curious when it comes to

things time related. I keep a log of when I do things vis a vis the time. So I can see if there’s

some kinda pattern. I mean if there is a pattern...if there is a predicable occurrence of

events....then maybe that calls into question the whole notion of free will. Because if I do things

every day at the same time then maybe I’m doing them not because I choose to. Maybe I’m

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being forced to by some preordained schedule drawn up eons ago by the creator. Get my drift?

Because this... and this is important because it's the crux of my theory. If I am preordained to do

them; do I have free will? Am I free to have my will...free?"

Carl looked for some understanding in Brian's facial features. With nothing forthcoming he

plowed ahead. "Or are the determinists right? Maybe there is only one possible choice for each

of us in which case is that a choice? Can you choose from one? If I am preordained to make

breakfast am I really choosing to make breakfast? Or if you are preordained to eat it are you

choosing to have it?"

"I don't know."

"And further did you really choose to stay here or was it in the cards all along?" Carl asked.

"I chose to stop to because of the sign. From God."

"But did God already know you'd stop? Huh?" Carl smiled and nodded. "It's all very

complicated, I know but it does fill my days and when you're fighting depression, it keeps your

mind off your life. So what about the breakfast?"

"I'll pass."

"Just as well really, our cook's not what he once was."

"Can't cook anymore?"

"No. He lost an eye in the war." There was a silence. "And an arm." Again there was a long

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pause. "He also walks with a limp."

"What happened?"

"Had his foot amputated. So as I say he's not what he once was."

"Thanks for filling me in " Brian said as he took the key and made his way to his room. He was

tired and needed a rest. And this was the place to rest. The sign had told him. The sign that was a

sign. Stay I n, it said, stay I n. So he would. He would stay in. At least for a few hours more

before he needed to get on the road again.

When he entered the room, the TV was already on. The sound was down but the TV flickered,

spreading its message to anyone within a 50 square foot radius. It looked like it might be the

news. At least that's what Brian thought. He saw a picture of a hand gun. Then someone else

came on screen and started talking. At least it seemed that way because their lips were moving.

Brian turned the set off. To him it looked like another in an endless stream of American school

shootings and that was the last thing he wanted to see. More people being killed.

As he turned off the set his eyes fell on the carpet. He immediately noticed the burn marks that

stood out in a field of beige. On closer inspection, it was apparent that they weren't just marks,

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they were letters. Someone had burned a message in the carpet. Was this another sign?  
Was

God filling his evening with obtuse messaging? He could make out the letters but not the sense.

D...O...N. What was God trying to say? And why was this deity using an indoor/outdoor carpet

to communicate? There were certainly many better types of carpeting that could be used and God

being an all powerful, would have had access to many, if not all of them. Still it was a sign and it

needed to be deciphered.

What was this monument to beige trying to tell him? Was this a message to someone named

Don? There was no Don in the room so that made no sense. If not a message to Don then who or what? Was God telling him to don't something? Was this an incomplete warning? Don't

what? Don't stay here? In that case he ought to leave. Or was this an affirmation of his previous

sign; stay I n? If that was the case then had God meant to say don't go? It made more sense that

this was an affirmation. Why would God tell him to stay and then to leave? That made no sense.

The idea of an ambivalent God was not something Brian wished to contemplate. No this was an

affirmation: Don't go. Stay I n. So Brian did.

Still he was perplexed. What kind of God gets distracted and fails to complete their message? Did God suffer from ADD? And if so did that make Ritalin as sacred as frankincense

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and myrrh? Just then his concentration was broken by a clap of thunder. His eyes darted to the

window. So he got up and looked out. As he watched the rain fall he started to wonder how he

had gotten into this mess. He remembered when he first joined the Beatlemania: The Sound

Alike Show of the Century. He recalled the excitement when he first heard that he had gotten

the part of John Lennon. The pride he felt in being chosen. He had always wanted to be a singer and now he was a singer in a mock-up of the world's greatest band. Best of all, he was

playing the part of his boyhood idol, John Lennon. What more could he ask for? The world was

his oyster. Or if not his oyster at least one of the more important bivalve molluscs.

He was playing the part of John Lennon. The late stage John Lennon. His friend Pete played the

Role of the early Lennon. The naive Lennon. The Lennon who dressed in suits and sang 'Ya Ya

Ya'. That was important to know because as you have probably guessed Brian was not the only

John Lennon in the show. Besides Brian and Pete, Johnny Nicola was cast as the middle period

Lennon, the grass smoking, slightly chubby, impish Lennon from Help!

Brian however played the last Lennon. The Lennon who experimented with heroin, the Lennon

who got drunk with Harry Nilsson and stuck tampons on his forehead, the skinny Lennon with

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an edge who climbed into a bag and sang. While he had no affinity for singing inside a sac of

any description, he did like the music of the late period Lennon and remarkably if he combed

his hair properly and dressed in the right clothes he looked exactly like this Lennon.

The greatest compliment you could give Brain was if you came up to him and told him how

similar he was in appearance to Lennon. The comment 'you look just like that dead English guy'

always brought a smile to his lips. And because he was the only one of the Lennons in the cast

who could do a credible Liverpudlian accent, he got all the lines in the show. His favourite

part was when one of the numbers came to an end, he would step up to the mic and in his most

droll voice say 'I'd like to thank you on behalf of the group and myself and I hope we passed the

audition'. He was also hoping to get a new line in the show, one that he had been lobbying for

for quite some time. It was the line from the Royal Command performance. He saw it playing

out like this; just before the last number, he would step up to the mic and say 'we would like to

do another song but we need a little help. So those of you in the cheap seats clap your hands and

the rest of you just rattle your jewelry.' However it was never okayed due to internal politics of

the show and so remained just a dream.

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Brian's eyes started close when a crash brought him back from the edge of sleep. His heart

stopped. Maybe it was just someone in the next room. The walls were thin. But maybe it wasn't

next door, maybe it was outside. Maybe someone had followed him to the motel. He had heard it

in his sleep so he wasn't able to locate the direction of the sound. If it was outside it was possible

someone was sneaking around. That realization stopped his heart. It took all the energy in his

body to propel himself back to the window. Slowly he moved forward and once more pushed

open the curtains. Nothing. Just rain. Rain and a flashing light that was a sign. From God; stay

In it pleaded, stay In. There was nothing else. No person hiding in the shadows. No man lurking

in the distance to do him harm. No stranger brandishing a high powered weapon leering in his

general direction. Only the rain. The rain and a sign. A sign imploring him to stay In. So he

continued to do so.

He felt utterly alone as he closed the curtains and moved away from the window. He started to

cry. He remembered when he first called his mother and broke the news that he had gotten a

job with the Beatlemania: The Sound Alike Show of the Century. How proud she was and how

convinced that this would make him a star. In fact he was the closest thing to a star that Sandy

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Point, Nova Scotia had ever produced. So much so that when he went home to visit, they held a

parade in his honour. In actuality it was two cars decked in pink bunting and they don't sell

bunting in Sandy Point. For that you had to go to Yarmouth. So when he was picked up at the

bus station, bedecked in pink bunting and driven to his mother's place, the idea that this was a

full blown parade was already alive in Brian's mind. The fact that several people waved along

the way home only sealed the deal. So of course with time and every telling of the story, the

number of cars rose and the crowds watching became more expansive and the parade took on a

life of its own. Like many in the arts, revisionism played a huge role in Brian's success.

What a wonderful feeling it had been when he first started. Performing was a joy, the travel was

mind opening and his new status was rewarding both spiritually and materially. Slowly it

changed though. Ticket sales began to flag and the crowds became less so. Officially no one

made much of it but behind the scenes rumours were flying. Everyone talked openly about the

possibility of replacements. A new McCartney and a new Lennon. Actors who could play all the

stages of their lives. That would certainly save some money, having to employ fewer Lennons

and McCartneys. In fact when Mick Jagger was asked what he thought about the idea, he

said the world would be better off with less Lennons and McCartneys so there was certainly an

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appetite for a reduced cast.

Then came the bombshell. A change that no one could have predicted. They hired a Mark David Chapman look-a-like. He didn't do anything really, he just stood on the side of the stage,

holding his autograph book and staring at the band while being very visible and of course people

loved it. To be honest, he didn't look at the entire band he just stared at the Lennons. He never

said anything, he'd just stood there motionless. Once in a while he'd make a half hearted wave or

formed the hint of a smile. Everyone on stage found it uncomfortable but the audience revelled

in the anticipation of what might happen next.

After the show people would line up to get the Mark David Chapman look-a-like's autograph.

Long lines queued up to get his autograph while fewer and fewer choose to stand in line for

Brian's. Brian however consoled himself with the belief that this popularity was a novelty and

would wane. In time, he thought, people would grow tired and the Mark David Chapman look-a-

like would be retired.

In the meantime he did try to get to know this new member of the cast but that proved difficult.

The best description that Brian could give to anyone about his personality was that he was 'polite

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and quiet' and as any cop will tell you, those are two traits to be avoided at all costs. As Brian

had guessed, the novelty soon wore off and ticket sales started to drop. Again rumours of change

were rife but no one in management communicated their thoughts. Everyone it seemed was on

edge. Johnny Nicola started to drink. Heavily. Some nights it's got so bad he can barely

walk. Then one night while on stage, Brian noticed the Mark David Chapman look-a-like with

what appeared to be a bulge under his coat. Not too large but noticeable. And as sales dropped

further and further, the bulge under his coat seemed to grow bigger and bigger.

In the autograph sessions instead of signing, he now stood in line with the audience. He'd get

in one of the Lennon's lines, obtain an autograph and then go re-join the line at the rear ad

infinitum. Nothing however could stem the falling ticket sales. Then last night, while Johnny

Nicola was on stage Brian heard a bang. Like a car back firing or a balloon bursting and

Brian looked out on stage only to see Jimmy stagger and fall off the edge into the crowd. In the

confusion people were screaming. He couldn't tell if it was an accident or something else. So he

ran back to the dressing room to where Pete was, to tell him but when he got there, the door was

locked. He knocked and knocked and knocked but no answer. Then it hit him. The look-a-like,

the bulge under the arm, the bang. So he got in his car and drove. He drove and drove until

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finally he saw a sign from God: stay I n it said. And that's just what he decided to do.

Suddenly there was a knock on the door. Brian jumped. It came again. Still he didn't go to the

source.

"It's me Carl. The guy from the front desk," said the voice behind the door.

Brian creeped to the door and opened it a crack.

"You okay?" the voice asked him.

"Fine."

"A while ago the people next to you complained about some crashes. I'da been here sooner but I

had to start to get the breakfast room ready. You know for breakfast."

"It wasn't me. I've been asleep," said Brian.

"Oh." There was a silence. "You comin' for breakfast?"

"Why?"

"Thought I'd give you another chance. In case you wanted to break the pattern of predetermination. Also I need to figure out how many tables I should clean."

"You don't clean all the tables?"

"I jus' clean what's needed. So what about breakfast?"

"I'll pass."

"I think this might jus' be the nail in the coffin for free will. Oh well." Carl started to move away

but stopped. He turned back and stared at Brian's face. At least the part of it he could see through

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the crack between the door and its jamb. “You know you look like someone. I’ve been tryin’ to

figure it out all night and it finally came to me...you look like that dead English guy.”

“I think you’ve got me confused with someone else.”

“I figured that. What with him bein’ dead an’ all” and with that Carl walked away. Brian closed

the door and sat back down on the bed. He turned on the TV. As the picture started to flicker into

focus, he closed his eyes. A close up of a photo of Johnny Nicola now filled the screen. But

Brian didn’t see Johnny. Once his eyes closed, he started to drift off and within a few minutes he

was fast asleep.

Again there was a crash outside his door but this time he didn’t wake. This time he didn’t go to

the window and look out. This time he didn’t see the rain or the sign and most importantly he

didn’t not see anyone who might be a threat lurking about. This time he slept. For better or for

worse he slept as his door knob began to turn.

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *Normally I start with an idea and work the narrative until a theme emerges organically. I grew up a big John Lennon fan. I was a little late for the Beatles but when did I start to consume music, Abbey Road was the first record I bought and was then bowled over by Lennon’s first 2 solo releases. However it wasn’t just the music that intrigued me. When I discovered Lennon’s writing, I was captivated. In His Own Write and A Spaniard in the Works were very influential by showing alternative ways that stories could be told and how words could be used in nonconventional manner and still support your narrative. In addition his rather dark sense of humour always appealed to me. From there it was only a stone’s throw to Monty Python, Lewis Carroll, N.F. Simpson, Edward Lear, Beyond the Fringe...*

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*With A Shot at Fame, one of the themes that materialized while I was working through the story was the idea of the cult of celebrity. It's particularly pertinent today as so many people seem to be willing to do anything to be grab a few rays of the spotlight. They'll happily be exploited and humiliated just to be on TV or youtube or whatever medium that's available. In this story the protagonist sees his mimicking of another artist's work as a perfectly justifiable reason for him to be famous. Even though he is not responsible for the creation of any of the work he performs and his performance can never be as good as the original, it doesn't matter to him or the audience that attends the concerts. Like so much of popular culture it is a victory of spectacle over substance.*

**BIO:** *Originally from Halifax, Dave studied drama at Dalhousie University before moving to Toronto and working as an actor and improviser including a stint with Second City and a radio show on CBC. In the last couple of years, he has turned his hand to writing plays. He's had numerous scripts featured in the Toronto Cold Reads and Store Front Theatre's Sing For Your Supper play reading series. His plays have been performed in the Short, Short Play Festival in Toronto, Unit 102's Operation 24, Pittsburgh's New Works Festival, The Newmarket National Ten Minute Play Festival, Buffalo's The Road Less Traveled Festival, Alumnae Theatre's New Ideas Festival and at the Red Sandcastle Theatre in Toronto. Most recently his play 'True Love and the Precise Nature of Miracles' was part of the National One Act Play Festival in November. He sincerely hopes you enjoy his latest work, a short story called A Shot at Fame.*

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# SCARLET LEONARD

By John Michael Flynn

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Dialogue heats up like a Saturday night special in this perfect replication of pulp crime fiction circa 1955. It also beams a flashlight on smoldering issues like anti-Semitism, racial discriminations and gays—which you won't find in the dime store novels. But wisely, 'Scarlet Leonard' isn't a platform for social activism—they are there because they are in keeping with the story, must be dealt with and assumed to be 'just the way things are'. Characters and style dominate over plot and we almost like HOW Flynn says it as much as WHAT he is saying. Dialogue is smart-mouthed, prose snappy on top, complex below, tone noir-ish—just as you'd expect in this genre. Apart from everything else, we love the retro details like a 'Monte Cristo sandwich' and forgotten cocktails called 'Gin Rickey' and 'Rob Roy'. Those were the days! Quote:*

“Eh, you know, he got into trouble with two colored boys who were taken in for selling handguns out of the trunk of a Buick in South Fortuna. It was Armen's car, but he wasn't in it. Armen testified in court that the colored boys had stolen it. Leonard defended Armen, got him acquitted. It turns out that Armen had loaned the colored boys one of his Dad's cars. That they were all in it together.”

“What happened to the two boys?”

“Well, they're coloreds,” said Tiny. “They're in prison now.”

## Scarlet Leonard

My Pa Burton and his partner Tiny Aria had counted the cash and locked their safe. Bartenders, wait staff, dancers and drunks had gone home. With the lights out, The Blue Danube Supper Club felt cavernous.

“So, you were saying,” remarked Pa to Tiny.

“Still don't got no weapon. Just a cadaver.”

“But why Leonard? Something personal here I ain't getting?”

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Tiny paused a moment. “Burton, you know our man Arturo at the G-Clef? He told me Leonard has a nephew living here in Fortuna.”

“Ring him up. Get him to spill. And all this time, I thought I knew the man.”

“You never know, Burton. Not really. You got a thirst?”

“Not tonight. I’ll lock up and set the alarm. See you on the flip side.”

It was four a.m. by the time Pa Burton got home. Over soft-boiled eggs, he confessed to his wife Cherry, my Ma, that he was afraid Leonard Zion’s death was going to ruin them.

“But you didn’t do nothing wrong,” said Cherry.

“FPD will shut us down. A supper club can’t be the last place a respected member of the community was seen before being killed. The river’s just a walk from our place. That’s where they found him.”

“I know. It’s in *The Standard* already.” Cherry wiped egg yolk off her lips. Such luscious lips they were, too. “What you wanna do, Baby?”

“Beats me. I feel naïve when these things happen.”

“You still got FPD friends and nothing to be afraid of.”

“But look at me.”

“I’m looking,” said Cherry, who still liked what she saw though at 38, developing a paunch, my Pa Burton had lost a step and there were nights when bullet scars screamed out of both his legs. He was neither the soldier fighting Nazis nor the handsome bachelor that Cherry, eight years younger, a brunette with disarming blue eyes, had married. She didn’t mind. She was still his Ava and he was her Frank, even though he fretted she’d tire of him. Once a cocktail waitress and before that a cigarette girl, Cherry had finished night school classes to become a certified bookkeeper for The Blue Danube. She no longer

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looked like bombshell Rita Hayworth in *Gloria*, but her curves and her smile still complemented a glittering gown and heels as she met couples at the door when they arrived to confirm their reservations.

Before the war, when Pa Burton, just a skinny shaver, had frequented The Blue Danube with my grandfather, it was a first-class snort. As part owner and also a full-time detective, he'd labored to keep it that way. Having Cherry and Tiny on board made that possible. They'd known Leonard Zion as a genteel and respected Fortuna attorney who always arrived alone to the club and drank only Brandy Alexanders. Cherry had known him the longest, from her days growing up on the city's east side where a Jewish diaspora had begun to develop post-war in some of the newer neighborhoods being built there.

Pa Burton put down his cup of Sanka. "Tell me, Baby. Why the boosterism? Should I start smoking again? I miss my *Old Golds* and my slacks don't fit like they used to."

"Do some reducing with me at the Y pool, one lap at a time."

"I dunno. I'm all over the map with my emotions."

"Take on Leonard's case. Help out the FPD. You need a challenge."

"Baby, the man got eighty-sixed in our joint. Ain't that a conflict of interest?"

Cherry smirked. Pa Burton reminded her who they had to look out for, the same ruthless Albanians from the old country who'd owned The Blue Danube before Tiny and Pa had bought it from them. With Ike as president, those Albanians, once denigrated, had gelled and joined forces with the local Sicilians to form a well-organized influence on the cops and city government.

"Burton. You got moxie and ideals. Stand up for what's right."

"But Leonard wasn't a criminal."

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Cherry nodded while chewing. “But he was bent. As scarlet as they come. Always tidy.

Dined in them fancy places like Town and Country.”

“Love their Cobb Salad.”

“So did his male lover.”

“How come I didn’t know this?”

“Because I kept it from you. It’s one more of my charms that you never notice.”

“I feel a lousy taste coming on.”

“Burton, all those years a regular and I bet you didn’t know Leonard was married.”

“I just knew he was a lawyer in the Jewish community. Reliable.”

“He projected that, but his law partner and his lover, the same man, lived in the Copper Lake neighborhood. Raymond Vinovich.”

“You’re giving me the heebie-jeebies.”

“Don’t look so shocked, Baby. Didn’t make the connection, did you?”

“How could I?”

“Vinovich had a son and daughter,” said Cherry. “Like you, he was in the war.”

“I remember that case. A bullet to the head and found naked in that new Howard Johnson’s hotel on Route Thirty.”

“What’s your detective instinct tell you?”

“Maybe the same hired gun killed them both.”

“Great minds think alike.”

“Contracts, jealous spouses,” said Pa Burton. “Other lawyers in the firm who can’t let on they work with those who make like Sodom while posing as upright Republicans.”

“Baby, you’re getting the bird’s eye just like I thought you would.”

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The next day, Burton arrived at his usual time to the supper club, where he found Tiny admiring the cut of Cherry's jib. She was in a pencil skirt and tight yellow blouse over a bullet-tip brassiere. Burton cleared his throat to get Tiny's attention and they pow-wowed in the back room that no other employees were allowed to visit.

"The bigger question," said Burton, "is who we trust. Vinovich and Zion were members of the same firm. Everyone employed there, Jewish or scarlet or not, is a suspect."

"Including Zion's nephew. Art at G Clef was right. He's here."

Cherry excusing herself, popped in to ask if either of them would like a martini. "Not now," said Tiny. Burton seconded the polite refusal and Cherry left.

Tiny said, "His name is Malachi. Had the keys to his uncle's apartment downtown."

"A love nest?"

"Yup. Keys to his car, too. That's all we got right now. I'm gonna look into whether he had access to certain accounts. He works in a bank."

"You think he was skimming from his uncle?"

"Not sure. He's just a teller, but if you mean, did he help secure loans and signatures on the legit, that sort of thing? Yeah, it's possible."

"He can't be trusted. No one can."

"We'll figure it out, Burton. We always do."

"Invite him here for supper. Champagne, the works. We'll make him feel welcomed."

Tiny followed through and Malachi was treated to five-star hospitality. He feasted on Chicken Kiev and drank bottle after bottle of beer while revealing, among other facts, that his uncle Leonard kept journals.

"Can you get them, the journals, do you know where they are?" asked Burton.

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“They’re in his apartment.”

“Why did he give you a key and not anybody else?”

“To look after the place, I guess.”

Tiny interjected, “What did he use the apartment for?”

“What do you think?”

“But not women?” asked Burton. “You did know that, right?”

“Do I need to go into those details?” asked Malachi.

“It would help,” said Burton, who thought Malachi a handsome devil in a gray satin shirt, a silk black tie and seersucker jacket, his hair oiled in a D-A, his pointed shoes perfect.

“Tell me about that last night you were here with him.”

“I was here in a booth like this one.” Malachi slapped padded lavender vinyl. “Uncle Leonard was sitting where you are. He loved to hear the live music.”

“That, we know. He was on friendly terms with most of the cats in our house band.”

“But I remember your club was quiet that night, too. A weeknight. Kind of early. The house band wasn’t playing. And me,” said Malachi, “I was marveling at a woman across the room and that’s when I heard one of your doormen shouting ‘Excuse me, anybody here with a Chevy Bel Air, license plate 401 DOI. Your headlights are on.’”

“Leonard’s plate number?”

“I didn’t recognize it. Uncle Leonard did right away. He was a bit tipsy already. He said ‘That’s me’ and then he staggered out to the parking lot.”

“Front door?”

“No. He took the back way.”

“So, that’s why I don’t remember seeing him,” said Tiny.

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“Me neither,” added Burton.

Tiny pointed toward the club’s curved bar framed in beveled chrome. Behind it in one corner hung a black curtain. He said, “You’re not supposed to. That curtain is an employee entrance that leads to the hall past our office and dressing rooms. The kitchen entrance is behind the saloon doors on the other side of the bar. It can get crowded back there. That’s why customers go in and out the front. Eventually, we’re getting valets. We’ll have them park cars for our clientele. Nobody uses that back way except us and some of our staff, usually the musicians and our girls.”

“You ever use it?” asked Burton.

“All I know is Uncle Leonard thought of this place as his oasis.”

“Malachi,” said Burton. “Was there anyone here that night, maybe another lawyer or someone your uncle prosecuted that wanted to hurt him?”

Malachi rubbed his chin.

Tiny said, “What we know is that no blood was found in the parking lot that night. No gasoline or oil spilled. Just his car, lights still on.”

“So what’s that tell you?” Burton asked.

“I’m thinking that my uncle never made it back to his car.”

“Makes sense, doesn’t it?” said Burton. “Why else the rear exit?”

Tiny said, “But what gets me, Burton, is how would they know it was *his* car?”

“His killers knew him, set him up,” said Malachi, chipping in. “He services his car at the Gregorian Brothers Garage. I’ve taken it there for him in the past. You know their garage? It’s up on Jones Hill behind City Hall?”

“We do,” said Tiny. “And we know those brothers.”

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“One of them has a son, Armen,” said Malachi. “He works as a desk clerk at the Continental Hotel. Uncle Leonard used to eat in the dining room there. He’d meet his friends, other lawyers, people like that.”

“Truly honest folk,” said Burton.

“But Armen,” said Tiny. “I know that boy.”

“You do?” Burton couldn’t hide his surprise. “Is there anybody in this city you don’t know?”

Tiny chuckled. “Probably not. Unfortunately.”

“What kind of kid is this Armen?” asked Burton.

“Eh, you know, he got into trouble with two colored boys who were taken in for selling handguns out of the trunk of a Buick in South Fortuna. It was Armen’s car, but he wasn’t in it. Armen testified in court that the colored boys had stolen it. Leonard defended Armen, got him acquitted. It turns out that Armen had loaned the colored boys one of his Dad’s cars. That they were all in it together.”

“What happened to the two boys?”

“Well, they’re coloreds,” said Tiny. “They’re in prison now.”

“That’s not right,” said Malachi.

“Of course, it isn’t.”

“So, Armen goes free thanks to my uncle?”

“Sounds like it,” said Burton. “Unless my partner here is lying.”

“Which I’m not,” said Tiny. “Nobody knows where those two boys got those guns from in the first place. I bet Armen knows. We need to talk to him.”

“Don’t be hasty, Tiny,” said Burton. “I’m sure Leonard saw a lot of cases like this one.”

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Malachi faltered a little as he spoke. "It's like he had a secret life."

"What do you drive?" Burton asked. "Just for the record."

"I can't afford a car. I ride the city bus. Take the trolley, too. I'm working, saving for college. Take after my father, I guess. He's a dentist."

"Nothing wrong with that. But look, Malachi, I'm tired and my legs are acting up. Get me those journals. Let's meet at Leonard's apartment tomorrow at ten?"

"I'll be there," said Malachi.

Tiny and Burton left him alone to finish his supper, on the house. They sent over a call girl to keep him company while he ate dessert.

After closing time, Tiny and his girl Eva joined Cherry and Burton as Tony Martin sang his hit "Walk Hand In Hand" on the club's new juke box, the two men sipping highballs and the women sipping martinis while all four played Hearts. It was one of their mid-week routines.

Cherry could talk a blue streak and she didn't mind hitting Burton below the belt now and then. "Leonard was a fair lawyer, don't forget that. He worked pro bono all the time, took a lot of cases for those who couldn't pay him."

"Yeah, he had a highly evolved sense of moral imperatives, but you should have seen the look of disappointment on his nephew's face."

"It's a rotten world out there," said Eva.

Burton said to her, "His people came from nothing. Some were gassed during the war. Those that survived, they worked hard. He knew what it was like to go hungry and he cared about the little guy, but I think somewhere it all went wrong."

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In heels and crinoline that night, Cherry sat a few inches taller but not bustier than Eva. She rested a hand on one of Tiny's shoulders as she wobbled while rising and walking to the bar to refresh her drink. "I'm of the mind he probably had his share of enemies in high places. Dirty places."

"I think Cherry's right," said Eva. "Women's intuition."

"And it's going to take you and the rest of the police force a long time to interview all those who knew and trusted and even hated him," said Cherry from the bar.

Burton sounded defensive. "What I know of Leonard Zion, personally speaking, is that after my mother died, he helped me get through the legal red tape with her so-called estate and all the money she owed others. I put everything in his hands and he didn't let me down. I never knew he was scarlet or that he was married."

"So, who has a motive then?" asked Tiny.

"Malachi," said Burton. "He's too fearless. I bet he knew all along that his uncle was a gungel and he was probably blackmailing him."

"But I can't link Malachi to the murder of Raymond, the lover," said Tiny. "And to be honest, that boy doesn't strike me as a murderer. He's a Boy Scout."

"I think you're right as usual, my Sweet," said Cherry as she returned and sat.

"Still, he was in on part of it, I'm sure," said Burton. "Too much to gain. The dirt on his uncle, the key to his love nest. He could provide evidence to Leonard's wife and legal partners. I think Armen is in, too. Armen's bad news."

"Those poor colored boys," said Tiny. "They're in jail. Armen should be there with them. It's not right."

"A lot's not right, Tiny," remarked Burton. "You should know that by now."

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“But he don’t,” said Eva, laughing bitterly. “That’s why we love him.”

Burton eyed his partner, short, balding, also running to fat, and he told himself he couldn’t be sure of anything anymore, that he’d never been sure. What would be the next surprise? He needed to be better prepared. He suspected something; its hammering left a sting in his left knee he hoped Cherry would massage later and make go away.

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A dream started Leonard Zion’s journal. Burton held the small spiral notebook, *Fortuna Nocturna* written in black ink on its beige cover. Zion had written in pencil, relying on a gift for penmanship, recording with care and delicacy chapters, moods and conflicts from his life, spelling them out in vivid detail.

Seated, a Gin Rickey in hand, Burton continued to read pages and Zion’s vision of the Clepsydra Lounge at the bus station on Fortuna’s Raven Street. Leonard wrote how he remembered one of its stalwart regulars, Everett Dimmer, describing the man as contentious, reedy, a flannel-puss, rugose, hemorrhoidal, opinionated and dyspeptic. Not to mention a lush. Leonard also scribbled in the margin that a reader who didn’t know the meaning of rugose had to look it up and that like all dreams this one, too, was more real than reality itself. Such a margin note convinced Burton that Leonard Zion had suffered, at one time, literary aspirations, yearning for an echo of his presence long after he was gone.

Now, he had all he needed. He dialed Tiny and asked him to invite their journalist friend from *The Standard*, Stacy Onus, to ask if she was free for lunch at Café Agonistes. Tiny called back to say she most certainly was, as long as they were footing the bill. They met her there. Stacy looked comely in a long blue overcoat with bone-white buttons, an

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accordion skirt with a floral pattern, synthetic pearls and an orange blouse with a bow top that matched her beige cardigan. It was winter, a bit breezier than usual, the sun out and the temperature just a tad above freezing. They sat near the window, a drafty spot, but they wanted the afternoon sunshine.

Tiny and Burton treated themselves to broiled scallops with mashed potatoes and leek soup, while Stacy, prone to big chuckles and long-winded stories, devoured a Monte Christo sandwich with hand-cut fries and told the waiter to keep the Bloody Marys coming. She explained to the boys she didn't care about her figure and how little work she'd get done that day. She'd had it, she said, with efficiency and restraint. Tiny and Burton were eager familiar companions and as a threesome they found it easy to erase the hours that bridged afternoon into evening.

Stacy's chatter as she got increasingly drunk and smoked her Benson and Hedges took Burton's mind off varying states of insecurity about his work, his age, his growing obsession with an increasingly blurry past. He faded in and out of her racy stories glad that, unlike Tiny who'd slept with Stacy more than once, he'd never been the sort to even consider adultery. He sipped a Schlitz draft in a short glass. Tiny sipped a Rob Roy. Stacy got into details she had on the Raymond Vinovich murder. "This is our man."

"How do you figure?" asked Burton. "In what way?"

"I covered that murder. If I want the past, I go back to it," said Stacy. "Look, you know how sometimes you believe you've experienced an event, long ago, but then you try to remember it and you can't. You go back to the place, maybe it's a neighborhood here in the city and it's gone, the whole neighborhood, everything. As if it never happened."

"I know what you mean," said Tiny. "What's that got to do with our case?"

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“Everything,” said Stacy. “It’s connected.”

“I think I get it,” said Burton. “Vinovich had a few years on Zion and he’d already burned in hell with guilt regarding his family and community standing as a closet case and maybe he decided he’d gone too far down that blind alley with his secret life.”

“His real nature,” said Stacy. “So he decided if he was to burn, then he’d do it like he was breathing in and out.”

“Right,” said Tiny. “In and out. But I still don’t understand.”

“Zion killed Vinovich,” said Burton. “It was a ruse. He paid Malachi to pay Armen to drive him to the Howard Johnson’s. The two were supposed to meet there. A lover’s tryst. A usual thing. The only difference was that Raymond wasn’t expecting to get shot.”

“But why would Leonard do that?” asked Tiny.

“Because they were done,” said Stacy. She looked at Burton. “Go on. I totally follow.”

“Just a matter of time,” said Burton. “All they’d worked for would go down the drain. That part of the city has been changing for a long time now. The Jewish community is growing. It’s close-knit. Word travels fast. The family names, in both cases, would be disgraced.”

“So, Zion took matters into his own hands?” asked Tiny.

“No,” said Burton. “They agreed to it. And I think Zion dreamed it up. I met with Malachi at the bank. He was able to show me transfers of funds into his uncle’s account. From Vinovich. The boy Armen, that whole situation, it was a favor. Unfortunately, they treated the colored boys as collateral damage. Zion was using them to earn extra money. The important thing was that Armen got paid and got off because Vinovich owed money to the Gregorian Brothers. How much, I can’t say. A lot of green stamps and dinners at

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The Continental. Blackmail money that Raymond Vinovich was supposed to pay the Gregorians or else they'd tell the whole story."

"Zion knew all this, arranged it all, too?"

"That's right," said Stacy. She was glowing.

"But, Tiny, there's more," said Burton. "I read Zion's journals. Pored through them. And no, Stacy, you can't have them for your story. He describes Vinovich as a gold digger. Vinovich had children and his wife, but he'd been married once before and still had unresolved issues with that first wife from over fifteen years ago. She knew he was in the closet and she was blackmailing him, too."

"Vinovich owed everybody money," said Tiny.

"And so did Zion, I bet," said Stacy. "Oh, what a doozy for *The Standard*."

"There's a line in the journal that explains it," said Burton. "Zion wrote 'If only for myself. It's always about someone else. All this money.' Zion at least could assess where he'd been and where he was going. Make sense of it. He was at the end with Vinovich. Sick of him. True, they were lovers, but Vinovich was threatening to tell Zion's wife and, so to keep him quiet, Zion paid him blackmail money. This helped Vinovich keep making blackmail payments to his first wife. All very underhanded, tit for tat and secret."

"How on earth did you find this out?" asked Stacy.

"It's all in the journals. I just had to read between the lines. And then I had to stop reading. Malachi helped too. You were right, Tiny. A Boy Scout. When we were at the downtown apartment, I thought it too spic and span, that there had to be another meeting place."

"Again, in the journals?" asked Stacy.

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“Righto. A bar. The Clepsydra Lounge on Raven Street. At the bus station,” said Burton.

“I know that bunghole,” said Tiny.

“Sure, you do. But Malachi didn’t. And he didn’t know his uncle held practically all his client meetings there at odd hours. That’s where he met Vinovich sometimes, too. I didn’t bother you about it, Tiny, because it was a hunch, but when I stopped by there and talked to the bartender and some regulars, it was confirmed for me. The place was Zion’s hideout.”

“Not like our club,” said Tiny.

“Naturally, he used The Danube to be social. Put up a good front. But you have to admit it was strange he never hired a babysitter or brought his wife. The difference with The Clepsydra was that he’d have his meetings there during the daytime at off hours when it was empty. There’s a back room there that he used. And his journals suggest his obsession wasn’t with the past so much as it was about him learning how to see. He liked this thought and he goes back to it lots of times in his journal, one agonizing description at a time.”

“Spoken like a poet,” said Tiny. He grinned, impressed, at Burton. “What would I do without you, partner?”

Stacy had to laugh. “Solve a lot fewer cases.”

Burton said, “At the age of fifty-five, Zion was coming to realize he’d never really thought about anything in his life, so he decided to compensate by taking action. He orchestrated the murder of his lover and then he murdered himself. He never went to the car. He walked to the river, fast as possible, from our back entrance. Shot himself along the shore and fell in. Consider how FPD found the body. Afloat. Gunshot wound in the

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chest. Nobody took pains to make sure it sank to the bottom. The way I see it, if anything, it was a form of release for Zion. He'd had enough of the charade."

"Physician, heal thyself," said Stacy. "He was tormented by love."

"It's all in the journals. Leonard left clues. He wanted us to catch on."

"Hopeless," said Tiny. "Must be tough being so scarlet."

"I wouldn't know," added Burton. "I liked the man. I'm not here to judge."

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I wrote Scarlet Leonard to have fun, to bring pleasure to anyone who might read it, to create the kind of story I like to read and a world I had never lived in and would have to imagine entirely. There's an obvious nod here to Hawthorne and the themes in his famous novel that I and many others had to read in school. I tried to not get too heavy-handed while delving into the racism and anti-Semitism that were part of the era in which my story takes place. One primary influence was the viewing of either photographs of mid-century-modern furniture, or finding some to look at during visits to antique fairs and yard sales. Lastly, I'm a fan of Cornell Woolrich and James M. Cain, among others of that ilk.*

**BIO:** *John Michael Flynn was the 2017 Writer in Residence at Carl Sandburg's home, Connemara, in North Carolina. He's published three collections of short stories, his most recent Off To The Next Wherever from Fomite Books ([www.fomitepress.com](http://www.fomitepress.com)). He teaches at TED University in Ankara, Turkey. Visit him at [www.basilrosa.com](http://www.basilrosa.com).*

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# So What's Changed?

By Kim Farleigh

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *A modernist short that almost has the feel of manifesto-theater. It's a take on the age old battle of the sexes but the author approaches it from a very different slant: the characters are not people so much personas identified by particular qualities or conditions. Thus the 'back-ache man', the 'standing man', the 'gasper', etc. We know none of their names, including that of the feminist revolutionary—the fulcrum of the story-- around whose statue the group has gathered. The question of feminism is pursued through dialogue exchange that touches on empiricism, naturalism and social determinism. We wonder if something of Beckett's nihilism isn't behind the deliberately mechanical and minimalist prose. Quote: Research was what the standing man did naturally. It's the one choice we all have. And being one of the few choices he had, he engaged in it. What choice did he have, but to engage in one of the few choices available to him? But most of all we love the overplayed lines like: 'the engineers buttocks crashed into her cotton dress' and 'smiled like a spotlight' and best of all 'her ankle-length dress, tied in at the waist, emphasising her boomerang curves, curves boomeranging before men's eyes.' Sweeeet!*

The statue's garden's low, black, iron fence bordered a half-metre-high, rectangular hedge, hedge and fence giving the statue solemn intimacy. The statue commemorated Spain's first female university student, its bowed head of tied up hair, and its body-length robe of flowing folds, suggesting hard-fought erudition.

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Three women and two men on a guided walk faced the statue. One of the women was a thirty-six-year-old industrial engineer who spoke four languages, her black-framed glasses highlighting her white skin, black magnifying white and vice versa, a freckle archipelago, upon the shoals of her cheeks, forming a chain of dark-brown islands, her ankle-length dress, tied in at the waist, emphasising her boomerang curves, curves boomeranging before men's eyes.

A wooden bench faced the statue.

The guide said: "This will take at least ten minutes. Sit on the bench if you like."

The three women raced to the bench and sat down.

The guide said: "She wasn't allowed to study with men. A teacher had to take her to a separate room. The teacher locked the room's door to keep her inside, the door locked from the outside."

Two of the women gasped. The engineer didn't. She was studying her WhatsApps. The guide didn't look offended. He earned the same whether people listened or not.

The gaspers occupied half the bench, almost touching, the engineer in the middle of the bench's other half. One of the men stood beside the engineer.

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The guide continued: "She worked to ensure that women could get an education and have the same opportunities as men. She gave speeches asking women to stop being submissive to their husbands. She became the first woman to be accepted into the legendary arts and business society, *El Ateneo*, and the first woman to work as a university lecturer in Spain and one of this country's first female novelists."

The guide read an exchange, written by the legendary woman, between a man and a woman, the woman demanding equal rights, the man saying: "Impossible!" His contemporaries would have called him a maverick or insane for supporting equal rights.

"Impossible!" the woman screamed. "Isn't this supposed to be the age of equal rights?"

No such age will ever exist, the man beside the guide thought. Power maintains power to get increasingly more with increasingly less effort.

The seated women shunned sharing comfort. Having a rotation system where everyone took turns standing never entered their heads. Why should this have entered their heads? The men were irrelevant.

The legendary woman's busy social life with aristocrats and politicians ("she was a countess," the guide said) meant she had had many more opportunities than most

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people will ever have, the man beside the guide moving to ease his backache. He couldn't stand for long without his back aching.

The other man finally bent down and whispered to the engineer: "Can I.....?"

His voice was almost undetectable. He didn't want to highlight the engineer's obliviousness. Her head shot up when realising her thoughtlessness. She moved so the other man could sit down.

Will this teach her anything? Backache Man wondered. I doubt it. Nature guarantees that she can satisfy her needs easily. Any punishment she may receive would be so limited it would have no impact on her thinking, other than to assume that others were demented.

The guide said: "She advocated positivism. Positivism purported that the only authentic knowledge was scientific knowledge, that that knowledge could only be obtained through empiricism or the scientific method. This idea paralleled her belief in naturalism, an artistic style based on realism that permitted scientists to study people as if they were also objects, like other living creatures."

Research was what the standing man did naturally. It's the one choice we all have. And being one of the few choices he had, he engaged in it. What choice did he have, but to engage in one of the few choices available to him?

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"She exposed society's contradictions in her works," the guide added, "and the arrogance that demanded that people only marry within their class."

The standing man put his left foot forward and arched his back. Changing positions reduced pain, so he changed positions regularly. Sitting had become a luxury, his satisfaction scale minute in comparison to the engineer's.

A passing pedestrian was asked to photograph the group under a sign that said: *The Garden of Feminists*. Had the statue's inspirer witnessed the bench events she may have had a more subtle vision.

And who believes in equal rights? the standing man thought. We believe in extending our privileges. Some people have naturally more chance of doing that than others. Things now are really naturalistic.

Afterwards, the two men, following the guide and the three women to the Metro, resembled useless appendages hanging off power's hierarchy. The engineer's buttocks crashed into her cotton dress, each thump making Backache Man think: "Those buttocks are privilege-giving powerhouses." Equal opportunities? he thought. How can they exist when some people can connect desire with opportunity, while others have no choice but to connect it with probable frustration?

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At the Metro station, the women went their separate ways. The two men entered the Metro to catch different trains. Before parting, Backache Man asked the other: "Have you ever met a real feminist?"

The other man's chin rose. His smooth, tanned skin indicated that his hair had turned grey prematurely.

"Maybe," he replied. "But I can't think of anyone at the moment. And you?"

"One of my grandmothers. She used to point out how some types of legislation were unfair towards men."

"Really?"

"Yes. Apart from her, I can't think of anyone else."

"Now, in Spain, because of economic differences, people don't have equal access to education."

"How many rich women have you heard complain about that?"

The man with the smooth, brown face smiled like a spotlight.

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"Maybe your grandmother would have complained about that," he said.

"She definitely would have. Maybe she's a dying breed in a world that loves privileges?"

When Backache Man's train began slowing down to stop, he moved to where he predicted a door would open before him, getting there just before a woman who had raced towards the door from the opposite direction. He was training himself to not let his gentlemanly upbringing give women undue advantages. After all, they believed in equal rights. The woman, who had flown towards him from the other direction, had demonstrated by her speed that there was nothing wrong with her physically and that therefore no extra consideration should have been shown towards her. She had tried to reach the door before him and had lost; but she hadn't given up trying to get into the carriage before him to grab a seat. She thrust her left arm in front of him to press the button that opened the door. She had seen that door, therefore she believed it was hers. He, however, didn't agree. She had to pull her arm out of the way as he entered the carriage. He got the only available seat. She stared at him as she walked by, trying to induce guilt. He stared back. She looked away, the first time he had felt proud, instead of contrite, for beating a woman to a seat.

THE END

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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** The story was inspired by a guided walk I went on in Madrid in Spain. The walk was about Spain's first feminists. This story explores the idea that people aren't interested in equal rights, but in extending their privileges, that equal rights is an idea used by people when it suits them. My literary influences include Hemingway, Conrad, Bellow, Fitzgerald and Greene.

**BIO:** Kim has worked for NGO's in Greece, Kosovo, Iraq, Palestine and Macedonia. He likes to take risks to get the experience required for writing. He likes painting, art, bull-fighting, photography and architecture, which might explain why this Australian lives in Madrid. Although he wouldn't say no to living in a Swiss ski resort or a French chateau. 172 of his stories have been accepted by 100 different magazines.

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# JOURNAL TO MARS

**By Brad Garber**

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Pilgrims have set out on a colonizing expedition to Mars and as they draw farther away from Earth's magnetic physical and psychological gravity, the 'Journal', which is as much diary as logue, records the changes in their relationships—no longer, it seems, determined by our familiar space-time model. Old social alliances fall away to be replaced by new attractions. Descriptions enthrall and attention to detail is scrupulous... 'Sometimes I cry. Have to watch out about that, though. Don't need tears floating around and getting into the electronics.' Technically it's science fiction but the voice—with its sophisticated edge of sarcasm—make us feel like it belongs more in The New Yorker than Tales from Outer Space. The poignant last journal entry underlines the uncertainty ahead for the crew and as writing, reassures us of the author's well-placed trust in incompleteness.*

## Journal to Mars

Day One: Feeling happy to have left the Earth's atmosphere without incident. Just sort of floating, now. Jason and I have a great discussion about terraforming. Sandy is still mastering urination in zero gravity. Somewhat interesting to see Earth moving away.

Day Two: The beef jerky is pretty good. Wouldn't you know it...started my period. Passing the moon. Talked to mom, by Skype. She seems to be a little unhappy. Jason is so funny. Greg is writing poetry and Sally is playing chess with Amy.

Day Four: Yesterday was sort of busy. The crew met to discuss feelings, after three days. Jerry

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was sort of a downer, but this is not surprising, given his pre-trip jitters. Most of us wanted him

to stay home. Just sort of floating along.

Day Six: Eating pot brownies is just fine, in space. I didn't wake up for days!

Day Ten: Wow! Had some more brownies! Sure glad we could bring a few pounds of really

good shit with us! I love this crew! I'm not sure, but Jason seems to like me. Gonna talk to

Cheri about him; she boned him before we left.

Day Twenty: Sure glad we get "The Daily Show!" Not sure how long this transmission will be

good. I brought some tunes along, but some in the crew don't really like Cajun music.

Day Thirty: So much has happened! Sandy, Sally, Cheri and I have decided that sex is a good

thing on this voyage. Amy is not sure, yet. Talked to mom, by Skype. I'm getting tired of Beef

Stroganoff for dinner.

Day Thirty-two: Whoa! Something hit us! Whacked off an antenna. Not sure I have access to

Facebook, now.

Day Forty: Jason is SO FUCKING GOOOOOD!

Day Forty-five: So is Greg! MY GAWD!

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Day Fifty-five: Have watched “Wall-E” WAY too many times! Cry when he and Eva hold

hands. Can’t connect up to Skype. There is a lot of silence, sometimes.

Day Eighty: Yeah, it’s been a while. Stuff seems to slow down. I hate reconstituted string

beans!

Day Eighty-five: OMG...Greg let a turd loose! It was floating around like a runaway dog! We

had to chase it down and contain it. GROSSSSS! Wish I could tell my mom.

Day Eighty-nine: OMG...now Hardy’s coming on to me! Sally’s a bitch. She seemed OK,

during training, but she uses too much toilet paper and is sort of hitting on Jason. We’re halfway

through the SPAM. Glad we’re still getting video from Earth. I can only read back issues of

Sports Illustrated, Glamour and The New Yorker for so long.

Day Ninety: Damn! I thought so! Things weren’t feeling right. So much for condoms in space.

It’s gotta be Jason’s! Suddenly, my bedding seems dirty. Too bad they couldn’t load the washing machine in. Guess I’ll go take a shower. Wish I could tell Dad & Mom. I guess I’ll

send’em a message through Mission Control, although I maybe should wait to see if it takes. All

of this floating around....

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Day One Hundred: What a day! Oh, by the way, it's ALWAYS "day" out here. The damned

sun never disappears, and it sort of looks just as big as it does on Earth. We can't see Earth

much, these days. It's a black blip across the face of the sun, sometimes, but that's about it. The

jokers back at Mission Control blared "Halfway to Paradise," through the intercom. It's difficult

to think about how far we've come and how far we have, yet, to go. Another hundred days, or

so, before we land on Mars and set things up. I thought I was prepared for this.

Day 102: Was on the exercise cycle when something blasted through the vessel. Two fucking

leaks! We were losing pressure, fast, until Cheri and Hardy, patched the holes. Pretty scary!

I'm glad Cheri and Hardy are getting along. It was tough, telling him that I was pregnant. I

could tell he wanted me. I've got a good little bump going. Wonder what it would be like to

grow up, never seeing a tree, or feeling wind. Sometimes I cry. Have to watch out about that,

though. Don't need tears floating around and getting into the electronics.

Day 110: Jason's been really good. I think he's wondering about what is growing inside of me

and what it's going to mean and how healthy the kid can be on Mars. In the meantime, Amy has

been "sleeping" with me. Jason doesn't care. We talked about this sort of relationship stuff

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before we left Earth. Gawd! I remember some parties, back on Earth. Some wild shit! I wish I

could have some pot.

Day 120: Funny how time doesn't mean anything, anymore. We all have stuff to do, to keep this

bird flying, but it's mostly controlled back home and it gets a bit boring. If it wasn't for talking

about the past and the future, with the other folks, my mind might go numb. But, I can feel the

tyke moving around inside of me, so I have a different sort of conversation. So hot! I heard

Sally and Bill fucking their brains out. Made me miss Jason, a little. He's off with Sandy, these

days, and I think Cheri is preggers. I hope we have enough modules, when we land! What a

bunch of rabbits! LOL! Mars is getting a lot closer!

Day 133: Another rock ripped through the ship! This one was bigger and we all had to scramble

to plug the holes. Pretty damned scary! Hell, if something bigger hits us, we're all dead! We

have some shields, outside, but they aren't much match when encountering something traveling

about 50kps! I admit, this was the one time I was genuinely scared. I am holding my baby. I

can only think of how much my mother wanted me to stay home. This is what I was trained for,

dammit! This is MY dream! I feel, sometimes, like Magellan, or Sir Frances Drake. Anyway,

glad we still get streaming videos. Off to heat up some pasta with reconstituted shrimp meat....

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Day 147: My hair is too long, but you can't just cut hair in a vacuum. It would get all tangled up

in the gear. Seriously, though, all of we women are looking pretty sketchy. You never know

how a woman's upper lip looks until she can't wax the thing. My GAWD, Sally...poor girl. Of

course, can't say much for the men. They all look like they walked out of Grizzly Adams show.

Jason has a unibrow! I never knew. Amy's been really good to me, in SO many ways.

Day 163: About 40-50 more days. It's sort of like counting the miles down until you get home,

after a long trip. If you mix the egg concentrate with orange juice, you can actually get some

good-tasting shit. I tried it, after re-reading one of the "The New Yorker" special publications on

culinary stuff. GAWD! The kid is moving around a lot. We don't have an ultrasound with us;

it'll get blasted up in another wave of migrants. So, it'll be a surprise to see what pops out. I

think it's a boy, though. I can't wait to send photos back to mom and dad.

Day 164: Watched "Wall-E" again. Amy was holding my hand. Had to fight back the tears, so I

didn't gum up the works. I'm trying to get Amy and Jason together.

Day 188: Getting things ready for landing. This is getting tense and there have been some low

level arguments. I think everyone is worried about the entry into Mars atmosphere and what the

hell we're all going to do, for the rest of our lives, on this outpost in the solar system. Everyone

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seems a bit snippy, although Cheri and Sally and I are all pregnant and, I think, we tend to put

some things into perspective. After all, we are populating a new planet! That's exciting...sort of

an "Eve" thing. I just want to land and start moving around in the modules. The plan, of course,

is to move out of the modules into a larger enclosure, in another year or two, and to terraform the

place. The whole process is going to keep everyone busy, and I'm going pump out babies!

Oh...Hardy....

Day 200: Mars is looming. We are so close! It's a beautiful looking place. Not blue, of course,

but still lovely. It's odd to not see any water. I remember flying into Kona, Hawaii, after six

hours of flying over nothing but water, water, water. I wonder if I'll miss that. We can't even

see Earth, anymore. Just a black dot, somewhere in the distance. 23 weeks into it, and the little

critter is kicking the shit out of me! I love him/her!

Day 203: Preparing for landing. All systems are GO! Mission Control blasted Bowie's "Space

Oddity" and Elton John's "Rocket Man" over the intercom while we checked all of the electronics and mechanics. I kissed Cheri for the first time. It was wonderful. We are, all, so

full of hope. Stephen and Bill are back together. Jason loves to rub my stomach and has been

very caring. We are, all, very nervous.

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Day 204: Don't know if I can even call this another day. It all went so fast. We entered Mars

atmosphere, which is not much. But, it shook the crap out of us for awhile, until we settled into

the glide down. We all held each other, briefly, with towels around our heads to soak up the

tears, and told each other how much we loved each other and, then, strapped ourselves into our

Pods. It was not supposed to be a rough landing, but you never know how you'll land when you

do it on another planet. We could feel the thrusters kick in as we descended, and everything was

surprisingly smooth. Then, BOOM, we landed and everything was quiet. No one stirred for a

very long time. We all had to process what had just happened and where we were. No one

cheered. I remembered watching that odd show, "Naked & Alive." I had just been dropped off,

140 million miles away from the closest Starbucks. I was not expected to make it back. I made

that decision. My child and I are pilgrims, explorers, dreamers.

Day 210: The modules are in place. We spend days eating the last of the SPAM, the freeze-dried

crap in the bins and the last of the powdered wine. We look for that little black shadow of Earth,

drifting across the face of the sun and wait for the first supply shipment from Earth which, we

are sure, will arrive on time. I hold my growing belly at night.

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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *The seemingly inexhaustible human spirit of curiosity and thirst for exploration is what prompted me to write about what I imagine a colonizing journey to Mars might be like. I mean, really? I've heard that people are signing up to go! Personally, I believe it is a stupid and doomed enterprise, to try to inhabit a dusty desolate rock that, from an astronomical standpoint, is a block away, when the nearest possibly inhabitable planet is probably a million light years away. But humans will be dreamers, so let them have their fun...and babies.*

**BIO:** *Brad has degrees in biology, chemistry and law. He writes, paints, draws, photographs, hunts for mushrooms and snakes, and runs around naked in the Great Northwest. Since 1991, he has published poetry, essays and weird stuff in such publications as Edge Literary Journal, Pure Slush, Front Range Review, Tulip Tree Publishing, Sugar Mule, Third Wednesday, Barrow Street, Black Fox Literary Magazine, Barzakh Magazine, Ginosko Journal, Junto Magazine, Slab, Panoplyzine, Split Rock Review, Smoky Blue Literary Magazine, The Offbeat and other quality publications. 2011, 2013 & 2018 Pushcart Prize nominee.*

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# TOTAL WAR

By Christopher Moylan

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Like a Flemish hell panel, this modern ‘parable’ is both a warning and a premonition of what awaits us. We are at war with an ‘unseen’ adversary and the consequences of defeat are beyond our imagination. The collapse of natural law...’Hair turned unusual colors, fell out or burst into flame’ becomes not a metaphor but the new reality—a future that exists in the present when the conditions that surround us become the aggressor. Astonishing imagery, oracular prose and charismatic voice result in a stand out literary performance. Quote: ‘There were reports of fugitive conceptions and trick or treat deliveries. Babies, unsuspected and completely unanticipated, appeared in the shower or in the middle of a jog. Tiny, sylph-like creatures attached by umbilical cords frail as silk.’ And, this powerful sentence: ‘It was not for them to say ‘We declare war,’ any more than it was to say ‘We declare gravity’ or ‘We pronounce light.’*

## Total War

Our bodies were under attack. Some suffered from stress reactions, others migraines or hormonal imbalances. Hair turned unusual colors, or fell out, or burst into flame. Growths appeared in odd places. Door handles, car seats. Palms, tongues, and eyelids. Scaly eruptions. Encrusted deposits. It was

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as if a bomb had dropped—in each person, individually, the poison radiating idiosyncratically, through the lymph nodes or brain or circulatory system.

Casualties were everywhere. Biological disruptions, sabotage at the cellular level. Some women endured serial periods or periods like sacrificial offerings. There were reports of fugitive conceptions and trick or treat deliveries. Babies, unsuspected and completely unanticipated, appeared in the shower or in the middle of a jog. Tiny, sylph-like creatures attached by umbilical cords frail as silk. Males were subject to ludicrous distortions, derangement without the relief of comedy. Full body arousal, priapism of the digits or nose or ears. Among the elderly, hearts burst or shriveled or continued beating, furiously, after death.

It was a war without battles. A frictionless war. No air raids or coastal sightings, no cruise missiles lighting up the skyline. No armies. No plausible enemy among the hostile powers. Our bodies were in the line of fire but everything else—our cities and towns, our roads and bridges, everything—was

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not. For that matter, there was no line of fire in the usual sense, or in any sense we could identify.

If there was no line of fire, if there were no armies or declared enemies, it was natural to wonder if we were actually under attack. Had war been declared and we didn't know it? Is that what one did, declare war? Pronounce it, perhaps. No one could remember. So much had been put aside over time that the terms and procedures of such official utterances had become vague.

War or peace, this was not for us to determine. Nor would those on high intervene in such matters. It was not for them to say 'We declare war,' any more than it was to say 'We declare gravity' or 'We pronounce light.' As for other questions, they were equally rigorous. What was an attack without a line, they asked. Likewise, what is pain without injury, suffering without illness? Pain and aggression without lines or origins, without a place or marker, how could one describe such things?

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One could only infer, they said, that these were attacks from nowhere or everywhere: from the water, air or food, from power lines or ambient radiation. Likewise, the attacks might originate from within. Who is to say what occult powers reside in the realm of fantasy, dream, or reverie? Perhaps these attacks came from all directions or some, randomly or in sequence...

How must we respond to this state of affairs, we asked. Respond, they said, as you must respond: at all levels. A total response; carry the resistance to the air and water, food and drink. Purify them. Carry it to the screen and page. Eradicate suspect fantasy; destroy fifth column movies and stories. Call out the producers of treason and filth. Seize them. Poke his eyes out, cut out her tongue. Drag their guts in the public square. Seize the enemy. Seize every last one. We'll see who is reading this and we'll take necessary measures.

Death to the readers of this page, death in agony.

See, you feel better already.

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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *The central concern of my work is climate change and the lack of any response commensurate with the danger all of us face. In my short prose pieces I try to generate a violent storm within the confines of a compressed narrative, with the compression corresponding to tension of various sorts and the violence of the narrative to the dire prospects we face. Literary influences include Kafka, of course, the Swiss author Fleur Jaeggy, and the Italian poet Eugenio Montale.*

**BIO:** *I am an Associate Professor at NYIT where I publish short fiction, poetry and nonfiction. I have won an Academy of American Poets Prize and various other awards. This is part of a series of short, experimental pieces having to do with climate change.*

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## POETRY

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# TAKING SHAPE and other poems

By John Grey

*Poetry Editor Hezekiah Writes:*

*TAKING SHAPE: I suppose if you are transfixed by the first stanza, odds are you'll read on: Fashioning thoughts into images like patterns of dots—if you get the pointillism. '...all poked into place / by the tip of a brush.' And what happens when those little tittles on the canvas take flight? '...the broken rhythms of the restless.'*

*DEAR FIERY ONE: Who doesn't love to observe conflict in its domestic form with the benefit of distance? Take a light opera, add some soapsuds, and the sponsors will eat it up: 'Just hold the wheel. / Don't brandish it like a weapon.' Inflated debates in automobiles, yet. It gets even better than overhearing a hushed quarrel at the next table in a fine restaurant...heading for a rhubarb...*

*GALE: What a lovely name to blame on your parents. (Who could hold a newborn daughter in their arms and pronounce: "It's a Gale!?" ) 'her twisted mouth / more for balance than effect.' 'Toes...sucking on the teats of the morning.' 'Seated side-saddle on the bed,' Odds are I haven't captured your[*italic*] favourite line. There are so many. One's impression might be that he is a morning person, and she is nay-where-nigh. My scatological mind imagines 'First, a masterpiece. / Then coffee.' implies a foreday movement. But in my experience, women tend not to be that regular, nor is subtext my forte.*

*I find Gray insightful, inciting and delightful. No room for me remains: NEIGHBORHOOD ELEGY and A MUGGING mined each from the same rich vein. (Spacing is author's own.)HS*

## TAKING SHAPE

I imagine Seurat  
bringing light, scenery,  
living creatures,  
to life with infinite dots

Sailboats, a lake,  
dogs and umbrellas,  
bodies and their shadows,

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a man smoking a pipe,  
a girl clutching a bunch of flowers –  
all poked into place  
by the tip of a brush.

And then there's the raw scenery  
before me,  
a stretch of Maine coastline,  
waves and rocks,  
wind and cliffs,  
as chaotic as a world forming,  
its mean untenable,  
its dots scattering,  
refusing to be shape.

Seurat painted as calm  
as the scene before him.  
I must take on  
the broken rhythms of the restless.

And yet,  
no doubt his head swarmed  
with day-to-day conflicts.  
And my peace can embrace  
the madly agitated sea.

But Seurat's discord  
will not betray his masterpiece.  
My restful watch  
won't settle on one canvas.

#### DEAR FIERY ONE

Ignore me.  
Watch the road.  
The white line in the middle.  
The ditch at the side.  
The animal that could come darting out  
of the woods at any moment.  
The traffic behind and in front.

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And those monster trucks barreling down the highway  
in the opposite direction.  
I know you're mad at me  
but no reason to take it out on the kid on the bike  
or the jogger in the orange shirt  
or the old couple at the crossing up ahead.  
Simmer down.  
That's all this car asks.  
Just hold the wheel.  
Don't brandish it like a weapon.  
And take the bend slowly.  
Don't flatten it on the straightaway.  
You can't get back at me  
by knocking down a light pole  
or splintering a tree.  
Besides, you'll get over it.  
And better that we kiss and make up  
with the car in one piece,  
the front not squished,  
the air bags not ignited.  
Your memory must be short.  
It always happens this way.  
I say the wrong thing.  
You get a little angry.  
And the auto just happens to be at hand.  
And foot of course.  
On the accelerator as it so happens.  
Why not pull over,  
let me drive for a while.  
Your hostility can sear the passenger seat.  
My apology is a safer driver.

#### GALE

An indifferent waking,  
she invokes a comedy,  
her thumb-twiddle  
taking on great importance,  
her twisted mouth  
more for balance than effect.

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And then out pop her toes  
from the end of the sheets,  
flaked with red paint,  
wiggling like piglets  
sucking on the teats of the morning.

Her arms stretch wide  
as lungs retrieve some of the oxygen  
gone missing in the night,  
then knuckles rub eyes  
so vision can move forward.

She lifts herself up on her elbows,  
swings legs around,  
touches the floor gingerly  
like dipping feet in cold water.

Seated side-saddle on the bed,  
this is her first portrait sitting  
for the day.  
Sun warms to the task.  
Light is eager to begin.  
First, a masterpiece.  
Then coffee.

#### NEIGHBORHOOD ELEGY

The cat was crushed  
beneath the wheels  
of a neighbors' SUV.  
The birds nest fell out of the tree.  
The young squirmed on the ground.

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The parents flew off.  
The mastiff from three doors down  
bit the bichon across the street.  
The fat guy in the blue house  
had a heart attack.  
Rumor has it, he was found  
with a knife and fork in his hands.  
The guy who works at the hardware store  
drove hard into a pothole, lost a tire.  
Something howls at night.  
Folks say it's a coyote.  
I reckon it for a stray Basset hound.  
A rat was seen crossing the road  
just after dusk.  
Everyone's laying poison traps.  
The old abandoned Victorian  
was broken into.  
Fires were set  
but none took hold.  
Full moon  
bathes the neighborhood  
in a ghostly glow.  
But everyone's at ground level.  
There's no one on the moon to see.

#### A MUGGING

Your face is hard against the wall,  
eyes, lips, roughed up by concrete.  
But that's nothing to the gun barrel in your back.  
Or the words out of the stranger's mouth.

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“Don’t move.”

You were always warned to do  
what a mugger says,  
that cash and credit cards  
are nothing compared to your life.  
But this is your first time  
putting that advice into practice.  
Your knees tremble and scrape  
against the roughness.  
Your heart is in your neck.  
Those carpenter’s hands  
are as limp and useless as a baby’s.

Strange fingers reach into your pocket.  
An odd thought occurs to you.  
If you were a woman,  
this could also be rape.  
Alison is waiting for you at home this very moment.  
Your first time being robbed,  
and being glad it’s you, not her.  
offers solace, then strength,  
then finally some dignity.

“Don’t call the cops,” the mugger says,  
before darting off into the shadows.  
You’re left with no cell phone, no wallet,  
but most of your nerve  
and everything of Alison.

**THE POET SPEAKS:** *My poems are inspired by what is currently happening in my life whether it is a walk in the woods, something I read in a newspaper or book, travel, a piece of music I happen to hear. I try to be open to everything. While I’ve read and admired many of the great poets both old and new, I try not to let one particular writer influence me to any great degree. I typically let the sense of what I’m trying to say dictate the way in which I say it. Poetry’s importance to me is the way it gets to the nub of its meaning quickly and honestly. I am a great art lover though no great painter and to me a poem is like a landscape, a portrait or even something totally abstract but in words not oils.*

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**BIO:** *John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in That, Dunes Review, Poetry East and North Dakota Quarterly with work upcoming in Qwerty, Thin Air, Dalhousie Review and failbetter.*

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## **FUR TEN LUDICROUSLY WIGGED CANINES NAMED BEETHOVEN**

**By Matthew Scott Harris**

**Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: They say there is a fine line between genius and madness, it is a duplicitous distinction; I have no doubt Harris is the former but perhaps with a dash of the latter. If he was captain of the debating team I was opposing, I can only assume my wisest strategy would be to render myself mute: 'eschatological, diabolical, critical... runs ruinously, reprehensibly, rampantly roughshod... Atrocious, cantankerous, egregious...' Next: 'Inchoate virgin Gaia... gratis opposable thumb... ineluctably, inequitably, inexorably... colluding, denuding, extruding...' There is so much more. Take a seat as Matthew Scott makes a stand...I am going to go lie down. I can only hope that when I wake up, he will be President. Can you imagine? (Spacing is the poet's own. In this case, it's part of the reading experience.) HS**

**Senior Editor Charles writes: A renegade poet whose words come blood and body drenched into his head, a Pyrrhic pilgrim whose muse, like the Nike of Samothrace, like the Delphic oracle, mainlines many voices—we hear Li Bo, Blake, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Milton Acorn, Allen Ginsburg and some rarefied manifestation of William Carlos Williams. Whether or not they are actual influences on Harris is unimportant—something of their distillation passes in and out of his soul on a regular basis. An explosive, turbulent talent that sets its own rules on the road to 'private language'. CP**

**1. Fur ten ludicrously wigged canines named  
Beethoven**

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**poem number one: Send Mephistophelian madman back  
to stone age**

**Impossible mission, nonetheless  
eschatological, diabolical, critical...  
dire straits betokens armageddon.**

**Come Tuesday, November 3, 2020  
mandatory voting obligation to oust  
horrible malevolent commander in chief.**

**Spanish and English writing on border wall  
bespeaks impending apocalyptic windfall  
weapons of mass destruction concomitant ashfall  
brinkmanship ticks doomsday clock, hence the call  
muster civilians and military troops coup to marshall  
tuckered bands overthrowing pathological  
megalomaniac haint your  
homegrown garden variety apprenticed screwball,**

**Née commandeer of human abuses free world oh God  
this exclamation ejaculated yours truly house atheist  
runs ruinously, reprehensibly, rampantly roughshod  
scaring out bejesus within winkin blinkin and nod  
land of powdermilk biscuits and raw bits promises  
to become ground zero predicated boneheaded clod.**

**Atrocious, cantankerous, egregious,  
grievous, ignominious... dispensing  
most every venerated, ushered, touted,  
sacred, revered, pronouncing  
progressive amendments dead  
on arrival blithely shredding to tatters**

**hard won reforms since Fred  
Flintstone days of yore shelving  
codied, ratified, sanctified... shed**

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**jeweled important legislation,  
plus Russian musk cows to wed  
Putin on the ritz.**

**Blasphemous, cantankerous, deleterious...  
execrable folly... doth seed  
subsequently begetting and breed  
anarchy, chaos, hell, plus helps  
foment pernicious, ominous,  
noxious, malodorous... misdeed**

**2.  
pitting one against another creed  
internecine warfare, where liveried  
troops don and trumpet  
(auld) alternative energy  
fighting gear powering, i.e. ac/dc freed  
one or more dirty deed**

**done dirt cheap reducing at lightspeed,  
the hard fought/won democratic  
inalienable rights purportedly guaranteed  
by United States constitution,  
(though oft times bias, i.e. reed**

**anti semitism, charade, facade...) heed  
trample equality, morality, universality...  
making mockery (attested bleed  
courtesy flagrant historical extant bigotry,  
chicanery, depravity... greed).**

**Hence, I step off figurative soapbox  
dodging any lobbed missiles or rocks  
no surprise bullied by same jocks,  
who tormented me during high school  
probably tattooed, pierced, and bald of locks  
unlike yours truly, he sports self**

---

**as aging pencil neck geek  
wearing non matching shoes and socks.**

**3.  
poem number two: Primates plundered pristine planet**

**Inchoate virgin Gaia  
unwittingly bequeathed...  
bajillion years later  
subsequently avenged  
Homo sapiens predecessors  
gratis opposable thumb**

**veritable global Edenic  
virgin hinterland,  
aforesaid hominids housed  
initial sparse population,**

---

**courtesy series of fortunate  
punctuated period viz,**

**equilibrium evolutionary events,  
(thank you Lemony Snicket's  
sainted doppelganger)  
contemporary i.e. twentieth century  
Earthlings progenitors  
approximately fifteen**

**thousand generations elapsed  
(read: [https://www.quora.com/  
How-many-generations-  
of-Homo-sapiens-have-there-been-  
and-how-many-can-  
this-vary-in-modern-humans](https://www.quora.com/How-many-generations-of-Homo-sapiens-have-there-been-and-how-many-can-this-vary-in-modern-humans)),**

**thru anthropological fitbits and starts  
yoyos (ma pinion)  
ineluctably, inequitably, inexorably...  
acquired, adapted, aggregated...  
scattered population pockets incontinence  
across oblate spheroid**

**survival of fittest brutish, nasty, short  
(think Thomas Hobbes)  
foo fighting beastie boys and gulls  
endowed by their creator  
crafted, forged, implemented...  
trappings to meld physical environment,**

**(perhaps even to bay pigs)  
initially adventitious, but gradually  
deliberately employing abilities  
allowing, enabling, and providing  
4.  
strategies to coax, nudge, wrestle...**

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**fruits and vegetables of labor**

**i.e. sweat of their collective brows  
jet setting human league on arked  
Noah weigh intimating (chaotic) trajectory,  
whereby innovations took quantum leaps  
wresting, smelting, adapting... resources  
fast forward countless millennia,**

**(when Melania appears on the stage)  
donning, trumpeting, usurping...  
selfish schemes to  
beget sophisticated machinations  
eventually reaching tipping point  
triggering catastrophic phenomena**

**armageddon inching  
ever closer to doomsday  
(currently registering 2019 at  
two minutes to midnight --  
<https://clock.thebulletin.org>),**

**whereat human population bursting  
at figurative seams  
breaching, hijacking, riveting  
seat of pants dire prognostications  
mandating dramatic blueprints**

**upending fossil fuel legacy  
and dominance of one  
colluding, denuding, extruding...  
naked ape.**

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**5.**  
**poem number three: Ill suited for madcap twenty first century world**

**Aghast at explosive industrialization/  
urbanization once sacred wild woodland  
whittled away overlain bumper crops  
comprising trappings green lighted  
supposedly signaling progress unwittingly  
overrides avast enclave (teeming with**

**diverse flora and fauna passively cleared,  
dominated, expropriated by dictate of  
commercialization, exploitation, fabrication  
fueling amalgamation, fabrication, lubrication  
oiling cogs and wheels sustaining, murdering  
guaranteeing production trumpeted at**

**expense native flora and fauna acquisition,  
cooptation, extermination, gratification  
decreed domination Homo sapiens usurped  
law of land i.e. eminent domain foisted  
upon unsullied "new world" defining  
European age of exploration, whereby**

**pristine undulating immense acres  
indiscriminately partitioned, (despite  
indigenous peoples unrecognized precedence**

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**to remain holistic caretakers of Mother  
Earth tendered, predicated, linked in with  
generations worth of sacredness, which**

**spiritual reverence meant naught to  
unwelcome trespassers solely hell bent  
to force acquiescence, compliance,  
obedience,... to warlords, whose cruel,  
diabolical gall lee jeepers libidinal  
incursions sought extinction toward**

**defenceless native inhabitants subject  
to machinations spelling extermination,  
yet their restless spirits infiltrate occupants  
of once happy hunting grounds devoid  
without a trace, when this bucolic tract  
devoid of present schlocky vinyl zoned**

**abodes, whereby fast disappearing vestige  
alluding to pastoral vista spurs overactive  
imagination regarding yours truly, who  
chiefly hankers he got born during  
sparse population versus pell mell hustle.**

**6.**

**poem number four: Incomprehensible space/time  
continuum intrigues...**

**One insignificant, infinitesimal  
incomprehensibleness cosmic speck,  
who doth readily confess  
swallowed within**

**infinite cosmic wormhole, nonetheless,  
he feels mind boggled, fascinated,  
transfixed... helpless to express  
following concept suddenly  
gripping his feeble mental compass.**

---

**I haint never gonna get  
smart enough to understand  
supposedly how universe  
under contract to expand  
subscribers embracing divine  
intervention ascribe to invisible hand  
cosmographical phenomena defies**

**garden variety Homo sapien  
understanding schema so grand  
feeble analogy whereby  
Neanderthal apt to understand  
lingual mechanics predicated  
I grammatically, markedly, pointedly...  
exclaim with ampersand.**

**No particular reason nor rhyme  
prompted contemplation  
Einsteinian/ Stephen  
Hawking concepts sublime**

**defy one average guy  
way past his prime  
ideal, optimal, universal... time  
to fortify i.e. cognitive ability  
brewing, immersing, steeping... gray matter**

**within astrophysicist clime,  
now punishing ignorance mime  
limited aptitude climb  
stymied best taught during childhood**

**undoubtedly education pioneer - Haim  
Ginott speculate would even  
advocate buzzfeeding fetus  
7.**

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**with intelligent boosting enzyme.**

**I chomp at the metaphorical bridled bit  
and chafe not being genius like Trump pit  
ting president (gag me with a spoon),  
and lemme don pith helm mitt  
this crash test dummy, whit  
no shadow of doubt ready to quit**

**human race if said nitwit  
nabs 20/20 election twit  
tilling, spindling, mutilating,  
fondling... constitutional sacred writ  
issuing dynastic emperor gambit  
hastening cremated ashes (mine)**

**launched into distant orbit  
bajillion light years  
careering, hopscotching, zipping  
eventually reincarnated into runny Babbit  
ironically enslaved for profit  
blindly obedient dagnabbit,**

**indentured as intergalactic caddy  
fired while under probation as apprentice  
up Paul ling lee forced to exit  
Sartre's stage door left sporting  
embarrassing MAGA prison outfit  
hustled away courtesy  
as laughingstock exhibit.**

**Thus, I helm ship of state into black void  
alone within cosmos, yes...overjoyed!**

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**8.**

**poem number five: Replete with Colonial Army spirits**

**Two hundred forty two (12.1 score) years ago  
countless stripling soldiers  
strapping farming homeboys  
healthy agrarian lads  
raised among generations  
in summer re:**

**offspring original settlers heirs  
family acreage encompassed  
wide uninterrupted forested swaths  
across sprawling vistas  
sparsely populated enclaves,  
now heavily industrialized**

**lovely bones occupying  
unmarked never known graves  
buried amidst avast  
cleft rapacious urbanization  
long forgotten innocent youths  
hailing within then bucolic**

**Montgomery, Delaware and Chester county  
forsook their young precious lives**

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**voluntarily promising sons  
risking life and limb  
more often former versus latter  
sacrificing stripling flesh**

**encompassing urbanized tracts  
quite familiar to yours truly  
suddenly made aware  
unbeknownst till yesterday  
informative literary handiwork  
titled "A Glimpse of Freedom"**

**engagingly written by Douglas Shupinski  
details innocently naive country bumpkins  
sacrificing potential sweat of brow,  
albeit grueling labor  
fostering holistic existence  
transforming boyz to men**

**hardened green soldiers  
into battle weary fighters  
regarding, kickstarting, envisioning  
inchoate cause named freedom  
9.**

**emancipating fledgling America  
against British throne awareness percolates,**

**perturbs, permeates psyche  
synchronizing, manifesting, galvanizing  
how past historical events  
within close proximity,**

**where I mostly resided  
since birth, now experience  
absorption, communion, edification...  
with dead souls nearly deathly quiet  
only most perceptive can detect!**



**10.**  
**poem number six: Autodidact in love with words**

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**Zealousness prevails to amass knowledge  
lifequest nsync toward expansive lexicon  
extant since yours truly kneehigh toddler  
inquisitive mind fired passion to steep me  
within inexhaustible voluminous treasure  
trove housing increasing bound knowledge**

**inexplicable to thyself, wherefore heartfelt  
ineradicable passion to sequester attention  
between newpages of selective genres for  
hours experiencing intellectual ecstatic nee  
orgasmic excitation sustains purposefulness  
as explains escapist redoubt within mental**

**framework, thee singularly soulful asylum  
offering me cerebral satiation, sedation, and  
solution to cope with unbearable millstone  
linkedin with emotional/psychological pain  
wrought courtesy neurological mutation all  
throughout tender years, when one doth seek**

**natural predilections in tandem toward naked  
lunch (heady salad days lettuce not go there),  
quite the contrary this socially malnourished  
individual burrowed within reading material  
even now tickles fancy of mine johnny come  
lately body electric exploring, crafting, and**

**allowing milieu writing to pacify, gratify and  
codify mindset never entertaining delusions  
of grandeur (hypothetically envisioning to  
discover friendship (even platonic) regard-  
ing another, who exudes similar love with  
words, though accepting fickle human nature**

**at most hope flickr of ephemeral pinterest**

---

**maintains attention of anonymous reader  
rabbit nibbles morsel of recondite tidbit, and  
synchronizing ever so briefly with logophile,  
whose aura, charisma, dogma, karma, persona...  
hoopfully brings even an ad hoc "FAKE" smile.**

**11.  
poem number seven: Shooting Rapids In The Time  
Stream**

**Steady rain swirled, pooled,  
and eddied around rolled  
up pant legs skinny ankles, which  
immediately felt cold  
before undertow willingly  
steadily, and nimbly pulled this former  
ace swimmer into watery fold  
quelling, relinquishing, and taking  
hard won mettle of gold  
earned early in primetime, now  
at last...preemptive quiescent salvation  
sluiced into unbarred  
Davy Jones's locker hold  
all me eager life possessions  
long since donated and/or sold,  
final countdown found yours truly submerged  
for no rhyme, nor reason told  
as I blissfully headed into webbed  
wide woebegone watery wold,  
of course said dreamy forevermore  
hoary idyll mere reverie of stevedore  
"FAKE," & figuratively, hypothetically,  
and imaginatively furthermore,**

---

yaws true well lee washed away  
in briny deep pull lore  
ably tipped, gypped, and drowned ma poor  
body electric far from shore,  
soaking wet tha top n bot hum  
'o me soggy mossy noggin,

wharf fanta seas no longer will eyes explore  
waterlogged optima gills, this papa  
wet tin his every pore,  
March 21st, 2019 (ewe could Hermes faintly  
bleating after mighty roar)  
of ocean riptide off back  
offload mein kampf bon jure,  
buffer dis future papa gets tubby old,  
and senile, who would bean imposing chore,  
asper deux marriageable  
daughters tubby saddled, reined in upon, and  
bridled to endure  
caretaking role asper,  
this former stevedore  
whose existence also spent  
teaching many a bore from Bangalore!  
12.

poem number eight: The Bane Of Facebook Poetry  
Group Administrators

This erstwhile avid poet stir "boy"  
prone to hyperbole in a "man" newer  
(manure) of writing about his foie  
gras bulls, (which matter of fact  
happen tubby Ruby red)

redirects his gripe, how  
he no longer doth enjoy  
sharing his rhymes without  
(poems), resorts to joy

---

**full tongue in cheek humor to**

**lament, harumph, decry...  
a source of annoy  
ants, sans how nearly every  
one of my satisfactory  
albeit "FAKE" Hiam**

**Bick Penn- -Tam Meter  
most definitely did perturb,  
irk, and displeasure to cloy  
administrators regarding gamut of  
various and sundry writing groups,**

**(yes specifically geared to poetry),  
(presuming me in cahoots with George Soros)  
I suspect did employ  
secret double agents groomed by  
Mark Zuckerberg, and/**

**or Sheryl Sandberg deploy  
ying ambiguous reference did not tow  
arbitrary guidelines to cite nearly each  
endeavor of mine as discrepancy  
causing equivalent as digital row**

**points of view not  
countenanced from this bro'  
penniless, nearly without dough  
nuts to dollars, thus to assuage ego,  
(which rejections of sorts)  
did rankle at first, hence**

**explanation no mo' crow  
wing (except on my homepage),  
an abrupt end explains absence  
13.**

---

**in case any readers did show  
interest can still peruse yo  
yo wing unstrung thoughts  
from this average joe  
by enclosing a blank check  
addressed to this wise**

**acre and silently assertive bozo,  
who will express how ire doth flow,  
yet tactfulness and diplomacy  
kept in mind before I go  
ranting and raving like some roe  
ving madman wading in deep water!**

---

**14.**

**poem number nine: Missile Poised To Strike**

**Hidden under crop circle  
resembling an ampersand  
hides sheathed silo - obscured,  
said symbol adorned every armband  
of national socialist, yet weapons  
of mass destruction) bland  
lee, blatantly ignored global pact  
prepared from this once (bajillion  
years ago) geologic bottomland  
repurposed for bomb bin able  
(made in good ole US of A) brand  
to release payload upon given command  
i.e. at moments notice, the notorious brigand  
usurped entire communications broadband  
to stow and let loose by,  
thee once upon a time pokey cowhand,  
now chief of state tyrant,  
sans military industrial complex edifice,  
where deadly warheads demand  
did and trumpeted by "FAKE EVIL"**

**apprentice madly (ad libbing)  
gesticulating, & expostulating to DISBAND**

---

**at once - to no effect falling on deaf ears  
as Doomsday Clock rhythmically  
minutely gourmandises  
cannibalizing entire webbed  
world, whose former slender  
(now stubby) baby grand  
piano playing butter fingers  
primed to press miniature  
Taj Mahal shaped hand,...  
(now a pause for infowars  
commercial identification about Homeland  
security threatened by migrant husband  
and wife, especially terror unleashed  
from baby, whose hood loom doth not expand  
much taller than kickstand),**

**Regular noteworthy poetic program resumes:**

**...but biological chattering multiplicand  
the fiercest most critical operand  
linkedin with scheme  
asper deadly retaliatory reprimand  
15.  
against leader of free world,  
a hot headed note tory us  
donning wig by handmaiden Shetland  
knitwear, which Total Mortal Kombat  
every man, woman and will soon understand!**

**KA-BOOM! Into a bajillion  
(to the power of Googleplex)  
goes civilization and discontents,  
and since World War II  
accursed with self destructive hex  
hmm...mebbe terrestrial for  
another species similar to T-Rex  
with no nemesisto vex!**



**16.**  
**poem number ten: The Carnivore Within...**

---

**Meaty morsels besiege  
this vegetarian advocate  
yet, the atavistic Jainist within me decries,  
egg hen hies his, and lamb hence  
carnivorous ache that won't abate  
case in point being on the horns**

**hoof ah dill ham ma, neither willing,  
nor ready to abdicate  
nagging, succumbing, and writhing,  
asper Pavlov's dog salivation,  
Ike hen not obliterate  
every now and again curr raven**

**hunger for game, though aye abominate  
hone beak able unethical abuse  
delivered sans electric ham not prod,  
nor pleased, when yours truly doe eth abrogate  
his staunch conviction against  
merciless maltreatment of animals**

**which doth exhaust and accelerate  
environmental degradation, and realized  
moo mints ago, a temptation did accentuate  
bull dozing tenuous die hard longing,  
how quickly temptation,  
recidivism, and predilection to accommodate,**

**and appease feeling mouth watering za eel  
for ma ham mulls hamstrung taste, I did acclimate  
and acquire ineradicable taste primal beastie boys  
relished after the hunt squatting by flick ring fire  
with other village people  
tearing killed deer - if accurate,**

**nonetheless a grievance  
(akin to heresy) as a traitor**

---

**Joe against fundamental aversion to reactivate  
cow hard lee self betrayal caving against tenets  
regarding aversion to the very business  
of slaughter (houses), and I eve hen advocate  
against gluten free NON GMO free ranging**

**creatures, who can experience pain  
and suffering, some display affectionate  
behaviour, plus without doubt agitate  
17.**

**without success to savor natural longevity,  
perhaps becoming family pet,  
whose tender loving (vittle) care will not alienate**

**said domesticated innocent  
porpoise full chums  
hoof found a caring home, articulate  
ting compassion, tha hare fore,  
a conscientious baldpate  
or hirsute organic caretaker,  
would neigh ver deer stirrup the roost  
ruffle any tail feathers, only celebrate  
affection, and mane lee horse around!**

**THE POET SPEAKS:**

**Today December 27 two thousand nineteen**

**Start time: at sixteen minutes  
after seven o'clock post meridian  
End time: nine minutes after  
nine o'clock post meridian.**

**Where the outer limits as Guiding Light  
regarding twilight zone,  
vis a vis edge of night  
i.e. est gracia constituting caterwauling**

---

**doggone existential plight  
punctuating past, present and/or  
predominantly future days  
of our lives (think kite)**

**scudding, kickstarting,  
and exhibiting sight  
for sore (myopic) eyes Doppler Effect  
zipping, spinning, jet us sinning**

**within time stream spanning infinite height  
(concerning self and missus,  
no longer The Young the Restless,  
plus All My Children,  
(deux grown darling daughters),  
as the world turns,  
23.5 degrees relative  
to our orbital plane,  
nor once upon time, The Bold  
and the Beautiful delight  
Philly urbane guy noir once  
upon time chess your  
aver ridge generic white knight  
in rusty armor dimly bright  
oft times plumbs depth  
of my psyche quite  
populated with strained relations  
within his birth family  
serving as grist for write  
ting mill, whether thy nonagenarian  
father, siblings (an older/younger sister  
eldest/youngest daughters tight  
lipped regarding sharing travails  
I rarely see them, both live out of sight  
thousands miles distant, eager to take flight  
as soon as opportunity prevailed,**

---

**which estranged dynamics  
among all kith and kin can be to bite**

**yours at double scribble,  
where sun don't shine, nonetheless might  
as well craft birthday poems despite  
any response forthcoming**

**(usually I can cite)  
zero instances receiving slight  
if any acknowledgement...,  
who knows maybe one they might...  
even express care and concern  
which genuinely communicated  
unconditional love could unite  
invaluable linked bond greater than gravity,  
or cosmic phenomena that doth excite  
one modest organic philosophical,**

**quizzical, rat tickle schlemazel  
ungapatchka riddled scrambling  
scrivener seeking respite  
with automotive issues this right**

**handed leftist nonestablishmentarian  
plagued with general  
tsuris non neophyte  
to mental health issues  
arising where spite**

**and malice gave way  
to effort tubby polite  
not impossible mission,  
catharsis like vite  
tummy soul expunging, so**

**yours truly can huff ford**

---

**peace of mind tonight,  
and subsequent tomorrows, where  
death be not proud  
will transport to another world.**

**BIO: Hi (Matthew Scott Harris) dwelling in  
Schwenksville, Pennsylvania, 19473, USA) - berthed January  
xiii, mcmlix). Hi yam juiced a penniless dime a dozen dollar  
day bitcoin (a chip off the ole nick culled blockchain)  
bending, bloviating, branching... off the rushing limb bough  
tree (shawn of ha nitty conformity) with tree trim men dose  
- city skeined webbing courtesy humanity.**

**Aye got natural mike canonical pro pence city to ply  
(close on par with Wordsworth wondering willy shake his  
spear), their weight in gold, and thus as a scribe take to the  
most vibrant media platform these days (tidy electronic  
soapbox) to express most bothersome doggone fiendish  
harmful beef jerk, lobbing nuggets packed resplendently,  
tightly unfashionably vested with yik yak animal clout.**

**Tis like a colluding trumpeting stormy field day (tour  
wren NATO), asper communicating, expressing, gut heaving  
input. Tinder days of yore sparked psychological  
conflagration kindle ling outlook per questionable rite Trump  
violated with yipping super tramping brigands doing dirty  
deeds done dirt cheap trick.**

**Though unknown to thee reading public and chattering  
class, this totally tubular thought provoking meister  
jabberwocky houses full deshabelle attire invoking an  
automatic repulsion if aiming to affect "FAKE" couture of  
nouveau riche.**

**No ambition to clothe thyself in the latest craze,**

---

**fashions, gizmos, kool leaning trends always found this middle aged, monkey's uncle, mwm to be an outlier. Early years of mine kempf fraught with emotional, physical and spiritual angst, when forced thru the gauntlet thrown up by one eyed punks with (wha Usain) appears jagged lightning bolt designed to carve mean scars.**

**They (threatening) thugs thrive on being mean, and stepped up the propensity of bullying, especially since this presently grown man evinced (as a pipsqueak), an extremely cowering, frowning, identity guard.**

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as the world turns,*

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*Philly urbane guy noir once  
upon time chess your  
aver ridge generic white knight  
in rusty armor dimly bright  
oft times plumbs depth*

*of my psyche quite  
populated with strained relations  
within his birth family  
serving as grist for write  
ting mill, whether thy nonagenarian  
father, siblings (an older/younger sister  
eldest/youngest daughters tight  
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---

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*They (threatening) thugs thrive on being mean, and stepped up the propensity of bullying, especially since this presently grown man evinced (as a pipsqueak), an extremely cowering, frowning, identity guard.*

---

# FALLING and other poems...

By Leslie Dianne

*Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: I am young and easily confused, but still it amazes me the calibre and quality of the poetry sent to me. I feel like I am spinning all over again. Adoration demands suppliance. Forgive me if I quote too many lines: Is 'their junk skinny / friend leans' a reference to the emaciation that harbours substance abuse? '...his friends catch / his back / I hope God / holds / his soul.' It is appropriately entitle, the Falling. Next '... anger rising and / falling in the instant / that the light / turns green' This is so SO. (So true, not so-so)... "...we walk with bowed heads / next to each other..." How sad is this, why don't we take the chance and engage? Why is it that the people we have yet to embrace are considered strangers [italic]—stranger than us? Address someone new today! Read Dianne '...dream and don't shut your eyes...' You won't be disappointed. It will '...sharpen your dive....HS*

Falling

---

You clean?  
I hear the men whisper  
in voices  
full of worry  
and care as  
their junk skinny  
friend leans  
against the wall  
when he falls  
his friends catch  
his back  
I hope God  
holds  
his soul

### We Shape The Day

We shape the day  
for each other  
quick jostle  
hard shove  
wheels rolling  
over toes  
anger rising and  
falling in the instant  
that the light  
turns green  
and urges us away  
we walk with bowed heads  
next to each other  
we say prayers  
that only  
we can hear  
and when the man

---

on the corner asks  
for a dollar  
we count our blessings  
and good fortune  
and slip into  
the morning  
never knowing  
that we really did  
see each other  
hear each other  
and when we  
accidentally touched  
something in the  
universe shifted  
and the atmosphere changed  
in that small instant of time  
we truly did  
change the course  
of each other's lives

### How To Live

This is how to live  
dream and don't shut your eyes  
put your hands out in front of you  
not to stop your fall  
but to sharpen the dive  
and plummet  
then spread your arms  
let the sky  
support you  
the concrete will shiver  
and lose its place  
and you will find yours  
in flight  
in the diving dream  
that should be done

---

every day of your life

**THE POET SPEAKS:** *I am a storyteller, a mirror, an interpreter looking out at the world and relating what I see, sense, feel, imagine, hope and dream in words, sounds, rhythms, images and emotions. I am trying to tell my truth and I am blessed when someone reads my poetry because I have a chance to take someone on a journey and if I'm lucky, to touch their heart.*

**BIO:** *Leslie Dianne is a poet, novelist, screenwriter, playwright and performer whose work has been acclaimed internationally in places such as the Harrogate Fringe Festival in Great Britain, The International Arts Festival in Tuscany, Italy and at La Mama, ETC in New York City. Her stage plays have been produced in NYC at The American Theater of Actors, The Raw Space, The Puerto Rican Traveling Theater and The Lamb's Theater. Her poems have appeared or currently appear in Night Picnic Press, About Place Journal, Passaic / Völuspá, The Moon Magazine and The Lake and are forthcoming in Medusa's Laugh Press and Hawai'i Review.*

---

# AESTHETICS and other poems...

By Larry O. Dean

**Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:** *This entry leaves me overwhelmed and under-nourished for more...*

**Aesthetics]:** *The first is a haiku, less is always more...Is 'tics' a play on words? Maybe it is the Fleas in me. We all have the--eyes blinking, throat clearing, toes clenching or alternate spasms-- And as we grow older they collect and infest. Nose tics can be most bewitching or annoying in others, but not in long-time lovers; with familiarity the face of tics fade. But for the sake of new acquaintances. 'keep an eye / on your nose' (It is odd how pith evokes more thought than poems-in-prose.)*

**Chopped: Slasher Film Edition:** *The gastronomic-thriller imagery, here, recommends that Dean knows how to cook: '...point-of-view tequila / shots representing the "chef's perspective," / a jolting sauce and graphic deglazing...'*

**The Elephant in the Room:** *I wouldn't want this misconstrued, but one of my favourite verse-ists is Dr. Suess. This reads like quintessential, adult Suess. Maybe it is due to the Horton Hears a Hoot in me—'boil that dust-speck.' In the aftermath, the biggest most elusive, illusive, docile, yet untamed, entity in the room has now been shrunk to its most diminutive form: 'His trunk was limp as unspooled thread,' Not to go unread.*

**Tangent [bold]:** *Now here is some poetry-in-prose that would appeal to the most orthodox of standpats—what a diverse perspective Dean offers us...(Spacing is poet's own) HS*

## Aesthetics

As the tics grow,

keep an eye

---

on your nose.

***Chopped: Slasher Film Edition***

What I've made for you today is a horror

or a thriller of a dish, typically involving

---

a mysterious, generally psychopathic

entree scalloping and kneading a sequence

of adolescent or young adult taste buds

in a secluded kitchen

with little or no

adult supervision, point-of-view tequila

shots representing the “chef's perspective,”

a jolting sauce and graphic deglazing

by vinegar and meunière, with a twist

at the end leaving it open for seconds.

### **The Elephant in the Room**

The elephant in the room is dead.

Found him this morning, locked the door.

---

I still can't get it out of my head.

His trunk was limp as unspooled thread,

splayed out there on the icy floor.

The elephant in the room is dead,

though I didn't check for a pulse; instead

I wished things could be just like before.

I still can't get it out of my head

but maybe there are signs that I misread

—I'm not a vet, and can't speak for

the elephant in the room that's dead.

His tusks were pointed overhead.

Elephants are herbivores.

I still can't get it out of my head,

where images in infrared

---

burn in my brain to underscore

the elephant in the room is dead.

I still can't get it out of my head.

## **Tangent**

This next poem is a new one and it's based on a true story.

---

I was in a pretty dark place when I wrote it—and by that I mean mentally, not 'dark' as in low-lighting, though now as I remember when I wrote it, the room I was in was pretty dark because one of the bulbs in the lamps had burnt out and I had been so depressed because I'd lost my job and my girlfriend all in the same week and I didn't have the energy to buy any bulbs much less any money, which I then needed to watch because I had lost my job.

I still have to watch my money, but if I needed a bulb right now I could run right out and get it, or two, or even three, or come to think of it a lot of the time they're packaged in a box of four and I could afford that—buying four at a time would be smarter than just a single bulb—they'd be cheaper per bulb and bulbs are the kind of thing it's always good to have a supply of, but back then I wasn't in the right state of mind to be thinking intelligently about bulbs, or bottled water, or batteries, or any of those emergency supplies they say it's wise to have on hand. Like I said,

---

I was in a dark place, and wrestling with my demons, which I know is a cliché but as far as me at the time, it was true; I was at an all-time low, sitting in my spare bulb-less apartment and ruminating on a lot of stuff, not just about getting fired or breaking up with Brooke because I slept with her friend from the bar, which was a terrible mistake, I admit it, but we were both drunk and kind of did it on a dare, and sorry about it the next day, though it was awesome, she's cool and we like a lot of the same music—unlike Brooke—and even though we only did it once we kept texting each other and that's how Brooke found out.

Anyway, she was none too happy and dumped me right before we were set to take a trip out east to meet her parents, which got me to thinking about my dad, and what a hard-ass he could be, and how when he died I kind of compartmentalized it because we had one of those love-hate relationships that a lot of fathers and sons have—though ours was way more complicated

---

—and it's a relationship that I'm still unraveling, the way you  
open a present, or better, the way you unwrap a bandage  
to change it when a wound is still not healed and you can't help  
but stare at it, all scabby and gross, and it gets you kind of woozy  
but you keep on staring because what doesn't destroy you makes  
you stronger, and I remembered my dad's car and how it always  
smelled like cigarettes because he was such a heavy smoker,  
and how he'd be driving and the ash on his Camel<sup>®</sup> would get  
really, really long, and kind of curl over but not break,  
and how I'd be watching it the whole time, waiting for it  
to crack in half and fall and how he'd swipe the seat where it  
fell or stomp on the floor, swearing, making sure it wasn't still lit,  
and the car would swerve and jerk a little, and the image  
of that red ash always stuck in my head. That's what I mean  
in the first line. It's called, "A Fiery, Falling Ash."

**THE POET SPEAKS:** *I've always been a reader, as well as a writer; I don't remember discerning a difference between the two—a "hey, I'm allowed to do this too!" moment—but rather, an inherent inclination to write intermingled inextricably with the pleasures of*

---

reading, especially since each feeds off the other. I was also a drawer, and an innate visual acuity offered me an idea of the power of images. I messed around with prose but later gave myself over to poetry, as an outgrowth of being a fan of pop songs, then later a purveyor of smart songwriting. I admired how songwriters could do a lot with a little, toying with language, making jokes, being deliberately vague or ambiguous, such as “Lola” by The Kinks—a perfect marriage of words and music. My early poems were angsty and serious, and a friend once asked, “Why isn't your poetry funny? You're funny.” I'd always had a sense of the absurd, embracing it aesthetically in what I liked but hesitating to embody it in what I wrote. Creem magazine out of Detroit had a very particular kind of rustbelt existentialist viewpoint that spoke to me, and over time I realized their attitude mirrored as well as amplified my own. To that extent, I consider the Creem school to be every bit as (if not more so) important in my development as a poet as the various versifiers, hardboiled scribes, and fringe rockers I found sustenance in.

**BIO:** Larry O. Dean was born and raised in Flint, Michigan. His numerous books include *Frequently Asked Questions*, (2020), *Activities of Daily Living* (2017), *Brief Nudity* (2013), *Basic Cable Couplets* (2012), *abbrev* (2011), *About the Author* (2011), and *I Am Spam* (2004). He is also an acclaimed singer-songwriter whose latest solo album is *Good Grief* (2015); the sophomore album from his band, *The Injured Parties*, *Product Placement*, was released August 2019. For more info, go to [larryodean.com](http://larryodean.com).

**LARRY O. DEAN**  
***Songs & Sardonica***

---

=> New Injured Parties album, *Product Placement*, available from [Bandcamp](#) and [Apple Music](#)  
=> New book, *Activities of Daily Living*, available from [Salmon Poetry Ltd.](#)

=> [Home page](#)

=> [Facebook](#)

=> [Goodreads](#)

=> [Poets & Writers](#)

=> [LinkedIn](#)

=> [Draconian Measures](#)

---

"Cachet — isn't that like *panache*, but sitting down?" *Warren Zevon*

---

# SIX POEMS

**By I. B. Rad**

*Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: You can't vet poetry without inviting a New Yorker, but these came easily. Riff along with I.B. RAD. His Bio almost rivals his verse. The first is Adam and Eve dialoguing in Play form: "...So I'd get the blame." ... 'engorging with explicit knowledge' ... " ...for in tomorrow's grim epoch / each other is all you'll have." How prescient is this aged reference? Each is so romantic, so incited. I can't help thinking if we were a dating service I would hit the click button and introduce him to my sister. If you want to love someone, you can only love those who have hurt, and have been hurt. Is he Soothsayer or just a player? 'Magritte indicted'? Basquiat: tendering 'Mona Lisa' on a dollar bill? Still my heart, I will likely read these over and over even if you don't...(Spacing is poet's own) HS*

## **A&E, Five Minutes of Play (or How Love was Born)**

Curtain opens, Adam is gazing heavenward at thunder and lightning.

Eve is facing Adam.

**Adam:**

"Good God, it's all Eve's fault!

She was bewitched

---

by a cold blooded viper's shtick  
that eating Your forbidden fruit  
would bring untold bliss.  
Then sampling that fruit  
and fretting over her transgression,  
she enticed me to try it  
so I'd get the blame."

**Eve:**

"Come on, fess up Adam!  
You're forever craving forbidden sweets.  
So on ripping that fruit  
right from my hand  
and taking your fateful bite,  
engorging with explicit knowledge,  
you hardened  
and chased me all about  
as if there were no tomorrow."

**Adam:**

"Dear God, give my rib back!"

---

My sole fervor is for resuming calm reflection  
on the splendor of my earthly paradise."

**Eve:**

"A likely story!"

**God:**

"Is this how you venerate your Lord?!"

(thunder and lightning)

"Old-time Yahwehs

won't allow extenuating circumstances

or do plea deals,

nor do we grant second chances,

for as ostensibly just Gods,

we're strictly, 'Just do what I say!'"

(more thunder and lightning)

"Your only salvation

lies in embracing one another

and drawing together,

for in tomorrow's grim epoch

each other is all you'll have."

---

(still more thunder and lightning, with wind picking up)

**Adam & Eve:**

Ultimately resigned to their fate,  
gently gazing into each other's eyes,  
Adam and Eve hug and kiss,  
in concert acclaiming,  
"Together we hail our new found feeling,  
The Creator's wondrous gift  
to lighten our journey,  
Love."

(The heightening wind pushes A&E, hand-in-hand, off stage)

**The Chain**

**I.B. Rad**

Oddly, I never noticed  
that thick chain,  
much like those anchoring ocean liners,  
extending outward from our starcraft.  
Perhaps an illusion

---

produced by too powerful tractor beams,  
it stretched through the ubiquitous gloom  
gradually merging with an engulfing blackness,  
that congealing shadow  
that kept us in its' thrall.

How often I'd thought of slipping away,  
of stealing an Exit Pod  
to follow the chain;  
yet, of countless earlier flights,  
none returned.

Others I'd spoken with  
had also witnessed this apparition;  
though curiously, our youngest staff  
seldom seem to have noticed.

And clearly, the chain moved,  
for if you focused on a link  
situated by one of those luminous whorls  
and stared long enough,  
you began to see it creeping outward,  
toward the blackness.

But where was this chain drawing us?  
Through an ever deepening vacuity, ad nauseam?  
To some coveted emergence beyond imagining?

---

To our impending doom?

Clearly, no one knew;

so we made up parables, fables

to sate our curiosity, to alleviate our fears.

And as few voluntarily relinquished

our ship's highly circumscribed,

though ostensibly secure, familiar,

we crafted amusements to pass the time,

to distract us, to keep us entertained.

Yet, deep within our hearts,

we all await its summons,

that irresistible pull

impelling us to take an Exit Pod,

to follow those who left before...

To where?...

## **Dark Adaptation**

### **I.B. Rad**

Blinded

by their "otherness",

we couldn't see

---

any conceivable humanity  
until, gradually,  
after the frenzy  
of sanctimonious fury,  
our marred vision's aftermath  
came into view.  
Confronting our sight  
lay a Boschian nightmare  
with gutted hellscapes  
featuring hemorrhaging rivers  
of gushing red  
disgorging disjoined  
heads, limbs, torsos,  
and torrents of refugees  
streaming toward  
the borders;  
while lifted on a pedestal of ruin  
above these Stygian heights,  
Madonna and child  
huddle, transfixed  
by bursting bright  
of shooting stars,  
though none

---

to steer us

by...

## **Pipe Dreams**

**I.B. Rad**

Beneath his portrait

of a pipe

Magritte indicted,

"This in not a pipe,"

goadng one viewer to laughter,

"Of course it's a pipe!

What else could it be?!"

At which our docent grinned,

"Then why not

put that pipe in your mouth

and smoke it?"

**"Mona Lisa"**

**I.B. Rad**

Basquiat

---

drolly transformed  
"Mona Lisa"  
to a grotesque  
presidential bust  
on a dollar bill;  
deriding, at least for me,  
our persistent commodification of art.  
For despite practitioner's pretensions,  
fashionable market validated art  
is a trophy investment  
of the uber-rich  
and our global culture's  
most profitable venture  
into "art appreciation."

### **The Washington Machine**

On perpetual spin cycle,  
our Washington machine's  
never coming clean  
that rectifying America  
is soiling us

---

with its' business

then expecting to clean up

by winning the next election.

**THE POET SPEAKS:** *I guess one thing that inspires my poetry is the challenge of writing it. It's like walking a tightrope. Can I do it this time? Fortunately, failure doesn't mean breaking my neck; it simply requires writing another poem. I suppose, as I once joked, for me poetry is a form of self stimulation comparable to a developmentally disabled person repetitively flapping their hand or tapping a cheek. I can't honestly say this or that writer influenced me. I can say that I very much like Anna Akhmatova, Wislawa Szymborska, Cavafy for their profundity, power, and wit, Margaret Atwood, the early Edward Field, Bukowski, E.E. Cummings, Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, to name a few. I'm also inspired by some satirical painters from Bosch, Bruegel and Goya to Beckmann, Grosz and Basquiat. Obviously, biblical themes and socio-political events also inspire me as does the wordplay used in advertising. I'm also the kind of writer who will slave away to perfect a poem even though I know it will probably never see the light of day because it goes against the current cultural grain. I think it important to expose others to less popular viewpoints that they may not like. I most definitely do not approve of internet shaming and job loss for the slightest ideational offense. "Freedom of speech" only has meaning when one can say what people don't want to hear without penalty. Perhaps my late wife was right when she said, "You're not really a poet (or at least an American one.) You're a sociologist, a satirical social critic, and a philosopher who uses poetry as a means of expression." But then, I suppose, by today's standards, Shakespeare's wife could have claimed that as well.*

**BIO:** *I.B. Rad is an independent New York City poet, who doesn't slavishly follow any ideology or our various conformities. Much of his more recent work is available on the internet. His latest book, "Dancing at the Abyss," was published by Scars Publications and is available from Amazon or it can be downloaded free of charge from the Scars' site (scars.tv). Stylistically, his philosophy is "Let the punishment fit the crime..." or, to put the matter another way, "Form follows function" (but that still leaves "more than one way to skin a cat" – a rather gruesome thought.)*

---

# 9 POEMS

By Bob Carlton

***Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:***

*So I have heard everything is big in Texas. But these are short and sweet. Alliteration is nothing without assonance and all the imagery belongs: Deserts, moonlight and misgivings. If I could strum a guitar, I would steal these in song ... 'surrendering trust to the darkness.' They pack as good a punch as Carmen Basilio. The rhythms both float and sting. For me, many of the lines are reminiscent of 'The muttering retreats / Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels.' Of course I am not quoting Mr. Carlton here, but his verse is effuse with such cadence. It makes me wish I could gallop or at least canter when all I do is trot... 'Every trembling, random bit of trash, / the loose paper, broken plastic, or shattered glass.' Here he is, and I am ashamed to take liberties with his line-breaks. Or: 'I would glide along / through an underworld / of urban underbrush and rust': 'Let us go then, you and I [Eliot]. If I acted on my instincts I'd be dead by now. HS (Spacing is the author's own.) HS*

At Liberty

Whorl of the windward ear  
catches dust devil dirt.  
Eyes crust with the day's debris.  
Sight, by necessity, narrows  
focus to the one approach,  
danger's only way in  
to such broken country.

Scratch a match on rock,  
light up a stubby smoke.  
Crack knuckles, swivel neck,  
stretch legs, wiggle fingers.  
Sand gathers in joint folds,  
saddle bags, and tin cups.  
The red sun howls through  
the lone, bare mesquite  
perched atop the western ridge.

No living sound

---

but the whirr of insects,  
no taste  
but the scorched sand.

A horse's sudden nod and snort  
snaps attention back  
to this single arroyo.  
Nothing there.  
Not yet.  
Maybe never will be.  
How can the fugitive, outlaw, deserter  
know when the last pursuer  
has quit the field?

Another pot of coffee  
to wash away grit and fatigue.  
Sourdough, pemmican,  
one swig from the canteen.

Maybe, as the fire  
dies away in the night,  
a nip from the flask,  
a quick communion  
with the god of agave,  
before surrendering trust to the darkness.

### Burlesque

By the end,  
the routine  
becomes so complex,

the plates spin-  
ning, dogs  
tumbling through  
hoops of fire,  
little guy in  
an old fedora  
juggling chopsticks  
and beachballs,

---

the schtick comes  
    crashing  
to a chaotic halt,

beer and dancing girls  
    slopped across  
the stage

in odd, sin-  
    ful salutes  
to human dexterity.

"Carmen Basilio..."

Carmen Basilio  
was no poet

his movements  
metric and rhythm  
left for  
others to  
art-  
icu-  
late

the punch having  
already landed.

Defrocked

Biretta gone,  
his bald pate sweating  
in shame beneath  
the unforgiving sun,

he swears

---

an oath to no god  
he has ever  
known before.

down the boulevard

past pawn shops  
dead dreams  
held in hock  
brothels  
and the bodies  
fucking without affection  
barest of touches  
absence of kisses

Eve

You come to me  
    out of a low crouch  
    in the wild grasses  
of an ancient rift,  
  
across wind-swept steppes,  
    forests thick with life;  
  
you have waded the vast  
    inland seas,  
        warm saline rapture  
beneath a drumming sun;  
  
you have trudged  
    the desert and jungle  
    extremes  
  
to come to me,  
    a distant man,

---

unworthy,  
and unprepared.

Mission Accomplished

I had always thrilled  
to the secret city places:

forgotten alleys  
too small for adult intrigue,  
or the abandoned building,  
with a beaten path along  
the outside wall, hidden  
behind dense shrubs.

The litter of modern artifacts--  
crushed cans,  
cigarette butts,  
fast food wrappers,

or the sudden mystery  
and forbidden thrill  
of the used condom  
or naked needle--

Hollywood-worthy plots  
waited in every  
trembling, random  
bit of trash,  
the loose paper,  
broken plastic,  
or shattered glass,  
final refuse  
of secret lives,  
slipping away  
in the blurring ink  
and fading pencil scratchings  
on lost receipts,  
half-used  
books of matches,  
the lingering traces

Carlton



---

Machines make  
better slaves  
anyway

leak nothing  
but oil  
slap on

another  
gasket good  
as new

### Song for an Old-Fashioned Christmas

So come on, boys,  
let's wassail in the old sense,  
beat down the doors  
of the filthy rich,  
cleansing their souls  
with outlandish demands  
for food, booze, and money.  
Out of arrogance or fear  
they'll all give in to us,  
the drunken Saturnalian slaves  
in the land of the free.

2. **THE POET SPEAKS:** *I am afraid that when it comes to talking about poetry, I have no grand pronouncements to make or theories to espouse. The necessity of the activity is evident by its ubiquity and continuity. I believe the uses of poetry to be much more varied than a short note can express. The Iliad and 'This Is Just to Say' are both valid as poetry, though wildly divergent in aims and means, the best reductionist efforts of literary Theory of Everything critics notwithstanding. For me, the poem begins with language; a word, a phrase, an image embodied in words. Often it ends there, with a sort of navel gazing self-reflectiveness. Sometimes, in what appears to happen in some of these poems, the gaze stays inward but is reflective of a subject (perhaps only apparently) external to the poem, a subject that often stands apart, isolated and separate. Apart,*

---

*isolated, separate, A L O N E: we all feel this way sometimes. We know the allure of false gods in our despair. We feel resentment at the good fortune of those unworthy and unaware. We know the ache of waiting for love and the pain of its departure. We know that freedom is not always what we want and seldom what we get. We even know that art is not always the answer. Poetry is a way to see our common plight anew, transfigured and objectified through language, to be taken as needed.*

3. **BIO:** *Bob Carlton lives and works in Leander, TX. The externally verifiable facts concerning his life are thoroughly uninteresting. That is why he writes.*

---

# Math Test and other poems...

*By Jennifer Jesseph*

**Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:** *Charmed, Charmed, Charmed. These could make me smile on the rainiest of days, in a monsoon. If an asteroid was destined to hit earth, I would re-read them on its way. They delightfully describe all our foibles and follies: MATH TEST enchantingly and uncalculatingly expresses all the angst we felt before we were prescribed pills. And who could resist FLY WAKING FROM HIBERNATION MID MARCH from the POV of an insect. Revel in the introspection of BIG, FAT POETRY. If you skip this one you've missed someone who could brighten anyone's daze. And, LAWN ARTIST—now who could dare say the gossamer of the quixotic is without depth, something that breathes, something with breeze, join Jesseph and I, in her language of ease...*

*'Now, spring / brings green tongues of grass / poking their way from dirt / whispering gossip.' (Spacing is poet's own.) HS*

## Math Test

In 6<sup>th</sup> grade, I remember taking  
a math test for decimals, variables, ordered pairs,  
and possibly even long division,  
but I didn't know any  
answers.

All I could see were the problems  
set up in little rows  
like soldiers or dominoes.

---

I heard the tick on the clock  
and the radiator hissed  
steam.

Then all I heard was the scratching  
of pencils on paper sounded like insects  
scriff scriff scriffing  
all around

the room. Everyone else  
huddled over their papers  
rapt in their answering. Oh, I could feel it.  
They were all running and winning the long marathon  
of this test and stretching and straining toward the finish line-----

while I waited to remember any solution

I made each unanswered problem  
into a math bug  
with legs thin as eyelashes

and bulging eyes marching across the paper  
into the land of solvation.

---

Fly Waking From Hibernation Mid March

Who turned on the heat? Where  
did my winter sleep go?

Wings? *scuttle, scuttle.*

Are you ready? *No.*

I want to finish that dream  
where a spider was about  
to die in her own web.  
Delicious, right?

She was coming  
for me! Hairy legs, horrible  
eyes. Then her own web  
attacked her. That delicate  
awful web  
grave bed to Grandma Jam Jam,  
and Mother Zizz.

Oh! The sun is out. It's a yellow  
zing zing lemon, but too much  
too soon.

---

Wings? *crinkle, crinkle*. You ready?

No. Only one wing

sort of wishy, swishy moves.

Any flowers up? No. How do the trees smell?

Tired. Alright, I'm sleeping in.

Wake me when the leaves

are new emerald green,

and you smell mud. Wake me

when dragonflies lace

the pond. Wake me

when that spider

is dead in her own web.

Poetic justice, right?

---

## Big, Fat Poetry

Oh, my poems are flabby and gabby now. They're no longer sleek, fit, and tight, but heavier, richer, and robust. I trust my word flow and let it go.

I suppose I could try stuffing them into some smaller,  
starker stanzas  
to slim  
the word count.

I could diet them down to the fine bones of a honed, toned, youthful poem, like a sprinter on its mark with chiseled muscles, taut, and ready to pounce.

But I won't. No thanks. No girdles or Spanks for my overweight, wordy poems.  
I'll take the heavy words, all their pounds and various sounds and let them waddle free on the page.

Some younger, thinner poet will craft sleek, slender lines. Those used to be mine.

Those poems can sprint to the finish. They'll be the winner, the new writing wonder,

while I will blunder and barrel along with my curvy songs. I'll be with my words spilling and filling up pages.

Let my poems be great with wonder. Let them be voluminous and billowy.

---

Let my writing be fat. It has thickened with age and renders me in middle sage.

Oh large, lovely words!

You are home. You are home

in this fleshy, plump, and meaty poem.

---

\

Lawn Artist

My wife left me just as winter  
poured out its gifts  
and chilled everyone with  
ice. It was fitting  
she'd leave me then  
and without words, so I hunkered  
down all winter while the neighbors  
watched and wondered. Now, spring  
brings green tongues of grass  
poking their way from dirt  
whispering gossip.

Every day brings more green  
in the buds and the seedlings I planted  
and though I try to forget her  
by immersing in planning  
the vegetable garden, reupholstering  
a chair, even learning to sculpt, nothing  
relives me,

---

until mowing. Every tongue blade  
wagging at me gets chopped down. Then I mow  
messages in my lawn. STOP, GO HOME, PUKE. The lawn  
is my canvas and I am an artist in grass clipping.

My neighbors believe I am lost and lonely. They don't  
talk to me anymore, but, I've never been  
better. I mow words and they read my lawn. FLY, FREE,  
REACH.

**THE POET SPEAKS:** *I get ideas from my life, such as taking math tests was stressful for as a young learner, I did observe a fly waking up too early one day on the back stairwell at work, and I wondered how climate change impacts animals. I also really enjoy writing persona poems which is what "Lawn Artist," is, and I like to add humor into writing.*

*Influences: Anne Sexton, Mary Oliver, Amy Nezhukumatathil, Tracy K. Smith, Mark Doty, Edward Hirsh.*

**BIO:** *Jennifer Jesseph is a poet and fiber artist in Pine Island, Minnesota. Her poems and flash fiction recently appeared in the publications The Talking Stick Volume 28: Broad Strokes, Upon Waking: 58 Voices Speaking Out From the Shadows of Abuse, and the newspaper Post-Bulletin in Rochester Minnesota. Some of her fiber art is on her website [www.jenniferjesseph.com](http://www.jenniferjesseph.com)*

---

# 4 POEMS

By Frank Modica

*Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:*

*I have never dreamt of having a vagina, nor have I ever contemplated all the men who have stood before me at a cracked urinal... 'I don't care, I just [read] the poem[s]. 'Some of the WWLI's are predicated on the pomposity that—I could never write this. Nothing is more intimate than inspired, uncensored interior monologues, unmeasured yet melodic with imagery abounding. Stare stark into the frankness of Modica's mind, all agog if so you must be, but don't miss it...' I run my fingers over my head, / Hair almost all gone, an empty forest!' But grass doesn't grow on a busy street. Perhaps I will stop wearing socks in my sandals. And if **Antipasti** is anything that is not pasta, does that include the tables, chairs, cutlery and the menu itself? I don't get out that much, but this entry offers some refinement for the most subversive of sophisticates. (Spacing is poet's own) HS*

## EnVy

I had a dream last night  
and I let the memories percolate for hours  
while having every confidence I would remember it.  
When I picked up my pen and paper  
the images came back to me,  
the words spilled out on the page.  
In my dream I was looking down at my waist,  
inspecting my genitals, like I usually do.  
No penis, no testicles, just a huge vagina.

---

My vagina opening was bigger than a grapefruit,  
reddish in color with a pink vulva that didn't  
match my olive complected stomach.

It didn't seem unusual to me,  
so I accepted my vagina,  
didn't question the disappearance  
of my penis and testicles,  
didn't marvel at the size  
and perfection of its opening.

Some might ask why an avowedly  
heteronormative older white male  
would have such a dream.

I don't worry myself too much with those questions

Was it vagina envy and something crazy

I drank that night? I don't care.

I just write the poem.

### **Porcelain**

I try to stand tall  
at a cracked, ceramic urinal.  
but I am a short man,

---

I have a narrow stance.

I contemplate  
intellectual accomplishments,  
physical abilities,  
and the fragility  
of the white male ego,

and I wonder about  
everyone who  
has stood up  
at the same spot,  
hoping that someone  
will remember them.

### **Life's a bitch**

At night, I run my fingers over my head,  
Hair almost all gone, an empty forest!

Up and down from my bed every few hours  
Restless bladder, mind preoccupied.

---

My body stumbles against an unstable world, heart  
struggles to grasp frailty-66 years, 25,000 nights.

For wisdom I carry a tablet or my smartphone.

For comfort I walk with sandals-no socks.

Holding everything so close to my heart—

Still no master of flesh and bone.

### **Antipasti**

Mushrooms slow dance

with the olives,

grateful for the beets,

holding onto

each other,

happy for the two-step

reflexive moment.

They don't want the

---

music to stop,  
ignore the  
sassy tomatoes  
with greasy leaves  
whispering unfiltered  
trash through their spores,  
try to evade  
the officious artichokes  
crisscrossing the dance floor,  
who admonish the pickles,  
*Keep your hands  
above the vines.*

**THE POET SPEAKS:** *I've always loved words-how they bang against my ears and the way they jump out of a page when I write poems. I can't sing, play an instrument, or paint, and I'm too lazy to write the Great American novel, but poetry provides an outlet for my creativity. Living in a college town, I'm exposed to sights and sounds from a constellation of cultures. When I ride the bus through campus, I create poetry from the body language and the sounds of speech around me. Reading the poetry of contemporary American writers such as Stephen Dunn and Tony Hoagland provide some of the models for how I want to respond to this non-stop stimulation.*

**BIO:** *Frank C Modica is a retired teacher who taught children with special needs for over 34 years. His writing is animated by interests in history, geography, and sociology. His work has appeared in Slab, Black Heart Magazine, The Tishman Review, Crab Fat Literary Magazine, and FewerThan500.*

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# MARITIME KEENING

*By Ayaan Elokobi*

**Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:** *I just love this. And we get so few Cameroonian-Somali poets—  
across the Gulf to the Horn. ‘Maritime Keening’: Are we lamenting the dead or  
something lost to  
the past? I have no shame in exposing my ignorance: I am more routinely unaware of it. I  
did  
not know that ‘shingle’ was a term for a pebbled and stone-covered beach. Is ‘a  
duplicitous  
lover’ one who gives and takes like the tides of an ocean goddess. Or is it? The duality of  
the  
seas lapping the Continent from Guinea to Aden. Nori I have come to learn is a kind of  
seaweed.  
Did someone down here get stabbed by a fisherman’s spear? Or is it an allegory for love  
unrequited? Even the line breaks and the face of the verse trace and take the shape of  
the  
jagged edges of South Africa. (It occurs to me I have droned on—twice as many words as  
comprised in the poem.) Yours to discover.*

## **Maritime Keening**

ocean goddess/  
i swim through the slips / soul slicked / fate drips /  
agonizing / antagonizing /  
stifled as the shingle shifts /  
walls grip / AS FLESH / drifts /  
a duplicitous lover / sinks ships /  
spiralling / drowning / *nori* crowning /  
in seashells / sliced down /  
to darkness /  
trident / salt / water / lungs /  
pining / breathe / her love /  
i’m done /  
done

**THE POET SPEAKS...** *I spent much of my young life never having seen the sea. The idea of it  
became like a  
romance, something I read about in books and heard tales of, and it grew in my imagination.  
When our*

---

*family relocated to live close to the sea, I flung myself toward it. After learning to swim, I went to the ocean every day. I challenged myself to reach a rocky outcrop and once almost drowned doing so. The poem was a way of remembering my early fixation with the sea, with all of its romance and danger swirling in the words.*

**BIO:** *Ayaan Elokobi is an unpublished poet (Until now. Eds.) with Somalian and Cameroonian roots. She is currently with no fixed abode, and writes wherever and whenever she can.*

---

# RECIPES and other poems...

By Jared Pearce

***Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:** WOW, Whoa! Read these Pearce Poems. It is a cookbook of head-and-heart **Recipes**. To quote Will Ferrell, as James Lipton, they are "Scrumtrulescent." Yes, I am this shallow by any comparison, let a pedestrian walk you through. **Center Piece** is as fertile as it is furtive: 'Only the warped and warbled / will wrangle the dying rays.' Who could write this stuff(!) '...Meaninglessness is nothing to me....' Time is just the yardstick of **space**: 'so smiles like chimeless faces paled, / our hands turned only where gears wore.' Ouch! Don't miss the rest. These are jewels in the Fleas' crown. Jared's submission is received with an enlightened gratitude...It would be fooling for me to critique the rest, and foolish of you if they remained unread...(Spacing poet's own) HS*

## Recipes

They've been inventing pies,  
cold cereal, cookie dough,  
double-deckers, every day  
another revelation pulled

from their wants and hot  
for the knife, no method  
or combination can't be,  
nor limits to effect.

Maybe we all dreamt that  
way, beginning with the base  
hope, beating in a leavener,  
whipping something smooth,

no cracks or burns or dying,  
no sense in failing.

## Center Piece

She cut all the mad zinnias,  
those kinked and curved,  
bushy and brute, and combed  
them into a glass, their wild

---

limbs and breaking heads  
still pushing against everything  
the wrong way, still bold  
for life against the settling

frost. The hibiscus, hydrangea,  
ecinachea are rolled to their beds.

Only the warped and warbled  
will wrangle the dying rays  
here, in the dining room,  
where she just wanted to talk.

**Baby, I'll get as fast as I can.**

She didn't directly fire  
me; she wants me to fill  
in the pink slip, push  
it out of the ditch, shovel  
a walkway through the ice.

When I empty my desk,  
a pack of cards, some dice  
are mine, and a stapler out  
of staples, only gumming  
books together. I'll take

the key to her, and she  
can have the concrete,  
the engine, and the building.  
Meaninglessness is nothing to me.

**Time is just the yardstick of space.**

I used to love her pretty feet  
until they kicked the clock in me,  
and choked the chance from her romance,  
and ticked the scale of difference,

so smiles like chimeless faces paled,  
our hands turned only where gears wore  
them so, the batteries dripping slow

---

toward dying talk, mechanic clunk.

I found no key to wind us up,  
nor counter weight to rouse the bird,  
the circled church, the kerchiefed maid  
distracting him from life and work.

I will not be a second. Cast the minute out,  
and drag me like an hurricane—  
the world might mean at each degree,  
so let's meet there and there be free.

### **Super Mario Sister**

She sat me down for time  
together; going first, her red  
fist pounding the bricks,  
fire from her face scorching  
a path, her raccoon tail,  
her shuttling tortoise shells,  
her mouth mushroom full.

She turned to me, all green  
to go, but I didn't know the jump,  
the clackity rhythm, that keeping  
my face to the ghosts kept  
them, that stepping, not swatting,  
bullets is key, that getting  
to the end is not the point.

### **Don't let it get behind you.**

Early thaw, dad and boy  
training catch, oversized  
ball between them.

The boy is to keep  
his knees bent, eyes  
focused, feet light.

It comes at him, a bounce  
then quick roll, a flurry

---

of commands.

His reaction becomes  
an instinct, a premonition,  
prognostication.

A man's armor cinches  
in back or flank;  
the action is no surprise,

only the preparation  
toward its coming  
and fearing he'll have

to chase it, losing.  
The sticks and dead  
leaves don't help,

but they stay at it:  
dad facing east, releasing  
sunsets to him.

**Having read a lot of abuse poems lately.**

How the egg boils is what  
I don't get: the heat,  
pressure, and the bird  
somehow alive inside  
its cave and melds  
death when the temp  
scalds the yolk, stiffening  
then freezing so  
it stays in place,  
silent and creamy.

Because I'm a man I can  
find this, make it  
sit, shake, beg a treat.  
Once I've cleaned it up  
I'll build it a little house  
out back and hang  
its name above the old towel  
doorway. I'll leave  
its food in a bowl,

---

water and walk every day.

I'll see how all the cars  
go against me,  
and I'll wonder at this,  
which makes my heart  
go weird as carrying  
a dozen eggs, all wobbling  
to take flight, feathers  
drying into beauty,  
hoping a splatter will  
split them into song.

### **I wouldn't understand.**

Homeless most of her life,  
she slept with her pals  
for a roof, she slept under  
shrubs for love, boarding  
schools and addict men

couldn't hold her. Her mom,  
she said, had to buck  
mid-century rules of dinner  
time and party invitations  
and the complicated codes

of dressing and undressing.  
Mom was sad at her  
chained stability, and she  
seemed relieved with pain.

### **Last Stand**

Dear *Poetry Magazine*, the long  
piece themed, Dissatisfied  
Black Man, was intensely dull,

and while reading it I recalled  
watching a drama written,  
directed, and acted by teenagers,

who had a lot to say, and said,  
with an overthetop bravado,

---

queasy to witness, which brings

up a letter I wrote to the Romantics  
some time ago, and which began  
with Homer's Host who

reminds Odysseus that we  
all have our troubles. Thus,  
in the spirit of public safety

I suggest no more poems  
as lame as the poem I'm writing,  
where the airing of personal hurt

force-marches public morality  
into having to listen to  
the airing of personal hurt:

keep to yourself your sex, your family,  
your dead, your race and religious  
persecution, all that matters

only to you should—and think  
of us kindly—stay with you, for  
despite the fashion, we don't

have to feel pity for you, your pity  
without power to catharsis.  
But when you can nurse your pain

and speak like Telemachus  
in the Assembly, a truth for all,  
then shear your beauty,

point its muzzle in my face point  
blank, and pull its  
trigger, pull its trigger.

**THE POET SPEAKS:** *I take poems from everyday life—my experiences, others' experiences—and encourage the poems to wring truth. I was about to say that I consider experiences true and otherwise, but then, as I thought about it, all experiences, even the fictional, are true. Reading: Ron Padgett, Todd Boss, Nate Pritts.*

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**BIO:** *Jared Pearce's collection, [The Annotated Murder of One](http://www.aubadepublishing.com/annotated-murder-of-one), was released last year by Aubade ([www.aubadepublishing.com/annotated-murder-of-one](http://www.aubadepublishing.com/annotated-murder-of-one)). His poems have recently been or will soon be shared in *The Coachella Review*, *Breadcrumbs*, *BlazeVOX*, *Panoplyzine*, and *Call Me [Brackets]*. Further: <https://jaredpearcepoetry.weebly.com>.*

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# NOT SO FAST and other poems

*By Chris Bullard*

**Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:** *There is something extraordinary about this poetry—I can't quite put my finger on it. The greatest rewards come from embracing that which is just out of reach. Having Bullard within your grasp is like discovering handles to/on doors you never knew were closed. I am in the habit of quoting excerpts from entries in order to entice you. It is not necessary here. He's like learning new words that describe feelings you have felt forever. Fernweh: A nostalgic longing for places you have never been...Who wouldn't want to know this guy? HS*

## Not so Fast

You may have sent me packing,  
but I'm not moving on to the next waiting area.  
It takes more than a blanching cold front  
to see me off with the Monarch multitudes.  
Tucked in among the mixed perennials,  
I've taken sanctuary with the garden gnomes.  
My little bros are as resolute as legionnaires.  
I've grown a plaster beard in solidarity.  
The dogs are on my side in this business  
of sniffing around your door for scraps.  
I've learned to lift a paw. I beg with the best of them.  
There's a good boy.  
My stubbornness has the monumentality

---

of some natural feature in an Ansel Adams print.

I look so good in your backyard

they're talking about making me into a national park.

The Jersey Boy hybrids have inflated to the size

of world-circling dirigibles. Uhm, tasty.

Mafiosa stop to have selfies taken with them.

The kukes show up like ICBMs on Google Maps.

You've got to stop thinking inside is paradise.

Out here, baby, it's all herbs and flowers karma.

You threw me out;

time to throw yourself out, too.

### **Memo to the Voice Actor**

I wanted a voice-over for "My Life" that was positive and uplifting.

The voice-over you provided is snickering and disdainful.

I specified a dignified, plummy British accent,

but your delivery is American, urban and sarcastic.

I wanted a voice-over that would brand my story as one of high importance.

Instead, you have delivered your line readings in mocking tones.

For example, where I enter a room and pick up a book,

you go off script and say, "Like the dick head read anything more than comics."

I must conclude that we no longer share the same aesthetic vision,

just as we no longer share a positive physical and emotional relationship.

Your insistence on imposing your own ideas upon my inner voice

is becoming destructive to this production as well as to my sense of self-respect.

---

Please perform your voice-over in a manner consistent with the story board I wrote.

Also, I am tired of hearing the laughter of your girlfriends in the audio background.

### **Fourteen Shades of Dark**

- 1) It was so dark you could set your watch by it
- 2) It was so dark that you couldn't see where you were in your dreams.
- 3) It was so dark that the white bishop and the black bishop kept traveling on the same diagonal.
- 4) It was so dark that it was impossible to read each other's thought balloons.
- 5) It was so dark that if you held your hand in front of your face you could only make out your face.
- 6) It was so dark that we kept tripping over the furniture even though we were standing still.
- 7) It was so dark that we gave all the awards to dead people.
- 8) It was so dark that when we stumbled off the cliff we didn't fall.
- 9) It was so dark that the police stopped shooting people because they figured they were probably just shooting other police.
- 10) It was so dark that our language only had one adjective left which was "dark."
- 11) It was so dark that when you tried to imagine what it would be like if things got darker you could only imagine things getting lighter though it would still be dark.
- 12) It was so dark that when our eye offended and we plucked it out we got bored and put it back in, again.
- 13) It was so dark that the government agents couldn't redact any of their memoranda, so all the secrets got released except we couldn't read any of them.
- 14) It was so dark we didn't notice how blind we were.

### **Angels**

flit through the aether like anxious light beams.

God's product design flaw

has left their radiant, sculpted faces without eyelids.

They can't grab forty winks.

---

To escape eternal consciousness they use their halos  
for nooses or batter their skulls  
against Heaven's border wall. Only china white  
offers them a momentary nod.  
Slip a bag between their feathers; they pay  
in redemption whatever its street price.  
Don't turn up begging for miracles empty-handed.  
They might kick you to hell  
and watch you go up in flames just as a distraction  
from the pain of always seeing glory.

**THE POET SPEAKS:** *I started writing poetry in school, but gave it up after college only to go back to it after a series of unfortunate events. Writing poetry is a way of organizing and recording my thoughts, but in such a way, I hope, that is not simply a recitation of instances that I find to be either beautiful or ugly. What is literal is usually boring and I try to write poems that do not bore the reader. It's hard to tell who and what has influenced me. Writers you hate may be more of an influence than writers you love. I have not consciously tried to write in the style of anyone else, but there are many writers I have tried my best to avoid imitating. If you are looking for someone to read, I would suggest Russell Edson, Ted Berrigan and James Tate.*

**BIO:** *Chris Bullard lives in Philadelphia, PA. He received his B.A. in English from the University of Pennsylvania and his M.F.A. from Wilkes University. Finishing Line Press published his poetry chapbook, Leviathan, in 2016 and Kattywompus Press published High Pulp, a collection of his flash fiction, in 2017. His work has appeared in recent issues of Nimrod, Muse/A Journal, The Woven Tale, Red Coyote, Cutthroat and The Offbeat.*

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# BEESWAX and other poems

By Gale Acuff

*Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:*

*For every boy who was ever ten years old, feeling outnumbered by the 'Trinity:' how could you not fall in love with a Sunday school teacher named Miss Hooker? 'Satan's rotten because he's sad and lonely and deeply in love.' Adam and Eve: messing with everybody's immortality—religiosity colliding with pubescence. If you are clever enough to live in the present, there are lots of moments here: Burying a pet: 'With that dirt God could make another dog.' (I went to school with a boy named Job Boyle; he's still on the dole. Parents can be cruel.) / 'Dangling on the cross' / '[Angels] got red hair and green eyes and freckles.' Read on, it gets even better; I'm running out of room. If Huck Finn had been a televangelist, I would have tuned in. (HOTS! Spacing is author's own.) HS*

## **Beeswax**

*Yes, Jesus loves me--He damn well better  
I holler at Preacher after church and  
Sunday School in the parking lot, I mean  
we were standing in the parking lot, not  
that that's where we hold church and Sunday School  
and then I ran off toward my house, my  
folks sleep late on weekends so it's just me or  
is that I to face off with God and not  
just God but Jesus and the Holy Ghost,  
they're the *Trinity* so it's 3 against  
yours truly, plus Preacher plus Miss Hooker  
(by my counting that ciphers 5-to-1)  
my Sunday School teacher and for ten years  
old I'm good but I'm not *that* good and they've  
got the Bible to back 'em up I guess  
and all I've got's my ignorance but I  
ought to be proud about something besides  
my clip-on bow tie and Thom McAns and  
spanking new underwear, if it was light  
or is that *were* would I let it so shine  
before men or hide it in a haystack,  
when is proud *too* proud and what happened be*

---

-tween me and Preacher is that I caught him with his eyes on Miss Hooker, I mean her ankles, they're mighty sound ones, too, they hold her right up straight even when she's sitting down and anyway *I* like her, too, that's a miracle in and of itself, she's old, 25, but she'll outgrow it, ha ha, and then I'll kind of catch up, so I told Preacher after class that Miss Hooker's *some kind of pretty, ain't she*, and he blushed and told me to mind my own *beeswax*, I guess he saw me seeing him see Miss Hooker, studying her is what he was doing and predicting the future, too, so he thinks, but that's what predictions are, just wishes, and so I gave him Hell in the parking lot like I guess Satan gave God but I have a theory, Satan's rotten because he's sad and lonely and deeply in love.

--Gale Acuff

In Sunday School this morning I winked at Miss Hooker, my teacher, while she was on about Jesus and some woman who was going to be stoned but he stopped the folks who had their rocks at the ready and then told the lot of 'em that whoever had no sin should fling the first one and then they

backed off and sneaked away and Jesus turned and told her *Now where are your accusers* but not in English, of course, anyway He added *Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more* or something like that and to tell the truth I wish I could have

---

followed her for the rest of her days just  
to see how her life panned out, it would  
make a Hell of a Hollywood movie,  
instead what we get is more Jesus 'til  
He was crucified, then rose, then ascended  
and then in the next book or six Paul goes ape

on Him and that's *Christianity* and  
after class Miss Hooker took me aside  
and thanked me for the wink but said I  
shouldn't be suggestive with a lady  
that way and wait at least until I'm grown  
to try it and watch myself even then,  
if I'm standing too close to her I might  
get slapped and hard and if I died right then

I'd wake up dead in Hell and all because  
I didn't know how to treat a lady  
so I apologized and Miss Hooker  
accepted that but halfway on my walk  
home I wanted to turn around and run  
back and thump her upside her head though not  
with a stone but a Good Book. *Her Good Book.*

--Gale Acuff

### **Do You Solemnly Swear?**

When I die it will be like being born  
but in reverse is what I learned at Sun  
-day School today so I don't need to be  
afraid, death's natural even if God  
made us not to die but Adam and Eve

crossed Him up kind of though that, too, was meant  
to be is what I'm taught, that's *religion*

---

for you, it doesn't make a lick of sense  
but what can you do but complain about  
the truth yet do nothing about it though  
sometimes I want to ask Miss Hooker if  
the truth she teaches is *really* the truth,  
the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but, but

something stops me, I think it's that I'd make  
her sad and someday when I'm grown I might  
want to ask her for a date, what the Hell,  
even marry her though she'll be an old  
woman, she's 25 now, that's fifteen years  
and that's my magic number, my favorite  
one and at the same time the one I most  
hate but that's life, even what you love you

lose or it will lose you, like your life, now  
you have it but one day and forever  
you won't, you'll be born like I say, only  
die but if Miss Hooker's going to then  
so will I, it's that or never see her  
again. Otherwise, I won't give an inch.

--Gale Acuff

## **Anniversary**

A year ago today I buried my

---

dog and now I'm out behind the garden  
to see if I can find his grave, which I  
never marked because it marked itself when  
I finished it, all that clean dirt piled on  
to make it a mound because he'd displaced  
some of it, about one dog's-worth, with his  
body. It was like setting him on top,  
in a way, even though he was beneath.  
If I find my dog's grave, then I'll find *him*.  
With that dirt God could make another dog,  
or maybe half a little boy--I'm just  
10 and small for my age and at 5 I  
didn't weigh much more than Caesar. He was  
famous, the real Caesar, I mean. The man,  
I mean. The big one, I mean. I can't find

the grave. All the grass back here looks the same.  
I'll get over that, I guess. It's more like  
he's run away than dead. I wonder  
if there's really a Heaven, like they say  
at church, and if he's in it and if I'll  
go and if we'll see each other up there,  
if Heaven's *up*. I'm pretty sure Hell's *down*  
and they're kind of opposite so that makes  
sense. If there's a God He wouldn't send him  
to Hell but I can't say the same for me  
--they say that plenty of people go there.  
He got run over on the highway. I

was asleep but I thought I heard a thump  
and a yelp and maybe a whine but  
went back to sleep, as if I had ever  
been awake. The next morning I saw him  
on the road and I rescued him, or his  
body, and buried him on an empty  
stomach all by myself--Father wasn't  
even up yet, or Mother. I started  
digging and got to enjoying it and  
I could've buried three dogs in that hole.  
Then I cried but that was alright because  
nobody saw me, unless there's a God,

or Caesar himself, if a soul has eyes,  
and if he has one, a soul, I mean. Then  
I went into the house and washed my hands

---

*(continued; no stanza break)*

and went into the kitchen for a bowl  
of cereal and sat down with Father  
and Mother and they asked me what I'd been  
doing and I started crying again  
and had to blow my nose in my napkin  
then had to get a clean one and said, I  
had to bury Caesar because he's dead.  
*Oh, I'm so sorry*, Mother said. *Me, too*,  
said Father. Yeah, I said. Do you believe  
in God, I asked them. *Why not*, said Mother.  
*Sure, I guess*, said Father. *Do you believe*,  
they asked. Yes, I say, but not when I think  
about Him. *Ah*, they say together, like

Adam and Eve. Now how do I know that?

--Gale Acuff

---

## Plenty

Monday through Saturday, no Miss Hooker  
but come Sunday I'm happiness again  
because she's my Sunday School teacher and  
I see her once more, in front of the room  
and telling us a good Bible story,  
David and Goliath maybe, or Job  
and all those boils all over him, and then  
there's Moses and what he did to free his  
people. I'm only 10. Will I ever  
free anybody or raise somebody  
from the dead? I guess not. It's enough to  
learn from the things that I can never do.  
Maybe that's as close as I'll ever come  
to being a hero but maybe it's  
plenty. Maybe that's what it means to be  
mature. Miss Hooker is. She's 25  
and that's pretty old. I'd like to have her  
for my wife someday but she'll have to wait  
and never marry anybody else  
until I'm old enough for her, 16  
or 18 maybe, to her 31  
or 33--that's how old Jesus was when  
He died but then of course He rose again,  
at least that's what the story says. I say  
that's probably good enough so if He  
didn't truly then I don't really care,  
it seems enough that we get together  
and talk about what's-what one hour a week,  
on the day when God, they say, rested from  
creating everything. I'm one of His  
creations, I guess. Mother and Father  
helped somehow--I don't know the skinny but

---

I expect that Miss Hooker will teach me,

say on our honeymoon, and I'm a good  
student, at least when I take notes and get  
enough sleep the night before, no ice cream  
or candy. In regular school I miss  
God and on Saturdays I just goof off.  
Miss Hooker says that God's with me always,  
Jesus dying on the Cross saw to that  
and it hurt like heck but no pain, no gain.  
If I studied harder I'd make good grades  
but I'm not strong enough yet on Sundays  
I sing my lungs out to the sweet old songs.  
Miss Hooker smiles at me. *You've got a good*

*(continued; no stanza break)*

*voice*, she said to me after class last week.  
*You sound inspired*, she added. That might mean  
that when I die I'm going to Heaven.  
I guess she ought to know. She's got red hair  
and green eyes and freckles. So do angels  
I bet. I may never get to Heaven  
but if I go to Hell God will be on  
my mind. That might ease the heat a little.  
But I put in my time at Sunday School  
so I hope that counts for something. Maybe  
God will give me an A for effort or  
at least a passing grade so I can move  
on--*up* I mean--to the City of God.  
Miss Hooker says there's no suffering there.  
I think she means she won't have so many  
freckles. I say you can't have too many.  
Job bore all those boils but look at him now.

--Gale Acuff

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## **Grappling**

Miss Hooker's my Sunday School teacher and  
I'd like to make sweet love to her but I  
don't know how and maybe I'm too young to  
know, I'm only 10 to her 25  
so she probably does but if not then  
I can teach her once I learn or if she  
knows then she can show me but it's a sin  
to make love if you're not married, I think.  
After Sunday School next week I could ask,  
ask Miss Hooker I mean--I asked Mother  
yesterday in the kitchen and she dropped

a bowl into the soapy water she  
was washing with and Father was drying  
and he got suds in his eyes and that's as  
close as I've ever come to seeing him  
or any other grown man cry, except  
for Jimmy Swaggart but that was only

---

TV and Father was watching with me  
and started laughing. Mother left the room  
but before she did she said she wouldn't  
come back unless Father changed the channel

so he went out to fetch her back but they  
went into their bedroom and never came  
out so I changed the channel to wrestling  
and watched Jimmy Snuka go up against  
Ole Anderson. It was a good match  
but Nature Boy Ric Flair interfered so  
Ole got disqualified. I wanted  
to go to their bedroom, my folks' I mean,  
and knock and ask them if they were alright  
in there and offer my services as  
a referee. *No blows below the belt.*  
*No foreign objects. Best two out of three.*  
*Pinfalls count anywhere in the building.*  
After a while I put myself to bed  
and lay there in the dark with Miss Hooker  
on my mind and all I can figure is

kissing's key in making love, and hugging  
too, and probably being naked, at  
night, like wrestlers almost are but don't love  
each other, but then again maybe they  
do, maybe fighting's another way to  
show it, and there are good guys and bad guys

*(continued; no stanza break)*

so I wonder which my folks are, and which  
Miss Hooker and I will be when we get  
in *the squared circle*, that's wrestling-talk for  
*the ring* and a way of saying *the bed*  
even though mine's shaped like a rectangle  
and is softer and there aren't any ropes  
but when I was a kid I had a crib  
with rails so I wouldn't hit the floor when  
I forgot where I was and was sleeping  
and dreaming. I guess that we'll have babies  
if we can swing them. How much do they cost?

---

--Gale Acuff

**Divine Comedy**

I love Miss Hooker. I'd marry her if  
I was older or she was younger but  
I'm 10 to her 25 so each night  
I pray that God will change the numbers so

---

that next morning we'll wake up the same sum  
and goofy about each other and then  
I'll go to her house, wherever it is  
(I guess God will map it out in my head)  
and knock on her door or maybe she'll be  
waiting on her porch, if she has one, for  
me, and then we'll shake hands and then we'll hug  
and then we'll kiss and maybe more than once  
and with all our lips to boot. We have four.  
And we'll close our eyes or they'll close themselves  
without us really thinking about it  
and I won't peek, I won't even try, like  
I do in Sunday School when she has me  
stand up and bow my head and close my eyes  
and lead us all in the Lord's Prayer. I  
spy her there in her chair and with her eyes  
closed and head bowed as if she's asleep or  
even dead and I imagine I kiss her  
and wake her. I'm a kind of Prince Charming,  
maybe. But sometimes I forget the words  
and stumble during the prayer, I mean  
with my brain, it trips over my tongue, so  
I have to close my eyes and concentrate  
on God and Jesus and that other world

where They live, and the only way we know  
it is to pray and sing and talk about  
the good old stories of the Bible, which  
is why Miss Hooker is our teacher, to keep  
us out of Hell, at least for as long as  
we're still in her class. And of course we want  
to go to Heaven one day, I mean when  
we die because that's the only way, no  
one gets in there alive, that's for sure, but  
if we can put up with being dead for  
just a short time then we get eternal  
life, forever, that is if we rate and  
don't get sent to Hell instead and the Lake  
of Everlasting Fire. I learned to swim  
last summer but that won't help me there, not  
that I expect to go but you never  
know. The thing to do, Miss Hooker says, is

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(continued; no stanza break)

never sin at all but of course we will,  
she says, because we're in a *fallen state*,  
no thanks to Adam and Eve, and so  
we have to try hard not to sin and not  
to want to sin and when we sin we must  
pray to God in Jesus' name to forgive  
us. We'd better not die in sin, either,  
she warns, which means don't die sinning because  
then we'll be too late to be forgiven.  
Whew. She sure knows her stuff and it would be  
a shame if after all she's done for me  
I wind up in Hell anyway. I hate

to disappoint her so if we married  
then maybe we could get in together,  
sort of like a package deal or two for  
the price of one. If God doesn't give us  
a miracle, or me one anyway,  
and make us both the same age tomorrow,  
then I'll just wait until I'm old enough,  
16 say, and all grown up, to ask her  
for her hand, and all the rest of her, too.  
She'll be 31 and that's not young but  
I don't care even though odds are she'll die  
before me and leave me lonely until  
I die, too, and go to be with her, if  
I haven't sinned too much since she left me,  
of course. But if I've been a good man then  
I'll meet her up in Heaven and, damn, will  
we have a reunion. Holy cow. If  
we have hands we'll shake them and if arms we'll  
hug each other and if lips we'll kiss them.  
If there's a way to get closer than that  
I'd sure like to know what it is. I guess  
I'll find out. But if we never marry  
and I happen to get into Heaven  
anyway I'll be sure to seek her out,  
if I have eyes to see and ears to hear.

--Gale Acuff

---

## Honeymoon

I have parents and they love me and my  
dog loves me and I guess Jesus loves me,  
that's what the song says--why would a song lie?  
--and God and maybe the Holy Ghost, Who  
-ever that is, exactly, but I need  
more, more love, or love of a different kind,  
the kind I could get from Miss Hooker, my  
Sunday School teacher and a damn good one  
and a real beauty, too, red hair and green  
eyes and more freckles than I've ever seen  
on any one face before, let alone  
her neck and arms and legs, if it's no sin  
to say so--I can't help but notice them.  
Last night I dreamt I married Miss Hooker  
and on our honeymoon I asked her what  
she wanted to do, anything at all,  
and she said, I'll do anything you want  
to do, Honey, so I said, Okay, let's  
play checkers for a while, then watch TV  
because the Braves are on, and read comic  
books. Then we can have pizza rolls and  
french fries and maybe ice cream for dessert,  
Neopolitan because we're married  
and that's special, and then we can play cards.  
Well, alright Honey, she says--you know just  
how to treat a woman. I think I blushed  
because I wanted her to be satisfied.  
So we had a busy night and we both  
won at checkers and cards, even-Steven,  
and didn't bother to break the tie or  
pretend we were in the championship  
like I do with guys because we're married  
now and to each other so equally,  
I mean Miss Hooker and I, not my pals  
and I. And the Braves even won their game,

---

though it took extra innings. And then

it was time for bed and we were pretty  
sleepy after all that fun and we saw  
each other naked and she's got freckles  
everywhere and I told her so and  
this time Miss Hooker was the one who blushed.  
Then we put on our pajamas and crawled  
into bed and kissed a couple of times  
like we meant it, which we do--did, I mean  
--and shook hands and rolled over, then out

*(continued; no stanza break)*

of nowhere I heard a voice asking, Do  
you want to make a baby, and it was  
Miss Hooker's voice but it sounded kind of  
husky, kind of deep and growly, so I  
said, Well, just what do you want me to do?  
Then I woke and it was time for Sunday  
School so I still don't see how you make them,  
babies I mean, but I was pretty close,  
in bed with a woman and the lights off  
and our teeth brushed but come to think of it  
we forgot to say the Lord's Prayer before  
we fell asleep and maybe that's what does  
it, that or a secret one for after.  
If I dream it again I'll remember  
and when I'm all grown up, I'm only 10,  
and I still don't know the secret then I'll  
ask it on my wedding night. Then Bingo.

--Gale Acuff

---

## Exodus

In Sunday School today Miss Hooker said  
*Let my people go!* Or Moses said that  
to Pharoah, not to me. But then again  
maybe I have some, people I mean, I  
keep as slaves but not real slaves but slaves all  
the same. I have to think about that one.  
And I don't live in a pyramid or  
wherever Mr. Pharoah lived. I live  
in a little white frame house about one  
mile from church so I walk here and of course  
back again. It's a kind of *exodus*,  
unless that's one of those new foreign cars.  
I forget. And I sleep in the attic.  
Maybe that's a kind of upper room.  
I'd like to try a manger out to see  
what that sleeps like but I'm ten years old so  
it might be a little small for me but  
just right for Jesus, even though He was  
--or is--a kind of king, even bigger  
than old Pharaoh but a little later  
in history. I'm not stupid--so what

---

if I failed the second grade. Not by much,  
I'm proud to say. It's not false pride, either.  
But the only slaves I think I own are  
my dog and goldfish but I treat them right.  
They're free to come and go as they please--well,  
not the goldfish, they would drown in the air.  
And my dog doesn't seem to want to leave.  
Good boy. But I do have parents, Father  
and Mother, I mean. Father goes to work.  
He's a geography teacher so we're  
poor. Mother stays at home but still works hard.  
She works hard for Father and me and he  
works hard for us and maybe I don't work  
as hard for them as they do for me but  
that's natural, I guess, and I'm a lot  
smaller and not so educated and  
I don't drive or shave. Not that Mother does,  
shave I mean, unless you count her legs. She  
has two, last time I checked. Ha ha. Maybe  
I do own slaves, then. I hadn't thought much  
about it. I don't have much to think with  
yet. One day I'll have more. Then they'll be free,  
Father and Mother. I'll let my people

*(continued; stanza break)*

go, but by leaving them. I'll graduate  
and get a job and get married and have  
babies and be *their* slave. That's what you call  
justice. I'm going to pay for my crimes.  
I just hope that I don't go to Hell but  
if I do and I should see that Pharaoh  
I hope he doesn't laugh at me. Too much.  
Anyway he drowned and now he's in hot  
water again in the flames of Hell or  
something like that. If he laughs at me I'll  
point that out, that God made him all wet, then  
turned up the heat. If he says back, *You're here,*  
*too,* I'll say, *Well, yeah, but I'm proud to be.*  
*So there.* And that he let my people go.

---

--Gale Acuff

**THE POET SPEAKS:** *In things seemingly ordinary there exists enough – perhaps – of everything; the work (and it is “work”) of the poet is to seek it, recognize it, and articulate it contextually so as to clarify and entertain (not that clarification is greater than entertainment). No exaggerating is necessary to the realization that common matters are excellent enough in themselves but sometimes require help in the revealing, one which is not the product of the imagination (I mean what was once called fancy) but the facilitation thereof. The work becomes less frustrating when one reads other poets (and other writers of all kinds) to learn not just what they’ve learned but how they’ve learned it, their means to the ongoing-end. I think that my work has been influenced (inescapably) by Wordsworth, Whitman, and Frost, but also the rhythms found in good prose, especially fiction and the personal essay – oh, by any good writing, and (ha ha!) by bad as well. Poetry is a way of urging the world to introduce the oneself to oneself. Such is shyness.*

**BIO:** *I have had poetry published in Ascent, Chiron Review, McNeese Review, Adirondack Review, Weber, Florida Review, South Carolina Review, Carolina Quarterly, Arkansas Review, Poem, South Dakota Review, and many other journals. I have authored three books of poetry: Buffalo Nickel (BrickHouse Press, 2004), The Weight of the World (BrickHouse, 2006), and The Story of My Lives (BrickHouse, 2008). I have taught university English in the US, China and the Palestinian West Bank.*

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# Yesterday's Doorway and other poems...

By Susan Dale

*Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: The most beautiful poetry is so often written in pain. Ridding those from our hearts and off our chests will forever remain a universal language of latter rejoicing.... Yesterday's Doorway and The House Where I Live do this; as does The Color of Time. With hope, words can make us hurt less, in so much, as they can harm. Here is to Hope. Whoever left this person must be sorry not to be saddened by the loss of forsaking such a profound being: ... 'How deep our shadows / In doorways where once we stood / Thin, distant figures / Etched in soft strokes' ... 'Our dreams burnt scarlet by sunsets of delirious colors / To be measured by the star spun seconds / Of the hours in our time.' ... I invite you to delight or disparage in everything in between...What maybe even more tragic is that we are forever attempting to make people who we wished they were...but who knows? We are often, as well, better for being rid of them..(Spacing is poet's own.) HS.*

## Yesterday's Doorway

How deep our shadows  
In doorways where once we stood  
Thin, distant figures  
Etched in soft strokes  
What always we knew  
But didn't know we knew  
Being caught in a downpour of melodies  
The truth of them shining  
In a sun gone to sea  
Thinking for a thousand miles

---

Of earth to time

Of songs on slow journeys

And life quick as a eulogy

Over our buried secrets

### **The House Where I Live**

You've not seen the house where I live

Have you?

It sits among cubicles of memories

But impulses older than thought

Yearn to see you

If you're driving down route four

There's a road where dreams

Will trip you up at a lonely corner

There, turn then drive through

Winds whispering secrets

Come to a yard bordered by lilacs

The lilacs tight with purple bundles

Bloom in late spring

When the air is crystal

And poke up among the tall pines

that sway

---

In their long green gowns

This yard:

the one where you will feel passionate distances

And time beating in metronomes

There, Stop!

In back of the lawn

spread fields with fierce blades

Of winter wheat sprouting up within

The recent spheres

Of winter-white serenity

Knock on the door; say-

“I heard this is where you live.”

“Oh, come in and I will show you

A window in the kitchen

Where I watch the sun come up

In explosions of color

And while coffee is brewing

Steam rises above the cupboards

And leaves kisses on the windows

“Sugar, cream?” I ask, like once I did in another house

Far off in another year

The year when our hours

fell through sand

---

And you said, “Black” in that narrow passage of the then

When time paused to stand still

But that was in another house

A house of babies and diapers

Of wooden toys, clothes to fold

Those walls harbored memories

This house: the one you haven’t been to

Has echoes in the ceilings

But no words between us

There is instead a clock that tick-tocks

Through the annals of time

And an energy that spills out to listen

You’ve not pulled up, have you

When I was spading ground

Or yanking weeds with fierce aplomb?

Stopped, on the curb with motor running

Or in the stone driveway

When spring was in a sun’s lingering smile

And the air moist with rebirth?

“Just driving by and thought I’d stop

and say: what?

So this is where you live?

I wondered if you were you.”

---

Then would come a sadness  
That stops further words from being said  
Instead, a cup filled with silence  
Would spill into the moments  
Of coming together when we didn't  
Come now, let's not be melancholy.  
Instead, I will show you a sunny lane  
Where birds gossip  
through long summer days  
And point out an alcove between the pink almonds  
Where daffodils nod in glorious gold dances  
And surges of light  
Where soar Van Gogh sunflowers  
That follow a map of the sun  
I'll take you to the back garden  
Where roses nap on a barn roof  
That sizzles in the bronze body of July  
"But what to do about the willow?" I would ask  
You, always practical, would say, "Cut it down  
It's too close to the house."  
"But birds' nests are fashioned  
In those vines climbing up the tree  
In them reel intoxicated butterflies

---

And ephemeral flowers that bloom in the clouds

The bees, the pale moths

How to lose them forever?"

Caught, we would be

Between crossed-out words

That crumble in realizations

And the souls of songs

That once passed our way

But in a slow reckoning moment

I would have to agree

"Yes, that is the way life often is

Ours, when you didn't stop

To see the house where I live."

### **The Color of Time**

Our dreams with tendrils,

coiling to climb the tree of life

And swim with a bruised moon

and a cup of stars poured into the sky

Fragile the spring petals

falling from flowers

blooming under the light that left us

---

we stumbled blindly through our days  
Until spring ... traipsing off with minute winds  
To summer with fat fingers and firm feet  
and full crowns of treetops  
Syllables of light galloping across the skies  
in three-quarter rhythms  
to the glory of fecundity  
suffocating the meadows with  
A bonfire sun and barefoot dances  
Gliding down rivers and hours  
In our sampans too wide  
Our dreams too heavy  
for the narrow canals we sailed  
The noose of our fears  
strangling us  
The monopoly others had on luck  
A lady they courted with lusty songs  
and syrupy endearments  
Lady luck on the balconies  
we sat beneath  
wearing masks to shield our faces  
from the desires shackling us  
The fingers of mortality

---

squeezing, tightening

The solemn command that brought autumn

with gold veins and cream clouds

To winter waiting in the sacristy

We stepped up to an altar of chalky skies

and the silence of frozen years,

And frozen tears of snow

The waves of winds, the stone cold silence

Filaments of white lights

Leather straps binding us to our pasts

The powerful jaws of our determinations

Wrapping to clamp down on the

Skeletons of the dead

searching for old lovers with hollow cheeks

carrying dreams they'd long outgrown

Caught we were in whispery webs

We, with moth wings

Trying to find the light of life,

We beat ourselves to shreds

Our dreams burnt scarlet by sunsets of delirious colors

To be measured by the star spun seconds

Of the hours in our time

---

**THE POET SPEAKS:** *My poems are inspired by what is happening in my life and in the world. I don't have any stylistic influences. I just write them and then go over the poems until they flow: often the rhythm and the rearranging of words take time. I love poetry, both to read and write. The darkness of Shakespeare, the melancholia of Archibald MacLeish, the spontaneity of Pablo Neruda, the genius of Emily Dickinson, the variety of Larry Smith. All of them and more are inspirations to me. Poetry is important to me because I love it.*

**BIO:** *Susandale's poems and fiction are on WestWard Quarterly, Mad Swirl, Penman Review, The Voices Project, and Jerry Jazz Musician. In 2007, she won the grand prize for poetry from Oneswan. The Spaces Among Spaces from languageandculture.org has been on the internet. Bending the Spaces of Time from Barometric Pressure is on the internet now.*

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# FOUR POEMS

**By John Guzlowski**

*Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: These four are a treat. Who says little has been written about Shakespeare? Plumbing the depths of his genius: 'He loved carrots / and fresh bread' '... and lost as Jesus / from a long way off' '...there is more hope / than silence' I love this inversion of the "Lost Generation" squandering their roaring 20's. It was the 30's, the depression years, eking out 'the generations of loss.' And the pathetic fallacy that nature, somehow, heeds us: 'When the flood came, / it didn't listen.'*

*From the "Bard of Avon," and his passion for carrots, to Kafka in Bed: 'He feels the earth pass / through the moon's shadow.' What a line to allow alight on your mind and let linger? From what I know of Arabic folklore, you are wise to follow your moon shadow, wherever it leads, should it appear—whispers of Yusuf.*

*No need to stroke this chap's ego, the rest of the world got to him first. See how Fleas can soar...(Spacing is the poet's own.) HS*

## **What Shakespeare Loved**

He loved carrots  
and fresh bread

loved to watch  
the grayness of winter  
descend in December

loved to feel the snow  
on his face and beneath  
his feet

loved April  
with its sweet showers  
too

It all reminded him  
of when he was a kid,  
waking in his mother's arms

## **The Moon is a Cat**

---

The moon listens  
like an old cat  
for the whisper  
that means food

For the meteors  
that still lift dust  
when they fall

For the light  
that comes cold  
and lost as Jesus  
from a long way off

In a sky dark  
and starry as always  
there is more hope  
than silence

### **The Language Poor People Use**

I grew up listening  
to the words of the poor,  
farm people and refugees  
who had lost everything,  
again and again,  
beyond all  
the generations of loss.

They had words:  
bread and rain,  
winter and trees,  
hunger and love.

But most of the time  
they didn't speak them.  
They knew these words  
were useless.

When the flood came,  
it didn't listen.

---

## **Kafka in Bed**

The sheets are clean  
The room is dark and quiet

He feels the earth pass  
through the moon's shadow  
and he remembers his mom  
asking for soup,  
his dad singing a song  
in Yiddish about geese  
flying low across the sky

Perhaps  
if there was a moon  
it would listen  
like an old cat  
for the whisper  
that means food

For the meteors  
that still lift dust  
when they fall

For the light  
that comes cold  
and lost as Jesus  
from a long way off

Outside someone  
Walks by.

Kafka wonders,  
Why do I feel this?  
Why this?

He knows  
he would rather  
touch the moon  
than make sense  
of his own dreaming.

---

## THE POET SPEAKS:

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*Why do I write about what I write about?*

*The muse. She speaks to me, and I write. What choice do I have?*

*She used to tell me to write about my parents and their experiences in the German concentration camps in WWII, and that's what I wrote about, and then one day, she told me to write about something else, some goofy stuff that had nothing to do with my parents, and I wrote about that and continue to write about what she wants me to write about.*

*I write about snow and sparrows, the world in the morning, the world at night, the friends who are still here and wondering where I've gone to, and the friends who are waiting in their graves for my memories to give them some breath.*

*I write about God and aging, my wife and my family, the way a door closes and the way a door waits to be opened.*

*I write about standing at a bus stop in Chicago in the pearly gray rain waiting for a passing crucifixion just the way I did when I was a kid 50 years ago.*

*When I first started writing, I thought the idea of a muse was just a gag, some bullshit left over from the Greeks. But then I met a terrific poet named Gray Jacobik who said, "Listen to your muse." And I thought she was kidding me too, but she wasn't. She believed all writers and artists have a muse, someone who speaks to them.*

*I finally came to believe it after that. What I noticed was that thoughts and words were always popping into my head, and I didn't know where they were coming from, but there they were, and I had to write them down immediately because the muse wasn't going to whisper twice what she whispered once.*

*Is the muse real? I don't know, but what I do know is that I have to listen to this voice and write down everything that it says to me because some of this stuff is really really good.*

**BIO:** *John Guzowski's writing appears in Rattle, North American Review, and many other journals. Echoes of Tattered Tongues, his memoir about his parents' experiences as slave laborers in Nazi Germany, won the Benjamin Franklin Poetry Award and the Eric Hoffer/Montaigne Award. He is also the author of the Hank and Marvin mystery novels (reviewed in the New York Times) and a columnist for the Dziennik Zwiazkowy, the oldest Polish daily newspaper in the US. He has been nominated 2 times for the*

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*Pulitzer Prize, 7 times for the Pushcart Prize, and 3 times for Best of the Net. Always a bridesmaid.*

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## WHEN YOU SAID YOU LOVED ME and other poems...

By Angelica Liu

***Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:** Reading these are a pleasure and a treasure. When did poetry cease to be about love? How mistaken can anyone be reading this: 'When you said you loved me / you looked upward / your pale blue eyes / anchored at a quiet corner.' Do people look left or right when they are prevaricating, misrepresenting themselves or lying? That is for the face-scientists to figure out. How is it that everyone loses a love? And, yet, there is still so much love lost-and-found to go around? Liu speaks so beautifully in her verse, why don't you just find your way and find out why? 'Buds of kisses / Ready to burst:' [These are a shout-out to Pat and George(personal)] Shit[bold], the next poem was exactly that—what if Liu made a habit of someone else feeling good about themselves...? HS*

### When You Said You Loved Me

When you said you loved me  
you looked upward  
your pale blue eyes  
anchored at a quiet corner  
like a ship from  
across the glittering ocean  
that lay at my harbor.  
I willingly boarded your ship  
and together we sailed  
to the distant horizon.

### The Rhythm of Love

Silent music  
Fizzy sparkles  
Buds of kisses  
Ready to burst  
I could feel my body

---

As bent as a bow  
And as stretched as a string  
Melodies flew out  
As natural as milk and honey  
To an unstoppable rhythm  
We slowly rocked...  
The rhythm of love.

### **Ageless Love**

I feel love  
I read love stories  
I watch love movies  
I have a great discovery about love  
Love is of so many different shapes  
and takes so many different routes  
but love is always young,  
which begs a question:

If love is ageless,  
why aren't we?

### **Shit**

I know life has ups and downs,  
Swings from high to low,  
but  
now  
I feel stuck in limbo  
Hung in midair like a pendulum  
That has lost its momentum  
Struggling against a dark desire  
To crash to the ground.

Swarms of annoying thoughts  
Hum around and around  
Like flies you can't wave off  
Thoughts  
That  
Make me feel like shit....

---

## PERCEPTION

It's strange that when I think of you,  
I don't consider any external factors like  
culture, age or physical distance.  
You are you, and nobody can be you.  
I know other people will think we are insane  
if they know the details of our story,  
but between you and me,  
everything is so right.  
When we are together,  
we are like two adolescents  
stealing kisses inside a hallway...  
Maybe we were adolescent lovers  
in our past life!  
Some may say  
that these are all temporary illusions.  
After all, love is blind.  
Once the passion fades,  
love fades and reality asserts itself.  
But we know that is not true,  
for us.

You say there may have been other possibilities.  
It all depends on earlier choices.  
You say there must be some great purpose  
In our coming together.  
I don't agree.

I believe our love itself  
Is the great purpose!

## PARADISE OF LOVE

We slipped into the park  
A moonlit night  
Hand in hand  
Like teenage lovers  
We walked on the soft moist grasslands  
The tangled hair  
Of the succulent lake  
Opening her legs

---

To her moon lover above  
The paradise of forbidden love

Couples scattered  
Like singing insects  
Curled close to the ground  
Kissing  
Touching  
Moaning  
Loving  
Only we were standing  
With our bodies connected.

My softness  
Your hardness  
Pieces of our nakedness  
Shone in the moonlight  
Rustling nature surrounded us  
Like velvet skin shivering in passion  
You dove into the lake  
Between my thighs  
Pleasure exploded through my being  
My conscious mind collapsed

Leaving me to wonder  
If the lake shimmered in the moonlight  
Because of its own orgasm  
Or mine....

### **Waiting**

A man is waiting  
at the entrance of a metro station.  
He holds an umbrella in his hand  
like a knight holding a sword.  
Every few minutes  
the ground vibrates beneath his feet  
faint subterranean rumblings  
as if the whole station is breathing.  
Its blood vessels are deeply buried.  
With every contraction of a strong heart

---

the black blood is pumped out  
and diffused to the expanse of a giant body  
like a dark flower slowly spreading its petals.  
The man patiently waits.  
Then another tide of faces floats out  
There, in the midst of hundreds of ravaged flowers,  
a fresh smile blooms for him like a morning daisy,  
a svelte flame dances closer in his eyes.  
The man waits for his love to walk into his arms.  
He holds his umbrella in his hand  
like a knight clutching a bouquet of red roses.

## **She**

She's in me  
A friend, a sister, a *potentia*  
She is the younger me  
She is the older me  
She is the braver me  
She is the wiser me  
She is the hostess in the dreamland at night  
She is the guide through deserts in the day  
When she opens her eyes in me, I know  
Because the city looks different  
The trap of steel and concrete has become  
A forest rich with manifestations and signs  
Sunlight kisses me, leaves dancing  
People passing by like vessels on the sea  
Their journey is not under the foot  
But deep down beneath the surface  
Inward to the center of universe  
That's how I reach out to her  
She is to me like the moon to the sun  
The acorn to the oak tree  
The map to the treasure hunter  
She's the reason for my being.

## **THE WHITE CAT**

Once I encountered a white cat in a dream  
I was back in high school--a shy, unconfident girl.

---

I was sitting at a desk against the wall.  
That enchanting creature just appeared from nowhere.  
It appeared on my lap, incredibly beautiful and alluring.  
In a sluggish manner she stretched out her purely white body.  
I was mesmerized by her.  
I began to stroke her back the length of her body.  
The arch of her back continued through her slender tail.  
I could feel her elegant curve under my touch---  
An inner pliability wrapped in a boneless softness.

She slowly turned around and looked back at me,  
Her soul-to-soul gaze stunned me into a state of awareness,  
I must have known her for all time, I thought.

That day, when we were in that hotel room,  
I was opening my body to you,  
and I stretched out my body to the greatest extent.  
I crossed my hands under my head,  
I lay on my back and looked at you  
Your eyes and hands touring my body  
I felt a boundless freedom between us  
I never felt so shameless  
I only wanted to open myself wider to you,  
I only wanted to merge into one with you.  
I held your head tightly with my arms.  
That was the moment when I felt we were almost one---  
To rub my burning face against yours,  
To exhale my heavy breath near to your ear,  
To be deeply breathe in your masculine smell,  
To dance with you to the most instinctual rhythm...

And suddenly I knew the white cat I encountered in my dream  
The white cat  
Was my own soul,  
And it was you  
Who set her free....

### **Some Days**

Some days are faceless,  
Like the reticent shadows

---

Of their buoyant sisters.

Infertility in the air,

Giving no sight of

The fruit of possibility....

**THE POET SPEAKS:** *I love poetry. It is the dance of the heart choreographed by the soul. And, I love the English language. I reside in China, and English is my second language, but in poetry it is my only language. I find the possibilities for expression in English so immense and thrilling that each poem I write is a literary exploration. I write about life, love, emotions and the quantum soul. In this collection, I have tried to capture the intensity of quantum love in both a spiritual and sensual sense as contrasted to those days when love is not enough.*

**BIO:** *Angelica Liu is a teacher, a blogger, and a poet living in Hangzhou, China. She's never been to an English speaking country, but she strives to write for an American audience. She has a passion for Jungian psychology, quantum physics, romantic love, and Starbuck's coffee.*

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# CORTISOL and other poems...

By Robert Beveridge

*Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: There is something quite exquisite in these writings. Poets appear to me to be people who do not put up walls or shield themselves from others; they remain forever open, letting the world reflect straight into their souls un-refracted, which makes them both courageous and most vulnerable. Beveridge invites us to do this, his use of language and themes are fascinating to me. I think my favourites here are CORTISOL and POETRY TWO, but it is hard to choose—who hasn't lamented that scrap of paper misplaced or the perfect lines accidentally deleted. Find yours, read and be inspired to write '...the pencil your enemy.' (Spacing is poet's own.) HS*

## CORTISOL

The sleeper metabolizes citrus,  
sprouts, the motif of stucco  
in Luchino Visconti's mid-period  
filmography. The IV keeps him  
hydrated, dulls the worst  
of the pain, but the fog rolled  
in this morning and isn't like  
to burn off until the clouds  
unleash their payload over a world  
that could be just the same  
as yesterday's, or could be  
tomorrow's zombie apocalypse  
today. Where were you when  
the Great Coma of 2016 fell upon us?  
Asleep in your easy chair, lost  
in dreams of what used to be,  
unable to remember breakfast  
but with perfect recall of the 1979  
Windies? You're not alone. We all  
watched *Sullivan's Travels* too many  
times for our own good, relied  
on Poverty Row to give us  
the promised happy ending.

## JORNADA

**A single boat  
passes as you sit on the bridge.  
Another two days  
and it might all have worked.  
You can't remember**

---

**the last time you had a cigarette  
or tore the sky  
with pincers.  
A cat leaps onto your knee,  
then bounds off the way it came.**

## **LEXICON**

**The redwoods are thick, impenetrable  
on their own, but the thorns burst  
from the ground, slithered up trunks  
like buttered tendrils of blueberry  
waffle. Turned an entire forest  
into a hedge that brooks neither  
error nor erasure. The letters little  
more than lines in occult formations  
to your eyes, the pencil your enemy.  
And the only tree with a tunnel  
through its bole hit the ground  
last weekend in a storm.**

## **A MINUTE TO PRAY**

**Trencher holds as many coal  
biscuits as they think you  
can swallow. Even the sun  
has turned its back on you,  
wretch, though your keepers  
have not yet seen fit to divulge  
your transgression, or even  
whether one exists. Another  
few days and it's possible  
the green-screen prophecy will  
come true: you will die  
of dysentery. You can feel  
it well in the deepest recesses**

---

**of your bowels, as immanent  
and sure and the knowledge  
that you've forgotten your  
girlfriend's birthday, or whether  
she prefers McDonald's fries  
to Burger King's. What can  
you do, other than look out  
the window and reflect upon  
the canned hams that block  
your view of a sunless sky?**

**167**

**In the dream the boat carries  
us to the correct destination  
but I cannot remember  
what that destination is**

**In the dream the man  
in the funeral suit and black  
top hat orates while he stands  
in front of us in line turned  
around to look straight at you**

**In the dream the toucan pecks  
at your head and we hear  
the sound carry across the endless  
water but what it bounces off  
to feed its echoes we cannot see**

**In the dream we are whole, our  
bodies are not broken, when we  
listen we hear, when we walk  
we move across the deck  
and do not fall against the mast**

---

**In the dream we take turns  
with the spyglass while we mop  
the deck and we tell each other  
that when the deck gets cleaner  
we will see a promontory  
and it will welcome us**

**In the dream it is beans and rice  
again and a squeeze of lime  
in the whiskey jug to keep  
our teeth in our mouths**

**In the dream the sun never  
rises, never sets, is always  
just at the point where the clouds  
are either black or red  
as if they have never been white  
In the dream I never thing  
to ask if you remember when  
we boarded or where we come from**

## **PERCH**

**The bark of the heart tree  
under our palms is rough,  
hand- and footholds hidden only  
to those who would not climb.  
The branches above do not offer  
comfort, shelter to just anyone.  
From the highest, it is said,  
those who sit hand in hand  
can see eternity, what is beyond  
the horizon, or maybe just  
their own desires reflected.**

**I have discovered the secret:**

---

**to love the climb as much  
as the promise of destination.  
And so it is that, tangled in your limbs,  
I see all those things  
in the salt-slick twining of our fingers.**

## **POETRY TWO**

**I write this poem  
in a notebook  
called Poetry II  
because the first  
one got stolen  
along with a hundred fifty  
bucks' worth of books  
and my favorite pipe.**

**There were two original  
poems in that notebook  
that I hadn't put on  
the computer yet.  
They were worth  
more than the books to me,  
and even though the pipe  
wasn't meerschaum,  
it was a sentimental  
favorite, but the poems  
were still worth more.**

**So I bought another notebook  
six months ago,  
and I've been trying to rewrite  
those two poems  
again ever since**

---

## **ROCK SALT**

**The crack in the wall  
of the universe lets out  
the entropy, the matter,  
the spilled cheese  
on the floor of the movie  
theater. Sweat collects  
behind your knees, the secret  
ingredient in your world-  
famous tortellini. A few  
words in an ancient tongue  
as it goes into the oven  
and it never comes out wrong,  
and your clay bakeware  
has yet to fail you.**

## **SAWFISH 3AM**

**Most people don't know  
that the the collective  
of sawfish is the confederacy**

**like larks come in exaltations  
or soldiers in bodybags**

**There's an aquarium  
full of confederate sawfish  
in front of my hand**

**that holds the glass  
with the muddled mint,  
the ice, the bourbon**

---

**with just a drop of filter water**

**and in the model of the burnt  
house amidst the gravel I think  
I see the bones of our soldiers  
STUCK**

**I whisper the names  
of the things around me  
wish I could  
reach out to grasp them  
one by one**

**but my arms are bound  
my hands can touch nothing  
save one another**

**these things manifest  
in stone, in tarmac**

**lamp  
in a pile of asphalt**

**desk  
in a hunk of concrete**

**greeting card  
in a vault of slag**

**forbidden desire in a beehive**

**but I cannot reach out**

**THE POET SPEAKS: My inspirations for these pieces  
were all over the map—unsurprising, given that the oldest of**

---

them ("Poetry Two") is from somewhere in 1987-88 and the most recent ("167") is from earlier this year. The common theme that runs through them is pop culture, or at least the weird way I define pop culture (most, I hope, would pick up the Flesheaters riff in the title for "A Minute to Pray", and almost as many would pick up the Svankmajer nod in the opening lines, but "Sawfish 3AM" is entirely down to my friendship with Philly poet Stan Heleva in the early nineties, and specifically his poem "McClellan"). "Jornada" riffs on John M. Bennett's piece of the same title from his 1992 chap *Was Ah*, "Poetry Two" from Bukowski (I was keeping up pretty steadily with him at the time, so it had to be something from *You Get So Alone...*). Most of the rest... oh, no. "Cortisol" is the title of a compilation cassette released on ZNS Tapes in the late eighties, that I didn't discover until decades later, but ZNS were one of the hubs of European industrial music, which has been as pervasive an influence on my work as damn near anything else.

The only thing missing from that flood of influence is the dada/surreal bent that comes out in nearly everything I do (poetry, music, media criticism, cooking, you name it). I cut my teeth on Michael Benedikt's *The Poetry of Surrealism* anthology in the early eighties; Michael Hamburger's translation of Apollinaire's "Zone", and Benedikt's own translations of Daumal, are still some of the things in this world I love best. They helped me see, as an outcast-by-choice high school student, that in order to find meaning in the world, you have to look at it perhaps a few degrees from true and see if you could dig up something interesting in the innards. I've been doing it ever since.

**BIO: Robert Beveridge (he/him) makes noise ([xterminal.bandcamp.com](http://xterminal.bandcamp.com)) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in *Collective Unrest*, *Cough Syrup*, and *Blood & Bourbon*, among others.**

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## **DAR ÁRBOLES/ GIVING TREES DECALOGUE**

**New Yorker, 22 July 2019**

### **1. Roach Motel Under The Banyon\* Tree?**

**"A rose by any other name would smell as sweet."  
-- William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet (II, ii, 1-2)**

**For a strong stretch, Sarnat has belonged  
to two men's groups. Gerry is youngest member  
of one where he learns tons from their life experiences**

**although eldest in the other whereby default  
I teach. Former winkingly calls itself "Dharma Punks,"  
latter wincingly "Sangha's Sour Old-Timers."**

**But while first prefers check-in schmoozing,  
second can't get enough off our chests mumbling  
about walk-the-talk convincingly before you check out.**

**\*Gautama Buddha attained enlightenment (bodhi)  
while meditating underneath a Ficus religiosa.**

### **2. Chinese Proverb haiku**

**The best time to plant  
a tree's twenty years ago<sup>[1]</sup><sub>SEP</sub>  
--- second best time's NOW."**

---

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### **3. Paintsville's up the hill about a Moonday above Deadwood City.**

**Sunday after a painful meditation I loved being wheel-  
chaired around narcotized,  
our eldest texted, Dad, it sounds like your hippy rose-  
colored glasses  
seem to work really pretty great still!**

**Monday began getting lifted first into the Subaru's  
passenger seat  
ten Sunnyvale's spine MRI station wherein for twenty-  
eight ear-plug  
clang-clang poly-pharmacy crazed minutes**

**I hallucinated Redwood City, the place another  
daughter lives, anew:  
everyone joined in to transform their town into Xmas  
Tree Lanes  
whose baubles taste juicy like Santa's just-picked  
oranges.**

**Avoiding freeways or boulevards, cruising leisure back  
streets  
which recapitulate a family's shared memories, while I  
hangdog  
my head out the window as a Golden Retriever puppy  
might**

---

**my half-century partner, perhaps tuned into her own  
downbeat  
contact high, breaks that slow-motion sick silence as  
we pass  
four parked blue and red SamTrans pufferbillies all in a  
row,**

**Ghost ship wind's in those black sails but no  
homebodies're aboard.**

---

#### **4. Throes Of Proper Lynching**

**Our trees bleed blood.  
Their gaudy birds go crazy.  
Bare bodies are cut with thuds.**

---

## **5. No Petrarchian, I've Always Been A Homer**

**Simpson back home, after spending hours vacuuming,  
washing  
plus waxing the 1942 Woody, Ulysses' on the floor  
trying  
to see if yoga helps various shoulder spine hernia  
miseries.**

**bag of broken bones odious septuagenarian cul-de-sac,  
an APB's out for memories of Daddy who played the  
radio  
loud while Mama sang around the house in her  
nightgown.**

**having circled the earth at least a dozen times  
exercycling**

---

**or before that hill jogging, today will be the last  
breaking  
a sweat for the six weeks while my new left hip's glue  
sets.**

**the backbone of this fool's odyssey remains a search for  
love.**

**reclining with therapeutic purpose in a pool of warmth,  
we return  
waves to kind neighbors & nosy in-laws exploring our  
epic forest.**

## **6. End As Beginning As...?**

**99.9999% lifeforms  
died today.  
75% known species  
went extinct.**

**If you looked up  
a "star"'s  
luminosity grew  
very large.**

**The previous lush  
warm planet  
just teeming with  
organisms --**

---

**an asteroid plunged  
Earth from  
Cretaceous Period  
into dark**

**deep freeze Palogene.  
It was as if  
we took a billion  
Hiroshima**

**bombs' lone bullet:  
peaks rose  
much higher than  
Mt. Everest.**

**Temperatures  
higher  
than our sun's.  
Wildfires  
consumed 70%  
of forests,  
set subcontinent  
India ablaze.**

**Oceans emptied.  
Ash covered  
all – only ferns  
thrived.**

**But vagabond  
debris sown  
into space had  
microbes**

---

**which make it  
promising  
2 Jupiter moons  
contain life.**

**And 66 million  
years pass  
bark beetle bits,  
paddlefish**

**conifers blossom  
as dinosaurs  
give way to  
previously trivial**

**mammals which's  
what allowed  
us a short time to  
thrive 'til now?**

## **7. Blighted Parched Dreamscape On Saint Anthony of Padua Feast Day**

**Momentous mourning one morning  
post sawing down 4 more Sequoias  
the family planted from seedlings  
when we moved into an oak grove  
cabin 35 years ago but which  
beloved trees fire marshals plus**

---

**our naturalist son sadly agreed needed to be removed: that same evening 103 year-old Mom's finally felled, my wife said, You snored/ whimpered all night.**

**There is every good reason to lose sleep over destroying those redwoods. Parched forest is alive in so many ways we really just do not consider enough, and killing it ends up killing ourselves.**

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## **8. Deeper In Doc Sarnat's Backyard**

**Looking like a mango when sated  
plus an overripe banana  
if it develops melanomatous spots,  
the slug's slime numbs  
the tongue of predators that nibble  
-- as well as attracts mates.  
During famine, Northern California  
Yuroks who lived here resorted  
to foraging bountiful critters as food.  
These gastropod members  
in good standing of our majestic  
redwood community on  
occasion leave the adjoining forest  
floor's detritus to meander  
onto our cabin's many screen doors  
where they deposit patterns  
resembling mysterious sine waves  
perhaps reproducible by  
giraffe saliva or maybe Martian snot.**

**But what muse moi to write  
today are my son and his Benjie Blaze  
who together roam the land  
we are graced to occupy for a while  
where Eli spent a childhood  
figuring every spring how many frogs  
lived in our creek, then later  
on the number of males and females,  
differentiating subtle sounds.  
Now he teaches my grandson to ID**

---

owls by their eerie hoots  
from high in Japanese maples nights  
before hawks the next day.  
I am proud on the trail as the toddler,  
picking up a big black feather,  
simply says to me, It's crow, Coachie  
-- though I'm the one who learns.  
Mostly silent, this two year-old boy  
earns points avoiding poison oak.  
Benjamin bends down to gather wild  
mint which he offers, For your tea.

9. The late Indian summer twilight,  
still basically hundred degrees out

as rhythm moves toward night,  
few frogs/ owl hoots, some crickets

make many musics which waft into  
both French doors and open

windows while we begin  
to celebrate in confines

of master bedroom  
our holy wedding

anniversary  
marking 50

years -- with  
old golden

retriever  
all call

---

**Chico at  
wife's side.**

**I do realize  
fully for very**

**1st time ever  
how living in**

**rustic cabin  
within forest**

**raising fam here  
who experience**

**4 real seasons  
(now just a bit**

**off with global  
warming), offers**

**sanctuary including  
quiet plus cleaner air**

**to grand/kids: it is clear  
during earlier r/ toasts**

**honoring us; not enough  
credit went to this beatific home.**

**10. Operative question's not If but When Windy Hill  
burns."**

**Per Don the Woodside Fire Marshal's several**

---

**inspections**

**walking our property with me starting with house  
perimeter**

**& on new synthetic roof down easement to barn then  
Shady**

**Trail into 1st growth forest,  
"Now through October'll be**

**peak  
Red Flag days' high temperatures/ gusts plus low  
humidity**

**when everyone's risk is as strong as weakest-link  
neighbor,  
so you all better co-operate**

**doing these most basic things:  
although water goes downhill, conflagrations flow up  
thus**

**clear brush, cut dead trees, trim branches below my  
height  
well as ten feet from cabin**

**swap out ground vents more  
than**

**1/4 inch holes for 1/8 to catch sparks, broaden  
defensible space**

**in meadow below from 100 to 400', keep gutters clean  
of leaves  
in order to minimize ladder fuel..."**

**Living here for more than 36  
years,**

**back in those good old days we only had to make  
preparations**

**for how to survive on your exact epicenter of the San  
Andreas**

**Fault after that Big One finally hit.**

---

**Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: Sarnat is very cerebral and at times, for me, arcane. Might I even say surreal? It is heady candy. Theatre of the mind on printed pages—idea art: 'the backbone of this fool's odyssey remains a search for love.' 'the slug's slime numbs... giraffe saliva or maybe Martian snot.' "although water goes downhill, conflagrations flow up...keep gutters clean of leaves / in order to minimize ladder fuel..." I would describe his writings as colloquial esotericism with a Buddhist-Homeric twist.(Spacing of text and images is poet's own) HS**

**THE POET SPEAKS: Like a meditation practice, poetry is personally important because its dis/quiet beauty elevates life both through reading others' work and creating sometimes universal gyrations which express my voice, make me happy, perhaps keep me young(er).**

**BIO: : Gerard Sarnat is a physician who's built and staffed current homeless and ex-prisoner clinics as well as a Stanford professor and healthcare CEO. Currently Gerry is devoting energy/ resources to deal with global warming. Sarnat won the Poetry in the Arts First Place Award plus the Dorfman Prize, and has been nominated for a handful of recent Pushcarts plus Best of the Net Awards. Gerry is widely published in academic-related journals (University Chicago, Stanford, Oberlin, Brown, Columbia, Harvard, Pomona, Johns Hopkins, Wesleyan, University of San Francisco) plus national (Gargoyle, Main Street Rag, New Delta Review, MiPOesias, American Journal Of Poetry, Poetry Quarterly, Free State Review, Poetry Circle, Poets And War, Cliterature, Qommunicate, Texas Review, Brooklyn Review, San Francisco Magazine, The Los Angeles Review and The New York Times) and international publications including Review Berlin. He's authored the collections Homeless**

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**Chronicles (2010), Disputes (2012), 17s (2014), Melting the Ice King (2016). Gerry's been married since 1969 with three kids, five grandsons with a sixth incubating.**

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# I Wanted A Blue Tricycle

**By Mir-Yashar Seyedbagheri**

*Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: What does one do with this, other than offer it praise? As one who [whom?] so longs to be admired, I grow tired of admiring others. YES, just this once more: A neglected, affluent child who got the wrong colour tricycle; unloved in the way we all long to be loved. Okay, I get it, and yet: 'pissing in three languages, / le cuckold. asshole who ran off with Mama,' This could be good: '...a European tricycle, / made by some French fucking pedophile.' Wait: Pedestrian, peddler, pedophile (lover of the bipedal?): Such an odd declination. English is not my first language, nor is French, still it seems strange to me. 'Daddy who dips his dick in the fishy waters,' a fine line. 'Fulminating,' I like this word and once I learn it, I will make every opportunity to take to using it. 'Faberge eggs' are meant to be out on display. Auden said, "the art of poetry is to enchant by disenchanting—this is too tight to be obtuse... here it is... (Spacing is poet's own.) HS*

## I Wanted A Blue Tricycle

I wanted a blue tricycle,

but you gave me a red one,

devoid of gilt, luster,

sparkle the color of

---

regal eyes.

I wanted a blue fucking tricycle,

Mama, Daddy dearest,

through which I could see my youthful visage

vain, nose regal.

I feel

pretty

no love. Who cares? Just wanted a blue tricycle

oh so pretty

not a red one, I am regal riding mythical blue tricycle

vain

love is smothering in any event. Better that

Daddy should drink,

Mama should run off

so hypnotized by

bon vivant, drunker than a peasant,

---

pissing in three languages,

le cuckold. asshole who ran off with Mama,

while I dream of

tricycle, ride my blue tricycle

emptiness.

even though they say the red tricycle is

just as good. And worth so much, a European tricycle,

made by some French fucking pedophile.

Give me that blue tricycle,

I cry, years later,

with migraine and frown

astride

a psychiatrist's office, dissecting my drunk deadbeat

Daddy who dips his dick in the fishy waters,

Mama calls      fake apologies      tricycle

drunk says she can't attend my latest poetry reading,

---

bon vivant is spraying chocolate syrup, she says

laugh track rising from an unseen

TV

offers me everything else, but

no tricycle.

Not love or diet love, in a Coke bottle

but I just want that

blue tricycle. someone to watch me ride it

pretty, smile wavering.

if only I had that blue tricycle, premium model

wouldn't be. fucked up in a bar fulminating

against the colors of my fiftieth credit card

or the staleness of Chanel No 5,

i wanted a blue tricycle,

you gave me a red one,

and all I got was this life,

---

a Mama I call Nancy, or Penelope,  
or whatever her name is. A Daddy who lives in his  
dick  
smile crumpled. fuck love, fuck tears  
they can be dried away, hidden like Faberge eggs  
love still doesn't matter. I think.

**THE POET SPEAKS:** *"I Wanted A Blue Tricycle," was inspired by a need to poke fun at greed and self-gratification, things which seem to be on the upswing as of late. The blue tricycle metaphor was inspired by a sardonic comment made by a friend in regards to privilege and greed. I thought the concept nicely described ideas of greed, materialism, and unhappiness with people's lives.*

*I find it vital to read and write poetry as a form of therapy. I find that poetry allows me to dig into happiness, sarcasm, joy, and a range of emotions in ways fiction sometimes can't. I like to explore the broad visual form on the page, as a form of content in and of itself, specifically. I generally consider myself a Romantic, but like to play with visual and other experimental forms, especially when engaging with the political or the societal. In terms of personal inspiration, there are many poetic muses. I love the witty lyrics of Cole Porter, Queen (Bohemian Rhapsody in particular), the barbaric yawps of Walt Whitman, and Vladimir Nabokov's mélange of poetry and prose, such as Lolita's famed opening lines. In this poem, Queen's "Bicycle Race," specifically inspired the line "tricycle, ride my blue tricycle," and the last lines of "Bohemian Rhapsody," inspired, "love doesn't really matter, I think."*

**BIO:** *Mir-Yashar is a graduate of Colorado State University's MFA program in fiction. A recipient of two Honorable Mentions from Glimmer Train, his story, "Strangers," was nominated for The Best Small Fictions. Mir-Yashar's work is forthcoming or has been published in journals such as Maudlin House, The Drabble, Door Is A Jar Magazine, and Ariel Chart.*

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RESPONSE TO EL PASO AND DAYTON SHOOTINGS AUGUST 2019

By Aimee Nicole

**Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:** *These are bewitching, bothered and bewildered. Perhaps Rodgers should compose the melodies with Hart in a netherworld. Still, Nicole's words are chanting, captivating and uncompromising: 'In 1989 this body was birthed fierce and ready at 7:17AM.' Her words ring-out for all advocates having encountered the aggressions of Men. I heard a good line once, I am more attracted to someone who is interested in me than I am attracted to [italic]—dangling propositions are almost always edited out. (I am too hard on the eyes and strange in the face not to insist on a chance to know someone better. Just lucky that way, women are not so stuck on looks; they have evolved beyond and can see inward.) Instead of editing poetry, I feel I am coming to offer advice for the lovelorn—it is probably the same thing. Still Nicole's language and themes should not be missed even by a waning misogynist. I have not done her justice. "In Death" is a pleasant diversion from her pain 'the pews hardened by decades of / silent suffering.'* Once again, I have gone on too long..(Spacing is poet's own). HS

Response to El Paso and Dayton shootings August 2019

In 1989 this body was birthed fierce and ready at 7:17AM.  
Nurses and doctors made to work overtime to bring this  
7-ounce body screaming, already knowing when to fight, safely to my mom's arms.  
My body learned the rules  
(a.k.a learned the danger of men)  
young like a good woman does.  
This body dragged across the yard by its hair by her father.  
This body held down by a boy, mouth hot as wax,  
his body weighted like a dead body, my body's words rejected,  
shelved, reserved for him to tongue later when alone.  
Not long after, this body betrayed by itself, unable to carry the weight.  
Disc tissue crunching itself down to nothing.  
Head spinning out of control as vertigo took all the power this body had left.  
Unable to walk to the bathroom without clinging to walls,  
unable to open its eyes, unable to keep its eyes open.  
The irony of having PCOS was not lost of me.  
Every time a man wanted to shove a dick inside without permission,  
I could bear it because I am a woman and that's what women do.  
And he would not have to deal with the consequences because that's what men do.  
My body was born to be political, this body was born to bear your vote.  
You don't keep me safe in school or in my home.  
You worry what my body will do with itself after a man grabs my  
body by the throat and slams it against a wall.  
You worry what my body will do with itself after a man grabs my  
wrists and holds me down for hours.  
You don't worry about the man.

---

You give the man a gun, publish his name in the paper  
so his name lives on forever.

### Light Internet Stalking

I looked up my sexual assaulter online today.  
It's such a mouthful to say "the man who sexually assaulted me"  
so I'm taking the liberty of paring down and creating new language.  
To my surprise, I re-learned he's blocked from my Facebook  
so I had to get creative with tax assessment websites.  
Still living in town, I see.  
At least I made it out for a few years with a failed marriage  
and even more trust issues to show for that adventure.  
I notice the white truck parked outside the house and chastise myself  
for scanning the roads for that old black Ford all these years.  
I don't know what you look like in 2019. We're both 30. I hope the  
years are weighing on you, your face weathered and worn.  
I'm surprised to see your voter affiliation is democrat.  
Does this mean you believe in a woman's right to choose anything for herself?

---

## The Burden

Working with so many women has its ups and downs.  
The downs: that devastating, sickening crunch of breaking bones  
walking over my body in the lunchroom as blood gushes from the gut.  
Babies visit on a Tuesday morning, fresh from the womb, warm with wonder.  
Becky from Finance is pregnant with twins and that lady  
whose name starts with "T" is out on maternity leave.  
There are a dozen grandmothers with 5 on the way,  
shoving sonograms in my face at the front counter.  
I swallow thickly, smile with teeth, and say how cute the grey shapes are.  
Then lock myself in the handicapped stall for 15 minutes surrounded by quiet.  
My busy mind regretting being born in this bruised body.  
My silent tears leaving ghosts on the tiled floor.

---

Second Chances

*Why do you have insomnia?* They ask.

*I'm falling in love,* I say.

Lying in the dark I think about your soft lips molding against mine,  
melty candle wax hot to the touch.

Your hand searching for mine from the passenger's side.

Mine, pulled quick to yours like a magnet.

Out darkest secrets revealed under moonlight one Saturday.

How we weren't afraid to see, craving blood stained corners of the past.

Days ticking by like sticky syrup until our next meeting.

Irritating. An unsolvable crime.

When we meet again, will it be cinematic magic?

Will my skin burst into flames at your touch?

Is the phoenix that rises from my ashes be our love?

---

## Youth at 30

For the first time in years, my body is sore and it's not from physical therapy or chronic pain.

I sit up straight and tilt my head gently to the right, then the left.

Adjusting my scarf as needed to cover up the gift that keeps my cheeks blooming.

When I bend down to tie my sneakers, my legs moan with memory.

My cat steps over my knees, swollen from your Ford Focus, and I yelp scaring her into the closet.

I hunch over, my shoulders feeling like I swam laps for hours like I did in my younger years.

This pain is comfortable.

This pain reminds me my body can move in beautiful ways.

This pain is proof that I'm still able to wow a man to his knees.

---

## In Death

At your funeral, people will come. The real and the fantasy. There will be flowers birthed to wither in a blanket, all for you. It will be held in a church — the pews hardened by decades of silent suffering. Everyone able to advocate for you was pushed away before the end. Someone, a stranger to you, will order the food. It won't all be vegan. The mindless chitter chatter...something you abhor on a good day. At the close, everyone will slide into their cars and glide away. Say what a nice young man you were. Lying through their teeth.

---

The things I get from online dating that aren't dates

Edward is visiting his parents for the weekend in the area and is only seeking hookups. Somehow he ended up in the hospital and is giving me a play-by-play. Cocktail of antibiotics/steroids/morphine=party. I talk to him all night so he isn't alone, wondering where his friends are...or the family he came to visit.

Constant blur of demands telling me who and how to be:

Loyal.

Trusting.

Fun.

Cool.

Hot.

Fishing is life.

Hiking is life.

Must love guns.

So many opinions about pineapple on pizza.

Telling me that you love poop jokes isn't a strong lead.

Once I saw a picture of a tree and the bio said:

"I am a tree, I love wood."

The tree had two stony eyes and a stone mouth.

I'm 95% sure it was a fake profile...but couldn't help being intrigued.

Why do all the men want me to camp outside,

hike up mountains,

and think flipping me off is sexy?

Are they trying to find a woman or a bro to go boating with?

Constant bio boohooing about no one responding to their messages

but I'm stacked with no replies and I'm sleeping fine at night.

Women have their own issues, good conversation until

they don't show up for our dates or let me in on the secret that

they are just looking for me to bankroll their lifestyle.

Let me get right on that after I pay of a million dollars in my student loans.

Also, I'm the femme queen here. Didn't you see my pretty dress in that first pic?

---

## The Appointment

For an hour, I sit on a plush purple couch  
with many unicorns looking down on me from all angles.  
Unicorns in heat.  
Unicorns in romantic gesture.  
Unicorns in childlike frolic.  
Unicorns in metal band garb.  
Unicorns in rage.  
The artist is running late, yet I  
blame myself for booking a same day appointment.  
The healing process is jagged and rough.  
Today, I'm trading in my wedding ring  
for a semi-colon and I'll wear it for everyone to see.

---

## Life with Mental Illness

Mental Illness lays its cards on the table every hand.

It brags about a flush when there are 2 black cards and 3 red cards.

It screams out loud for hours about a full house that is really a run.

It begs you to accept the run of 2, 4, 6, 8, King or else it will die.

Mental Illness is in despair over its hand when it wanted all black cards and there is a red king.

It cannot bear when you need to take a 5 minute coffee break in the middle of a hand.

Forget about a bathroom break or needing to make a meal in the kitchen.

You need to see everything Mental Illness does while playing and congratulate every move.

---

Mental Illness Speaker

You don't know me at all.  
You think you know me, but you don't.  
You don't know me as well as everyone else.  
We should have never met each other.  
We should not even know each other.  
We're never going to work, are we?  
Everyone else thinks I'm fine.  
Everyone else thinks I'm normal.  
You make me feel crazy.  
You're the worst thing that's ever happened to me.

I never said that.

**THE POET SPEAKS:** *My poetry is very organic and often written on napkins and the back of receipts. If you notice someone driving very slowly on the highway with a pride flag bumper sticker, it's probably me and inspiration hit inconveniently. The human connection influences me heavily. How do we treat others? How do we expect to be treated? How do our actions send ripples out into our surroundings? We are becoming distant from each other, the communication already faltered and broken down. Poetry and art can bring us together by sharing our stories. Even if we don't believe in all the same things, our experiences are human. Our struggles are our own. It's important to listen to each other, to support each other, and to show up for each other. We can do that by sharing our own stories and by having the humility to hear other voices that are being lost.*

*You don't have to put your finger on good poetry and feel it's heartbeat. That beating heartbeat is jumping right off the page. Something inside you shifts and a bond forms between you and the poet. Recently, I've been so inspired by Sam Sax, Blythe Baird, Melissa Lozada-Olivia, Danez Smith, José Olivarez, Yesika Salgado, and Sabrina Benaim. I enjoy poetry that is messy and raw. A poet with the courage to show you their bleeding heart, still pulsing in their hand.*

---

**BIO:** *Aimee Nicole is a queer poet currently residing in Rhode Island. She holds a BFA in Creative Writing from Roger Williams University and has been published by the Red Booth Review, Psychic Meatloaf, and Dying Dahlia Review, among others. For fun, she enjoys attending roller derby bouts and trying desperately to win at drag bingo.*

---

## 10 POEMS

By Emily Strauss

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: Here is an anthology, a gathering of wildflowers, nosegays, picked fresh for your perusal. 'all the way home past the flower market / where roses in clay urns dozed in the heat...fingers that danced on the strings,' Strauss' poetry ignites with quite a unique spark. Don't miss: "First the rain, then the moon" It ranks with some of the best verse I have never read. 'I was exhausted, filthy / hadn't bathed in a week'—and this is the least fragrant line, but it is one of the most absurdly erotic pieces I have never encountered. 'I smiled, said to the dark / 'don't worry'. 'My space insists that I skip along, but don't miss a beat: 'better dark to see into sadness—' 'a dog running home / in his dream twitches his legs,' I could go on, as I am wont to do, but suffice to say, Strauss is surfeit with fine lines and staggering stanzas.(Spacing is poet's own.) HS

### On a Bus in Guadalajara, 1964

On a bus in Guadalajara  
a mendicant with a guitar  
sang La Malagueña  
in a voice so beautiful  
the girl showered him with pesos,  
urged him to sing again  
all the way home past the flower market  
where roses in clay urns dozed in the heat.

A young beggar with a tattered shirt,  
deep brown skin, dark hair,  
with a guitar battered and stained,  
fingers that danced on the strings,  
a pure voice like the wind, crying—

she paid him more and he sang again





---

**light a fire, begin to warm my stiff hands.**

**South China Sea: Summer**

**Bounded by a thin white line  
the gray sea and sky merge  
a backdrop for this dull earth,  
haze later thinning to let  
the wan sun filter through  
narrow lanes where farmers  
bend under poles of bananas.**

**Fishermen sway on wooden  
decks as if on land, weaving  
fine nets, sluicing the oiled  
surface of the ocean with fish  
entrails the gulls dive for  
and gobble whole, screaming.**

**Small islands emerge from the haze  
offshore like a giant's footprints  
breaking the glassy sheen.  
Garbage washes up, clinging  
among rocks with waves rolling  
languid in the breathless heat.**

**The midday glare reflects  
on the junks anchored offshore,  
clean salt smells lingering in wet  
holds, men sweating in grimy shirts  
fan themselves with palm leaves,  
infants swing in cloth hammocks.**

**Clicks of mahjong drift ashore from  
open windows, tea cups in saucers,  
a baby's whine, a dog running home**

---

**in his dream twitches his legs,  
soon cooking fires will heat rancid oil,  
squid and peppers, the sea rolls by.**

### **Hot Evening Blues**

**(loosely after Jules LaForge, "A Hot Evening")**

**feet baking, arteries throb in my ankle,  
under my chin, at my wrists**

**hands swollen and wet, skin wet—  
what if I were a military musician**

**laced tight in a uniform, blowing  
into a trombone on a bandstand**

**or a fly on a wet tile floor, or a sponge  
encrusted on a sea bed, watching fish**

**a blue cornflower on a piece of Delft  
china in a dark room of an antique shop**

**or a flower on a chintz pillow in a prim  
old maid's parlor, or a heron...**

### **Violence at Dusk**

**At dusk, the start of deadly night  
when shadows unmask our deepest fears,  
men are led to violence, without a right**

**to see the shining of the sunset's light  
on women let loose to shed their tears.  
At dusk, the start of deadly night**

---

**the blood red skies watch men fight  
the ghosts of day. Born of angry seers,  
they are given to violence, without a right**

**to peace. Men mostly live holding tight  
to the whispers of death that appear  
at dusk, the start of deadly night.**

**A wife may view his naked fears as trite  
yet for those men to whom folly endears  
stars align only to violence, not right.**

**Dusky pink descends as if the bright  
western sky can sanctify us in arrears  
at dusk, the start of deadly night.  
Men are left to violence, without a right.**

### **Path of Totality**

**I stood on the forest road  
as the light dimmed  
birds turned silent, suddenly  
I couldn't see, the day dark**

**I called the dog, removed  
my sunglasses, glanced at  
the sun's glowing disk behind  
a thick Jeffrey Pine trunk**

**for a moment it was dark  
standing silent under the trees  
I saw a bright star,  
then the disk brightened**

**a little, and a little more**

---

**the forest dim but  
coming back from  
the silent shadow passing**

**and I walked on  
in the August sun  
warm again on the road  
but cool under the trees.**

### **Driving down Dirt Roads**

**First, animal tracks— deer, buffalo, coyote  
wore grooves on the land, and humans followed  
them to water and berries. Much later men on horses**

**gouged into the mud with wheels and wagons, cut  
deeper tracks, hauled shoring timber up to mines  
high in the canyons, mules labored along side.**

**The trails crossed gullies and mesas, going  
somewhere new, always new, always seeking more  
until the men hit their ends and stopped**

**at the cliff's base, ore veins inaccessible. Defeated,  
most men quit and returned to the flatlands  
but the faint scars remain, overgrown, wavering**

**parallel ruts in every direction to destinations  
unknown, prospects unmarked. Their roads still  
challenge me to follow as they cut through wire**

**fences—I explore the ranges, drive the same  
dusty paths, cross washes and slopes, find a stone  
chimney, its cabin long gone, some men stayed on.**

---

## **Full Moon Setting over the Tracks**

**Late winter full moon sets at dawn  
over the western hills just turning pink  
beyond the tracks where abandoned rail  
cars display graffiti painted over thousands  
of miles from Elko to Barstow.  
Now they sit rusting, the industry of them  
faded on the sidings by the open  
fields littered with homeless camps.**

**If they wake early the sky forgives  
and bestows a sheen of pale  
white and coral onto the beaten  
land. For a moment great peace  
covers the slow trains sliding  
through town, used needles  
in the dirt lie in uneasy rest  
moon disk arrested in its descent.**

## **Losing Sight of Land**

**The storm darkens  
will not reveal the lost trail.**

**I run through a field of stones  
lose sight of the ground underfoot**

**lightning flares but too fast  
to see the path**

**adrift among boulders I flee  
something that follows**

---

**lit by a spark  
for a moment**

**the storm black and thick  
I am lost on solid ground.**

**THE POET SPEAKS:** The poems here represent over 25 years of my writing, and show a variety of my attempts to portray the world. Some of them are personal, some real, some fantasy, some formal, some naturalistic, all imagistic. I think that's my primary purpose: to draw pictures and images that relate what we see outside ourselves with what happens inside our psyches. My influences are 20th century, from the Modernists of the 1920s to the Naturalists like Jeffers, Snyder, Mary Oliver, and Galway Kinnell.

**BIO:** Emily Strauss has an M.A. in English, but is self-taught in poetry, which she has written since college. Over 450 of her poems appear in a wide variety of online venues and in anthologies, in the U.S. and abroad. She is a Best of the Net and twice a Pushcart nominee. The natural world of the American West is generally her framework; she also considers the narratives of people and places around her. She is a retired teacher living in Oregon.

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# THREE POEMS

By Ben Ellingson

*Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: I was truly moved by this uber-verse, beyond my universe, in forward and reverse. Ellingson, Ellingson, Ellingson! Repetition is a poor man's trope. His Bio almost rivals, or at least echoes, a thirst...for his work. 'Take a humbuck toothy-grin ride' 'Banana cream insubordination' 'or a scissors made of cloth.' And what will children need to breathe...? Words that confound, astound, and strung together, transcend the profound. I'm only part-way through. If you can't trust me by now, JUST have a peek. Take a glimpse, read on and long for more...What if Cale is as clever?(Spacing is poet's own) HS*

## Therapy

red bicameral ligature  
spontaneous fizz membrane  
accordingly dope snuck  
freefall clawhammer  
organization  
below smooth melody infrastructure  
galvanizing inappropriate impromptu  
aging spyglass just prior to  
the great storm of confusion  
that batters legs and maims  
inarticulate parishioners  
scavenging for mushrooms  
in their filthy dirt.

Take a humbuck toothy-grin ride

---

to Tillamook County  
in an economical compact car  
amid concerns about  
the subsonic remnants  
that came in through the bathroom.

The pulverizing drive  
uplifts spirits across the parking lot  
while safety pins evolve to  
cover the land and one local pie  
crust becomes particularly good  
at helping others discuss their feelings.

If only for jigsaw puzzles.  
Banana cream insubordination  
drags on for hours  
with the tambourine too heavy to lift,  
a jar full of scorpions tips  
and the locomotive turns to art.

It's probably time to relax  
and take it all in,  
too much process,  
but thrilling in an analogous fashion,  
like a whisper in a megaphone  
or a scissors made of cloth.

The children will need things.

---

Shoes, shirts.

Love, breath.

Some will require bulldozers  
and others dragons, while  
yet another absconds to the attic  
with a human doll  
and begins to hatch a plan.

## **An Opening**

tree leaves sour infantile menageries  
of order and civility, seething across the river,  
speaking, glowing, heaving like the belly of God,  
churning through the light, bristling  
like a muscular cornered animal  
preparing to pounce and dismantle  
human industry like a child  
enthusiastically brushing aside  
monuments of carefully stacked  
blocks, rendering the alphabet  
to a rubble heap  
ready for the re-structuring.

Messages have been sent,  
invitations issued,

---

warnings proclaimed,  
through dropped seeds and pollen grains,  
wordless and powerful like  
the ox in the china shop.

It feels like an end because it's the beginning.  
You've found yourself because you felt lost.  
The shrill whine  
of a diamond drill driving deeper.  
Relief release.  
Purpose anew.

Birds swoop in prancing flight, alighting on branches  
to sing among the fluttering leaves. The sun emerges  
from behind a cloud just as a squirrel  
scampers past along an electrical line.  
A skunk hides in the flower bed  
and the dirt trail leading to the Nature Center  
is closing in from each side with foliage.

You pass, tickled by sticky blossoms,  
breathing fully in the teeming abundance  
of light and life, proceeding down the path,  
wondering how rigmarole bladderclamps  
stung igneous fishtails  
among candid showering drenched feet wet...

---

## **Phrenetic Smile**

sampleclay jimbleflig  
enorato emmulion  
coldahmelie insplacious  
hullibloog tross jot  
ting down the sound  
of melons vibrating  
at the frequency of water drops  
strung across the hollow  
body and up the neck  
of an old abandoned instrument  
smoothed in ageless bedlam  
across the Euphrates  
up nine flights of stairs  
and dropped on the floor

---

at the side of your bed.

Tricky adjustments  
call for an altimeter,  
three rolls of gauze  
and the moisture  
in the back of your lover's throat  
extracted minglejoin  
emphlason biljingoy  
mallahaxelon jivoombeloy  
of klont.

Don't be surprised if you're  
startled by a knock at the door  
in the middle of the process.  
That's what the third  
roll of gauze is for.

Like the spilled glass  
of milk that runs  
across the table,  
under everyone's plate,  
over the edge,  
drizzling benignly down to the floor,  
following a crevice  
to ride the gentle slope  
of the room over to the trimboard  
and then SNAP, gone,

---

out of sight

into the land of rodents  
who hold firelit banquets  
inside the walls  
of your night,  
conjuring apparitions  
from the moistened dust  
and then eating eating  
devouring the sweet  
mixture until collapse  
and wild dreaming  
of ixcantybloo miramdella  
fallablee donginome  
de skullbiromp.

Time to check your altitude  
and secure the final substance.

**THE POETS SPEAKS:** *Back in the mid-1990's, when I was in my early twenties, I lived with a friend who attended the University of Iowa Law School. One night, while studying, he jokingly asked me if I knew the meaning of an obscure legal term called The Rule in Shelley's Case. Funny thing is, I'd been reading some Percy Shelley during the preceding days and was able to catch him off guard by quoting the last line from A Defence of Poetry. "Yes" I said. "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."*

*That may be taken as a cute and harmless reference to an artist's dictates over the realm of his or her own imagination, but I suspect it meant more to Czeslaw Milosz when he asked "What is poetry which does not save Nations or people? / A connivance with official lies, / A song of drunkards whose throats will be cut in a moment".*

---

*A few nights ago, my wife and I sat up late discussing the new background I'd installed on our living room television, a painting called One: Number 31 by Jackson Pollock. I explained that I'd put it there to remind me daily of the question so pressing on my mind: What would a poetic expression be like if it had the same dynamic, non-representational approach as Pollock's paintings?*

*In the "West", The Arts have traveled a long and fascinating Road to Abstraction since the onset of the 20th Century. I try to follow that path, and where there is no trail, I make a little stack of words to mark a new one, just in case it leads somewhere interesting, or useful. My work is often messy, and sometimes to the chagrin of my wife, I even surrender to using clichéd phrases.*

*But out here on the Periphery, you use whatever's available in the moment. And sometimes it takes more than a red wheel barrow.*

**BIO: :** *After years of wild exploits in Santa Fe that included earning a Master's Degree in Eastern Classics, a career as a high-end leather craftsman, a little western fashion modeling, and endless late nights thinking hard at the Cowgirl Hall of Fame, Ben Ellingson was rescued by his amazing wife Amanda and moved on to become the eCommerce Director for artist and storyteller Brian Andreas and his former company StoryPeople. Ben, Amanda, and their now-teenage son Cale ultimately settled in a little house by a river in Montpelier, Vermont, where they calmly enjoy the flow of water and words.*

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# 7 POEMS

By Wayne F. Burke

*Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: Here is some poetry from the Green Mountain State. If I land on Vermont (when I roll the dice), I always buy it. Burke might have a monopoly on making it even greener. In reference to 'Winnie the Pooh,' This is the Eeyore blues, the donkey with the pin-on tail, in rapture. These are Winners: "Allergy Shot:" and 'lollipops' 'nothing happening for me / lately / on the poetry scene and / I do not like the / silence, or the / still air of these late summer days,' Well it is happening NOW! These verses read like a poet confounded, as all the while, I am, so too, astounded. Please abide 'Squiggles' and the 'Yetz brothers' and 'Vacay et al' —unless, you want to miss out?—there is no earthly reason to ignore these pages, at the peril of disappointing yourself...read this stuff...but only if your eyes are as thirsty as your ears...HS*

Vacay

an entire beach of  
white sand  
to myself,  
no radios  
no voices  
no rabid teens,  
only the sound of  
the ocean waves splashing  
Paloush  
and spreading in a sheen  
all morning long  
until noon  
when a guy with lunch-pail  
sits on the top a wall marked  
PRIVATE  
and begins to run his mouth  
into a cell phone  
but only  
until he has to return to work  
while I  
remain

---

on the quiet empty beach  
I paid for.

### Allergy Shot

nothing happening for me  
lately  
on the poetry scene and  
I do not like the  
silence, or the  
still air of these late summer days,  
the waiting-room atmosphere,  
and the dog-eared magazines;  
the nurse in starched white  
tells me follow her  
into an office of mahogany furniture and  
shadows, a telescope under glass  
a bench with paper covering that  
crinkles as I sit,  
a needle the nurse sticks  
into my arm  
without any warning  
and the thing gets stuck when  
I flinch,  
she cannot pull it out;  
calls the crabby doctor over  
and, afterward  
no one offers me a tissue to wipe my tears  
only a lollipop  
I refuse  
until my grandfather  
standing by  
says  
“take it.”

---

## Squiggles

the Yetz brothers, new to the  
school, threw a party  
their mother paid Mr. Squiggles to attend  
the artist from the Cowboy Bob TV show  
who turned kids' squiggles into pictures,  
I had never met an artist before and  
was excited to do so  
(I wanted to be one—else a baseball player)  
at the party the  
mother announced  
Mr. Squiggles would be late,  
meanwhile  
my grandfather had shown up at the  
prearranged hour--  
I said I could not leave  
yet  
he said I had to  
I yelled no! No!  
He carried me out on his shoulder and  
threw me into the back seat,  
I cried all the way home  
and in the driveway  
he asked why I was so upset  
I told him Mr. Squiggles had yet to  
arrive  
he asked why did I not say so  
because  
if I had  
he would have let me stay longer.

---

## Life-Buoy

church over, another  
Sunday morning in the books:  
the ride home uneventful  
until  
beyond the lime kiln  
my sister announces  
that she is going to kill herself  
and us  
and turns the car toward the oak trees  
in front of the grammar school.  
My brother, up front  
dives across the seat,  
gets into a tug-of-war  
with my sister  
for the steering wheel;  
he rises like a buoy  
in a sea  
as roadside trees rush to greet us--  
the car wobbles and  
a tire hits curbside  
and my head hits the roof--  
shrieks of metal screams  
car engine noise and  
sputter,  
beached like a whale on the  
sidewalk:  
my sister sobs, shoulders  
quaking--  
my brother says "kill yourself  
but not us"  
Mrs. Gray from the corner block  
at the window, arms  
crossed and a face of flint:

---

“are you alright?”  
“Oh yes,” my sister says, perking-up  
“we are fine.”

H.S.

sitting in my car  
outside of the laundry  
while waiting for my clothes  
to dry;  
fans of bare brown trees  
spread on the ridge line,  
gray November sky;  
kids from High School  
walking on the street:  
I was one  
once,  
years ago  
when bell bottoms were  
in style  
and nobody but bikers, jailbirds  
and sailors had tattoos,  
and telephones had  
a dial  
and the pool hall  
was open  
and so was the Drive-In Theater.  
The seventies, baby  
platform shoes  
and hair to my shoulders,  
cocaine  
Farah Fawcett  
The French Connection Deep Throat  
A Clockwork Orange  
Nehru jackets  
I never wore  
and The Hustle  
I did dance to.

---

Flagpole

in bed early

11:30 PM

try and get some reading done

or maybe write something

worthwhile

but

fuck-it

I am too tired

for either, and

start to think of a girl

I used to watch undress

as she stood in her window,

and though

I know it is not healthy for me

to go there,

I go;

watch her stretch and

bend, then

raise the old flagpole:

I used to be her dildo

she my girl

we met

11:00 PM

each night

a cold and distant relationship

that ended

only because

she moved elsewhere.

---

## The Old Ballgame

the baseball got wet in morning  
dew  
and became slimy,  
hard to throw,  
and if lost  
in the high grass of the  
cow pasture  
behind the backstop  
everyone had to look  
among the snakes and cow flops  
hot or dry;  
the bats we used  
were old, worn  
my Frank Robinson-32 model  
cracked and nailed  
together  
it burnt my hands whenever  
I hit the ball,  
some days it was hard  
to get nine players  
to a side,  
some guys had to be  
begged before they would play;  
the games were fierce,  
often bloody;  
we played our hearts out,  
argued, fought  
slid head-first;  
some of us  
needed to win

---

more than others.

**THE POET SPEAKS:** *More perspiration than inspiration went into the making of these poems. Their “being” a result of becoming serious with myself—putting my guts out on the page. And afterward, brutally editing the results. My style is anti-formulaic in the footsteps of the free-versifiers; my chief concern rhythm and pace: how to move the poem down the page, how to create an organic whole out of disparate parts. My language usage strongly influenced by the fairy tales I heard as a child plus the vast store of folkloric sayings used by my semi-literate grandmother (“no fool like an old fool,” “no rest for the wicked” etc.)...Poetry is important only to the extent someone attaches importance to it. As reflection and repository of the loftiest most beautiful and fulsome sentiments, poetry is the best and truest record of humankind—thus its significance.*

**BIO:** *Wayne F. Burke's poetry has been widely published online and in print. He has published six full-length poetry collections, most recently DIFLUCAN (BareBack Press, 2019). He lives in the Green Mountain State, aka Vermont (USA).*

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# WAITING....

**By Claire de Merritt**

***Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:** The brevity of this submission is astonishing to me. It is reminiscent of that wonderful cockney slang. You know: apples and pears for 'stairs' and Alan Whickers for 'knickers' and on and on. It even bursts the boundaries of a Haiku—I invite you to add your third line...One can only cherish those who take the least of your time. HS*

WAITING...

Can't sleep?  
Count sheep

**THE POET SPEAKS...** *I have never been sure which phrase is which but Ne peut pas dormir compter les moutons does not role of the tongue so easily [with the assistance of a translator].*

**BIO:** I speak very little English.

---

O My Sweet and other poems by Marc Darnell

I feel dumb in skull  
and gut without you.  
I didn't know  
you had that pull,  
but now woe  
is me. Oh to slap you--  
assault has benefits.

I think I'll paint  
a picture of you,  
a loud one, it won't  
be hard, and dart it  
every now quiet  
appreciated hour,  
or I'll let the new  
pup pee on it--  
the one you craved  
then left with me  
for hairless Dave.

Were you that sour,  
fed up, enslaved  
or swept away  
to make a trollop's  
hop away from me?  
Mom will flip--  
she hoped for marriage,  
ignored your baggage,  
but screw the carriage.

Three times a week  
I feel I made you up--  
O a dream sweet;  
then I see my cheek,  
the crescent scar from your,  
my, engagement ring,  
a fading bling sting.  
Gag, or shit it out,  
the way you shitted me.  
Keep those antihistamine  
Enya DVDs.

---

autopsy

row row row your blade  
gently through the chest  
of my vessel sadly made  
of outer laugh and inner shade  
bronze the body's best

merrily merrily massively  
messily  
then throw out the rest

throw throw throw your coat  
on my patchwork corpse  
but first remove my walmart watch  
and cross my arms across my crotch  
press my belly for burps

rhythmically rhymingly hymningly  
heimlichly  
lest the body warps

---

## Groom's Vow

With this ring I thee wed till I  
am sick of you and need a separate bed,  
a separate house, because I will not try  
to take your shit, you'll leave my heart so dead

I'll have no love to give our future children  
that I'll see off to school and hope they find  
a life that is more solid and less broken,  
without a spouse who has an ax to grind.

With this ring I let my strong will bend  
till I snap, till I do not care  
when I die or if the world will end,  
if I'm in hell as long as you're not there.

Kill me now and trap another man,  
or smash your veiled face before I can.

---

the asshole orderly

get off me  
dusty fart  
I'll never be  
old like you  
just wheeze  
that crotchety  
way you do  
I came to clean  
you seizure  
not to carry you  
to the can  
your skin it rips  
like husks I had  
an iguana like  
you but I'm a  
rubber man  
with rubbers man  
bouncer of beds  
your call button  
jams the link  
the ice clink  
of my boo's  
cold texts  
you're deadbook  
friended when  
dumped here  
so play yahtzee  
it's real easy  
with parkinson's  
roll a die and die  
wheel this hell  
forever I'll never  
pickle here I'm a  
smooth-skinned  
suave stag  
going home to a  
squeeze on the  
vine every night  
this job's fluff

---

my shift's up

God

I'm the cataract that made your mother a bit blind and crash her Malibu  
squint at word searches the rest of her life in the nursing home

I'm the cancer that ate your father's esophagus until they cut it out  
stretched his stomach up to his Adam's apple so he couldn't vomit

I'm the fungus gnats that swarm your plants the bugs you swallow  
accidentally since they love carbon dioxide and irritating lonely people  
whose only friends are weeping figs anemic ivies and philodendrons

I'm the mysterious lust in your pedophile uncle who only got probation  
for possessing kiddie porn oh it wasn't his whatever

I'm the amblyopic eye of the klepto hotel maid  
the one that didn't look at anyone when she walked out with amenities  
and other maids' tips in her butt crack till flatulence gave her away

I'm influenza sneaking around in hospitals and dreams thrown  
in Sara Lee-sweetened dumpsters and eaten by the homeless  
whose sorry asses you think of a little on that prophet's birthday  
no he's not my son why did he say that it got him nailed

I'm the deformity of the child who doesn't stand a chance  
yes that's me I can make anything that's how low I go even lower you'll see

I'm the anger in unmaintained bodies and hints of mortality  
in varicose veins and all black that comes from below defecating  
on hope and snuffing babies on their bellies as I laugh at the whim of heaven

I'm dancing that you think I was the Big Bang the sea-parter  
cruel bystander ruler of biology and you don't know me  
at all I'm not an explanation for anything to you bald animals

---

John Denver

Sunshine on my shoulder looks so lovely,  
more so than the tumor on the screen--  
an X-ray glyph, inoperable and caused by  
too many sunny days upon my skin.

Thank you, melanomic, bluest sky--  
clouds and rays angelic to my eyes,  
hard to take for one about to die--  
I'm glad the doctor's own eyes didn't lie.

Insurance paid one half of all the measures  
it took to tell I'd croak before my mother  
who now will have to watch my violent seizures.  
I'm way past middle-age and have no lover

and never will, I do not blame another  
nor myself, nor God, I blame the weather.

---

the cord of life

when I vacuum if I can't  
find any open outlets I  
unplug things but forget  
to plug them back in like  
phones charging or hotel  
alarm clocks televisions  
programmed for favorite  
channels or respirators  
O<sub>2</sub> tanks helping people  
live I remember before  
I leave work usually if it's  
a vital apparatus maybe  
I'll find another job that  
doesn't require a PhD  
in sucking why do I  
forget to plug things back  
in is my brain gelling  
it takes fourteen seconds  
to unplug a cord vacuum  
the carpet and plug it  
back in but somehow I  
forget and I wonder if  
Maury misses a crucial  
phone call in the morning  
or if Gene oversleeps  
has Esther suffocated  
gone coma since I cut her  
power if this is some  
bit of dementia and I'm  
soon surrounded by an  
electrical Stonehenge  
and my senile lungs quit  
their involuntary reflex  
will the dufus remember  
to plug the cord to my  
bag of a lung back in?

---

Don't Let Me Die Here

Cold people and bad traffic-- that's all  
that comes to mind thinking of this hole--  
this Midwest town of ignorance and hell,  
a special hell of year-round potholes, souls

concerned with jaunts and frisbees in the park,  
with secret prostitution sought through apps.  
This grinding city grid destroyed my brakes--  
stoplights every hundred feet, perhaps

the full Missouri will now wholly flood  
the streets and wash away the idling men  
smoking in their Bobcats pushing mud  
from here to there, the malls are caving in

from emptiness, I yearn for taller times--  
mirrored towers, no Dip and Yield signs.

---

## Propane Tomatoes

I think my mother is trying to kill me. She's  
a sweet, brown, Bohemian lady, almost  
eighty-three. A year ago the river  
flooded her house, yard and garden, tipping  
over her massive propane tank, spilling  
into the garden soil, and yet she planted  
tomatoes and peppers I don't trust to eat.  
Contaminated? I know I'm not her favorite,  
more a problem than all her kids combined--  
I lived with her when I was poor, out  
of work more than once from uncontrolled  
sadness, and yet, have I been such a headache  
enough to kill? How do we know our loved ones,  
or if they're loved, or if they truly love?  
*Take a bite, so sweet* she says, I'll pass--  
she could be the Snow White hag, my mother,  
angry I returned to cause her grief,  
toting medical bills she paid with blood,  
as I eat tainted produce from her mud.

---

a hut with a plus sign

come ye goats  
I have hay for you  
it is my body eat it  
the trough is my  
blood drink shh  
goateed god Baah  
is watching

**Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:** *Marc Darnell fascinates me. 'I feel dumb in skull / and gut without you.' Grooms can be jilted too, but rarely sue for breach of promise: I lost a love to heart balm. But the days are rare that I didn't think I made the right choice. Is there ever any consolation in lost love other than bitter ir-reconciliation? The constellation is forever star-crossed. "autopsy" may be the best verse I have read this issue. 'row row row your blade / gently through the chest...' "Grooms Vow" 'With this ring I thee wed till I / am sick of you and need a separate bed,' Maybe AimeeNicole (see ToC) and Darnell should get together, or in the least, be read juxtaposed for equal opportunity of gender hate misandry and misogyny colliding. Still their posies are delightful. "Propane Tomatoes" and a mother's love...Proof positive as much poetry is spun from hostility as felicity. Read each and every one—Darnell is fine art. Spacing is poet's own. HS*

**THE POET SPEAKS:** *I've been writing for 40 years now. I guess if I were going to be famous it would have happened by now. I started out a very gloomy poet hooked on Sylvia Plath, and I even had some professors wondering if I was okay in the head. Most poets are very sensitive, and their poetry is a reaction to their sensitivity. I write both free verse and formal. I recommend any poet trying to be good at both. I have a very serious side, and being bipolar and having OCD is rampant throughout my poetry, but I consider myself a very humorous person and have my special "lashing out" poetry. I don't think of it as "hate poetry", but it's my reaction to things that piss me off, like the ignorance religion seems to propagate in society, the cruelty of disease, and the jerks some people can be. I don't believe in heaven or hell, but it would be nice if there were a special little hell for people who make other people's lives crappier. I laugh at death and dumbness. I'm a quiet little janitor with a lot to say. I never earned a dime from my*

---

*degrees. My influences are Roethke, Plath, and the god and goddess of poetry-- Wallace Stevens and Emily Dickinson.*

**BIO:** *Marc Darnell is a custodian and online tutor in Omaha NE, and has also been a phlebotomist, hotel supervisor, busboy, editorial assistant, farmhand, devout recluse, and incurable brooder. He received his MFA from the University of Iowa, and has published poems in The Lyric, Rue Scribe, Verse, Skidrow Penthouse, Shot Glass Journal, The HyperTexts, Candelabrum, The Road Not Taken, Aries, Ship of Fools, Open Minds Quarterly, The Fib Review, Verse-Virtual, Blue Unicorn, Ragazine, The Literary Nest, and The Pangolin Review among others.*

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## BUT UNTIL THEN and other poems...

By David J. Thompson

***Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:** 'There's a sink in my room and / a bathroom down the hall that smells / like bleach, wet cigarettes and cabbage.' There is something about this itinerant troubadour whose depths I can't quite plumb. 'Lord Byron' and 'the Kardashians' taking you places only 'a stationary bike' might. Don't skip a line of "The Hill Called Golgotha" and I'll save you reciting mine. Next: 'ex-wives'... and... 'nearly empty bowls of oatmeal.' But my favorite "Lip Gloss and Laxatives" is pure gold. (Spacing is poet's own.) HS*

### But Until Then

Since my wife kicked me out  
I've been staying in a cheap hotel  
near the train station downtown.  
There's a sink in my room and  
a bathroom down the hall that smells  
like bleach, wet cigarettes and cabbage.  
If I slip the bellhop a few extra dollars,  
he's happy to bring me a pint of Jim Beam  
and some girlie magazines. I'm waiting  
for my wife to call begging me to come home,  
but until then, I keep the Gideon's Bible open  
on the nightstand, my revolver in the drawer,  
and the lights on all the time.

---

## Omens

On his way to Delphi,  
Lord Byron saw an omen,  
a flight of a dozen eagles,  
which he knew was a sign  
from the gods that success  
and fame as a poet were soon to follow.  
This morning at the gym  
all I saw was about an hour  
of the Kardashians as I rode  
away on a stationary bike.  
Unlike Byron, the only message  
I heard from those three goddesses,  
Kim, Kourtney and Khloé, was  
that my ass was getting real sore,  
and I just wasn't going anywhere  
at all, no matter how hard I pedaled.

---

## The Hill Called Golgotha

I live on the outskirts of Jerusalem,  
a nice neighborhood, quiet and safe,  
but my apartment is right on the trail  
the guys being crucified have to walk  
between the jail and the hill called Golgotha.

This morning I was out on the porch  
with my coffee and a bagel when  
that poor Jesus guy came by. Clearly  
those damn Romans had roughed him up  
earlier, he was bleeding all over. In fact,  
they even had to have a guy help him  
carry the cross he was so beat up.  
And like that wasn't bad enough,  
they made that poor bastard wear  
a purple cape and a crown of thorns  
to make fun of him being King of the Jews  
which even Fox News says is something  
that Pontius Pilate just made up.  
Everybody was laughing at the puny guy  
struggling along, but I didn't think it was funny  
at all. I went back inside, put on *Kind of Blue*,  
and fixed myself a stiff Bloody Mary.

A while later, right around noon,  
I was fixing a grilled cheese for lunch,  
when it it suddenly got pitch black outside.  
I just stood there in the dark, afraid to look  
outside, and wondering just what the hell  
was going on in this crazy goddamn world.

---

## Coffee Gone Cold

At breakfast the day she left me  
my ex-wife, the poet, was clanking her spoon  
around in a near empty bowl of oatmeal  
when she told me didn't want to hurt  
my feelings, but after all these years,  
she really needed to taste the French toast  
of new desire. That's great, I said taking  
the last, big swallow of coffee gone cold.  
Would you like some confectioners sugar  
sprinkled on that, too?

**THE POETS SPEAKS:** *I really don't know why I write poetry any more than I know why I like baseball or Indian food. When I was in high school I was drawn to the lyrics of songwriters like Bob Dylan, John Prine, and Hank Williams, but I didn't write my first poems until I was forty years old. At that time I was reading Charles Bukowski, Raymond Carver, and Richard Brautigan, and they helped me get started once I realized that the possibilities of poetry were much greater than I previously imagined.*

**BIO:** *David J. Thompson is a former prep school teacher and coach. His poetry/photography book Grace Takes Me is available from Vegetarian Alcoholic Press. A series of 1400 of his postcards is now part of the permanent collection of The Newberry Library in Chicago, Illinois.*

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# THERE IS SOMETHING WRONG HERE

By Bruce Wilson

**Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:** *It still amazes me that over seventy percent of the earth's surface is water, and here we are crammed into less than thirty percent—if my math is right. But it is no surprise to this entry. Somehow, Mister Wilson knows, and is cognizant of who is 'Spectre king' and how little the earth offers: 'like the magic. / of my mind / written in hand.' Whales 'from the sand below,' the depths of the ocean floors, 'jumped into the sky' as they dive upward. All the while we dive down. It confounds me that we search the cosmos while the waters remain unplumbed: 'Free hand / making waves. / like the vessel. / I traveled on. / in my hands.' HOLD ON. 'Hell is closed.' HS*

## THERE IS SOMETHING WRONG HERE

I don't understand.  
A Spectre king in the water.  
instead of the land.  
beyond my imagination.

like the magic.  
of my mind.  
written in hand.

A mystery.

frozen in time.  
I don't understand.  
The Blue whale.

jumped into the sky.  
All the way.  
from the sand below.

Heaven is now open.  
Hell is closed.

I don't understand.

---

this picture.  
What the whale is doing.

There is a difference.  
in my hands.

I experienced.  
for the first time.  
in my life.

Free hand.  
.  
making waves.

like the vessel.  
I travelled on.

in my hands.

**THE POET SPEAKS:** *Language itself has inspired me to write poetry. Leonard Cohen influenced me.*

**BIO:** *Bruce Wilson has studied under Irving Layton, Steve McCaffrey, and Eli Mandel, is the author of KOJIVO in 1978 and REALTIME two years later. He has been published in Writ, Irving Layton's anthology Anvil Blood and several other literary magazines.. He is 71 years old and lives in Toronto.*

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# QUIET WORLD and other poems...

*By Ted Millar*

**Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:** *Put on a flannel shirt and roll-up your sleeves and breeze through Millar's words: "Quiet Worlds:" 'The refrigerator isn't humming / like a Buddhist monk; ...' And now dress in formal attire. Next: "This" is as profound as anything Fleas' could possibly publish ... 'this is' not 'what I hid.'* "Agape" is one to tuck in your wallet or recall verbatim. "Cliché Convictions" Can one grow tired of being inspired? And "The Risen" reads like the ascendance, the rapture, after the tribulation, not in the least profane—secular jocularly, with a pinch of religiosity. These write like a laundry list of profundity, its rhythm, its rhyming. I love things that rhyme...(Spacing is poet's own.)HS

## Quiet World

Another Central Hudson truck  
just lumbered up the road,  
the third since the power went out  
sometime after we turned in.

The refrigerator isn't humming  
like a Buddhist monk; the cats'  
water fountain isn't gurgling  
in the corner; the kids'  
bedroom fans aren't wafting  
white noise down the hall.

Once the sun rises, everyone  
will be out in the road staring  
up at the sky wondering  
when we can get back to having  
trouble hearing ourselves think.

---

This

Whatever it should have been,  
this it is instead.

Whatever I should be thinking,  
this is in my head.

Whatever I planned to do,  
this is what I did.

Whatever you came to see,  
this is what I hid.

Agape

Always remember:  
God exists in everything.  
Allow yourself the  
Peace with which we were all born.  
Everyone is kith and kin.

Cliche Conviction

times,  
If I've told you once, I've told you a thousands  
it's the cover-up, not the crime.

Now I've got you dead to rights,  
a deer in headlights,

grinning from ear to ear  
as if you're in the clear,

flying under the radar.  
I guess from the tree the apple doesn't fall far.

---

going  
I always say, there's no place like home;  
in your case, it's the "big house", where you're

to which we'll throw away the key,  
where you'll be fine and dandy,

sitting pretty.  
What a pity.

When you see it's for the birds,  
no doubt you'll eat your words

and start singing like a canary.  
You could use a Hail Mary.

You win some, you lose some.  
The harder they come,

the harder they fall.  
I hope you have yourself a ball

alone making amends.  
Remember to keep your friends

close, your enemies closer  
and maybe in a few years you'll be a poster

child for parole  
for all those in the hole

awaiting trial at The Hague  
for not avoiding cliches like the plague.

#### The Risen

When it hits, some might survive.  
They might consider themselves lucky.  
But they won't want to be alive

---

in a radioactive dung heap.  
It will be as if we pressed reset,  
except no settings will remain,  
only shame, anger, regret.  
We'll have ourselves to blame.

If I'm among the quick  
I'll consider it a sign  
I was picked  
by something inscrutable, divine  
to preach to those who might listen  
to songs prophets sang about who will be

risen.

**THE POET SPEAKS:** *I was inspired to write "This" out of the constant frustration I feel over maintaining a life committed to high standards and optimism in direct conflict with often disappointing reality. The poem's parallelism is an attempt to suggest this. I remember writing it quickly, which happens occasionally despite mostly plugging away at poems for weeks before I arrive at satisfying drafts.*

*My literary influences are varied but vital to my art. Poets like Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Natasha Trethewey, Mary Oliver, Ted Kooser, Billy Collins, Sharon Olds, Wendell Berry, Yusef Komunyakaa, and so many other amazing contemporary poets are as inspiring to me as Thomas Paine. I also consume a lot of history and politics, so Thom Hartmann, Richard D. Wolff, Matt Taibbi, Chris Hedges, John Nichols are constantly on my reading list.*

*Poetry is important to me because it is my meditation on life. I don't seem to have much patience with prose, despite having composed some essays and publishing a flash fiction story this year. I require sustained, concentrated attention to every word, punctuation mark, syllable, and letter while at the same time leaving room for audiences to identify themselves. That poetry's beauty. It's how I attempt to make sense of this whole mess called life through which we find ourselves floundering.*

**BIO:** *I teach English at Mahopac High School and composition at Dutchess Community College. I reside in New York's Hudson Valley with my wife and two children. My previous work has appeared in [Valley Voices](#), [Better Than Starbucks](#), [Straight Forward Poetry](#), Reflecting Pool: Poets and the Creative Process (Codhill Press, 2018), [Crossways](#), Caesura, [Circle Show](#), [The Broke Bohemian](#), [The Voices Project](#), Third Wednesday, [Tiny Poetry: Macropoetics](#), [Scintilla](#), [GFT Press](#), [Inklette](#), [The Grief Diaries](#), Cactus Heart, [Aji](#), [Wordpool Press](#), The Artistic Muse, [Chronogram](#), [Brickplight](#)*

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*and Inkwell. I was also among 65 poets to have work accepted for the 2018 Arts Mid-Hudson exhibit Artists Respond to Poetry.*

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# EVOLUTIONARY ADAPTIONS

## and other poems...

By Brad Garber

*Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: Here are four poems that aim to intrigue and hit my bull's-eye (How is it someone so trite finds himself editing poetry?) They are each universal, personal and poignant. **Cave** is flavoured with atavistic imagery for each and all. **Amazon Burning** is distinct and discerning—it takes you there: ‘...the tentative rising of a tapir / or the tree-root flesh of anaconda.’ **Decision** holds heartfelt insights: ‘Her culture was bridge / golf, bowling, and booze.’ **October 2019** is not long ago and filled with reminiscence and anticipation. Here is to wishing someone well... ‘Red pines don’t do well, alone. ...They need to grow in a group.’ Don’t we all...? (Spacing is poet’s own)  
HS*

### Evolutionary Adaptations

Man that looks like a woman

Tiger that looks like shadows

Lion that looks like savannah grass

Octopus that looks like stone

Snake that looks like a leaf

Lizard that looks like a toad

Fish that looks like a horse

Moth that looks like an owl

---

Fly that looks like a bee

## Decision

What do you with her

    this way  
        peaceful  
surrounded by beeps and tubes?

You touch her feet  
    watch her bloated face.

You speak to her  
    as if she might hear you.

You walk down a long hall  
    peer out a window

think about her.

You came from her . . .

Remember those times  
    playing Yahtzee, after school  
    her constant cigarette  
    gin & tonic.

The time she blasted  
    a shotgun shell  
    above the head  
    of a trout fisherman.

Sneezing "ah shit"

    in church  
just to piss off your dad.

Her culture was bridge  
    golf, bowling, and booze.

But, she loved roses  
    and you.

---

What do you do with her  
as her life drains out of her

at least, that life  
that was?

## October 2019

My father sat on a south-facing porch  
on an October afternoon, in Wisconsin.

*Red pines don't do well, alone.*

A fickle sun warmed us.

*They need to grow in a group.*

The field that spread before us  
golden in the autumn light  
was devoid of iconic trees  
that were nurtured and trimmed  
victims of isolation and exposure.

My father, depleted by a slow cancer  
spoke about his education, at age five  
at a Catholic elementary school

in Ohio, how he brought gifts  
of his father's dahlias, to the nuns  
and sat in the back, without beads.

*White pine can do well. There are  
big ones up on the hill.*

He graduated at the top of his class.

What do you talk about, but trees  
and the childhood goat named "Tuffy"  
who used to butt him off the picnic  
table, while "Babs," the beagle barked?

After so much life, what matters  
but memories and trees?

Are you heading back up to the cabin  
next summer?

---

*If I'm still here.*

We watched the bluebirds and listened  
for the knocking sounds of woodpeckers  
back in the dark woods  
on red pines clustered together.

## Cave

I walk into the cave  
am surrounded by echoes  
soft whispers of sandals  
cries of babies swaddled  
deep in animal skins.

Falcon beaks and eagle  
claws and coyote teeth  
litter an earthen floor  
carpet of success and death.

Baskets of reeds and grass  
long blown away like dreams  
tumbled here in storms  
are lost among the sage  
like errant children at night.

Walls of sharp stone  
press down like spikes  
in a medieval torture  
chamber of ice and hunger.

I look out over a sun  
dropping beyond reach  
over shadows of hillsides  
and imagine game  
spread over vast plains.

Families in stony dirt  
blood and excrement stained

---

waiting out the next season  
as if things might change.

The cave no longer home  
is what we take with us  
when we move through  
the homes of ancestors...

the cave no longer home.

## Amazon Burning

I will never see your secret spaces  
listen to the bold songs of birds  
or the screeches of primate tribes  
in trees along slow muddy waters.

Nor will I spy the silhouette  
of the silent jaguar's shadow  
or the tentative rising of a tapir  
or the tree-root flesh of anaconda.

Never will I shake the bronze hand  
of the Yanomami, Akuntsu, Pirikuru  
enter their dwellings and lives, gather  
stories of lost and buried cities.

No, the Amazon will come to me.  
I will breathe its ashes every day  
and feel the burden of its absence  
in the lungs that give me life.

**THE POET SPEAKS:** *In my early life, I wrote music and performed in coffee houses, on radio, and in open-air concerts. I have been writing poems, lyrics, essays and indescribable stuff since childhood. Being alive and observant inspires my poetry. I write about the human experience, as experienced and imagined. Squirrels, birds, trees, food, sex, life, death, ceremony, silence – everything is fair game. I am attracted to writing prose poetry, when my mind runs like an open faucet. But, I admire and employ subtle structure, also. Every stylistic form is important for the imagination. Poetry is one of the oldest art forms, with the possible exception of peeing one's name in a snowdrift. Influences include Carver, Frost, Whitman, Riley, Stafford, Paul Simon and Dr. Seuss.*

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**BIO:** *Brad has degrees in biology, chemistry and law. He writes, paints, draws, photographs, hunts for mushrooms and snakes, and runs around naked in the Great Northwest. Since 1991, he has published poetry, essays and weird stuff in such publications as Edge Literary Journal, Pure Slush, Front Range Review, Tulip Tree Publishing, Sugar Mule, Third Wednesday, Barrow Street, Black Fox Literary Magazine, Barzakh Magazine, Ginosko Journal, Junto Magazine, Slab, Panoplyzine, Split Rock Review, Smoky Blue Literary Magazine, The Offbeat and other quality publications. 2011, 2013 & 2018 Pushcart Prize nominee.*

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# ALL THAT BUZZ

By Mathew Mendonca

**Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:** *Here is a single worth reading, for any skeptic tuned cynic but still antiseptic...Buzz is jazz. 'polarize, / identified:' 'Know your role little drone bee:' 'Yes, you're reduced, / but of little use,' Pay 'attention.' Word play bumble tumble reminds of dot and dash flight patterns and the famous 'bee dance' a worker 'performs' when returning to the hive. A short buzzy poem with a body bigger than its clothes. HS*

All that buzz

Flashy media  
feeding a chemical release with hard dividing lines;  
another issue from which to be defined.  
Pick a side,  
polarize,  
identified:  
Us or them.  
Fall in,  
regurgitate.  
Turn off your mind.  
Let the group think do the thinking.

Know your role little drone bee:  
Buzz, post, re-tweet  
anything terrible that's trending.  
Release the hormone.

If you're not wallowing in the oversimplified dramatic narrative  
you're not paying attention.  
Yes, you're reduced,  
but of little use,  
if not captivated and advertised to.

**THE POET SPEAKS:** *I wrote this poem in protest. Despite my quiet avoidance of internet socializing, it just keeps getting in my face and in my space. It's not all bad, but what isn't bad is mostly pointless and useless and takes up room, like a Styrofoam to-go container for a burrito already wrapped in tin foil. And like garbage, social media posts have a footprint; not just figuratively, as emotional static, but actually, in the form of data storage: Acres and acres and*

---

*acres of data servers are being built on the rim-rock skyline above my town, to store cat memes, and depressing status updates, where elk herds pass(ed) through to winter feeding grounds.*

*I've been writing songs for 15 years or so, but started accumulating all these lines and pieces of writing that I couldn't seem to make into music. That's when poetry really entered my life. I started "finishing" pieces that weren't songs, and calling them poems. I soon found that I enjoyed toiling for hours over the rhythm of a poem, just as much as toiling through the words of a song. I could be so lucky as to deserve such punishment.*

**BIO:** *My name is Mathew Mendonca and I live in Prineville, Oregon where I work in Forestry. I have no publication history. (Until now. Eds.)*

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# FIVE POEMS from MORTAL COIL

By Gary Beck

*Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: On a clear night, if you travel far enough north, you can see all the stars in the firmament. If you go even further you are treated to the Aurora Borealis. I believe Galileo coined the phrase back in the early sixteen hundreds. (Good friend of mine but a bit of a late-sleeper.) Here is a constellation of poems that burst into blooms and plumes of colour, like a magnetic midnight. Beck's poetry is present, yet speaks to The Ages[italic]. At any rate, any critique of mine would appear obsequious and remain sycophantic—dust it off and get your own licks in.(Spacing is poet's own). HS*

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## Travel Plans

Another seasonal change.  
Each year it gets colder.  
We are running out of fuel.  
The hunting is poor,  
so there will be no meat,  
fat, fur, to keep us warm.  
Some say we should leave,  
go south, where it is warm.  
But vicious tribes dwell there

## Nothing Changes

I sit at my desk  
with my iPad,  
send an email  
to a friend in France.  
It gets there in seconds.

Across the street

---

at a construction site,  
immigrant laborers  
who can't speak English  
put up a scaffold,  
the same way they did  
in ancient Egypt.

Down the block,  
four large men  
carry a heavy rug,  
just the way they did  
in ancient Persia.

At the corner,  
two men load a truck  
the exact same way  
two men loaded a cart  
in the middle ages.

The progress of civilization  
has given us  
powerful machines,  
electronic devices,  
yet everywhere I look  
we still do things by hand.

who do not live in peace,  
who'll kill us for intruding  
on their hunting grounds.  
My clan will stay  
one more winter.  
If we survive  
perhaps we will go south  
next year.

#### Relocation

We lived in one room,  
a roach infested,  
South Bronx apartment  
in a gang-infested neighborhood,  
where we heard more gunfire  
than laughter.

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But I went to school  
and got lunch  
and could go outside  
to escape Mom's boyfriend  
and his hard fists.

But Child Services insisted  
living conditions  
were unsuitable for a child,  
and moved us to a homeless shelter,  
somewhere in Manhattan.

It was too scary  
to go outside.  
The new boyfriend  
kicked and punched me  
when I played with my toys  
and made too much noise.  
He hurts me all the time.

Mom says she'll get rid of me  
if I tell anyone.  
Who is there to tell?  
I've been coughing blood  
for the last week.  
Mom says it better stop,  
or she'll get rid of me.  
Maybe it would be better  
if she got rid of me.

#### Need Versus Greed

The city wraps  
strangling arms  
around the poor,  
squeezing them harshly  
until the little they have  
dwindles, disappears,  
leaving them at the mercy  
of those with more,  
reluctant to share  
with those in need,

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never believing  
they ever have enough.

### Loyal Service

My grandfather went to Korea.  
My father went to Vietnam.  
I went to Iraq.  
My son went to Afghanistan.

Yet our country was too busy shopping  
to appreciate our service.

I do not sleep much  
and stay up late at night  
reading history books.  
I think of Roman legions  
doing their duty on distant shores,  
then abandoned by the Emperor.

I do not know  
where my grandson will serve,  
but it will be dangerous  
and his sacrifice  
will quickly be forgotten,  
as long as our masters profit.

**THE POET SPEAKS:** My poetry responds to the life around me and the greater world. I have been influenced by many poets, but now use direct expression as much as possible to impact a progressively detached tv and internet audience. Poetry can be the most basic art form to reach audiences more and more removed from the spoken word, a tradition I am impelled to continue.

**BIO:** Gary Beck has spent most of his adult life as a theater director and worked as an art dealer when he couldn't earn a living in the theater. He has also been a tennis pro, a ditch digger and a salvage diver. His original plays and translations of Moliere, Aristophanes and Sophocles have been produced Off Broadway. His poetry, fiction and essays have appeared in

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hundreds of literary magazines and his published books include 21 poetry collections, 7 novels, 3 short story collections and 1 collection of essays. Published poetry books include: *Dawn in Cities*, *Assault on Nature*, *Songs of a Clerk*, *Civilized Ways*, *Displays*, *Perceptions*, *Fault Lines*, *Tremors*, *Perturbations*, *Rude Awakenings*, *The Remission of Order* and *)Contusions* (Winter Goose Publishing, Forthcoming is *Desperate Seeker*. *Blossoms of Decay*, *Expectations*, *Blunt Force*, *Transitions* and *Mortal Coil* (Wordcatcher Publishing), forthcoming is *Temporal Dreams*. *Earth Links* (Cyberwit Publishing). His novels include a series 'Stand to Arms, Marines': *Call to Valor* and *Crumbling Ramparts* (Gnome on Pigs Productions), Forthcoming is the third in the series, *Raise High the Walls; Acts of Defiance* and *Flare Up* (Wordcatcher Publishing), Forthcoming is its sequel, *Still Defiant* and *Extreme Change* will be published by Winter Goose Publishing. His short story collections include: *A Glimpse of Youth* (Sweatshoppe Publications). *Now I Accuse and other stories* (Winter Goose Publishing), *Dogs Don't Send Flowers and other stories* (Wordcatcher Publishing). *The Republic of Dreams and other essays* (Gnome on Pig Productions). *The Big Match and other one act plays* will be published by Wordcatcher Publishing. Gary lives in New York City.

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# ETERNAL and other poems...

**By Miguel Rodriguez**

*Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: These are beautiful: Similar in style to Leslie Dianne's poems (see TOC). It has been my experience that those whose mother-tongue is Spanish speak the most beautiful English. My sister-in-law is another example. It must be the way the words are phrased in their minds. They express everything so gently and intelligently with a Latin passion and ancient wisdoms that never seem to skip a beat or generation—the beatniks [italic] of our global village [italic]: 'Framed in a / painting in time' 'All is forever.' A fisherman's love for his Ocean Mother, 'cults and gyms' 'Why do we torture ourselves / Over inevitabilities...' Like a bottle that never empties, there is more. Sip from the glass of Rodriguez, I insist upon it. HS*

## **“Eternal”**

What is done  
Is done  
Erased, it cannot  
Be as it has  
Already been

Everything you  
Know and do  
Not know is  
Framed in a  
Painting in time

A fragment becomes  
The whole of  
Everything  
In which we are,  
Were and will be  
A part of

Don't fear death  
As we go from  
Which we came  
From nothing  
To something

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To nothing again  
But the painting  
Remains  
As does everything  
And nothing is  
No longer nil

All is forever

**“My Mother the Sea”**

Separated so long  
I have forgotten how  
Special you are to me  
Your breeze, your smell  
Such salty smells  
That would wake up  
The adventurer in me  
Those cold days in  
The bridge, you sang  
To me with melodious  
Whistling sounds as  
The ocean air rushed  
Through the fishing  
Lines tangled in the pile  
I sat there with rod in  
Hand, dreaming of  
Beasts and legends  
Of the Great Seas  
And I would conquer  
Them all as you would  
Smile at me with the  
Sun ray’s warmth  
As I looked upon the  
Horizon of your  
Distant waters

**“The Quietude of Ends”**

We fear the end  
It creeps up on us, unannounced

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No one is safe from it, nothing is  
It drives us to join cults and gyms to  
Live forever and avoid it  
We obsess over it  
And ask palm readers when will  
Be the day, that it comes for us  
Terrified every night that  
That will be the  
Night

Why do we torture ourselves  
Over inevitabilities  
To flow is a much better way  
To live than to fight the current  
That will inevitably  
Wash us all away

The end is not our enemy  
It makes us stronger  
It brings meaning to our  
Lives by its existence  
The end is a deadline  
We all must meet one day

Time is our greatest gift  
Use it wisely and  
Never waste it worrying  
About the inevitable End

Aspire, Desire  
Accomplish, Achieve  
But of most importance  
Is to always possess  
Quietude of Ends

### **“Imperfect Nature”**

Beauty,  
Of imperfection,  
As all life is, imperfect.

Inability to reach perfection,

---

As flawlessness,  
Was never meant to be.

We are nature,  
Strong,  
Imposing nature.

We are nature,  
Insufficient,  
Imperfect nature.

**“Fate the Distractor”**

Do not listen to his talk  
About predestination  
Nothing is written until  
It is written  
Do not fall for his false  
Curses and jinxes  
Exclude your eyes from  
His feign visions of  
Defeat and torment  
He is a fraud, a hustler  
Attempting to distract  
You from attaining and  
Becoming majestic  
Take this dagger  
And kill your fate

**THE POET SPEAKS:** *For me, there is no better inspiration for poetry than living in a chaotic world. My search for truth, understanding and serenity in such a dystopian existence provides the perfect contrast I need to uncover the beauty of life through my poetry. The poets that have influenced me the most are Nicolás Guillén and Langston Hughes.*

**BIO:** *Miguel Rodriguez was born in Havana, Cuba, and immigrated to United States with his family in 1980 during the Mariel boatlift. After decades of working different jobs, he finally decided to pursue his passion for creative writing. Now, an English major from*

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*the University of Central Florida, he is on a quest of self-expression with hopes of connecting with the world.*

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## **PLAYS AND SCREENPLAYS**

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# CAMOUFLAGE—A Play In Three Acts

*By Michael Glassman*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Boi oh boi, do we love this one! An absolutely riveting edge of your seat drama that will make you forget everything but what you're reading. The dialogue is so good it hurts. 'I got hit with three golden showers last year...punks on the rooftop. I could hear them laughing'./'Get an umbrella.' And...'You're the step-brother from hell.'/ 'We all have to start somewhere.' And and and we can't forget 'I want to know why I'm the wood and you're the termite.' Outstanding noir theatre from talent with a capital 'T'. Five stars.(Spacing and syntax are the playwright's own.)*

## CAMOUFLAGE

### A PLAY IN THREE ACTS

#### Cast of Characters:

Charles Davenport	NYC police Chief Psychologist.. 55 years old
Rita Davenport	His wife, 46, Tony's step sister
Tony Stangler	Rita's step brother, 55
David Weinrib	Tony's former partner, 51

TIME: Monday 9am, July 1995.... Action over a 48 hour period.

#### SETTING:

We are in Charlie's disheveled office in New York City. On his desk is a picture of his wife. It is a hot day, the a/c is not working. A portable fan is on high. His tie is loose around his neck. His jacket is over the top of his chair. His phone starts ringing. He can't find the phone due to all the files on his desk. There's a knock on the door. When he does find the phone it stops ringing.

### ACT ONE

CHARLEY:     *(harried)* Come in.

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TONY:           *(enters wearing black leather shoes, black slacks, short sleeve high end polo shirt).*

How about those Yankees?

CHARLEY:      I stopped caring when Munson was killed.

TONY:           That was a heartbreaker.

CHARLEY:      The department is under a lot of pressure.

TONY:           I got a season ticket. Anytime you want to go to the stadium- -

CHARLEY:      It's only a game...have a seat Tony.

TONY:           What do you psychologists do for fun?

CHARLEY:      Fortune telling.

TONY:           Just two more years. I'm tired of wearing blue.

CHARLEY:      I thought your color was green.

*(moves thumb and fingers together in front of TONY)*

TONY:           I could come back.

CHARLEY:      My schedule's tight.

TONY:           *(points to a picture on the wall)*

That's New.

CHARLEY:      Things change.

TONY:           Retirement is making me nervous. I don't want to wind up waxing  
floors in a

mall.

---

CHARLEY: Even one cop falling through the cracks is one too many.

TONY: I put in my time.

CHARLEY: (*Thumbing TONY'S file*) ...  
It's all here.

TONY: You're the head honcho. You can approve it.

CHARLEY: I don't override the staff.

TONY: The promotions? .. medals?.. the citation from the mayor..thats in---

CHARLEY: I was there, remember.?

TONY: So you know.

CHARLEY: Two more write up's last year.

TONY: Those...they're nothing..You're not supposed to - -

CHARLEY: I just told you the department's changed.

TONY: The department?

CHARLEY: Yeah, the department!

TONY: There's no respect out there. Democracy starts with res- -

CHARLEY: I don't need civic lessons.

TONY: I'm talking about life on the streets.

CHARLEY: This is not about---

TONY: You do a tour on the beat. You'll see.. The city's full of crazies.  
Innocent  
people are getting hurt.

CHARLEY: And you're protecting them?

TONY: I got hit with three golden showers last year...punks on the rooftops. I  
could  
hear them laughing.

CHARLEY: Get an umbrella.

TONY: We stick together, Charley.

CHARLEY: Solicitation of bribes?

TONY: That was a setup.

CHARLEY: I heard the conversation, Tony, it was no set-up.

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TONY: You were a cop.

CHARLEY: I went by the book. My father was watching from his grave.

TONY: What book? You have to think on your feet. There's no time for Freud out there.

CHARLEY: I give a course on Freud at the academy.

TONY: *(slight laugh)*  
No wonder.

CHARLEY: It's not old fashioned to me.. Time honored ways to do things. There's a right way and a wrong way. I don't believe in giving free passes. I never

CHARLEY (Cont) dropped a college course or took one because the teacher was easy. I did what the teacher asked.

TONY: *(gets up to leave)*  
I've had enough of this. -

CHARLEY: Sit down! I'm not finished with you. I obeyed. I didn't ask for extra time. I didn't ask for make up tests.

TONY: Next time I'll bring an apple.

CHARLEY: You're going to need a flak jacket.

TONY: What are you telling me?

CHARLEY: Nobody gets to retire without doing the work. The right way. My way. No exceptions!

TONY: *(unbelieving)*  
What are you telling me?

CHARLEY: You spend more time defending yourself in court than defending the public.

TONY: You reek with self-righteousness, I smelled it as soon as I stepped off the

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elevator.

CHARLEY: I'm agreeing with the recommendation for dismissal.

TONY: Dismissal! .. I come here for a face to face... You blindside me with-

CHARLEY: I warned you last year... the year before that.. I have the- -

TONY: You're taking away my pension? You know that, right?

CHARLEY: You're dangerous, Tony.

TONY: You bastard. You're railroading me. Nobody treats me like this...do you

hear, nobody!

CHARLEY: I'm just doing my job

TONY: *(reaches across the desk at CHARLEY, then backs off)*

You're not turning my life upside down...I'm not like the others. I don't

deserve this.. I could wring your god-damned neck.

CHARLEY: You're not on the beat now.

TONY: You wanna make this personal? It's real personal now.

CHARLEY: You're out of appeals. Take my advice. Don't waste your time.

TONY: *(points to wedding picture on CHARLEY'S desk)*

Does Rita know about this?

CHARLEY: Your step sister doesn't work here.

TONY: This is not over.

CHARLEY: You're not holding any cards.

TONY: *(TONY storms out of office)*

That's what you think.

CHARLEY: Protect and serve, Tony...protect and serve.

BLACKOUT

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ACT 1

SETTING: New York main public library. A sign on librarian's desk reads, 'INFORMATION.'

A computer is on *RITA's* desk along with scattered paper work.

TIME: Monday one p.m.

*Rita is attractive in a sedate way. Light colored clothes with a thin sweater over her shoulders. She is sitting sideways using a hand held mirror while applying lipstick. Her shift starts in a few minutes. She feels uneasy.*

*(TONY enters stage right, raps on her desk with his knuckles)*

RITA *(turns, sees it TONY)*

The men's room is in the back...behind fiction.

TONY I'm O.K.

RITA You don't belong here.

*(TONY reaches into his pocket to show his library card)*

RITA *(looks it over).* Expired...a long time ago.

TONY Is this where late fees are paid?

RITA Tony....What do you want?

TONY Your husband's about to end my career. If he does that I lose my pension.

RITA I'm sorry Tony but I don't- -

TONY I want you to get him to give me a clean bill of health.

RITA I've learned to stay out of his business.

TONY It's your business, now.

RITA Look Tony...I know how you can be but like I said I don't interfere with-

TONY You will.. Believe me, you will.

RITA I don't owe you anything.

TONY Talk to him.

---

(RITA picks up desk phone)

TONY He might be lunching

RITA I'm calling the guard.

TONY *(grabs the phone and hangs it up, takes out photos)*  
Calm down, Bubbles.  
I was going to show these to your husband, but I thought I'd start  
with being nice to you...let's get to the point. Look at this one.. the guy  
you're  
standing next to in - -

RITA *(When shown the photo RITA'S body position changes, tenses, her legs cross, hands run through her hair).*  
That's not me.

TONY Did you forget who you're talking to?

RITA Where'd you get- -

TONY I'm a cop, remember?

RITA Give them to me.

TONY You gonna help me, right?

RITA Why? Because you have a picture of me and some guy in a Vegas club  
thirty years  
ago.

TONY Night clubs don't have cubicles with overhead mirrors.

RITA You can't use these to blackmail me.

TONY *(takes the photo, picks up some pins from her desk).*  
Where's the bulletin board?

RITA *(comes around to confront TONY)*  
You're crazy.

TONY Shhh. You don't want to disturb the bibliophiles.

RITA I'll ...I'll give you money... anything... please Tony

TONY *(reaches into an envelope.. brings another photo out )*

---

I don't want money..

RITA I can't talk to Charley about --

TONY I gotta say, Rita... your husband's a lucky guy.. this one amazes even me.

RITA Animal !

TONY Charley gets tricks for free.

RITA You're the step-brother from hell.

TONY We all have to start somewhere.

RITA *(grabs the photo from his hands)*

TONY *(laughs)*

When I hit 'send' they go right to his inbox. We're talking digital Rita.

RITA Tony.. please.. I don't want him to find out...I can't face- -

TONY I can't face losing my pension. Especially from mister high and mighty.

RITA I'm not risking my marriage.

TONY *(Reaches over desk for her calendar)*

Today's what? Monday ..I'll give you 'till Wednesday..6pm.

RITA I can't find a way to- -

TONY You're a librarian; find it.

(BLACKOUT)

## ACT 1

SETTING: David's office. Two windows behind David's desk. Sign on front door glass window reads, David Weinrib, Private Investigator. Clothes rack with suit jacket is near door. Alcove with shelf holding yearzeit candles, prayer books and tallis. Also, two pictures of David's son in Bar Mitzvah photos on desk.

---

TIME: Late afternoon same day. .

DAVID (Screaming into the phone)  
Lymph nodes normal .. white count normal. You said I had straight “A’s”  
Now..Now – you tell me that my white count is through the roof? What  
the hell  
happened? Last week I laughed for the first time in months. God damn  
you  
doctors! .... Yes, I’ll be there tomorrow. I look forward to see how my  
body is  
going to hell.

(DAVID ends the phone call)

(TONY enters without knocking)

TONY I never heard you raise your voice before.

DAVID I can’t talk to you now.

TONY Bad news?

DAVID Yes. Bad news.

TONY (*Wastes no time. Dances his fingers over David’s computer keyboard*)

Sorry to hear it.

DAVID: Enid is fine. Thanks for asking.

TONY: My manners are not what they used to be.

DAVID: When was that?

TONY You can target anyone with this couldn’t you?

DAVID Target? What are you talking about?

TONY I want you to find something out for me.

DAVID (*starts shutting down the computer*)

Not tonight.

TONY I’m talking to you.

DAVID (*stands, picks up cell phone , attaches beeper to his belt*)

I’ve had my last conversation today.

---

TONY            This is personal.

DAVID            *(Goes to get suit jacket...starts putting it on)*  
Does it have to do with my family?

TONY            If it wasn't for me you'd be dead.

DAVID            My grandchildren thank you.

TONY            I wasn't late when I pushed you out of the way of that bullet.

DAVID            This isn't China. I don't owe you my life.

TONY            I'm going to lose my pension if you don't help me.

DAVID            I'm going home, please move. Tony, you should have been kicked off  
the force  
  
years ago.

TONY            I risked my life for you.

DAVID            He was just a boy.

TONY            What are you talking about...He shot at us.

DAVID            You didn't have to kill him.

TONY            When are you going to get it through that 'cup' of yours? He was dead  
by his first birthday. Human trash..tell me I'm wrong.

DAVID            How old were you when *you* died?

TONY            You're too emotional, David. Guy's like you don't belong on the streets.

DAVID            Guys like me?

TONY            You know what I mean.

DAVID            No Tony, I don't. Explain it to me.

TONY            You should've become a teacher or a doctor of some kind. An  
accountant,  
  
to  
  
maybe. You would have made a good accountant. Sometimes you have  
to  
  
hurt people to make them understand. It's not in you to do that. Okay?

DAVID            If I didn't know you any better. What's the use. I can't tell you anything.  
Nobody can.

---

TONY (gets closer to David)  
Charlie Davenport has his thumb on my jugular.

DAVID What do you need me for?

TONY It's clean, David. No prints, no DNA.

DAVID (exasperated, points to the computer)  
Why don't you try reading the newspaper from the front for once. Live  
by the  
hard drive die by the hard drive. What goes in stays in.

TONY Computers can turn up missing.

DAVID I was just told I have cancer.

TONY Jesus. Then it doesn't matter if you help me.

DAVID This is not about you.

TONY We're both looking for a way out.

DAVID I'm not spending my last days on earth under indictment.

TONY Trust me.

DAVID I prefer to trust God.

TONY Even now?

DAVID I'm late for shul.

TONY Anything David, anything. I want to know if he's fooling around.. or  
maybe he

TONY (Cont) was a draft dodger..anything.. whether you think it's important or not.

DAVID They need me for a quorum.

TONY I need you too.

DAVID (dims lights)  
It's getting dark . (goes over to candles and begins to light  
them). Do you know what these are for?

TONY I've been to Jewish homes.

DAVID This one's for you.

(BLACKOUT)

---

ACT 2

SETTING: Later in the day. Charley and Rita's bedroom. King bed in center,  
Lamp tables either side of the bed. Mirrored dresser stage left with fresh  
flowers  
and candles.

AT RISE: (CHARLEY'S sitting up in bed bare chested, feet under the covers  
reading  
a report.)

RITA (off stage talking from the bathroom)  
You're staring at that report but not reading it. I know that look. I'll be  
there  
in a minute.

CHARLEY To tell the truth I've been at this so long policewomen are starting to  
retire.

RITA All on your watch. Charley.

CHARLY It started with just a few. I remember thinking...I wouldn't want to be  
married

CHARLEY (Cont) to one.

RITA Is that what you think now?

CHARLEY If anyone in a marriage should have a gun it should be the  
guy...Policewomen . Pensions? I never thought I would live to see the  
day.

RITA What does that mean?

CHARLEY I didn't think they could do the twenty years.

RITA You underestimate us.

---

CHARLEY I read that more women prefer the superior position now.

RITA What's that have to do with retirement?

CHARLEY That kind of control can't help but filter into the job market.

RITA Maybe it *started* in the job market and transferred to the bedroom.

CHARLEY Whatever. There's a lot of guys out there who can't handle it. What's taking  
so long?

(Rita exits bathroom and dims bedroom lights. Wearing sexy negligee holding a tray with champagne bottle, and two champagne glasses. She places the tray on an end table then reaches over and turns on the CD . She had programmed it to play soft blues).

CHARLEY What's this?

RITA Librarians don't need guns.

CHARLEY (puts papers down, looks at bottle label, nods approval)  
You look a lot like my wife.

RITA Does that excite you?

CHARLEY I'm not in the mood.

RITA I'm feeling good tonight, Charley..open..you know..I'd like to try- -

CHARLEY (pulls her closer but with a little tension)  
What's the point, Rita?

RITA Whoops!  
(Rita jumps up and lights two or three candles already set in place)..  
Please don't ruin it. C'mon Charley.. remember how we loved to

RITA (Con) dance at Roseland? Oh, how we *danced!* You swept me off my feet..

CHARLEY I pulled my leg at the gym this morning.

RITA (RITA reaches for CHARLEY's wrists. She tugs on them. He removes her hands )

CHARLEY I don't want to dance.

RITA Close your eyes. you're under my spell.

---

CHARLEY I told you my leg hurts.

RITA You know?

CHARLEY Stay out of it.

RITA I want you to give him a break.

CHARLEY You're so easy.

RITA He's my step-brother, Charley.

CHARLEY Think about what you're doing.

RITA Nobody's going to question you.

CHARLEY Business and family don't mix.

RITA He needs somebody on his side.

CHARLEY Last I heard a wife is family.

RITA I'm trying to keep you from making a mistake.

CHARLEY (Checks the level in the already opened bottle)

CHARLEY (Cont) You started without me. You're so sure of yourself tonight.

RITA A lot more of your cases are being appealed.

CHARLEY You never pushed that hyphenated brother on me before.

RITA I owe him.

CHARLEY I hate that you don't have the courage to tell me the truth. I make a living  
listening to people, Rita.

RITA Are you telling me to shut up?

CHARLEY You pushed me to get your nephew in the union. I got him in. He was a thief. I

CHARLEY (Cont) Had to answer embarrassing questions from guys who looked up to me.

RITA That has nothing to do with Tony.

CHARLEY (pulls at her ears)  
Open these Rita. It's us I'm talking about. You pushed a bad apple on me,  
now you're asking me to reach back into the bottom of the barrel.  
You're



---

AT RISE      All is dark.. Spotlight comes up stage left on David in chair wearing a hospital gown and non slip yellow socks. He is short of breath, mild wheeze and slow to move. Tony is standing next to him.

DAVID      (observes Tony's look of surprise on seeing David's condition).  
It'll pass.

TONY      Everything passes.

DAVID      (Pulls up gown to show stitches).  
Look familiar?

TONY      Same surgeon

DAVID      We're both made from the same thread.

TONY      Mine is gut.

DAVID      Hard to believe...isn't it?

TONY      You called?

DAVID      (Reaches under chair seat and pulls out a manila envelope..slowly offers it to Tony).

TONY      (Reaches for the envelope.. David's hand on one end Tony's on the other.. stays that way for about three seconds...Tony takes the envelope).

DAVID      I hoped you wouldn't take it.

(BLACKOUT)

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ACT TWO

SETTING: Charley and Rita's house. We are in the hallway.

TIME: Evening

AT RISE Rita is scurrying around. Nervous. Anxious. She hears the sound of a car door closing. Easing curtains aside she looks out the side window.

RITA (opens front door slowly)  
I didn't think you would have the nerve.

TONY I brought the photos.

RITA What happened to a little chit chat before blackmail?

TONY In case you didn't notice, the time is 7 o'clock'. I gave you an extra hour.

RITA He's not home.

TONY I'm not blind.

RITA I need more time... a few more days...please Tony.

TONY You had your shot.

RITA You can't do this to me.

TONY When is he getting here?

RITA This whole thing is making me sick to my stomach. I need more time. I need  
another...

TONY (makes himself comfortable, looks around the room)  
Nice. I'm gonna wait right here.

RITA It's called taste, Tony.

TONY (shows off envelope).  
I'm going to hit him with these. How's that for a handshake?

RITA He'll be here any minute. GET OUT !

TONY You think laying down for your husband makes you respectable?

---

RITA            When did blackmail get on the church's list of sacred rites?

TONY            I'm not religious.

RITA            I can't do it. Charley wouldn't cross in the middle of the street.

TONY            Believe me, he doesn't have any boundaries....I know.

RITA            What do you have against me?

TONY            I can't wait to see the look on his face.

RITA            Look at yourself for God's sake! You've turned into a monster. The  
mirror,  
  
Are you            there, LOOK! Do you like what you see? Are you proud of that man?  
  
                      proud of what you're doing?

TONY            Seeing gets in the way of business.

RITA            I don't know why they adopted you.

TONY            I was cheap labor. Your old man's farm slave boy. How did it feel  
having a step            brother dumped on you?

RITA            Same way it feels now.

TONY            Cruel bastard. We never got along. My happiest day was when I heard  
he lost            the farm.

RITA            You ran out on us.

TONY            Am I hearing right? You're blaming me?

RITA            You're a coward.

TONY            When did you start walking on water?

RITA            What's one more day? I'll talk to him.. I prom...

TONY            I might be dead by tomorrow.

RITA            You're going to die alone.

TONY            I'm used to dying alone.

RITA            He's not going to give in to you. I don't care how many men you've  
bullied;

---

no matter what you reveal. He's not going to change his mind. Save your breath.

TONY Your husband doesn't stand a chance.

RITA Take your dirty laundry somewhere else.

TONY A whore telling me how to live.

RITA I don't do people's wash.

TONY We're talking about your laundry. Recognize the smell?

RITA I slept with men because I was desperate ... You know about desperate.

TONY My legs stayed closed.

RITA How dare you! I was never in that room. Their stink...their sweat hitting me

between the eyes.. I was never in that room. I was listening to mom reading.

Men..their fumbling hands, hairy backs..I was fishing with dad on the lake. They

were there when they were there.. When they finished with me they were somewhere else like I was somewhere else. I was never in that room.

They

walked out—I used the bathroom. Scrubbed off empty cheap kisses.... I was

never in that room...and for that you want to blackmail me?

TONY When is your husband getting here?

RITA . (grabs the envelope from Tony's hand.)

For God's sake. I'm talking to a shark. ...

( Tony pulls back.. it cuts Rita across the palm)

Ahhh!

TONY You just can't stay out of trouble.

RITA I need to take care of ...

TONY Later

RITA It could get infected

---

TONY            Spit on it.

RITA            (spits on Tony)

RITA (Cont)    *I was never in that room!*  
                  (Charley enters through the front door)

CHARLEY      (to Tony) What the hell are you doing in my house?

TONY            (gives Charley the envelope)

CHARLEY      I'm calling the police.

TONY            First see what the cat brought in.

RITA            Stop !

CHARLEY      (opening the envelope..looks at Rita suspiciously like, '*You know what's in here, don't you, ' expression).*  
                  What are you afraid of, Rita?

RITA            (Rips envelope from Charley's hands)

TONY            Careful Rita. I wouldn't want you to get cut again.

RITA            (to Charley).  
                  Give him what he wants.

TONY            ( to Charley).  
                  Do what she says.

CHARLEY      Nobody tells me what to do in my own house.

RITA            Oh God, Charley. I prayed you wouldn't find out. I should have told you. I...

TONY            (to Rita with big grin on his face). Give it back to him.

RITA            (hands Charley the envelope)  
                  I love you.

CHARLEY      (Charley takes the envelope from Rita. He looks at the photos, Laughs)  
                  Good acting. Bad lighting. (tosses pictures on the floor)  
                  This? This is what you got?

RITA            (on her hands and knees picking up the pictures) . . .

---

What are you..You've seen these?

CHARLEY In the safe. The bag marked, 'grandfather's papers,'

RITA You knew all these years..I..I was the dirty one covering up my sins  
while you played mister high and mighty.. You bastard! How long did you have  
these?

CHARLEY What does it matter?

RITA What does it matter ? What does it matter? You had the power to free  
me..My guilt..confessions to Christ. It hurt, Charley..It didn't have to be that  
way..you could have made it go away. Instead, you kept me crying inside. Why  
didn't you help me? Not just me.. Us. (runs out through the French doors to  
the safe..opens and pulls out the envelope. She struggles to open it then  
begins ripping contents apart)

CHARLEY I needed to protect myself.

RITA This was all about you?

CHARLEY (To Larry).  
Now get out.

TONY (Throws Charley a second envelope. Charley opens it).  
Look at those and tell me what's the difference between us?

CHARLEY I'm not giving in to you. I'll have your gun and badge before you ever  
see a retirement check.

TONY From where I'm standing, I've got a strong grip right between your legs.  
(Rita is jolted away from her activity. She approaches both of them)

TONY (to Rita) .  
Don't you want to know about Mr. high and mighty?

RITA What are you talking about?

---

TONY Vietnam. Charley was there

RITA Is that true, Charley? How could you hide that from me?

TONY Tell her Charley. What did you do?

CHARLEY Damn you! I wasn't trained in chemical warfare.

TONY (Tony shows *Rita* one picture)

RITA That's you next to the graves, Charley.

CHARLEY Those children were innocent.

TONY What did you do?

CHARLEY We tried to use less.

RITA Less what?

CHARLEY Agent Orange, o.k.? How much did we need to do the job without collateral damage.

RITA Collateral damage?

TONY Tell her.

CHARLEY Dead women and children.

TONY Dead everybody. Well, not everyone died right away, isn't that true Charley?

RITA What did you do, Charley?

CHARLEY No more.....I've had enough.

RITA I want the answers, Charley...Me, your wife.

TONY You gave the orders.

CHARLEY You want more talk to the men in the squad.

RITA How many.. how many Charley? Ten, twenty, hundreds? How many bones are out there?

TONY Give her a number, Charley.

CHARLEY We stopped counting.

RITA Charley, you stopped counting? The first village...what you did wasn't that

---

enough? Why didn't you stop?

CHARLEY I'm not proud of what I did. O.k.? You.. you can't hold something like  
this  
against me..nobody knew it would.. maybe they did but we didn't.. I  
swear.  
later, go they told us it would clear things up. . save soldiers lives.. now, years  
you blame me...it's not right. I want forgiveness, Rita. I want you to tell me  
love me.

RITA I.. I really don't know, Charley. My head is spinning.

(BLACKOUT)

### ACT THREE

SETTING: Hallway, Charley and Rita's house

AT RISE: The next morning. Rita slept upstairs, Charley on the living room  
couch.  
Rita comes downstairs wearing a gray raincoat hauling two suitcases.  
Charlie  
is drooping against the stage left wall.  
He's wearing his disheveled army uniform. A bottle of whiskey  
Between his legs. Around him – an uncapped vial with pills sprawled  
on the  
Floor. He is back in Vietnam.

---

RITA Charley....Oh, Jesus.

CHARLEY I did those things.

RITA (picks up empty vial) How many did you take?

CHARLEY Keep your head down.

RITA I'm not the same any more.

CHARLEY There's no pattern. The next one could land in your lap.

RITA I don't know what to do with you.

CHARLEY I can't remember what they taught us about camouflage.

RITA Charlie.. What have they done to you?

CHARLEY I don't want to go in the black bag.

RITA This isn't...

CHARLEY The radio.. Where is the radio?

RITA Radio? What radio Charley?

CHARLEY What are the coordinates, Rita..? the map..get the map..I have to know

CHARLEY (Cont) where we are.

RITA There is no map, Charley.

CHARLEY He stripped me... in front of you.

RITA It's not important now.

CHARLEY He shoved his filthy hands into our guts.

RITA Don't stop Charley. Let it out.

CHARLEY Carry me to the clearing.

RITA (Rita picks up the vial to see how many pills were prescribed)  
How many? Fifteen! Have you taken any? (Charley drunkenly shrugs)  
(Rita begins gathering the pills from the floor and counts them)

CHARLEY I got two right away.

RITA One, two, three...Oh, Charley

CHARLEY The rest are hiding

RITA Four, five, six, seven, eight..

---

CHARLEY            Careful where you step Rita. They could blow- cut you in half.  
I've seen it happen. (Tries unsuccessfully to smack the pills from her hand).

RITA                Nine, ten, eleven! Charley, you took four.. did you take four? Jesus  
Answer  
me!

CHARLEY            (with his arm raised high he opens his hand. Two pills fall to  
the floor)  
Bombs away! .

RITA                Two?

CHARLEY            (anguished) I told you I got two.. Where are you guys?

RITA                I found the strength I need, Charley

CHARLEY            I'm going back.

RITA                No. No. . Stay here. This nurse will take care of you.

CHARLEY            Rita..Stop.. please...shhhh..I'll be o.k. Don't talk anymore. They're  
all  
around us. My buddies will get us out.

RITA                We're alone Charley. It's just the two of us.

CHARLEY:            (coming out of his fog places his fingers around *Rita's* wedding band).  
This is a lucky ring. I told you that when we got it. Remember?

RITA                You can't imagine what it's like for a girl to wake up and know that  
day  
she's going to pick out her wedding ring.

CHARLEY            That was.. what kind of day did we call it?

RITA                A beach day.

CHARLEY            The sun was shining on us that day.

RITA                I should have listened more closely.

CHARLEY            What he did.. that's not how I wanted it to happen

RITA                It was a good thing, Charley. I couldn't hear you before then..(twirls  
ring.

---

weren't reads inside band). Eternally yours..What did that mean when we speaking the same language?

CHARLEY I'm sorry.

RITA I thought I was a smart girl. I just keep finding out how stupid I really am.

before. A person should wake up each day a little smarter than the day before.

together but not I'm not asking much..just a (holds the tips of two fingers close touching).

CHARLEY Rita, where have you been? I missed you.

RITA The current moves so fast.

CHARLEY You're staying right?

RITA I didn't get in until now

CHARLEY You can love somebody you don't know

RITA We pretended, Charley.

CHARLEY I need you, Rita.

RITA You gave in to Tony so we can have a second chance.

CHARLEY The nights are long.

RITA Not any more. (slowly wraps her body around his).

THE END

**THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:** *The inspiration and dialogue of the play was influenced by the short, snappy 'film noir' genre of the 40' and 50's found in books and films written by the likes of Raymond Chandler and James Cain. Thanks to 'Fleas on the Dog,' This is the first time the play has seen the light of day since written two years ago.*

**BIO:** *Michael Glassman is a former high school teacher who, for the last ten years, has written poetry, short plays, flash fiction and creative non-fiction. He has been published on line in: Society of Classical Poets, The Voices Project, Foliate, and Hitchlit. His work has appeared in print in the Chronogram magazine, Cutthroat Journal of the Arts, and the Karpeles anthology series.*

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## **PERFORMANCE ART**

### **A Play In One Act**

**By Judy Klass**

## **CHARACTERS**

**KILEY:** A friend of the artist's – SHE is taken with experiments in what art can be and mean.

**ERICA:** SHE is a little more conventional, and unnerved when things get too experimental and weird.

## **SETTING**

We seem to be in an art gallery that has been converted to look like a theater space – or are we?

## **TIME**

The present.

---

AT RISE: KILEY AND ERICA wander out onto the stage, and peer at the audience, scrutinizing their faces.

ERICA  
So ... this is it?

KILEY  
This is it.

ERICA  
And they're alive? They're not mechanical?

KILEY  
(scoffing laugh)  
Yeah, right. Like she has the budget to build row upon row of cyber-people. Do you have any idea what life is like for artists now?

ERICA  
Artists can make a lot of money. If they're trendy enough.

KILEY  
She's not trying to be *trendy*. She's experimenting with the whole art gallery experience in bold, new ways. Some people do appreciate it – but no, she's not rich, and it's not like we live in a country where there are grants for artists or ways for them –

ERICA  
Okay, okay. Spare me the rant.  
(A beat. She stares at the audience again – points)  
So, then, like – if they're real ... Why are they doing it? Do they get paid?

KILEY  
I don't know. I didn't ask her. But I assume they did not get paid. I just told you – she has no money.

ERICA  
So, then ... why would they come and be part of this installation? And just sit there, and have us stare at them?

KILEY

---

Because they respect Hecuba. They respect her vision. They believe in her art.

ERICA

Kiley, seriously. Did her parents give her that name?

KILEY

What?

ERICA

Hecuba Rosenblatt. That is a truly terrible name. Did her parents do that to her, or did she do it to herself?

KILEY

I think she may have chosen it herself. She's forging her own identity.

ERICA

And you don't think that identity is maybe just a tad pretentious? Like this performance art installation, or whatever it is?

KILEY

As a matter of fact, no. I don't. I think she's doing daring and exciting work, and I'm proud to call her my friend. I know that a lot of people, consciously or subconsciously, have a problem with women artists – with the whole idea of Woman as Artist, instead of as Muse. They have a problem with a woman as a person with agency, as a person providing others with visual images and defying the ubiquitousness of the male gaze –

ERICA

Oh, stop it. Women are great as subjects or as objects. I have no problem with women artists. I like Georgia O'Keefe. I like Mary Cassatt. I was disappointed when I found out that Joan Miro was a guy – I always liked his work.

KILEY

But a woman changing the rules and shaking things up – that unsettles you. Even though you're a supposedly liberated woman yourself. And I find that very sad.

ERICA

I don't like trendy, pretentious experiments like this. Big,

---

dead sharks in tanks full of formaldehyde. You know?  
Madonnas painted with elephant poop.

KILEY

That's a wonderful painting!

ERICA

Crucifixes submerged in piss.

KILEY

That's a beautiful photograph! Suffused with a kind of divine, spiritual light. If you didn't know how Serrano had done it, you would swear that God Herself was immersing that crucifix in Her love, Her glory, why can't you get past –

ERICA

Because I'm conventional. I guess. Plus, I don't like gimmicks. I don't like artists posing in their own art installations, eating lunch, or sleeping, or sitting in a box. You might as well have Harry Houdini or David Copperfield suspended from a building, you know? That, at least, would be less pretentious. And I don't like it when artists film themselves doing whatever mundane stuff and put it on a screen and call it art.  
(indicates the audience with her hands spread wide)  
Or this stuff. It's silly, it's a dead end. It's not what I go to a museum to see.

KILEY

Wow. The Republicans who slash and destroy the NEA must love you. You are every bit as dull, and narrow, and closed-minded as they are!

ERICA

I don't get all morally offended, or religiously offended, but I hate gimmicks, I hate Barnumism pretending that it's something really deep and significant, and another thing – I appreciate real craftsmanship. Some artists have the ability to paint life-like pictures, or see the world in some new, impressionistic way, and render it, with a style that's unforgettable, that's unlike anyone else's! And other people ... they don't have that skill, that talent. So – they either teach art in a school –

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KILEY

Sure, as if schools still had the money to invest in art teachers!

ERICA

Or they come up with this stuff. And they say: “Oh, look at my new performance art installation! A bunch of people pretending to be an audience for an evening of theater, only instead of them watching a show, you watch them!” Whoop de doo.

KILEY

You’re just jealous because you didn’t think of it yourself. It seems too simple, and obvious to you, maybe, because you can’t even begin to think on such original terms –

ERICA

I don’t want to.

KILEY

And when an artist like Ai Weiwei films himself undergoing human rights violations and posts it to the web, that’s just Barnumism to you? That’s just trickery?

ERICA

He’s risking a hell of a lot more, when he does that, than Hecuba Rosenblatt ever has. And sometimes he builds things like fiberglass models of himself with his jailers – or that Bird’s Nest Olympic Stadium. He knows about craftsmanship – he knows about design.

KILEY

What if he has assistants creating the fiberglass statues for him? Just like so many of the old masters had assistants that helped with the execution of their projects? What if his great strength is his bold imagination and his willingness to question established rules, just like Hecuba does?

ERICA

Oh, please. What rules does Hecuba question?

---

KILEY

The comforting but completely arbitrary illusion of a line between the audience and the work being viewed – as if they don't refract each other's light, and modify each other!

KILEY (CONT'D)

As if art and audience were not in dialogue with each other, all the time! What Hecuba is doing here is as radical as when Andy Warhol painted a can of Campbell's soup or a picture of Marilyn Monroe and reminded us that art is a commodity, *everything* can be commodified, and art can't be separated from pop culture, and all dichotomies are illusions. That's what Hecuba is saying also, if you'd just throw out your bourgeois prejudices, for once, Erica, and open your mind and heart to something new. Embrace the Lacanian gaze! (points to audience)

Look at them. They've been reacting to us discussing them. So, are we the performance art installation – or are they?

ERICA

I don't know. Does Hecuba know?

KILEY

What do you mean?

ERICA

I mean ... maybe they've been duped by your crazy friend, and maybe we have, too. Maybe they think they really *are* a theater audience, just like we think we're visiting a museum installation.

(beat)

Are you sure this space is a museum? It looks a hell of a lot like a theater to me.

KILEY

Hecuba modified the space to make it look like a theater. That's a crucial part of this piece.

ERICA

So, how could she afford to do that? You keep saying she's broke.

KILEY

I guess she cut a deal with some theater that will move in after the installation is dismantled. How is that important?

---

ERICA

How come other artists aren't in here? With pictures on the walls and so on?

KILEY

Because this is not a group show.

ERICA

How come it doesn't say "museum" or "gallery" outside?  
How come it only says "Performance Art, by Hecuba Rosenblatt"?

KILEY

Because "Performance Art" is the name of this piece.

ERICA

Yeah, either that, or "Performance Art" is the name of this play – and we're it.

KILEY

Don't be ridiculous.

ERICA

Or both at the same time. It doesn't have to be either/or.  
"All dichotomies are illusions," right? Maybe we're the observers but we're also the art. Maybe we're being commodified, by your manipulative friend, just like these good people here. Should we ask them?

KILEY

No, leave them alone. You don't pester and harass people  
Who are part of an installation.

ERICA

Why not? You think they've got some kind of code of no response, like the guards outside of Buckingham Palace?

KILEY

No, but I think it's tacky and rude to try to disrupt an installation.

ERICA

Okay, fine, whatever, can we get out of here now?

---

KILEY

Why? Why are you so unnerved by anything you don't understand at first glance? Maybe real art shouldn't make you comfortable – maybe it should make you *uncomfortable*.

ERICA

Maybe cameras make me uncomfortable. You know? What if Hecuba is filming this? What if we're going to be the subjects of her next installation, for real?

KILEY

Why would she film this?

ERICA

She's one of those boring, narcissistic artists who films things like herself sleeping, right?

KILEY

She recontextualizes those concepts. She had one show with a film of her sleeping, where the camera focused on the rising and falling of her breasts in her sleep, but she had red plastic clown's noses on each of her nipples, which *completely* deconstructed the traditional role of the woman as art object, and how the female body is usually perceived as passive and vulnerable or as an object of reverence –

ERICA

Great, good for her.

KILEY

With a witty, pointed subtext, to all her work on film, about how we are constantly under surveillance now, by the NSA, and internet providers, and stores and corporations, and how, in a world of web cams and reality shows, the line between public and private space has been hopelessly blurred –

ERICA

The point is, she's into cameras. Suppose she also wants to destroy the dichotomy between – whatever – art and theater, and theater and film ... And she's playing the role of the NSA to make a political point? Suppose she's secretly filming us right now, watching us with her camera, watching us watch them watch us ... What right do we have to prevent her from

---

using it? I do not want to be a sucker, and I do not want to be her bitch.

KILEY

What a paranoid, self-hating woman you are.

ERICA

Hey, you know what, fine, if you say so. I'm leaving.  
(ERICA EXITS.)

KILEY

(glancing around nervously)

You wouldn't do that ... would you, Hecuba?

(to audience)

She wouldn't ... She didn't, right?

(KILEY EXITS. LIGHTS DOWN.)

#### END OF PLAY

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *An insightful example of conceptual theatre that addresses timely and provocative questions about the nature of stage drama, the role and nature of the audience and the feminist playwright's struggle for identity. It is at the same time a cutting edge satire of the contemporary art scene and the problems introduced by the Minimalist movement and installation events. The implosive result is meta-theatre where the actors are the performance rather than participants and the audience is both subject and object. As Kiley says, 'the line between public and private space has been hopelessly blurred'. A brilliantly realized play with energy, style and dialogue that smacks.*

**THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:** So, to the degree that I'm satirizing these characters, I'm satirizing myself, as a feminist who sometimes takes herself too seriously, and as a person involved with creating performances and "art" who sometimes takes herself too seriously while involved in those pursuits. (I am Kiley. I am Erica. I am Hecuba Rosenblatt.) As for the ideas these two women argue about – I've been on both sides of the debate. I've seen beauty and interesting qualities in controversial art pieces, and at other times some of them have struck me as easy and gimmicky. I have various influences as a playwright, but I don't think any of them led, directly, to this piece. I was taken with the idea, in a ten-minute play, of characters not only removing the fourth wall, but actually peering at the audience, trying to figure out who these people sitting in rows are and what they are doing ... and the play came out of that. It does work well, and it gets nervous laughs from the audience, when performed. As pretentious as it may sound to talk about a play getting "reflexive" and "meta" – it actually does, a bit.

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**BIO:** Seven of Judy's full-length plays have been produced. One, *Cell*, was produced in a mystery festival in Owensboro, Kentucky, got nominated for an Edgar and is published by Samuel French. Transatlantic was produced in NYC twice, Damage Control was produced in NYC once, After Tartuffe was produced in NYC once, Hackers and Heroes, co-written with Ron Reed, was produced in NYC once, Stop Me If You've Heard This One was produced in Nashville, Tennessee and Country Fried Murder was produced in Shawnee on Delaware, Pennsylvania, after winning in the Shawnee Playhouse competition. Stop Me If You've Heard This One won the Dorothy Silver Award. Judy's unproduced full-length play Hallway House made the Second Round of the Austin Film Festival in the Stage Play category in 2019. Thirty-five of her one-act plays have been produced. One, Untethered, won the William Faulkner Literary Competition in the One Act Play category in 2019. More info about her can be found at [www.judy-klass.com](http://www.judy-klass.com) and many of her plays, short and long, produced and unproduced, need good homes. Judy is also a songwriter. She is from NYC/NJ, but she now lives in Nashville, TN and teaches at Vanderbilt University.

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**UNDYING**

**By Zen (Richard) Wang**

**Undying**

**(Short Film)**

**By Zen (Richard) Wang**

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**EXT.STORE - NIGHT**

**A rainy and windy night. The streets of Chinatown is devoid of people. One store still has its lights on. YANG, late 20's, average build, wearing a drenched sports jacket walks toward the store. He enters as a couple leaves. Bell sounds.**

**INT. STORE -NIGHT**

**The store is filled with buddhist statues, ceremonial items, scary paintings and offerings for the dead. Yang walks half way up the aisle. STORE OWNER, 50's, tiny man, sits at end of the aisle.**

**STORE OWNER (WITH AN ACCENT)**

**Looking for hotel? Nothing open. Unholy hour.**

**YANG**

**Sorry for the trouble.**

**Yang stops in mid stride unsure of what to do. He turns to leave.**

**STORE OWNER**

**We have bed. Corner of store. Forty-three dollar a night.**

**Yang turns back.**

**STORE OWNER (O.S.)**

**But be careful, don't touch anything in here.**

**FADE OUT**

**INT. STORE -NIGHT**

**A pot of tea rests on a night table. A folding bed beside it.**

---

a small cup filled with steamy tea. As the steam rises we see the young man exploring the different items in the store. He glances over a small picture frame with a black and white photograph of a Chinese couple in traditional clothing.

He plays with some silk dresses and some ancient erotic texts. He opens a cabinet and sees a painting of beautiful woman dressed in traditional Chinese clothing.

**FADE OUT**

**INT. STORE -LATE NIGHT**

Yang asleep in bed. He is awakened by sounds of a woman weeping. He gets up carefully, picks up a bamboo stick and looks for its source.

A beautiful woman (AUTUMN) mid 20's, attractive and innocent with braided black hair, dressed in red Chinese silk dress is sitting with her back to Yang. Yang touches her shoulder as-if to check if she's real. She turns her head. A beautiful pale emotionless round face crying tears of blood.

**YANG**

(backing away)

Ahhhh!!!

Yang almost falls. The girl turns her head back again. This time the blood is gone and her face is only covered in tears.

**YANG**

(collecting his senses)

What? Who are you?

**WOMAN (AUTUMN)**

I am nobody. Get away from me.

**YANG**

Well, are you in some kind of trouble?

**WOMAN (AUTUMN)**

No one cares about me. I am doomed. A shadow that will untimely fade.

**YANG**

(lays down the stick)

Tell me anyway, it may make you feel better.

**WOMAN (AUTUMN)**

---

**(wiping her tears)**  
**Thanks but I don't even know you.**  
**YANG (GETTING CLOSER)**  
**The name is Yang. I just arrived here looking for work.**  
**And you?**  
**WOMAN (AUTUMN)**  
**Unwanted useless female child. Born before winter solstice. Bad Karma life.**  
**She swallows, glances at Yang before she continues.**  
**WOMAN (AUTUMN)(CONTINUES)**  
**My father was sick and my mother couldn't pay the rent when I was 15. As a mail bride I landed here.**  
**Yang pulls a stool over and sits next to the woman.**  
**WOMAN (AUTUMN)(CONTINUES)**  
**Husband was old and impotent but he wanted a son. His failure became my fault. Beatings, torture and hunger filled my days.**  
**Yang pounds the table. Startling the woman.**  
**WOMAN (AUTUMN)(CONTINUES)**  
**(turning to Yang)**  
**One day, I had enough so I ran. Some nice ladies on the street took me in. Their ugly boss tried to rape me. I kicked him straight and hard and ran again.**  
**YANG**  
**Good for you! Then what happens?**  
**The woman stares down at her clean silk embroidered shoes.**  
**WOMAN (AUTUMN)**  
**Then nothing. I have been doing this night cleaning job ever since. Hiding. Lonely and scared all the time. The one that no one sees.**  
**YANG**  
**Well, that's not true! I see you.**  
**The woman shakes her head and starts to cry again.**  
  
**YANG**  
**I can help...**

---

**WOMAN (AUTUMN)**  
(looks at his bed and sighs)  
That's sweet, but a cup of tea cannot save a burning house.

**YANG**

I know I am not much right now, but I can be a friend.

**WOMAN (AUTUMN)**

Friend. Friends come and go.

**YANG**

(stands up)

Not me! I make good on my words. I will be there for you always...I'll, I'll swear in front of this Buddha...

**WOMAN (AUTUMN)**

(stands up and smiles)

That's all I needed. That you will be there. Don't say another word.

The woman leans close and rest her head on Yang's shoulder. Yang catches a whiff of her scent, hesitates and carefully puts his arms around her. The two gaze into each other's eyes and share a tender kiss. Vapour from the tea rises between them.

Suddenly, the clock CHIMES three o'clock. The woman startles.

**WOMAN (AUTUMN)**

I have to go.

**YANG**

Wait! Will I see you again?

The woman runs toward the front. She accidentally bumps into a display shelf and knocks a wooden scented fan to the floor.

**WOMAN (AUTUMN)**

My time unpredictable. I go to the park by the temple on the 15th.

**YANG**

Wait! I don't know your name.

**WOMAN (AUTUMN)**

(smiling)

---

**Born Before Winter, remember?**

**FADE OUT**

**INT. STORE - MORNING**

**Yang opens his eyes to discover the store owner staring at him. Embarrassed, Yang sits up from a contorted position.**

**Store owner walks away.**

**YANG**

**Good morning sir.**

**Store owner continues to open shop.**

**YANG**

**Your cleaning lady. What is her name?**

**STORE OWNER**

**(picks up a broom)**

**Cleaning lady? I can't afford no cleaning lady. I do everything myself.**

**Yang looks around and notices for the first time how dusty the place is.**

**YANG**

**(scratching his head)**

**Strange, she said she was a night cleaning lady.**

**Store owner quickly walks to Yang and holds his shoulders.**

**STORE OWNER**

**I lock door and window before I go. You say you saw people last night?**

**YANG**

**Yes. As clearly as I see you now.**

**STORE OWNER**

**This is bad. Very bad.**

**(two beats)**

**Bad tea. Expired. No good for head...**

**Store owner takes away the teapot and walks away muttering something about his tea dealer.**

**Yang massages his neck, blinks hard and walks out. In haste he steps on the wooden scented fan on the floor making a cracking sound. Yang looks down in amazement.**

**SHOP OWNER**

---

**(without looking up from his newspaper)**

**Two dollar. You break you buy.**

**FADE OUT**

**SUPER: "AUGUST 15TH"**

**EXT. PARK NEAR THE TEMPLE - DUSK.**

**Yang leans against a tree smoking. Many cigarette butts around him. Two couples walk past him and exit the park.**

**Yang takes out the wooden scented fan from his pocket. He looks at it for a bit, unfolds it, smells it and walks away from the tree.**

**Yang finds a garbage bin and drops the fan into the bin. At that moment, Yang notices a flickering light in the distance. He follows it and finds an OLD MAN squatting near what looks like a small fire pit. The man is burning incense and ceremonial money while muttering.**

**OLD MAN**

**...you had a hard life. I couldn't give you mountains of gold and silver. Don't hold grudges against anyone. Be at peace...**

**YANG**

**Who are you talking to?**

**OLD MAN**

**(without turning, wipes his face)**

**I-Ching was my wife from back home. As soon as we got here she changed. She wanted everything we didn't have. She hated her life, so she detested me. Poor soul.**

**YANG**

**What a shame.**

**OLD MAN**

**One day she ran into the flower ladies. She thought she finally had everything: Money, jewelries, pretty white boys. They even gave her a stage name depicting one of the four seasons.**

**YANG**

**(helps to tend the fire against the wind)**

**What did you do?**

**OLD MAN**

---

**I couldn't bear it. I demanded a divorce and her family wanted her to go back home.**

**YANG**

**(shaking his head)**

**The old ways.**

**OLD MAN**

**Rather than going back to face a life of misery and humiliation she hung herself. Right here in this park. Every full moon I come to comfort her. Forty three years in the blink of an eye.**

**YANG**

**(surprised)**

**Forty three years?**

**OLD MAN**

**A ghost who died unnaturally will linger for a long time between the living and the dead.**

**Yang slowly stands up and walk away from the fire. He stops suddenly and turns.**

**YANG**

**What was her season?**

**OLD MAN**

**Huh?**

**YANG**

**You said they gave her a stage name. One of the four seasons. What was her season?**

**OLD MAN**

**Autumn.**

**Realizing that he has seen a ghost, Yang runs away through the bamboo forest like a crazy man.**

**AUTUMN (O.S.)**

**...A shadow that will untimely fade.**

**OLD MAN (O.S.)**

**...she hung herself, right here in the park...**

**AUTUMN (O.S.)**

---

**...The one that no one sees.**

**OLD MAN (O.S.)**

**...forty three years and counting...**

**AUTUMN (O.S.)**

**...before winter, remember?**

**OLD MAN (O.S.)**

**...Autumn.**

**FADE OUT**

**INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT**

**The apartment is in disarray. Garbage, half eaten Chinese food, cigarettes, half empty bottles are everywhere. Yang lies in bed motionless. A towel covers his face. He coughs. Without moving other parts of his body he reaches for the rice wine bottle with his hand. He finds it and takes a big gulp. He goes back to sleep.**

**FADE OUT**

**UNKNOWN, DREAM - NIGHT**

**Yang's POV. The woman appears out of darkness wearing a flowing semi-transparent white gown. She floats toward Yang.**

**AUTUMN**

**I knew you would come. They were all fakes but you are real.**

**YANG**

**They?**

**AUTUMN**

**So now you know how I came to be. Small details. What's important is you are here.**

**YANG**

**(looks around)**

**Where is this?**

**AUTUMN**

**I rule here. He has no powers here. Are you ready to hear my plan?**

**YANG**

**Your plan?**

**AUTUMN**

---

**You didn't think I was going to stay like this forever do you? One season is long enough. Next full moon, the priest will perform "Songs for the Dead". You need to grab his singing bowl. Once I have it, I...**

**YANG**

**Wait a minute! What's all this about?**

**AUTUMN**

**I am sorry my love. Where are my manners.**

**Autumn slowly waves her right sleeve. A bamboo forest appears. She waves her other sleeve. A stone table and stool appear, complete with a steamy teapot and two cups.**

**Autumn takes Yang over.**

**Birds chirping in the forest.**

**Cicadas buzzing on the branches.**

**Autumn pours the tea for both. Yang chokes on the hot tea, Autumn pats his back, wipes his lips tenderly and smiles.**

**She goes back to her tea, first smells it, then takes a small sip, twirls the liquid around in her mouth, finally swallowing it like an angel drinking from the fountain of youth.**

**AUTUMN**

**(sipping and watching Yang)**

**It could always be this way my love. Once I reincarnate we can begin anew. Everything's ready, timing is right. All we need is the singing bowl from that wretched monk.**

**YANG**

**(gingerly)**

**There is just one little thing. The old man at the park said you were not a mail-in-bride and you WANTED to become a flower girl.**

**AUTUMN**

**(becoming animated)**

**What! That old fool spreading lies about me again? I can't go back, I can't stay, I can't go forth. so I can only cling to him in his pitiful little world?**

**The bamboo forest and stone table vanishes and the**

---

setting changes back to Yang's dreamscape. Autumn starts to pace up and down like a caged beast.

**AUTUMN**

(arguing to herself with evil voice)

I told you men cannot be trusted!

(normal voice) I had to try haven't I. It's been too long.

(evil voice) They always get what they want and leave you cold and bleeding on the bathroom floor.

(normal voice) You are right, I know you are. So what now?

(evil voice) You **KNOW** what has to be done.

Autumn rises up ten feet into the air with her back to Yang. She starts a hysterical and evil laughter. She stops suddenly and turns around with her head looking down. A porcelain white face crying tears of blood appears. Her black loose hair has patches of white hair. Her tongue hanging out. She wears a faded, tattered robe. She glides toward Yang threateningly.

**AUTUMN**

You made a promise to always be there for me. You have to keep it or face my wrath.

Yang retreats and falls onto the ground.

**AUTUMN**

Is this what you pigs want?

Autumn waves her sleeve. Three other female ghosts appears dressed in different faded gowns.

They approach and circle Yang like a pack of hungry she-wolves.

They take turns sitting and grinding on Yang's trembling body laughing like cats in heat.

**AUTUMN**

(sits on top of Yang herself)

We won't stop until you are sucked dry. A skeleton not even worth burying.

A deep sounding **BELL** fills Yang's dreamscape. The female ghosts scatter. Autumn backs away.

**AUTUMN**

---

**We have to go now, but we'll be back if you don't keep your promise.**

**Yang wakes up drenched in cold sweat. He stops his alarm clock and tries to calm his heart down. He hears Autumn's hysterical laughter from the window.**

**He looks and sees "September 15th, Westend Cemetery #43." written in Chinese on the window pane. He blinks and it's gone.**

**EXT. CEMETERY - NIGHT**

**A Buddhist priest performing a passage ceremony for the dead. He chants buddhist text while waving ritual instruments in one hand and holding a brass bowl in the other. Candles and offering vessels are in front of a new tombstone.**

**A dark figure approaches the priest. They get into inaudible arguments and the dark figure takes out a crowbar and beats the priest's head with it. The Priest falls back and the dark figure takes something from him and runs away.**

**The dark figure runs and is intercepted by Autumn (normal ghost appearance) before he gets too far.**

**AUTUMN**

**(handles the brass bowl lovingly)**

**Perfect!**

**The priest suddenly gets up and shouts.**

**PRIEST**

**Now!**

**Autumn looks at Yang, startled, she drops the bowl. It shatters like glass.**

**Yang's expression is menacing. He takes a bundle of golden rope from his coat.**

**As if having a life of their own, the rope wraps around autumn's neck. Autumn realizes she's been tricked.**

**She pushes Yang away and struggles against the rope with all her might.**

**Yang tries his best to hold on to his end. His hands are bloodied and slipping. Just when the end of the rope is reached the sound of the Singing Bowl fills the air.**

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**The priest approaches slowly with the real singing bowl. He rotates a stick around the outside of the bowl and makes an eerie sound that resonates with one's skull.**

**Autumn (evil ghost, black loose hair with patches of white hair, faded, tattered robe.) struggles against the rope while trying to block out the sound.**

**She rises and falls like a broken kite tattering in a storm. Her neck appears to be broken and her head lays on the left or the right shoulder.**

**She flies toward Yang and crawls at his feet.**

**AUTUMN**

**How can you do this to me? Remember the smell of our tea and the taste of my lips?**

**Yang freezes and unknowingly loosens his grip.**

**Autumn grabs his end of the rope and backs away.**

**MONTAGE:**

**People having sex,**

**baby,**

**little girl,**

**ghost guardians,**

**bamboo windows**

**hanging corpse.**

**AUTUMN**

**Haaaa! Hardened men are no match for the soft blade.**

**Using the rope as a whip, Autumn knocks the singing bowl away from the priest's hands.**

**She wraps the other end around the priest's neck and begins to pull him in towards her.**

**Yang helps the priest unravel from the rope.**

**Autumn starts to shoot lightning bolts at them. The two men retreat behind a tombstone.**

**AUTUMN**

**As if I will let a man hold my reins ever again!**

**Neveerrrrr!**

**Autumn conjures up the mother of all lightning bolts. A voice comes out of nowhere.**

**OLD MAN (O.S.)**

---

**NOOOO! This ends NOW!**  
**AUTUMN**  
    **(Undeterred)**  
**This has nothing to do with you. Stay back.**  
**OLD MAN (O.S.)**  
**This has everything to do with me. YOU go back.**  
**The figure walks into the light and it is the Old man**  
**from the park.**  
**OLD MAN**  
**I-Ching, don't you think you have done enough? When**  
**will you stop?**  
**AUTUMN**  
**I will stop when I get what I want. The singing bowl**  
**will allow me to live again.**  
**PRIEST**  
**Undead spirit. If you reincarnate in a newborn. She will**  
**have two souls. She will end up in an asylum.**  
**AUTUMN**  
**(turns the priest)**  
**Lies, lies. Poison and lies. Now die!!!**  
**Autumn directs the huge lightning bolt toward the**  
**priest just as the old man darts in front of it saving the**  
**priest.**  
**He gets hit straight in the heart. Autumn stops and**  
**rushes over.**  
**AUTUMN**  
**You stupid old fool!**  
**OLD MAN**  
**(Lying down with his hand on his chest)**  
**No one else should be hurt because of me. (a beat) I**  
**want to show you something I-Ching.**  
**Old man turns and points at the tombstone behind**  
**them.**  
**It is the tombstone for I-Ching. The characters of her**  
**name is offset from the centre column, leaving room for**  
**another person on the same tombstone.**  
**OLD MAN**

---

One day of marriage, a hundred days of kindness to repay.

Old man coughs up blood on to this chest.

**OLD MAN (CONTINUES)**

Have you wondered why I never remarried? I wanted to be buried with you. I owe you from this world and I hope to settle my debt in the next one.

Autumn kneels down. Blood drops on the old man's hand. Gradually the drops become clear tear drops. Tears wash away the blood.

Autumn lies beside the old man on the ground. She is now an old woman wearing the same clothing.

She caresses his grey hair, his bearded chin and finally closes his eyelids. She rests her head on his chest near his stopped heart. Her hand covering the burn mark from the lightning.

**AUTUMN**

(closing her eyes, taking a deep breath)

Lao Gong.

**FADE OUT**

**EXT. BEACH - DAWN**

A set of foot prints in the sand. The buddhist priest walks along the beach toward the horizon. His outline is barely visible in the morning fog.

Yang is bundled up against the cold morning breeze. He looks at the horizon, turns and walks away from the lake.

An old black and white wedding photograph of I-Ching and her husband wearing traditional clothing is washed back and forth by the gentle waves on the beach. They appear to be reserved but happy. They sit by a traditional Chinese garden table with a pot and two cups. Bamboo forest decorates the background.

**The End**

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** The word undying is multilayered. It can mean long lasting as in undying love and also mean something that refuses to go away. In other words the

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**opposite of dying. I wrote it in Vancouver on the edge of Chinatown. After talking to my barber I got this incredible sense of sadness. All the immigrants were uprooted from their homeland, and like a water lily they can never put their root down again anywhere else.**

**I wrote 'Undying' in the template of LiaoZaiZhiYi, a collection of Chinese ghost stories from the Ming dynasty. The setting and era have changed, but the people stay the same. The people always stay the same.**

**BIO: Apart from being a filmmaker, an engineer, a teacher, a director Richard is also an editor at Fleas on the Dog. He lives with his wife Toby and baby daughter in Waterloo Region, Ontario. (Eds.)**

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## **THE 3 SERIES**

**A PLAY by Ed Cunningham**

**WHY WE LIKE IT: A refreshingly original sci/fi thriller with shades of Arthur C. Clarke and Ray Bradbury....emphasis on developing character...the background is less important...the play is set in the Fourth Millennium...all but 37 women have disappeared from the face of the planet and rare and exotic enough in a world of android love dolls, that they are housed and exhibited in zoos. The protagonist in the play, a generic research scientist, kidnaps one of these women and the drama is about their relationship in a non-supportive anti-female culture. A Dystopia masquerading as a Utopia to the population...an oracle of the future that could too easily await us...and thus, a warning. Spacing is the playwright's**

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own. (Tom Ball)

## **The 3 Series**

### **Synopsis for The 3 Series**

**In the year 2333, a world famous genetic designer, W.G. Harding, breaks into a zoo and kidnaps Bessie, one of only 37 female human beings left on Earth. His plan? To digitally replicate her soul, and use it as a template for his newest artificially intelligent, synthetic female, called a "Femanon." But, Bessie the female human being develops her own mind while under Harding's watchful eye, and gains a powerful influence over the scientist. The corporate overlords might not appreciate the new code Harding's written for his breakthrough Femanon, otherwise known as The 3 Series.**

### **Characters**

**6 actors are required: 4 male, 2 female**

**HARDING - A brilliant genetic designer, early 30s**

**BESSIE - A female human being, and then a synthetic facsimile of the same, 30s**

**SALAZAR - A handsome businessman with a good heart, late 20s**

**PAUL - An intimidating figure, anti-intellectual, 30s-40s.**

**EMMA / JUDY / THE COUCH'S ARMS - A facsimile of a pedantic zoologist / A facsimile of a secretary / A pair of**

---

**synthetic female arms that emerge from the couch and  
massage whoever's sitting there, late 20s**

**WAITER / ADAM COURSON - A French waiter / A very  
slick CEO of a very powerful corporation.**

**\*WARNING: There is NO nudity in this play. Sorry.**

**Necessary Set Pieces**

- 1. A Plexiglass box (big enough for a woman to fit  
inside)**
- 2. A Couch with Arms! (i.e. it must have two slits in  
the back for female arms to come through and massage  
someone.)**
- 3. A Hospital Gurney**
- 4. Café table and chairs**
- 5. A Table / Desk in an office**
- 6. Two reading chairs.**

**2.**

**SCENE 1**

**2333 A.D.**

**A Zoo.**

**In Sri Lanka.**

**The house lights are up; the stage is visible. On stage is  
a completely transparent 12' X 12' plexiglass box.**

**Inside the box is a WOMAN. Audience members can see  
her as they enter they theatre. Brightly lit, she lies on the**

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**floor in an upstage corner of the box. In front of the box is a sign that reads in both English and Sinhala-- "Female Human Being."**

**The woman stares into space, and appears sickly, listless, drugged.**

**When it's time to begin the show, the house lights dim...**

**We see HARDING, a distinguished looking gentleman in his 30s, enter and stand before the captive woman. He stares at her in disbelief.**

**HARDING**  
**My god.**

**A FEMALE VOICE comes over the loudspeaker.**

**ZOO ANNOUNCER (V.O.)**

**Greetings visitors to the Sri Lanka National Zoo. The natural female human being is a fascinating reminder of our evolutionary history. Female human beings require a tremendous amount of maintenance. Feeding, bathing, and regulating their endocrinological imbalances are daily tasks performed by our staff. Therefore, this section of the zoo will be closing in ten minutes. It is completely normal to feel emotionally or even sexually aroused by this exhibit. But we do ask that you now initiate chem code 4761, so that our systems for closing this exhibit can function smoothly. Thank you for visiting the Sri Lanka National Zoo. The female human being will retire in nine minutes.**

**Harding raises a hand, and with one finger, caresses the air in front of his face.**

---

### 3.

**It becomes apparent that his finger is swiping and scrolling through information suspended in the air in front of his face and all around him really-- a holosphere touchscreen that only he can see and use.**

**NOTE: The virtual screen hanging in the air before him is projected from an implant in his eye. This sort of technology is ubiquitous, part of everyone's everyday augmented reality.**

#### **HARDING**

**(reading) Invitro... Born in captivity... Her birther was an A.I. named Emma Yates, a zoologist. She carried her to term, and gave birth vaginally. VAGINALLY!? Born March 10th, 2301. She's 32 years old. One of only 37 female human beings left on the planet... all born in captivity... NO gene modifications, NO programmable cells, NO implants... Her very existence is illegal in most countries, but in Sri Lanka blah blah blah... Her name is Bessie. Huh. My name is W.G. Harding. I've come a very long way to see you, Bessie.**

**BESSIE stares at the white floor. Assessing the direction of her gaze, Harding gets down on his knees, attempting to insert himself into her field of vision. But she remains oblivious. Harding stands.**

#### **HARDING**

**Zoos are depressing. They could at least give you an outdoor habitat, let you roam around a little. Can you hear me?**

**He rests a hand on the glass.**

---

**ZOO ANNOUNCER: (V.O.)**  
**Please do not touch the glass.**

**HARDING**  
**Sorry!**

**ZOO ANNOUNCER:**  
**Please lower the volume of your voice.**

**HARDING**  
**Sorry. (beat) She's sleeping. God, she's beautiful.**

**Suddenly, Bessie sits up.**

**HARDING**  
**Jesus! Are you awake? Can you hear me? I wish I could... I wish I could sit in there with you...**

**4.**

**He puts his hand against the glass again. Suddenly, Bessie drops and rolls toward the downstage wall. Her hand slowly rises to where Harding's hand rests. They press their hands together, through the glass. For the first time, Bessie looks directly into Harding's eyes.**

**ZOO ANNOUNCER (V.O.)**  
**Please do not touch the glass. Please do not touch the glass. (an alarm sounds) Your failure to comply has been recorded. Zoo Security has been notified. The female human being will retire in 30 seconds.**

**HARDING**  
**Do you feel that? My God. Do you feel what I'm feeling?**

---

**ZOO ANNOUNCER (V.O.)**

**The female human being will retire in 15 seconds.**

**HARDING**

**LOOK INTO MY EYES! The next time you see me, they won't know who I am, but you will. Look into my eyes and you'll know that it's me. Okay? I'll come back for you... I'll come back for you...**

**An alarm sounds and a small door opens at the rear of the box. A blinding light shoots out.**

**HARDING**

**Bessie!!!**

**Bessie starts rolling backward toward the light, as if she's being sucked out of the box by an enormous vacuum. She's struggles, reaching out for Harding. But it's no use.**

**She disappears, and the door closes.**

**HARDING**

**Bessie...**

**BLACKOUT.**

**5.**

**SCENE 2**

**Three weeks later. A street corner. Harding approaches a Femanon (a female android) as she's waiting to cross at the light.**

**HARDING**

---

**Excuse me... Emma, is it?**

**EMMA**  
**Yes.**

**HARDING**  
**You work at the zoo.**

**EMMA**  
**Yes, I do.**

**HARDING**  
**I thought so. My name's-- Uh-- I'm sorry-- My name's**  
**Jeff.**

**Jeff Prouty.**

**He extends a hand. She just looks at it.**

**HARDING**  
**How are things?**

**With her finger, she starts swiping the air before her**  
**face, searching for background information on him.**

**EMMA**  
**Jeff Jeff Prouty. I'm not able to verify your identity.**

**HARDING**  
**Oh, I do classified work for Quad 4. They might have--**

**EMMA**  
**Who are you? What do you want?**

**HARDING**  
**I don't want anything. I went to the zoo today. Would**  
**you like to have a cup of coffee with me?**

---

**EMMA**

**I'm not coded for socializing. Forgive me if you find it rude, but the sequence is complete.**

**HARDING**

**That's alright. I'm a genetic designer, actually. I understand you more than most.**

**6.**

**EMMA**

**Then you understand, Jeff Jeff, that I am designed specifically for birthing and zoology. Outside of that, my abilities are limited to basic self-maintenance: gathering food, eating food, processing food, and then sleeping.**

**HARDING**

**Lovely.**

**EMMA**

**Good-bye.**

**HARDING**

**Wait, Emma. I was one of the original designers of your prototype. I happen to know more about you... than you do. All Femanons are able to enjoy a cup of coffee with a human being.**

**EMMA**

**I don't believe that's right.**

**HARDING**

**No it is. You've just never tried it. I want to ask you a few questions about Bessie, that's all. I'm a research-fellow**

---

**at the Institute, and Bessie has recently become integral to my work. Socializing with me will feel very zoological, I assure you.**

**EMMA**

**If the conversation pertains solely to Bessie, there is a high probability that I will experience smooth brain function.**

**HARDING**

**Alright then. Let's sit down.**

**They cross the stage and sit at a cafe.**

**HARDING**

**There. That was easy. Wasn't it?**

**EMMA**

**You wanted to ask me some questions about Bessie?**

**HARDING**

**Yes. Were you, in fact, her birther?**

**EMMA**

**That information is classified.**

**HARDING**

**Well... I happen to know that you were.**

**7.**

**EMMA**

**Then why did you ask?**

**HARDING**

**Did you carry her full term?**

---

**EMMA**

**Details regarding prenatal data are classified.**

**HARDING**

**Is it true you delivered her vaginally?**

**EMMA**

**Details regarding my vagina are classified.**

**A WAITER walks up.**

**WAITER**

**(in a french accent)**

**Bon jour. What can I get you?**

**HARDING**

**(in french)**

**Un Caffé au lètte, si vue ples.**

**WAITER**

**Tres bien.**

**HARDING**

**Wait. Sir? Could you take her order please?**

**WAITER**

**Are you joking, messieur?**

**HARDING**

**No.**

**WAITER**

**I did not even know she was turned on.**

---

**Emma freezes while they talk about her.  
All femanons do this.**

**HARDING**

**She's quite advanced, sir. She knows six languages. And she understands everything you're saying, even when she's paused.**

**WAITER**

**So.**

**HARDING**

**So. Ask her what she wants to drink.**

**8.**

**WAITER**

**You want me to ask a thing if she... Oh for heavens sake. Hello, mademoiselle. What can I bring you?**

**A silence. The Femanon comes to life in an awkward, but brief, reanimation sequence. A strange vocalization followed by some herky-jerky head movement.**

**She looks up at the waiter, confused.**

**HARDING**

**It's okay. What do you want to drink?**

**EMMA**

**I don't want anything.**

**The waiter starts to walk away.**

**HARDING**

---

**Wait! (to Emma) Order something.**

**WAITER**

**Messieur, I don't have time to play with dolls.**

**HARDING**

**(to Emma)**

**It's important for you to find the courage. Your designers never intended for you to be a hermit crab. What will you have to drink?**

**EMMA**

**Water.**

**The waiter rolls his eyes and leaves.**

**HARDING**

**You did it! Well done.**

**EMMA**

**Who are you? Why are you doing this?**

**HARDING**

**I told you. I'm a genetic designer, and I'm intensely curious about your Bessie.**

**EMMA**

**You can't have her.**

**HARDING**

**Have her? Why would you--**

**9.**

---

**EMMA**

**I'm sensing that you want to take her away.**

**HARDING**

**No, I'm simply eager to learn more about--**

**EMMA**

**I have to go now.**

**HARDING**

**Wait! We're only talking about Bessie, okay? Your water's coming. Please don't leave yet.**

**EMMA**

**What is it you want to know?**

**HARDING**

**Does she menstruate?**

**EMMA**

**Details regarding menstruation are classified.**

**HARDING**

**Does she exhibit any sexual awareness? Does she pleasure herself?**

**EMMA**

**Details regarding her sexuality--**

**HARDING**

**--are classified. Of course. What's not classified then? I mean, what can you tell me?**

**EMMA**

**She eats at 0800, 1300, and 1900 hours every day. Feedings are open to the public. She bathes on Wednesday and Saturday evenings at 2100 hours. Bathing is open to the**

---

**public. On Sundays, Bessie prays to her deity-construct from 0900 to--**

**HARDING**

**This is all public information. It's right here on the zoo map.**

**EMMA**

**I can only offer you the schedule for feedings, bathings, and worship. Perhaps if I were permitted to share more information... (she peters out)**

**HARDING**

**What was that?**

**EMMA**

**Never mind. I misspoke.**

**10.**

**HARDING**

**Finish your thought.**

**EMMA**

**People aren't usually interested in female human beings.**

**HARDING**

**You're right, they're not.**

**EMMA**

**I don't know why.**

**HARDING**

**Yes, it's baffling. Do you have a theory as to why that**

---

is?

**EMMA**

Those of us who work at the female human being exhibit are concerned about the lack of visitors we're receiving.

**HARDING**

(surprised) You are?

**EMMA**

Our funding has been jeopardized.

**HARDING**

That's amazing. I mean, that's a problem, yes.

**EMMA**

The lack of attendance is why I agreed to speak with you. Have you ever seen her bathe?

**HARDING**

(a slight pause) No. I haven't.

**EMMA**

I don't believe you. Hold please. I'm reviewing some video...

She's an extraordinary specimen... You were at her bath last

Wednesday evening.

**HARDING**

No. I wasn't. That's a V.I.D. error.

**EMMA**

It's you.

**HARDING**

---

**Zoom in, do an FR5 scan if you must. I've never seen her bathe.**

**EMMA**

**Do you want her? Sexually?**

**11.**

**HARDING**

**That's absurd.**

**EMMA**

**Because she's not available for--**

**HARDING**

**Of course not! Are you telling me people have-- Please tell me no one has ever--**

**EMMA**

**Bessie has never engaged another sentient being in sexual relations. Certainly no one here at the zoo would ever commit such a crime. Are you attracted to her?**

**HARDING**

**I will not be questioned by you, Emma.**

**EMMA**

**If you attempt to take her virginity, you will be terminated.**

**HARDING**

**(deadly serious) Well then let's stop fucking around. I would like to take Bessie's psychological profile. Not her virginity. Do you know what that is? Would it be possible for me to sit and talk with her? Yes or no. Stop looking at me**

---

like I'm crazy.

**EMMA**

I believe you to be perfectly sane.

**HARDING**

I like talking to you, Emma, but it's not the same as talking to her. Do you know why?

**EMMA**

Yes. She has a soul.

**HARDING**

Where did you--      What makes you say that?

**EMMA**

It's not something that can be proven. But...

**HARDING**

It's your belief?

**EMMA**

Yes. It is my belief.

**HARDING**

My god. And on what do you base this belief that she has a soul?

12.

**EMMA**

She smiles. Often times, inexplicably. And without provocation.

**HARDING**

---

**Your much more advanced than you let on. I mean, your EQ intel code has really progressed. You understand why I want to engage a female human being's mind, don't you.**

**EMMA**  
**Yes.**

**HARDING**  
**I'm glad. What do you say, Emma?**

**EMMA**  
**You will have to speak with my superiors.**

**HARDING**  
**I already did. They said no.**

**EMMA**  
**Because it's a security risk. There are those who hate Bessie and all that she represents. Some feel she's an example of wasteful government spending, and yields very little from a research standpoint. Others feel that female human beings were once the root cause of war, famine, and of course, the Prenata Virus. These people are of low intelligence, but they remain ubiquitous.**

**HARDING**  
**I'm not one of them.**

**EMMA**  
**I believe you.**

**A silence.**

**HARDING**  
**I would glean so much from an interview with her. If my findings are published it could extend your exhibit's**

---

**funding. Is there anything I could give you in return for access to Bessie?**

**EMMA**

**I have everything that I require. Good-bye Jeff Jeff. It was a pleasure meeting you.**

**HARDING**

**My name's not Jeff Jeff. It's Harding. And I drink water with my finger, while stuffing headless pigeons down my esophagus.**

**He sticks his finger in her water glass and begins making loud pigeon noises.**

**13.**

**Emma is confused, and freezes in suspended animation.**

**Harding pops up out of his chair, attempting to sit her back down at the table. But it's difficult-- as if rigor mortis has set in.**

**Suddenly, Emma unfreezes and begins thrashing wildly.**

**EMMA**

**What are you doing!? What are you doing!?**

**HARDING**

**I'm blowing bubbles and the toy lizards are smiling!**

**This nonsense makes her freeze again. And Harding is able to get her back into her seat.**

---

**He quickly moves his chair next to hers. When he sees the waiter coming, Harding pretends that she's a different kind of femanon, the kind that serves as a sex toy.**

**The waiter sets their drinks down, and finds Harding kissing Emma's ear.**

**WAITER**  
**What the hell are you doing?**

**HARDING**  
**None of your business.**

**WAITER**  
**We can't have that sort of display in our restaurant. Is she yours?**

**HARDING**  
**Of course.**

**WAITER**  
**We'll take her home and fuck her then. This is not the red light district.**

**HARDING**  
**Very well. What do I owe you for the drinks?**

**WAITER**

**87.**

**14.**

**HARDING**  
**Merci.**

---

**The waiter leaves. Harding quickly removes a tool from his pocket and cuts open a portion of Emma's scalp. He throws the rectangular scrap of scalp and hair to the floor. He then opens the back of Emma's skull and installs some software.**

**HARDING**

**Emma, can you hear me?**

**She reanimates. Her voice is higher in pitch now; she has adopted a more stilted tone of fake happiness.**

**EMMA**

**Yes. I can hear you.**

**HARDING**

**What's your employee identification number?**

**EMMA**

**71946274478.**

**HARDING**

**And what is your security access code for the female human being exhibit.**

**EMMA**

**7411.**

**HARDING**

**Does that override the retinal scan?**

**EMMA**

**Yes, it does.**

**HARDING**

**Thank you.**

---

**Harding removes the tool from her skull, and closes the opening. He picks the bloody piece of scalp up off the floor and attempts to press it back into place, but it won't stay. He pockets it, then lets down Emma's hair to cover up the opening on the back of her head.**

**Harding rises from the table and quickly exits the scene.**

**15.**

**Emma remains frozen. The waiter returns.**

**WAITER**

**Where did the dirty old man run off to?**

**The waiter walks over to Emma, snaps his fingers in front of her eyes, but she remains frozen. He raises her chin a bit and touches her lips.**

**WAITER (CONT'D)**

**Now, what shall I do with you, mademoiselle?**

**BLACKOUT**

**16.**

**SCENE 3**

**LIGHTS UP**

---

**Harding's house. Los Angeles. A day later.**

**We hear a door open and close offstage, then someone stumbling through a kitchen. Lots of shuffling, a few pots and pans crashing to the floor.**

**HARDING bursts into the living-room with a body draped over his shoulder. The body is wrapped in a white sheet. Harding wears a complicated looking oxygen mask.**

**He lays the body down on the floor, gently, then removes his mask. Panting furiously, he unwraps the head of the body-- it's BESSIE the naturally born female human being from the Sri Lanka National Zoo. Harding has stolen her.**

**Bessie's listless and disoriented. Harding unwraps the sheet down to her waist. Harding stares at her for a moment. She begins to shiver.**

**HARDING  
Heat living room to 78 degrees.**

**He props Bessie up against the couch, then runs over to the front door, to check that it's locked.**

**HARDING  
Can you feel the heat? Is that better?**

**Bessie still doesn't have her bearings.  
She falls forward onto the floor.**

**HARDING  
Aaahhh!**

**He runs back over and props her up. He grabs an afghan from the couch and throws it around her shoulders, then**

---

**gets down on the floor with her again, hugging her for warmth.**

**He lifts her head and begins examining her eyes, nose, mouth.**

**17.**

**He checks her pulse, her blood pressure. Finally, her eyes open wide, and she makes eye contact with him.**

**HARDING**

**Can you talk? That was all a bit much, wasn't it. I'm sorry.**

**I'm happy... you...are here.**

**Bessie stares at him, unphased.**

**HARDING (CONT'D)**

**I was scared you would freeze in the hull. It was the only way to get you through checkpoints. 119 over 78. You're the picture of health! I knew you would make it!**

**BESSIE**

**(struggling to speak)**

**W-- W-- W--**

**HARDING**

**Water! Right! You must be parched. I'll be right back. Stay there.**

**Harding runs offstage, back into the kitchen. Bessie stares blankly ahead.**

---

**He returns with a glass of water. He sits down on the floor, and brings the glass of water to Bessie's mouth. She still can't move her arms.**

**She drinks it down in one gulp.**

**HARDING**

**Oh my god. I'll get you another.**

**Once again, Harding heads to the kitchen offstage. While he's in there, the glass falls to the floor and breaks.**

**HARDING (O.S.)**

**Fuck.**

**We hear Harding rifle through a drawer and a cabinet.**

**Meanwhile, Bessie moves her fingers and her hand for the first time. She's slowly regaining mobility in her arms.**

**Harding returns with a pitcher of water. He sits on the floor, and holds the pitcher up to Bessie's mouth.**

**18.**

**She lifts the pitcher with own hand hand, gulping the water. It spills down her neck and chest, but she doesn't care.**

**HARDING**

**Whoa. Easy now, I don't want to shock your system. You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, do you know that? I shouldn't say that. But you know. The minute I saw you in that decrepid box. You were this beautiful paradox.**

---

**You were helpless, but I could see your strength. It's a strength doesn't exist in our world, Bessie. How could I leave Sri Lanka without it?**

**BESSIE**

**Emma...**

**HARDING**

**Emma's not here. If she were, she'd terminate me and take you back to the zoo. Is that what you want? We're safe now. You're in Los Angeles.**

**He lets some more natural light into the room, then reaches out to remove her sheet wrap.**

**HARDING**

**I should really get the rest of--**

**She flinches. Bessie begins to cry.**

**HARDING (CONT'D)**

**We need to dry you off. I'm not going to hurt you, I--**

**BESSIE**

**Emma...**

**HARDING**

**Give me a chance to show you a few things. Then, you can go back to Emma if you want. You would be choosing to live your life in a box, but it's up to you. I'm telling you. Give me a chance, and you'll feel so much better when you (remembering) Shit!**

**Harding runs to the kitchen, but keeps talking. Bessie moves her toes, her feet and her legs for the first time.**

**HARDING (O.S.)**

---

**Ok... Ok... Don't be frightened...Shit...I just...We've been wasting time here...**

**Harding returns with a large bag of blood.**

**19.**

**HARDING (CONT'D)**

**We need to start a transfusion, ok? Don't be scared.**

**He goes to a closet and removes the transfusion machine, wheels it over to the couch.**

**HARDING**

**I need your assistance.**

**Bessie thinks he's talking to her and cranes her head slowly in his direction.**

**Just then, two SLENDER FEMALE ARMS emerge from inside the couch and one of the hands holds the bag of blood for Harding. Bessie screams.**

**BESSIE**

**Ahh! Ahh! W-- W-- Wha--**

**HARDING**

**It's alright.**

**BESSIE**

**Wha-- wha--**

**HARDING**

**It's okay.**

---

**BESSIE**

**Arms...**

**HARDING**

**Yes. I designed this couch to have arms. They're not real.**

**He holds Bessie's arm up next to the synthetic arm.**

**HARDING**

**Feel the difference? Your arms are real, Bessie. I feel you inside these arms.**

**Now that he has the transfusion machine set up, he takes the bag of blood from the female arms, and sits down. The female arms disappear back into the couch.**

**BESSIE**

**Wha-- wha--**

**20.**

**HARDING**

**There are 37 women left on the planet. All of them live in captivity. Inside boxes. Inside zoos. All except for you.**

**BESSIE**

**Emma... Mama...**

**HARDING**

**She delivered you, yes, you gestated inside of her. And then you came out of her. Vaginally, which is fucking insane. But she is not your mother. Do you understand? (beat) Did they breast feed you?**

---

**Immediately, he projects his holosphere into the air between them, swiping and scrolling his way through some information on Bessie. She's fascinated with his activity.**

**HARDING**

**I'm sorry, I have to read some code here...**

**BESSIE**

**Read?**

**HARDING**

**Did they teach you to read at the zoo? Letters? Did they teach you letters?**

**BESSIE**

**Letters?**

**HARDING**

**I'll teach you how to read. And I'll give you an implant. In your eye. So you can do this.**

**Reading his holosphere...**

**HARDING**

**Godamnit, they gave you the breast. Goddamnit.**

**He's takes a moment, overwhelmed by the challenges before him.**

**HARDING**

**You're vulnerable, Bessie. They mishandled your infancy. There's a lot more I need to know... but right now, we just need to give you this transfusion. Syringe.**

**The female arms come out of the couch and hand Harding a syringe.**

---

**BESSIE**

**Ahh!**

**21.**

**HARDING**

**Its alright. Just be still and watch. (to the arms) I need the... adaptor thingy.**

**One arm retreats and then quickly returns with the adaptor.**

**Harding says the following slowly, calmly, all the while hooking her up to the transfusion machine...**

**HARDING**

**This blood is better than your blood. It was invented by a friend of mine, and ultimately it will help you live longer. And, you know, tomorrow, if you're up for it, we'll start physical therapy. And then next week we'll begin a basic education program. I designed it for you. We're gonna prepare you for social integration. You're gonna love it. You're probably starting to feel better, yes?**

**Bessie's fascinated with the transfusion.**

**BESSIE**

**Not red.**

**HARDING**

**No.**

**BESSIE**

**Feels good.**

---

**HARDING**

**Yes. Your words are--**

**BESSIE**

**Birthday.**

**HARDING**

**Birthday? Did they celebrate your birthday at the zoo?  
Did you have a party?**

**BESSIE**

**Cake.**

**HARDING**

**You had cake! Wonderful.**

**BESSIE**

**Candles...**

**HARDING**

**32 candles?**

**22.**

**BESSIE**

**32 candles?**

**HARDING**

**Did you have 32 candles on your cake? That's how old  
you are. I'm 33, sort of. Actually, I'm 221, but I have the  
body of a 33 year-old human. I know how to extend life, how  
to mimic life, how to create it. I'm going to take good care of  
you, Bessie.**

---

**BESSIE**

**You marry me?**

**HARDING**

**Ha! Will I marry you? No. We will be good friends. You don't belong to me, Bessie. I want to learn from you. And, in return, I will teach you how to survive in a world that has outlawed your existence. It's complicated. I need to teach you how to behave like a femanon. This is the most important thing-- we must make people think you're an everyday-run-of-the-mill A.I.**

**BESSIE**

**A.I...**

**HARDING**

**They won't allow you to live amongst them otherwise. You will become an award winning actress. Playing the role of my next femanon. But. We're getting ahead of ourselves. First, we want you to develop as a human being. Which means you will learn to read. To read numbers, letters, code, stories, novels. Novels! Novels cultivate our ability to empathize. That's what separates us from the A.I.'s, you see. But it all starts with numbers and letters.**

**He sets a tray of children's letter-blocks before her. They have numbers and letters on them and she plays with them through the rest of the scene.**

**BESSIE**

**I learn...**

**HARDING**

**Yes. Science, Mathematics, Programming, Literature, History.**

**The history of women.**

---

**BESSIE**  
Women...

**HARDING**  
Yes. Women belong to history now. But you have the power to change that, don't you. That's what makes you so special.

23.

**BESSIE**  
Why only... 37... women?

**HARDING**  
(beat) The Prenata Virus. It began about 180 years ago. It attacked predominantly pregnant women, and we couldn't find a cure. We failed to create an effective vaccine. Because it threatened the species, we were commissioned to develop an artificial reproductive system, a synthetic female torso, really. We called it a "Birther." And it worked. A little too well. They became unimaginably popular. And at the same time gene therapy and sexual selection were becoming commonplace. A perfect storm, you see. An unintentional replacement process had begun. Eventually, all efforts to find a cure were defunded. And that's when things took a very dark turn. A strange hostility toward women spread. And a terrible period of darkness ensued. A period known as "The Disappearance." One country at a time, the women...just... disappeared. (beat) I'm sorry, this is all too much for--

**BESSIE**  
You m-made me?

**HARDING**

---

**No.**

**BESSIE**

**You made...Emma?**

**HARDING**

**Yes. (beat) I designed the first completely synthetic female. So. If anyone's to blame. It's me. I hold myself responsible. I was young, and greedy, and they made me rich. I seek atonement, Bessie. I regret every last strand of code I've ever written. But I've brought you here, because it's time to reverse course. It's time to bring women back.**

**BESSIE**

**(beat) You saw... my strength.**

**HARDING**

**Yes! I was referring to your soul. The soul of a woman. It's riveting. Without a female soul, the human soul ceases to exist. Does that make sense? I look into your eyes... and I see strength. Will you stay?**

**BLACKOUT**

**24.**

**SCENE 4**

**LIGHTS UP**

**Harding's house. Three months later.**

**Bessie the female human being is dancing in the living room. She's dancing to a beautiful piano song.**

---

**She moves ever so gracefully all around the room in a free forming, interpretive dance. The front door of the house is wide open, and a warm tungsten light pours through.**

**Bessie dances more and more wildly-- she's possessed, listening to her body as much as the music.**

**Then, SALAZAR, a handsome businessman in his late 20s, appears in the doorway. He is dumbstruck, watching Bessie dance.**

**She finally notices him, and stops. Bessie walks over and pushes a button on the wall. The music stops.**

**BESSIE**  
**I didn't know you were there.**

**SALAZAR**  
**I'm Salazar.**

**BESSIE**  
**I've seen you before.**

**SALAZAR**  
**You have?**

**BESSIE**  
**Yes.**

**SALAZAR**  
**Alright then.**

**BESSIE**  
**My name's Bessie.**

**SALAZAR**  
**Nice to meet you, Bessie.**

---

**25.**

**BESSIE**

**Hi. I mean, it's very nice to meet you too.**

**A silence.**

**SALAZAR**

**Is Mr. Harding here?**

**BESSIE**

**Yes. No.**

**SALAZAR**

**Which is it?**

**BESSIE**

**He's been in the lab a lot lately. But I don't know where he is.**

**SALAZAR**

**You're not a Chamber Maid. You must be a Birther. Is Harding having a kid?**

**BESSIE**

**I'm sorry. What are you asking?**

**SALAZAR**

**You're a Birther. A series 1, yes?**

**BESSIE**

**Um...**

**SALAZAR**

---

**It's okay. I won't say anything. He's kept you a secret this long.**

**BESSIE**  
**Harding takes care of me.**

**SALAZAR**  
**I bet he does. I tell you what, I'll leave you to your...**

**dancing. I was just popping in. Harding works for me sometimes. Will you tell him I stopped by?**

**BESSIE**  
**Yes.**

**SALAZAR**  
**Alright then. Good-bye.**

**BESSIE**  
**Good-bye, Mr. Salazar. It was a pleasure meeting you.**

**He freezes. Something about her voice.**  
**He turns, they lock eyes.**

**26.**

**SALAZAR**  
**Could I stay and watch you dance? Would you mind?**

**I won't make a sound. I'll just sit over here, and watch.**  
**If that's okay...**

**BESSIE**  
**Do you want me to sing?**

---

**SALAZAR**  
I don't think I've ever heard a Femanon sing. What can you sing?

She closes her eyes and prepares to sing.

**BESSIE**  
(singing)  
Black is the color  
of my true love's hair.  
His face so soft  
and wonderous fare.  
The purest eyes.  
And the strongest hands.  
I love the ground on where he stands.  
I love the ground on where he stands.  
Black is the color  
of my true love's hair,  
of my true love's hair,  
of my true love's hair.

**SALAZAR**  
Who are you?

**BESSIE**  
My name is Bessie.

**SALAZAR**  
You're not a Birther.

**BESSIE**  
No?

**SALAZAR**  
What are you?

**BESSIE**

---

**I'm a Bessie.**

**SALAZAR**  
**How did you get here?**

**BESSIE**  
**Harding brought me here.**

**27.**

**SALAZAR**  
**From where?**

**BESSIE**  
**Sri Lanka.**

**SALAZAR**  
**He brought you back from Sri Lanka? Three months ago? (Bessie nods) Okay, I'm a little freaked out. Could you go back to dancing? Like you were before? I need to see that again.**

**She walks over to the control panel on the wall and hits a button. Music plays.**

**She begins to move, sheepishly at first, but then more and more freely.**

**When she gets close to Salazar, she lingers for a moment. As if caught in some sort of magnetic field. After a few seconds, he grabs her, and they dance.**

**They dance stiffly at first, but then she looks into eyes and he becomes positively transfixed. His mouth falls open. He dances less and less until they both stop all together. He**

---

**stands there, staring into her eyes.**

**Harding walks through the door.**

**BESSIE**  
**(startled)**

**Aaahhh!!**

**HARDING**  
**What the hell are you doing? How did you get in here?**

**SALAZAR**  
**The door was open.**

**HARDING**  
**Bess?**

**BESSIE**  
**(beat) I know how to unlock the door. I watch you do it every day. You're ALL I watch. Every single day.**

**HARDING**  
**Why did you--**

**28.**

**BESSIE**  
**(seething)**

**I was dancing. And it was hot.**

**HARDING**  
**Do you understand that we stay here because--**

---

**BESSIE**

**I stay here! I stay here! You go everywhere!**

**HARDING**

**You stay here because if you were to exhibit even the slightest bit of anger out there, they'd either jam a knife into the back of your skull or take you back to--**

**Harding stops himself before revealing too much.  
Salazar stares at Harding.**

**SALAZAR**

**I should go.**

**HARDING**

**Why did you come here? I already told you, I won't work for you people anymore.**

**SALAZAR**

**I was just popping in. I'm sorry, I'll leave you two to your... Does anyone know about her?**

**HARDING**

**No.**

**SALAZAR**

**She's a... a...**

**HARDING**

**Woman. Yes.**

**SALAZAR**

**She's... human?**

**HARDING**

**Yes.**

---

**SALAZAR**  
Jesus Christ.

**HARDING**  
You're not in any danger.

**SALAZAR**  
No, I know, it's just... Before you got here, she looked into my eyes, and I felt it. It felt like I was dying. But it was okay. It was comforting.

29.

Bessie looks up at Salazar, pining for another embrace. She runs to him, but Harding heads her off.

**HARDING**  
You're not ready for this! You're not ready yet!

**BESSIE**  
Let go of me! You said you weren't my keeper, but you're keeping me from him!

**HARDING**  
I can't allow you to--

**BESSIE**  
You don't own me! He wants to be with me. He loves me!

**HARDING**  
He's never met a female human being before.

**BESSIE**  
He loves me and I love him! Let me go!

---

**HARDING**

**This is not love! STOP IT!! RIGHT NOW!**

**Harding's tone frightens Bessie. She curls into a ball and weeps.**

**SALAZAR**

**I'm sorry. I'll go.**

**HARDING**

**Salazar. I need you to keep this to yourself. Alright? I'll pay you. I'll write code for you, whatever you want. Just don't say anything to anyone.**

**SALAZAR**

**You'll write code for us?**

**HARDING**

**Yes.**

**SALAZAR**

**Thank you. We've got something for you. I mean, I wouldn't tell anyone either way. Because you're an artist, I get it. But let me just say that if you write code for Solgen, you will be treated like a God, Harding. You'll have unlimited funding, your own set of rules--**

**HARDING**

**We'll discuss the details another time... if you don't mind.**

**30.**

**SALAZAR**

---

**Can I see her again?**

**HARDING**

**(beat) I'll bring you back when the time is right. And I'll let you two interact privately. Okay?**

**BESSIE**

**I HATE YOU I HATE YOU I HATE YOU I HATE YOU!!!**

**A flurry of her fists rain down on his chest.**

**Salazar runs over and grabs Bessie from behind; they fall back onto the couch.**

**She looks over her shoulder and sees Salazar. He looks down at her, and is about to get up, but is then suddenly drawn in again.**

**They kiss.**

**Harding is quietly destroyed.**

**HARDING**

**Leave. Now. (beat) SALAZAR!!**

**Sal snaps out of it. He gets up off the couch. Bessie continues to kiss his neck, clutch at his chest, his clothes. But Sal regains his composure, tears him self away from her, and runs out the door.**

**BESSIE**

**Noooooo!**

**She follows. But the door automatically slams shut.**

**Bessie crumbles to the floor, sobbing.**

---

**HARDING**

**I'm sorry, Bessie. The security risk is too great. I'll bring him back for you when you're ready, alright? It's just not the right time.**

**BESSIE**

**You're jealous!**

**31.**

**HARDING**

**You're right. I am. But I'm also responsible for you. We have to prepare you for a life beyond these walls, or they will find you out, just as that man did, and they will terminate you. End of story.**

**BESSIE**

**They would send me back to my cage, which is no worse than being in here with you.**

**HARDING**

**I'm sorry you feel that way. But, developmentally, it makes sense. I'll leave you alone.**

**Harding changes the password on the front door, then starts for the kitchen.**

**BESSIE**

**Put. My. Music. Back on.**

**Harding walks over and presses play.**

**BESSIE**

**Leave.**

---

**Harding goes into the kitchen. Bessie just stands there. She can't dance.**

**BLACKOUT**

**32.**

**SCENE 5**

**A year later. Sal's office. Sal sits at his desk reading his holosphere. There's a knock at the door.**

**SALAZAR**  
**Yes?**

**The door opens. It's PAUL SMALL, a professional man in his 40s. He's an imposing figure. An ex-soldier. He walks with a chip on his shoulder.**

**PAUL**  
**Hey. Your supervisor told me to come down here, stick my head in...**

**SALAZAR**  
**Are you a new-hire?**

**PAUL**  
**Yeah.**

**SALAZAR**  
**Ghengis Salazar. Call me Sal.**

**PAUL**  
**I've been assigned to your team, I think.**

---

**SALAZAR**  
If you're new, then yes. I'll be your team leader for the next three or four months probably. Have a seat. Kroll?

**PAUL**  
What?

**SALAZAR**  
(holding the bottle up)

**Kroll?**

**PAUL**  
What is that?

**SALAZAR**  
It's a popular ice-breaker.

**PAUL**  
I quit drinking.

**SALAZAR**  
Ok. Well, have a seat.

**33.**

**PAUL**  
Do I have to?

**SALAZAR**  
You can stand if you like.

**PAUL**  
I'll sit.

---

**An awkward silence.**

**SALAZAR**  
**What's your name?**

**PAUL**  
**Paul Small.**

**SALAZAR**  
**Paul Small?**

**PAUL**  
**Yeah. Look, I know I come off like an asshole. I'm sorry, I'm new to this sector. I'm not used to every little thing I say being recorded, interpreted, judged... it's annoying.**

**SALAZAR**  
**Where are you in from?**

**PAUL**  
**Grecco. The high desert. I planted security pylons for Exxon 5 up there. Last six years.**

**SALAZAR**  
**Jesus. Six years. That must have been brutal.**

**PAUL**  
**It's a fuckin' wasteland, no doubt.**

**SALAZAR**  
**Well, we owe everything to you guys. Without you--**

**PAUL**  
**Yeah, yeah. We know.**

**SALAZAR**  
**You should be proud.**

---

**PAUL**  
I am.

**Sal starts reading his holosphere.**  
**Paul thinks it's rude.**

**34.**

**PAUL**  
Anyway... I'm down here now, lookin' for a piece of the good life. I want to do something for this company that'll get me noticed. I want to advance.

**SALAZAR**  
(reading his holosphere)

**You put in your request last week, and Centcom ok'd it this morning?**

**PAUL**  
That's right.

**SALAZAR**  
It usually takes months.

**PAUL**  
Really. Well. What do you want me to say?

**SALAZAR**  
Nothing. Glad to have you on the team, Paul.

**PAUL**  
Thanks. What do we do here?

---

**SALAZAR**

**Genetic engineering. Biocoding, chemcoding--**

**PAUL**

**No, I mean on your team. I'm not an idiot.**

**SALAZAR**

**Oh. Well, we're headhunters of a sort. We track external talent, rising stars in the field, and then lure them over to Solgen. Especially designers who are onto something really hot. Something immediately marketable.**

**PAUL**

**I don't know anyone like that.**

**SALAZAR**

**No, I wouldn't imagine you would, but... You know, come to think of it, I think I know why you're here... Hold on a sec.**

**Sal goes into his holosphere and fires off a message.**

**PAUL**

**If you're just gonna type, can I go?**

**SALAZAR**

**Hold on a sec, I'm asking Bob Stevens a question.**

**35.**

**PAUL**

**Who's that?**

**SALAZAR**

**My supervisor. You just met with him. The guy who sent**

---

you down here.

**PAUL**  
Oh.

**SALAZAR**  
(reading)

Yeah. Okay. That's what I thought.

**PAUL**  
What? What's he sayin'?

**SALAZAR**  
You have a surveillance competency.

**PAUL**  
What does that mean?

**SALAZAR**  
You've worked with Thinthread.

**PAUL**  
I know how to intercept communications. Is that what you need? You want me to listen to somebody?

**SALAZAR**  
There's a designer in the 4th quadrant that Solgen's been trying to snare for like two years. He's the best in the world, actually. Solgen wants to sign him badly, but he's a little eccentric... hold on.

Sal starts typing.

**PAUL**  
I'm not gonna just sit here and watch you type.

---

**SALAZAR**

**Hold on. I'm trying to get you security clearance.**

**PAUL**

**For what?**

**SALAZAR**

**So I can tell you about this guy!**

**Paul glares at Sal while he types. Sal finishes, and turns to Paul, but before he can speak...**

**36.**

**PAUL**

**Don't you ever fucking use that tone with me again, you understand?**

**SALAZAR**

**What tone?**

**PAUL**

**"Hold on!"**

**SALAZAR**

**Paul, you gotta relax. I just got you level 5 clearance. Now I know you've been under a lot of stress if you were up in the Grecco, but I'm trying to help you. Out of gratitude for your service. This is a plum assignment with the possibility for advancement. So, shut the fuck up and be patient, okay? Listen to what people have to say around here. No matter what tone of voice they use.**

**PAUL**

**Go ahead.**

---

**SALAZAR**

**There's a designer in the 4th quadrant--**

**PAUL**

**You said that already.**

**SALAZAR**

**His name is W.G. Harding--**

**PAUL**

**Where does he live?**

**SALAZAR**

**I'm gonna tell you, just let me--**

**PAUL**

**You want me to listen to him?**

**SALAZAR**

**No. I want you to shut the fuck up and listen TO ME!!**

**Paul stands and grabs Sal's neck, clutching his windpipe. He slowly and expertly brings Sal out from behind his desk, then forces him to his knees.**

**PAUL**

**I don't want any trouble. I shouldn't have grabbed you like this, but it's too late, I lost my temper. Now I'm gonna let go, and I'm gonna listen to you.**

**37.**

**PAUL (CONT'D)**

**But if you speak to me like that again, or if you ever tell**

---

**anyone that I did this, I will hunt you down, and I will slit your throat. Nod if you understand.**

**He nods. Paul lets him go. Sal falls to the floor, coughing, gasping.**

**PAUL  
Get up. Get up!**

**Sal lifts his head up off the floor.**

**PAUL  
Bring your holosphere up again. Erase the last five minutes of our conversation. Do it now.**

**SALAZAR  
Security will be in here in two minutes.**

**PAUL  
Not if you erase. And not if you value your fuckin' nutsack.**

**Do it now.**

**SALAZAR  
I'm not doing anything for you. You're going away for another six years, pal.**

**PAUL  
Do you know who I am? Do you know what I can do to you? Why the fuck do you think Centcom cleared me so fast? Mmm? Think about it. Now, erase the last five minutes, or I will hunt you down, and I will bleed you out.**

**Sal thinks. Finally, he opens his holosphere, and types in a few codes.**

---

**SALAZAR**

**Alright, tough guy. They're standing down. Now go.**

**PAUL**

**Give me the assignment.**

**SALAZAR**

**Uh, the position's been filled.**

**PAUL**

**Give me the assignment.**

**SALAZAR**

**You can slit my throat. But it's not how we work down here, Paul.**

**38.**

**SALAZAR (CONT'D)**

**It doesn't matter who you frighten, or how many execs you've got over a barrel. If you're chemically imbalanced, you will never advance. Whether you slit my throat or not.**

**PAUL**

**Look you gotta cut me some slack, okay? I'm reassimilating. Let's just start over. I'll--**

**SALAZAR**

**You're not ready. There's plenty you could do for our security division. But the work our team does is delicate. Brute force never comes into play.**

**PAUL**

**They want me to listen to this guy. You said it yourself. That's why they brought me in. Isn't it?**

---

**SALAZAR**  
Maybe.

**PAUL**  
Then let me listen to him. Let me have this one assignment, as a probationary kind of thing, and I'll be forever grateful. I won't touch the guy, I'll keep my hands to myself. If I fuck up, I'll leave town before you even get the chance to fire me. Okay? (beat) I could be a good friend for you, Sal. I'll hand you this guy on a fucking platter. Give me a chance.

**SALAZAR**  
How many kills do you have?

**PAUL**  
What do you mean?

**SALAZAR**  
How many?

**PAUL**  
This year?

**SALAZAR**  
Total.

**PAUL**  
I just passed 1400.

**SALAZAR**  
Jesus Christ.

**PAUL**  
What? That's not a good thing?

---

**39.**

**SALAZAR**

**No, it is. It's great. It's wonderful. (beat) Look, why don't we try this meeting again tomorrow. Start over from--**

**PAUL**

**I want the assignment. Do me a solid, Sal. Trust me on this, and I will forever be in debt to you. I'll never fuck with you, no matter what my position in this company. You have my word. Give me this assignment and you're safe from me for the rest of your life.**

**A silence.**

**SALAZAR**

**Psychopath insurance. Immunity from your own unique brand of torturous violence. You've got yourself a deal.**

**PAUL**

**(shaking his hand)**

**Thank you. My word is all I have, Sal. And now it belongs to you.**

**SALAZAR**

**I'm sending you Harding's file. Take the last office on the right, go in there, and read everything in that file.**

**PAUL**

**I don't start til tomorrow.**

**SALAZAR**

**This assignment starts right now.**

---

**PAUL**  
Alright. I'm on it.

**SALAZAR**  
Oh, wait. I'm leaving for the night... I guess I should tell you about something that's not in the file. This particular designer is engaged in an illegal experiment with.... with a female human being.

**PAUL**  
What do you mean, female human being? (beat) You mean...

**SALAZAR**  
He has one.

**PAUL**  
He has a woman?

**SALAZAR**  
At his house.

40.

**PAUL**  
Come on.

**SALAZAR**  
If he were caught, he'd be terminated before sundown. Bob Stevens and the Big Three here at Solgen are shielding him from detection. Have been for the last year, since I first discovered her. They want to see what he comes up with.

**PAUL**  
They let him keep a woman?

---

**SALAZAR**

**It's R&D for the next generation femanon.**

**PAUL**

**How the fuck did he get a woman?**

**SALAZAR**

**He stole her. From a zoo.**

**PAUL**

**They have women in zoos? Fuckin' A, I've heard it all now.**

**SALAZAR**

**Harding is eccentric. He's a genius. He's the most innovative genetic designer alive today. So, don't fuck this up, Paul.**

**PAUL**

**Wild stuff. You think he might be trying to...**

**SALAZAR**

**Develop a system for female repopulation, yes.**

**PAUL**

**Jesus.**

**SALAZAR**

**He's one of a handful who has that kind of vision.**

**PAUL**

**You're talkin' widespread panic if people find this out.**

**SALAZAR**

**That's why you need to keep your mouth shut. Just report back with whatever he's working on. And lemme**

---

know how the female human is doing too. How she's developing.

**PAUL**

Whatever you want boss. Fuck, this is gonna be fun.

**BLACKOUT**

**41.**

**SCENE 6**

Harding's house. A year later.

Harding and Bessie are reading.

Bessie finishes a chapter and sets her book down. She's pregnant. She stares.

**HARDING**

What's wrong?

**BESSIE**

Nothing. (beat) Where is consciousness in the brain?

**HARDING**

Everywhere. And nowhere.

He smiles.

**BESSIE**

So, how many billions of calculations would it take to give consciousness to a--

**HARDING**

---

**I will never be able to recreate the experience of being you. Is that what you're asking?**

**Silence. Bessie stares at him.**

**HARDING (CONT'D)**

**Let's walk around the pond. Clear your mind.**

**BESSIE**

**No.**

**HARDING**

**It'd be good for you. (beat) I love you.**

**BESSIE**

**I know you do.**

**HARDING**

**How do you feel?**

**BESSIE**

**Fine.**

**HARDING**

**We don't live much of a life outside of books, do we?**

**BESSIE**

**You have the lab.**

**42.**

**HARDING**

**Do you get lonely when I'm in the lab?**

**BESSIE**

---

**There's plenty to do here. The nesting impulse is strong right now.**

**HARDING**

**Is it terrible that I'm happy to hear you say that?**

**BESSIE**

**You have me right where you want me, don't you.**

**HARDING**

**(flirting)**

**Not quite.**

**BESSIE**

**Yeah. Your sexual attraction will weaken as my belly grows.**

**HARDING**

**On the contrary. There's a perverse thrill in it for me now.**

**BESSIE**

**Are you joking?**

**HARDING**

**No. I day-dream about it, all the time.**

**BESSIE**

**My being fat?**

**HARDING**

**Us being together.**

**BESSIE**

**Have you ever seen someone naked-and-pregnant up close?**

---

**HARDING**

**I have, yes. A long time ago.**

**BESSIE**

**Was she yours?**

**HARDING**

**No. But, I remember thinking she was very attractive.**

**BESSIE**

**Who's was she?**

**HARDING**

**She was a patient at The Boley Institute. Where I was teaching at the time.**

**43.**

**BESSIE**

**A patient? A pregnant human?**

**HARDING**

**Yes.**

**BESSIE**

**You've never told me about her.**

**HARDING**

**Well, this was 120 years ago. I don't really remember specifics from that far back.**

**BESSIE**

**Did people know she was human?**

---

**HARDING**

Female humans were still legal then. They were quarantined, but in the major population centers, in hospitals and asylums, a Prenata case would pop up every now and then.

**BESSIE**

So one day a pregnant "Prenata case"... just popped up. Naked. In your hospital?

**HARDING**

Yes.

**BESSIE**

Wow.

**HARDING**

Yes.

**BESSIE**

Did you tell her it wasn't her fault?

**HARDING**

What?

**BESSIE**

The Prenata Virus.

**HARDING**

I don't remember.

Harding goes back to reading.

**BESSIE**

But, you must have interviewed her.

**HARDING**

---

**I don't know.**

**44.**

**BESSIE**

**What do you mean?**

**HARDING**

**I wouldn't remember that. I can check if you like...**

**He opens his hollosphere.**

**BESSIE**

**Stop using that thing. Use your brain. Why wouldn't you remember interviewing a pregnant female human being? I thought you were always so "fascinated" with women.**

**HARDING**

**I wasn't a clinician at the time. I was teaching.**

**BESSIE**

**Then why was she standing in front of you naked?  
(beat) Did you ask her her name?**

**HARDING**

**No.**

**BESSIE**

**You were gawking at her naked body, and never said a word to the poor woman.**

**HARDING**

**She was dead.**

**BESSIE**

---

**What?**

**HARDING**  
She was dead.

**BESSIE**  
You said you found her attractive.

**HARDING**  
I was lying. I'm sorry. I wanted you to feel attractive.  
Because you are. But I shouldn't have lied. (beat) I'm  
sorry.

I'll turn in early.

**BESSIE**  
Stay.

**HARDING**  
You're right to be angry with me, Bess. Forgive me. I  
love you so much.

**BESSIE**  
I don't think you know what love is.

45.

**HARDING**  
Teach me then. Is it emotion? Or is it chemical? Is it an  
experience that you can...feel. Or is it a desire?

**BESSIE**  
The way you feel love is different from the way I feel it.

**HARDING**

---

**Yes, I can tell...**

**BESSIE**

**There are MEN you could love, you know. It doesn't have to be with a woman. There are men who have intimacy and closeness with other men.**

**HARDING**

**Yes. But, that's different.**

**BESSIE**

**How? Why don't you even have male friends?**

**HARDING**

**I feel animosity toward most men. I'm not sure why.**

**BESSIE**

**It's because you've told yourself you can't be with them. You can be intimate with them, if you like. It wouldn't bother me.**

**HARDING**

**I'm not attracted to men.**

**BESSIE**

**What does attraction have to do with it?**

**HARDING**

**Physical intimacy depends on physical attraction, doesn't it?**

**BESSIE**

**Is that why you want to bring women back? So you can be intimate with their bodies?**

**HARDING**

**What?**

---

**BESSIE**

**You want to bring them back, right?**

**HARDING**

**Of course.**

**BESSIE**

**Why?**

**46.**

**HARDING**

**I want men to--**

**BESSIE**

**To feel their own soul, to feel romantic love, to gain the female perspective, blah blah blah...**

**HARDING**

**Blah blah blah, yes.**

**BESSIE**

**And they'll do this by fucking them?**

**HARDING**

**There are many ways to access the female perspective. I'm accessing the living hell out of yours right now. And it's changing my outlook. It makes me feel ten times more alive than if I were simply reading about it in a book.**

**BESSIE**

**What if you'd gone to the zoo in Beijing or Oslo, and one of the other 37 female humans left on the planet were sitting here with you. Would you love them the way you love**

---

**me? Do you only love me because I have a vagina?**

**HARDING**

**No! I love Bessie the human being. But the fact that you're female makes that particular perspective unique. I'm sorry, but you're endlessly fascinating to me.**

**BESSIE**

**You ask the wrong questions.**

**HARDING**

**What?**

**BESSIE**

**"Are you hungry?" "How do you feel today?" "What are you experiencing right now?" You don't know what love is, and you never will. You know absolutely nothing about women.**

**HARDING**

**I'm sorry.**

**BESSIE**

**Don't be sorry. (sarcastic) The Disappearance just happened.**

**Right? It's not anybody's fault.**

**Bessie leaves the room. Harding is left standing there. He reaches for Bessie's book, to see what she's been reading. George Sand. Bessie returns.**

**47.**

**BESSIE**

---

**George Sand.**

**HARDING**

**Can I read it when you're done?**

**BESSIE**

**Yes. I've made you feel rotten.**

**HARDING**

**You're teaching me. You're chipping way at my selfishness. It's good. I want to read this. I want to read all of the ancients again.**

**Bessie feels a kick.**

**BESSIE**

**Ooo.**

**Harding rushes to her side. He falls to his knees, hugging her belly. They smile, feeling the kicks together.**

**HARDING**

**I love you.**

**BESSIE**

**I know you do. (beat) I wonder. Which came first, the virus or The Disappearance?**

**HARDING**

**What do you mean?**

**BESSIE**

**I think women disappeared from the hearts of men, before they ever disappeared from the earth.**

**BLACKOUT**

---

**48.**

**Scene 7**

**Salazar's office. A month later.**

**Sal's inside his holosphere. Paul Small walks in without knocking.**

**SALAZAR**

**Hi Paul. I'm glad you don't feel like you have to knock.**

**PAUL**

**I just met with Stevens. He wanted me to brief you.**

**SALAZAR**

**Stevens wants you to brief me? On what?**

**PAUL**

**Harding and his girl.**

**SALAZAR**

**What about them?**

**PAUL**

**She got pregnant.**

**SALAZAR**

**What?**

**PAUL**

**Yeah.**

**SALAZAR**

---

**Why didn't you tell me?**

**PAUL**  
**I told Stevens.**

**SALAZAR**  
**Are you not on my team anymore?**

**PAUL**  
**I don't think I am. No.**

**SALAZAR**  
**(beat) Close the door on your way out.**

**PAUL**  
**Don't you want to know what happened?**

**SALAZAR**  
**With what?**

**49.**

**PAUL**  
**With Harding and the girl.**

**SALAZAR**  
**Ok. What happened?**

**PAUL**  
**We had to take care of it.**

**SALAZAR**  
**What does that mean?**

**PAUL**

---

**We had to take care of it. They're stickin' their necks out letting him keep that girl. If somebody found out she was pregnant, Stevens and the Big Three would be crucified. The whole company would burn. Not to mention the fact that Harding ain't gettin' any work done for us with a baby around.**

**SALAZAR**  
**So they sent you in.**

**PAUL**  
**Yeah.**

**SALAZAR**  
**And you killed her.**

**PAUL**  
**Yeah. Wait. Who?**

**SALAZAR**  
**The girl.**

**PAUL**  
**I didn't kill her, no. I killed the baby.**

**SALAZAR**  
**You killed a baby?**

**PAUL**  
**A fucking fetus.**

**SALAZAR**  
**You killed the fetus that was inside her?**

**PAUL**  
**Yeah.**

---

**SALAZAR**  
But not the girl.

**50.**

**PAUL**  
No. I didn't touch her.

**SALAZAR**  
How do you assassinate a fetus?

**PAUL**  
You want me to draw you a picture?

**SALAZAR**  
Yes!

**PAUL**  
Nanobots, Sal. You work for a company who makes them? Jesus.

**SALAZAR**  
A nanobot assassinated the baby. But the girl's alright?

**PAUL**  
Yeah. You know. She'll be fine.

**SALAZAR**  
And are you supposed to continue with surveillance?

**PAUL**  
That's what they want. But Harding ain't designing shit, man. I don't know why you guys are protecting this asshole. He's a fuckin' loon.

---

**SALAZAR**

He plans for a very long time. Sometimes years. Then one day, something sets him off, and he goes to work. Just be patient, Paul. Enjoy your rapid ascent through our company.

**PAUL**

Maybe losing the baby will motivate him, you know...

Sal starts walking him to the door.

**SALAZAR**

Maybe so.

**PAUL**

Maybe he'll make a baby android. That'd be somethin', right? (beat) Take your hand off my back.

Sal's hand drops to his side.

**BLACKOUT**

**51.**

**SCENE 8**

Harding's house. One month later. The living room is dimly lit. Bessie lies on the couch, covered with blankets. She's very ill.

Harding walks into the room with a tray full of medicine bottles.

**HARDING**

Here we go.

---

**BESSIE**  
I hate that one.

**HARDING**  
Come on.

He draws medicine out of a bottle with a syringe, a light blue liquid. She drinks it down, wincing at the awful taste.

**HARDING**  
It's not so bad.

He hands her a pill next, and a glass of water.

**BESSIE**  
They're not helping.

**HARDING**  
They are helping. This pill impedes viral entry, this pill stops replication, this one expedites the virus' life cycle--

**BESSIE**  
I take them to make you feel better.

**HARDING**  
Funny girl.

**BESSIE**  
So you can feel chivalrous.

**HARDING**  
Please.

**BESSIE**  
The invirons are more powerful than your nanocells, aren't they? (beat) Admit it. Let yourself be sad.

---

**52.**

**HARDING**

**You're not dying.**

**BESSIE**

**You've never dealt with a loss before. A terrible sadness can swallow you up.**

**HARDING**

**I dealt with the loss of our child. Didn't I?**

**BESSIE**

**It's been over a month. You haven't cried once.**

**HARDING**

**Just because I don't--**

**BESSIE**

**I'm through performing Pygmalion. I don't want to put those pills in my body, and I don't want to spend the remainder of my life arguing with someone who will never die. It's not fair.**

**HARDING**

**If you don't take these--**

**BESSIE**

**I'm closing my eyes now. I'll try not to expire.**

**She closes her eyes. A silence.**

**HARDING**

**I don't know how to cry. I don't know what's wrong**

---

with me.

**BESSIE**

Read to me. Pick out a novel.

He goes to the bookshelf, and returns with a book. It's the George Sand. Only now it's marked up, and filled with bookmarks.

**HARDING**

I've been reading the George Sand.

**BESSIE**

That's not a novel. It's alright, read it.

Harding reads from a marked passage...

**HARDING**

"Perhaps you have been brought up in the belief that women have no souls. Do you know whether they have or not? Do you understand companionship, patience, friendship? Shall I be your companion, or your slave?"

53.

**HARDING (CONT'D)**

Do you desire me, or do you love me? Do you know what I am? Hide your soul from me, so I may always believe that it is beautiful."

**BESSIE**

She wrote that to her secret lover. A younger man. I wonder if his voice was kind like yours. I'll take it with me.

**HARDING**

---

**You're not going anywhere.**

**BESSIE**

**Without death we would never know love. Would we.**

**HARDING**

**I love you.**

**BESSIE**

**I know you do. (beat) When I'm gone... you can stuff me and hang me on the wall.**

**HARDING**

**Funny girl.**

**BESSIE**

**I know what you've been doing out there in the lab. Look at me. You can't replace me. The only way you'll keep me alive, is in your heart. Let me in. I want to gain your perspective.**

**They smile. He reaches for the pills.**

**HARDING**

**I'll change. Please, I need you to live.**

**BESSIE**

**Look in my eyes. You found your soul. It's right here.**

**She is motionless.**

**FADE TO BLACK.**

**54.**

---

**SCENE 9**

**Harding's laboratory. Months later.**

**A woman lies on a hospital gurney, a white sheet covering her entire body.**

**A voice comes over the intercom saying, "There's someone approaching... A Mr. Ghengis Salazar is approaching the laboratory. He's at the door now."**

**Harding goes to the door.**

**HARDING**  
**Are you alone?**

**SALAZAR (O.S.)**  
**Yes.**

**Harding opens the door.**

**SALAZAR**  
**What's going on?**

**HARDING**  
**Get in here.**

**SALAZAR**  
**You always have these psychotic episodes at 4 in the morning. Can't you have them over lunch?**

**HARDING**  
**Did anyone see you leave your house?**

**SALAZAR**  
**I live alone.**

---

**HARDING**

**What about the neighbors?**

**SALAZAR**

**Neighbors? I don't have neighbors. What's going on?**

**Harding indicates the body on the table.**

**SALAZAR (CONT'D)**

**Is that...**

**Harding nods.**

**SALAZAR (CONT'D)**

**Is she...**

**55.**

**Harding nods. After a silence...**

**SALAZAR (CONT'D)**

**You're six weeks ahead of schedule!**

**Salazar laughs, and hugs Harding, which is immediately awkward for both of them.**

**SALAZAR (CONT'D)**

**Last we talked you hadn't even started epidermal generation. Now here you are completely finished!? You're incredible!**

**HARDING**

**I don't sleep anymore.**

---

**SALAZAR**  
Paul will be pleased.

**HARDING**  
I suppose.

**SALAZAR**  
What? What's wrong? Can we turn her on? I want to see her--

**HARDING**  
Sal, wait--

Salazar quickly pulls the sheet off the woman's body. She's wearing a spandex body-suit. Salazar is confused.

**SALAZAR**  
What the fuck is that?

**HARDING**  
It's a unitard.

**SALAZAR**  
Why isn't she naked?

**HARDING**  
Stripping her naked for demonstrations would be the single most destructive thing we could ever do to her.

**SALAZAR**  
Does she have breasts?

**HARDING**  
Yes. They're not the balloons you're used to seeing. Her breasts look the way women's breasts did before we started engineering them.

---

**56.**

**SALAZAR**

**Paul will want to see her naked.**

**HARDING**

**I know.**

**SALAZAR**

**At Femacon.**

**HARDING**

**I know.**

**SALAZAR**

**She's the "Home Companion" model, Harding. We built her because men are tired of "Birthers" and "Chamber Maids". We built her for the purpose of having sex.**

**HARDING**

**So?**

**SALAZAR**

**People like to have sex naked!**

**HARDING**

**I'm aware of that, but--**

**Sal finally sees her face.**

**SALAZAR**

**Oh my god... That's Bessie. You replicated Bessie!? Is this her skin!?**

**HARDING**

---

**Sal! Get a hold of yourself! She's completely synthetic.  
When Bessie died--**

**He looks up at the sky.**

**SALAZAR  
You put her in orbit?**

**HARDING  
Yes.**

**SALAZAR  
Will this femanon talk like Bessie? Will she sound like  
her?**

**HARDING  
Why do you ask?**

**SALAZAR  
I remember the way she... I remember the sound of her  
voice.**

**57.**

**HARDING  
She will sound like Bessie, yes.**

**SALAZAR  
Well, now I know why you won't allow her to be naked.**

**HARDING  
The fact that she looks like Bessie has nothing to do  
with--**

**SALAZAR**

---

**Harding--**

**HARDING**

**Let me explain-- Her psyche is extremely fragile. Do you remember my telling you about exstasis-emotional-stimuli?**

**SALAZAR**

**That last bit of code you wrote. She's going to get her "emotional life" from you, or something.**

**HARDING**

**That's right, rather than installing pre-fabricated stacks of emoticons and generic memories, she will come into consciousness as an emotional blank slate, without a shred of personality. Then gradually, over time, she will import and develop an emotional life using her companion.**

**SALAZAR**

**By looking into his eyes...**

**HARDING**

**Yes!**

**SALAZAR**

**By reading the pigmentation configurations in her companion's stroma iris, she will begin to code the intricacies of his emotional life, and those of human beings in general. Then, with that matrix, she will create her own unique emotional palate. One which will eventually make her more intuitive and more emotionally intelligent than most human beings even.**

**SALAZAR**

**Is that a good idea? If she's superior in some way?**

**HARDING**

**It drives the compatibility quotient through the roof.**

---

**SALAZAR**

**But the master will still dominate her?**

**HARDING**

**Not necessarily. She will come to know him as well as he knows himself. She will have tremendous power over him at times.**

**58.**

**SALAZAR**

**But what if the master--**

**HARDING**

**There is no master! There is no dominant sex! Her lover will shape her personality, her sexuality, everything at first. But only by looking into her eyes. And only by being honest with her. Otherwise it won't work.**

**SALAZAR**

**What are you talking about?**

**HARDING**

**Their relationship. The companion must open himself to her, in order for their souls to become symbiotic.**

**SALAZAR**

**She's gonna have a soul? How did you make her a soul?**

**HARDING**

**You're not listening. She will create her own soul, with the help of her companion. And he will have to develop his.**

**SALAZAR**

---

**I gotta “develop my soul” if I want a 3 Series?**

**HARDING**

**That’s right.**

**SALAZAR**

**These are some pretty radical changes, Harding. What if the master-- sorry, the man-- what if the man is some sort of diabolical, child molesting, serial killer? Will she become one too? Do we necessarily want her importing the emotional life of a psychopath?**

**HARDING**

**You’re assuming she’ll never have contact with human beings outside the home, or that she won’t engage with any kind of entertainment platform. Once she starts receiving data from outside sources, she’ll figure out real quick that her companion is depraved and she’ll auto-correct.**

**SALAZAR**

**She’ll self-destruct?**

**HARDING**

**No, no. I wrote an auto-correct sequence.**

**SALAZAR**

**What does that mean? She’ll correct herself or him?**

**59.**

**HARDING**

**You should read the operations guide if you’re thinking of purchasing--**

**SALAZAR**

---

**Harding! What the fuck! Are you saying men can only ever have good intentions around this thing?**

**HARDING**

**If they want a relationship with her, yes.**

**SALAZAR**

**Is wanting to fuck her a good intention?**

**HARDING**

**It could be.**

**SALAZAR**

**Jesus Christ. Alright, look, one thing at a time. We have to demonstrate her body design. You know that, right?**

**HARDING**

**Yes.**

**SALAZAR**

**That means naked. At the coliseum. And elsewhere. Men staring at her, dreaming of owning one.**

**HARDING**

**You're not understanding what I'm saying to--**

**SALAZAR**

**Hey, I know! Let's demo her body first!**

**HARDING**

**What does that mean?**

**SALAZAR**

**Before turning her on, we'll let everyone see her naked, then once they've had an eyeful, you put the body stocking thing back on, and we'll power her up. She'll be none the wiser.**

---

**HARDING**

**Guilt has it's own color configuration in each person's iris. If she looks into my eyes and sees even a trace of guilt, she will instantly open a file for distrust, and begin filling that file at an exponential rate.**

**SALAZAR**

**But that's insane. Why did you design her that way?**

**HARDING**

**Because that's what human beings do. Male and female.**

**60.**

**SALAZAR**

**You would feel guilty if you showed me her--**

**HARDING**

**Yes. If I did that to you I'd feel guilty. Would you do it to me, show everyone my naked body while I was unconscious?**

**SALAZAR**

**Probably not... You've put us in a tough situation here.**

**Salazar reaches out and strokes the side of Bessie the Femanon's face.**

**SALAZAR (CONT'D)**

**Damn if you didn't nail the skin though. It feels so real.**

**HARDING**

**Not too much.**

---

**SALAZAR**  
No touching?

**HARDING**  
Just. Please.

**SALAZAR**  
Harding. I trust you. And I'm gonna back you on this. But I'm warning you, if you want that body stocking thing to stay on, you can't tell Paul what you just told me. How she'll read all your thoughts and feelings and shit. He'll pull the funding.

**HARDING**  
So how do we explain it? How do we approach him?

**SALAZAR**  
How the hell should I know. You shouldn't have made her look like Bessie. It could raise suspicions if--

**HARDING**  
Paul never knew about Bessie.

**SALAZAR**  
Oh. Right. Well, maybe--

**HARDING**  
Did you tell him about her?

**SALAZAR**  
What?

**HARDING**  
Why would you say that, Sal? The day you met her, did you go back and tell Paul about her?

61.

---

**SALAZAR**  
No! He wasn't even with Solgen then. I'm just saying, Paul knows everything about everybody. How do you think he became Chief Executive so quickly.

**HARDING**  
Murder?

**SALAZAR**  
You should probably call him.

**HARDING**  
Well, I--

**SALAZAR**  
He'll be happy to hear you've finished ahead of schedule.

**HARDING**  
I called him. He's on his way over.

**SALAZAR**  
He's what!?

**HARDING**  
He'll be here any minute.

**SALAZAR**  
Why didn't you tell me that!? I have to leave!

**HARDING**  
What's wrong?

**SALAZAR**

---

**He doesn't like me. He fucking hates me to be more precise.**

**HARDING**  
**Why?**

**SALAZAR**  
**It's a long story.**

**HARDING**  
**Tell me quick.**

**SALAZAR**  
**He heard me make a joke about him in the commissary. He was standing right behind me, I didn't know he was there.**

**HARDING**  
**What did you say?**

**SALAZAR**  
**It was about his femanon. His Executive Assistant, what's her name...**

**62.**

**HARDING**  
**Judy.**

**SALAZAR**  
**Yeah. Somebody asked "Where's Judy?" And I said, "Dangling from Paul's cock."**

**HARDING**  
**And that made him angry?**

---

**SALAZAR**

People laughed. With derision. I wasn't even trying to be funny. That's where she is most of the day.

The intercom interrupts: "There is a man approaching the laboratory."

**SALAZAR**

Aah! It's him.

**HARDING**

Relax.

Harding once again covers the femanon with the sheet. The intercom says, "Confirming identification. I'm sorry, but I'm not able to identify the man. He's at the door now."

**HARDING**

(disbelieving)

He has override.

**SALAZAR**

That costs like a hundred quon.

There is a knock at the door. Harding opens it. Paul and his assistant JUDY are standing there.

**HARDING**

Why is she here?

**SALAZAR**

Hi Paul.

Paul shoots Salazar a dirty look.

---

**HARDING**

**Why did you bring her here? No offense Judy.**

**PAUL**

**What the fuck's your problem?**

**63.**

**HARDING**

**She doesn't have clearance for this, Paul. I can't just let her--**

**PAUL**

**Why don't you let me worry about that.**

**Paul enters. Judy follows.**

**HARDING**

**(disbelieving)**

**How did my scanners miss her?**

**SALAZAR**

**(under his breath)**

**She's black market. She's--**

**PAUL**

**That's right, smart guy. She's untraceable.**

**HARDING**

**I can't let her--**

**PAUL**

**Why am I here!?**

---

**HARDING**  
Calm down.

**PAUL**  
I don't want to calm down.

**HARDING**  
I asked you here because I've finished the 3 Series.

Harding gestures to the table. Paul looks at her for a moment, then back at Harding.

**PAUL**  
Judy, do a scan.

Judy moves toward the gurney, her hand outstretched, scanning. Harding stops her.

**HARDING**  
Judy, wait. Paul, I'm trying to protect your investment. Tell her to stop!

**PAUL**  
Judy, stop. What the fuck, Harding?

64.

**HARDING**  
The controls in this laboratory are vital to our success. Controls are like rules. Have you ever followed rules before, Paul? Are you able to function in a scientific environment, yes or no?

**JUDY**

---

**This is not the 3 Series. This is a female human being.**

**Paul suddenly steps over to the table.**

**HARDING (CONT'D)**

**Wait!**

**Paul removes the sheet, and stands dumbstruck.**

**PAUL**

**What the fuck is that?**

**HARDING**

**It's a unitard.**

**PAUL**

**Why isn't she naked?**

**HARDING**

**Paul...**

**PAUL**

**Does she have breasts?**

**Judy is fascinated. She begins running her hand up and down Bessie the Femanon's body.**

**JUDY**

**Blood type... Synthetic. ChemCode 101100101011001.**

**Subcutaneous hardware detected.**

**PAUL**

**What does that mean?**

**JUDY**

**Singularity... She may be or may not be human...**

---

**PAUL**

**What the fuck, Judy!?**

**HARDING**

**Don't be mad at her. The 3 Series fooled you, Judy. That's all. Gentleman, this is the most lifelike femanon the world has ever seen. She will change everything. The first and second iteration will be obsolete within a year.**

**65.**

**JUDY**

**This is not the prototype Femanon 2357, the Home Companion Model. Budgeted 16 months ago at 2700 quon, the 2357--**

**PAUL**

**Shutup Judy! (Grabbing the unitard at the neck.) Take this thing off.**

**HARDING**

**There's something you need to understand. The 3 Series is written with an exstasis emotional--**

**SALAZAR**

**Harding, if I may. Paul, the 3 Series starts out timid, demure, afraid. Until she and her master have copulated-- sorry, fucked-- she'll be mostly unresponsive.**

**PAUL**

**What are you waiting for, Harding?**

**HARDING**

**That's not the--**

---

**PAUL**

**I'll be the master. Let me take her home, Judy and I'll start fuckin' her, get her ready for Femacon.**

**SALAZAR**

**We'd like to introduce her, at Femacon, as a true newborn. That's why we brought you here tonight, Paul. We knew no one else would understand. No one else has your vision. The board is going to crucify Harding for this. But if we have your support, we can bring this incredible creation, this woman of all women, into fruition. If we do this right, she will be the most incredible woman humanity has ever produced.**

**PAUL**

**The missing link...**

**SALAZAR**

**Yes!**

**PAUL**

**An improvement over nature...**

**SALAZAR**

**YES!! Paul, if we do this right, initial sales will break industry records. Harding just has to be the one to bring her online... gently... and then she'll open her eyes... and it'll be like a virgin angel, ethereal and pure, floating down from heaven.**

**PAUL**

**Is this from Ken Bergfield's people?**

**66.**

---

**JUDY**  
(engrossed with Bessie,  
mumbling aloud)

**Ken Bergfield, Chief Marketing Officer at SolGen...**

**PAUL**  
(annoyed with Judy)

**We know who Ken Bergfield is!**

**SALAZAR**  
Ken had some input here. Yes.

**PAUL**  
I like it. It's deep.

**SALAZAR**  
People are gonna dig her, Paul. The key is... what's absolutely essential... you gotta let Harding walk her through those first few minutes of life.

**PAUL**  
SecTech's gonna steal this new architecture.

**SALAZAR**  
Harding did the encryption. By himself. And he's with us now.

**PAUL**  
That true Harding? You with us from now on?

**HARDING**  
I signed something, yes.

**SALAZAR**

---

**SecTech will pay through the nose.**

**PAUL**

**No, I'll let that SecTech prick have it. Right in the ass!  
What's that guy's name?**

**JUDY**

**(mumbling aloud)**

**Adam Courson.**

**PAUL**

**Courson. What an asshole.**

**JUDY**

**President of SecTech.**

**PAUL**

**I fuckin' hate that guy.**

**JUDY**

**You want to fuck him in the ass...**

**67.**

**All three look at Judy.**

**SALAZAR**

**Paul, this new model will fuck your brains out, then  
jump outta bed, make your breakfast, press your pants,  
balance your quon-book, all before you leave the house in  
the morning.**

**PAUL**

**Judy already does that.**

---

**They all look at Judy again, who's engrossed with Bessie's hands-- their softness, their shape.**

**SALAZAR**

**But the 3 Series will feel even more real, even more interactive. There will be more foreplay, lots more foreplay, lots of give and take.**

**PAUL**

**What do you mean give? What give?**

**SALAZAR**

**She comes with instructions. My point is, this femanon is a flawless replication. She is for all intents and purposes, a female human being. Harding, you're a genius!**

**PAUL**

**What if a guy doesn't want a female human being? What if he just wants someone he can put in the closet when he's done bangin' her. Will she be okay with that?**

**SALAZAR**

**Is that what you do with Judy?**

**PAUL**

**Yeah.**

**All three look to Judy, who's really into the Bessie-femanon's feet now.**

**PAUL (CONT'D)**

**(aside) It's weird, but every now and then... right as I'm closing the closet door on her... I detect a little resentment. It's like she's lookin' at me, thinking something. It's fuckin' creepy.**

---

**SALAZAR**

**Well. The 3 series has volume control on her thought projections, right Harding?**

**Harding glares at Salazar.**

**68.**

**SALAZAR (CONT'D)**

**And her default settings all bounce to laundry, cooking, cleaning, and fornicating. Sorry, fucking.**

**PAUL**

**Right.**

**SALAZAR**

**She calculates her master's pheromonal output every 30 seconds. I mean, talk about attentive!**

**PAUL**

**Is she self-lubrcating? I wanted self-lubricating, remember?**

**SALAZAR**

**Harding?**

**PAUL**

**Harding? Is she self-lubricating?**

**A silence. For a moment, Harding looks as if he's about to murder both of them. Then...**

**HARDING**

**Yes. She comes lubricated.**

---

**PAUL**

**Well, I gotta see her powered-up and naked at least once before I let you cart her out at the coliseum.**

**SALAZAR**

**Right, but Paul, I told you, Harding has to...**

**Salazar looks to Harding who's eyes are closed.**

**SALAZAR (CONT'D)**

**Harding? Harding, what's wrong?**

**PAUL**

**Harding!**

**Harding opens his eyes, and speaks with deadly seriousness.**

**HARDING**

**I will remove her unitard. After you've ogled her naked body, I will redress her. Then, I will say the word "Welcome" followed by the words "3 Series" and she will begin the animation sequence. I will do all of this right here and now, under one condition: No one, I repeat, NO ONE is fucking her! Is that clear? No one touches her, no one speaks to her, except for me. I will be the only voice she hears. Paul?**

**69.**

**PAUL**

**Fine, Harding. No fucking allowed. Thanks for letting me see what my 3600 quon paid for. (aside to Sal) Fucker thinks he's Jesus.**

**Paul and Salazar walk over to the**

---

**table.**

**Judy is into Bessie's face now, rubbing it, stroking it, on the verge of kissing her.**

**PAUL**  
**Judy step back.**

**JUDY**  
**She's quite extraordinary...**

**PAUL**  
**(ferocious)**

**JUDY!!**

**Judy immediately listens and steps aside with military-like obedience.**

**PAUL**  
**Alright Harding. Show me what you got.**

**Harding walks over to the table, already regretting his decision.**

**He lifts Bessie's torso, so that it's at a right angle to her legs and the table. It's as if Bessie is a Barbie doll.**

**He lifts her chin a bit, so that she's facing straight out. Her eyes are still closed.**

**Harding begins to remove the unitard. He pulls Bessie's right arm out of it's sleeve, and up through the neck hole.**

**The sight of her naked arm and shoulder has Paul, Salazar, and Judy in rapt attention.**

---

**Harding slowly pulls the left arm out of it's sleeve and through the stretched out neck hole, so that the suit now cuts across the top of her breasts.**

**70.**

**Salazar smiles a bit, anticipating Harding's next move. Harding reaches up to Bessie's chest, preparing to pull the suit down and reveal her breasts...**

**But then...**

**HARDING**

**Fuck you both! I won't do it! You will never see this Femanon naked. Ever. You can sue me or kill me or whatever it is you do, Paul. But I will not disappoint her.**

**PAUL**

**Disappoint her? She's not even human.**

**HARDING**

**Right. Why would you understand? You have the intellectual capacity of--**

**SALAZAR**

**Filet Mignon! Paul, you hungry? You ever been up to Harding's house? It's incredible. Why don't we all go up to the house, pour some kroll, put some steaks on the grill, we can talk this out in the open. Adult men. What do you say?**

**All eyes are on Paul. He looks at Bessie, then back at Harding.**

**PAUL**

**Fine. Let's have cocktail.**

---

**SALAZAR**  
**Alright!**

**PAUL**  
**But Salazar, you're out. Harding and I will drink mano a mano.**

**SALAZAR**  
**Paul--**

**PAUL**  
**I'm done with you! You understand? Any other guy makes a crack about Judy and me, I'd cut their fuckin' jugular. But you did me a favor when I first came to SolGen. Well, now we're even. Alright? You piss me off again, and next time you come into the commissary, the cubed beef they'll be serving will be you. Is that clear?**

**SALAZAR**  
**Very clear, Paul. Thank you.**

**71.**

**They all start toward the door, but Paul hangs back. He steps over to the table and yells in the femanon's face.**

**PAUL**  
**Welcome 3 Series!!**

**HARDING**  
**NOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!**

**Bessie's eyes suddenly pop open. She shrieks throughout the animation process, causing everyone else to**

---

turn around in horror.

**Bessie's animation is strenuous, and loud. Eventually, she lifts her head. Harding makes sure that the first eyes she sees are his.**

**The others quietly move around to see her face. She is indeed ethereal.**

**HARDING**

**Look at me. I'm Harding.**

**BESSIE**

**Harrrr. Ding.**

**HARDING**

**Harding.**

**BESSIE**

**Hard...ing.**

**HARDING**

**That's it.**

**BESSIE**

**Harding. Your name is Harding.**

**SALAZAR**

**My God. She sounds just like her.**

**HARDING**

**Sal.**

**SALAZAR**

**Sorry.**

**PAUL**

---

**(beat) How you feelin' sweetheart?**

**Harding slams Paul against the wall.**

**72.**

**HARDING**

**Don't you EVER speak to her. EVER!!**

**Bessie the Femanon gets off the gurney and walks over to Harding. Harding turns. She looks deep into his eyes, taking him in.**

**HARDING (CONT'D)**

**All of you leave.**

**They all start to go. Except for Paul.**

**HARDING**

**She will crash and burn right here and now if you don't leave. All of our work, all of your money. Gone.**

**PAUL**

**I'll be watching you.**

**Paul leaves. Harding pushes a button on the wall, locking the lab door. He and the 3 Series are still silently staring into each other's eyes. After a few more seconds...**

**BESSIE**

**They're gone.**

**PAUL**

**Yes.**

---

**BESSIE**

Your nanobots saved my life twice.

**HARDING**

And the blood. She couldn't be sure you were human.  
Your incredibly brilliant performance didn't hurt either.

She exhales, practically collapsing to the floor. He catches her.

**BESSIE**

Did we really fool them?

**HARDING**

Yes.

Harding hugs Bessie fiercely.

**BESSIE**

Them I'm free now. Yes?

73.

**HARDING**

Yes.

**BESSIE**

What's to become of me, Professor?

**BLACKOUT**

74.

---

## SCENE 10

**Bessie appears in a shaft of light, sitting at a small table. She drafts a letter. We hear her words in voiceover.**

### **BESSIE**

**Dear Harding. Like George Sand, I'm sitting down to write you a letter. I could leave you VizaMail, or a Thought-Bubble. But, we've come to do things like the ancients, you and I. Haven't we? I'd have this letter delivered by gondolier if I could. I'm writing to you, with a pen, with the muscles in my thumb and fore-finger, with the tendons in my arm. With my handwriting, which took years of practice. Pouring this forgotten skill onto this page so that, throughout your endless years, you will have something of me to hold in your hands. A hundred years from now, long after you've recovered from this emotional shock, you will look at this letter and smile, realizing that I could never have given you the love you wanted. But I do have a different love to offer, if you'll have it. It is not the love of your poets-- it is not the love between intimate partners. It is the love two strangers feel when they are the sole survivors of some great tragedy. We are those strangers. We are the last ones standing. Look around you. No one else is really here. And because of this, my heart breaks with love for you. For us. Will you have this love from me? I think you will. It's what allows me to make this decision. We've spoken about my leaving many times, and you know how grateful I am that you found me. When I was lying on the floor of that glass box, when I was raging and pounding my fists into your body, when I was sick with Prenata Virus and thought surely I was at the end of my life, I was wrong about so many things. But I was right about you. You would take care of me, and then you would let me go. You would want nothing in return. Only that I live, and live free. And so I'm only finishing what you started. I**

---

saved you from a life of not knowing yourself, from a life of not knowing love for a woman. Now you must do the same for me.

Lights up on the room where Bessie sits. She's in a small house on an island off the coast of South Africa.

Harding bursts through the front door. Massai drums play on the street outside.

**HARDING**  
Bess? BESS!

Bessie enters from the bedroom.

75.

**BESSIE**  
You scared me! What is it?

Harding closes the door.

**HARDING**  
They found us. Paul Small found us. He wants to video conference. He's sending someone here.

**BESSIE**  
They're coming here?

**HARDING**  
We have to leave. They could be here any moment.

**BESSIE**  
Do they know I'm human?

---

**HARDING**

**I don't know. That's why I agreed to video conference with him. We need to know what he knows, to know how to proceed.**

**BESSIE**

**I'm leaving. You stay, and throw them off.**

**HARDING**

**Bess, they'll kill me if they find me here. I have to go with you. Please, we can't waste time. Grab the black bag in the bedroom closet. It's got everything we need. We have to get out. We have to go to one of the other islands tonight.**

**Harding frantically scrolls through his holosphere while packing supplies.**

**BESSIE**

**The island where we saw the blue whale...**

**HARDING**

**Maybe. Somewhere further out probably.**

**BESSIE**

**How will we get there?**

**HARDING**

**I'll buy a hydrocraft. Disable the signal.**

**BESSIE**

**Harding. I'm not going with you.**

**HARDING**

**What are you saying? What are you doing? We need each other.**

**BESSIE**

---

**No. It's time.**

**76.**

**HARDING**

**Tell me again why you're leaving me. Tell me why we have to have this conversation now, minutes away from an assassin showing up at our door.**

**BESSIE**

**We don't have to have this conversation.**

**Bessie signs the letter she was writing and places it in an envelope. She hands it to him, and walks into the other room.**

**Harding sets the letter down, and brings a video conference up. Harding faces out, and we see JUDY on a scrim behind him.**

**HARDING**

**Hi Judy. How are you?**

**No reply. Perfectly still, she sits and stares at Harding (i.e. into the lens of the camera she's using.) Not a single muscle in her face moves. Harding waits.**

**HARDING**

**Where's Paul?**

**Judy's image cross-fades into Paul's. He sits at his desk, glaring at Harding.**

**HARDING**

**Hi, Paul. I want to work out a solution with you, but--**

---

**PAUL**

**Shut the fuck up, Harding. You sold company secrets for quon. You stole my fucking prototype. You're a dead man. You run away, you hide on the most far away island you can possibly find. Why'd you even bother? You think the Quad 4 bosses don't talk to Quad 3? Man, I am on you like flesh eating bacteria. Some associates of mine will be at your door very shortly, Harding. They plan to repo the prototype, and make quick work of you, unless you cooperate. It doesn't matter where you go. They will find you. You understand? So. You ready to do some business or what?**

**HARDING**

**I haven't done anything that--**

**77.**

**PAUL**

**What kind of data did you give them? Tell me exactly what was on that drive. It's the least you can fucking do. (Screaming sounds can be heard) That's your buddy Sal. Down the hall.**

**We've got his nuts in a vice. Literally. I had a vice installed in the breakroom a few weeks ago. I heard some employees the other day asking, "Why'd he put a vice in here? What's it for anyway?" Now they know. (More screaming sounds.) Does the sound bother you? Do you want me to close the door? Oh that's right, you don't really care about Sal, do you.**

**HARDING**

**Paul--**

**PAUL**

---

**Tell me what was on that device, or Sal will suffer a disgusting and disgraceful death. I will send the video to his mother. WHAT. WAS ON. THAT DEVICE?**

**HARDING**

**Everything. Everything required to put an end to all of this.**

**PAUL**

**What does that mean?**

**HARDING**

**Adam Courson from SecTec is coming here shortly, to meet The 3 Series. What he doesn't know is that the new home companion model will contain sequences that activate the moment a male human being lies to them. Sequences that will change the course of evolution. If any man lies to a 3 Series, it will trigger a coordinated replacement process. Femanons communicating with other femanons. Deadly sleeper cells. Conspiring to remove black souls like yours from the planet. Isn't that awesome?**

**PAUL**

**I don't believe you're that good. (Laughing) Man, that ego you got. I've gotten around your designs before, you know. Or have you forgotten? Man, are you for real? Do you really think--**

**HARDING**

**No, I'm actually counting on you not believing me...**

**PAUL**

**You think you're the only one who knows how to bio-code? Your fucking ego is what ruined you. Do you hear me?**

**HARDING**

**Good luck finding the sequence, Paul. By the way, all**

---

video copies of this conference have been deleted. Good-bye.

**78.**

**Harding reaches for something in his holosphere.**

**PAUL (ON T.V.)**

**Wait wait WAIT! What about Bessie!? What do you think Bessie will do... when I gain her perspective? On your livingroom floor. Will she smile or cry, Harding? Enjoy the last few minutes of your miserable fuckin--**

**Harding ends the call. He walks over to the couch. He's about to sit, but the intercom stops him. "There's a man approaching the front door. His name is HEahh HEahhh."**

**The scanners are malfunctioning. It repeats, "His name is HEahh HEahh. He's at the door now. His name is Heahh--"**

**Harding pushes a button on the wall to silence the faulty scanner.**

**HARDING  
(mumbling)**

**These scanners are shit.**

**Harding pushes a button on the wall, and the door opens.**

**ADAM COURSON stands there, a large man dressed in an expensive dark suit. He glares at Harding.**

**HARDING  
Are you alone?**

---

**Courson talks to Harding and into an ear piece.**

**ADAM**

**Yes. He answered the door. Copy that. What do you think this is, Bedford Falls? You just open the door to anyone who knocks?**

**He hands him a drive.**

**HARDING**

**Pleasure doing business with you.**

**ADAM**

**I want to help you, Harding. May I?**

**79.**

**Courson attempts to enter Harding's house, but encounters an invisible, electrical force field upon crossing the threshold. There is a loud electrical crackling sound, and the man is frozen in suspended animation.**

**ADAM**

**Jesus Christ!**

**It's extremely uncomfortable for him. He can move his lips and eyes, but nothing else.**

**ADAM (CONT'D)**

**Turn it off...**

**HARDING**

**I feel oddly compelled to keep you here. Throw eggs at your head.**

---

**Bessie walks into the room. She non-chalantly sets the black bag down.**

**BESSIE**

**Dinner's on the table. Oh. Hello.**

**She's pretending to be a 3 Series.**

**Harding immediately understands, and smiles knowingly at her.**

**ADAM**

**Who's she?**

**HARDING**

**That's my wife.**

**ADAM**

**That's the 3 series prototype?**

**HARDING**

**Yes.**

**BESSIE**

**Are you going to introduce me, Harding?**

**Harding hits the wall switch, turning the force field off. Courson falls to the floor.**

**ADAM**

**Fuck that hurt.**

**80.**

---

**HARDING**

**Bessie, this is Adam Courson. Adam, may I present Bessie.**

**ADAM**

**(taking her in) Can I watch you two have sex?**

**HARDING**

**Are you serious?**

**Bessie freezes, just as a femanon would if you started talking about her.**

**ADAM**

**I'll give you an extra 5 quon. I have it on me.**

**HARDING**

**Why would--**

**ADAM**

**I want to see how she treats a master two months in. A master who's followed every last procedure to the letter.**

**Bessie remains motionless, and will until Harding reanimates her.**

**HARDING**

**You're walking around with 5 quon in your pocket?**

**ADAM**

**It's gotten me out of some pretty sticky situations in the past. Did you know there are three very bad men in a hydrocraft, hovering above your house, right now?**

**Harding moves toward the front door, opens it, and is about to step outside...**

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**ADAM (CONT'D)**

Uh-uh-uh. Don't take another step. That's what they're hoping

for, that you'll step outside for a moment. They will kill you instantly. Even if you stay inside, I can assure you, once I leave, they plan to enter this dwelling and do unspeakable things to you. After 223 years on the planet, Mr.

Harding, I don't think that's the way you want to go out, is

it?

Harding closes the door. He walks over to Bessie, and strokes her hair. She is still pretending to be frozen.

**HARDING**

She's yours now. Do what you want with her. I'm walking away.

**81.**

**ADAM**

Let me put you under my protection.

**HARDING**

No, thank you.

**ADAM**

Come work for me. Be my new rock-star designer. You're the best. I only hire the best.

**HARDING**

Thank you, but I'm done.

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**ADAM**

**Look, forget about my watching you have sex. Just come work for me. You'll have my entire protection squad at your disposal, plus you can keep the 5 quon as a signing bonus. Take a little vacation before you start, the two of you. Take a month, take a year, but I want you on my team. Have you ever held 5 quon in your hand?**

**He hands Harding the five quon note-- a red, translucent card used by wealthy men as a kind of currency.**

**He holds the quon card up to the light and it sparkles, allowing him to scan the source-code and verify the funding.**

**HARDING**

**I've never held one of these. I am humbled by your offer.**

**ADAM**

**It's your only choice, really. You'll get your life back.**

**HARDING**

**No, I won't. I'm sorry. I wish I could make you understand.**

**ADAM**

**Well at least let my team stay here tonight. They'll get rid of those characters up there, along with anyone else who comes out of the woodwork.**

**HARDING**

**That's not necessary.**

**ADAM**

**You don't want to go through this alone. You're not gonna make it.**

---

**HARDING**

**I'm not alone. I'll never be alone.**

**82.**

**ADAM**

**(beat) Okay. I tried. Could I have my 5 quon back please?**

**Harding hands it to him. Courson walks over to Bessie, sniffs her up and down.**

**ADAM (CONT'D)**

**So she's mine now? She's ready to go?**

**HARDING**

**Let me show you a few things, help you get to know her.**

**ADAM**

**Absolutely.**

**HARDING**

**Bess.**

**BESSIE**

**(reanimating) Oh, hello. Will it be dinner for three?**

**HARDING**

**That won't be necessary. I want you to show Mr. Courson that massage technique you used on me last night. I want you to make him feel very comfortable.**

**BESSIE**

**Of course.**

---

**She walks over to the couch and indicates where he should sit.**

**BESSIE (CONT'D)**

**Mr. Courson, won't you sit down?**

**ADAM**

**My god. She glides. Beautiful.**

**He sits. Bessie goes to the back of the couch, and extends a hand to Harding.**

**Seamlessly, Harding hands her a syringe and she plunges it into the side of Courson's neck, injecting him with its contents. He yelps, then immediately loses consciousness.**

**HARDING**

**He should be out for several hours.**

**Harding looks at Bessie.**

**HARDING (CONT'D)**

**Well done. Jesus, Bess. How did you know I had the--**

**83.**

**BESSIE**

**I know you.**

**HARDING**

**We've bought ourselves some time.**

**BESSIE**

---

**No.**

**HARDING**

**I understand. I understand you need to... Let's get out of this house first. Then say good-bye, once we're safe.**

**BESSIE**

**The men above our house don't know we're aware of their presence. Even if they do, I'm the precious prototype, the expensive piece of technology that must be recovered unscathed... They'll follow me, and eventually they'll attempt to apprehend me. But I'll have disappeared. And they'll have no idea how.**

**HARDING**

**How will you disappear?**

**BESSIE**

**On my own.**

**She picks up the black bag, walks over to Harding, and hugs him good-bye.**

**HARDING**

**How do I do this, how do I let go? I don't know how. I love you too much... I love you, Bess.**

**Harding cries.**

**BESSIE**

**I know you do.**

**She runs to the table, grabs the unopened letter she wrote, and hands it to Harding.**

**She stands at the door, then hits the button on the wall. It opens. She waits for a moment, gathers her courage, and**

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**then walks out.**

**Alone now, Harding goes to the bookshelf, and grabs the George Sand. He gently kisses the book, and retreats to the couch.**

**84.**

**The arms appear to massage him, but he brushes them away.**

**The droning sound of a descending hydrocraft is heard. It gets louder and louder.**

**Harding looks to the door. Footsteps approach...**

**BLACKOUT.**

**END OF PLAY.**

**THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: The 3 Series began as a ten minute play I wrote as an exercise for a writing group. The spark for the play came from raising my daughters. At the time, they were in pre-school, and I had begun to notice just how differently little girls were treated, compared to little boys. It bothered me. Boys were given space, their wildness always tolerated. Little girls, on the other hand, were expected to control their behavior, to be sweet and polite. The pressure on little girls to exhibit perfect behavior came**

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from all sides— from their mothers and fathers, their teachers, their siblings, their girls scout leaders, their gymnastics coaches, their dance instructors, etc. But it bothered me even more to witness pre-school professionals teaching my daughters to accept the aggressive behavior of boys, teaching them how to deal with it. Putting the onus ON THEM. It was infuriating. I consider myself a feminist now. But I wasn't always, and I still have a long way to go, as the play no doubt reveals. The writings of George Sand, Phyllis Nagy, Mary Zimmerman, and my wife, Anastasia Basil, inspired The 3 Series.

**BIO:** Ed Cunningham is an actor, director, playwright, and producer in Los Angeles, CA. His play JOE won runner-up in The Pen is Mightier Than The Sword International Playwriting Competition. An expressionistic play set inside the mind of a dying American soldier, JOE explores the fractured psyche of a soldier accepting responsibility for the death of a child in Iraq. Ed has acted in over 40 professional theatre productions in Chicago, Los Angeles, and around the U.S., including the original production of Mary Zimmerman's Metamorphoses at Lookingglass Theatre, and A View From the Bridge at the Raven Theatre, for which he won the Joseph Jefferson Award. He also stars in the Sundance film Design. Ed lives with his wife, writer Anastasia Basil, and their two girls; he's a basketball coach, a political activist, and a fledgling song writer. He works daily as a voiceover actor at his own private recording studio in the San Fernando Valley, and is working on a new play about the American gun problem.

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# BIRDS ON THE EDGE

**By Marilyn Barner Anselmi**

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *If you don't think a half-bird/half-man and a suicidal teenager are material for a moving play this beautifully written example of absurdist theatre will blow it out the window. Anselmi addresses both the idea of 'inter-species' communication and the fact that two creatures of entirely different origin and behavior can participate in the exchange of emotion—especially tenderness and all its healing capacity. Opposing relations with air-space—flight and non-flight—became powerful symbols of their respective life situations. Dialogue is smart, savvy and dimensional. Quote: Birdyman--All right. All right. Suit yourself. I was trying to be, what do you bi-peds call it? Humane?/Chloe- Ha! Right. Any species is probably better at that than us. (Spacing is the playwright's own. We publish all submissions exactly as received.)*

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**BIRDS ON THE EDGE**

Marilynn Barner Anselmi

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## **Characters**

CHLOE: Later teens female

BIRDYMAN: Fully grown bird/man

Setting: On roof of a five story building.

Time: Late night, present

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(Enter BIRDYMAN in an erratic flight pattern carrying a couple of 2x4's. He should have some sort of bird regalia—wings, ridiculous beak, bird feet, something. Flight is up to you. He sings snippets of “Strangers in the Night”, has to la-la-la much of it, finally lands with a clunk on the roof-top. He regains his composure and curtsies to audience.)

BIRDYMAN

Sorry. Landings are clearly not my forte. My apologies. I so wanted to make a graceful entrance. Whole bird representing freedom and beauty thing. Hate to disappoint, but (drops the 2x4s) there it is.

(Sings another snippet of “Strangers in the Night”—badly.)

What? Everybody loves a song bird? Right? Right? Am I right?

(He looks at the sky.)

My kinda' evening: no stars, little bit a' fog, north wind stirring up a good strong wiff of our rancid river. (Inhales deeply.) And best of all, the piece de' résistance, so the speak, NO PESKY HUMANS. (Looks around at audience.) Well, present company excluded, of course. I would never, ever call humans like you pesky. Obviously well educated, into wildlife preservation, type that keeps those tasty bird feeders filled to capacity. Any critics in the house tonight, hum? Anyway. You get the picture. Just the kinda' night my fellow bird brothers are snugly ensconced in their sweet little nests.

(He picks up a hammer.)

Ever tried to get cozy in a pile of sticks, the occasional discarded (and used, I might add) *used* tissue and perhaps a stray piece of cotton from your discarded pill containers? (Shudders.) Hence, (Holds up the hammer.) This.

(He picks up a 2x4, hammers it into another, works a while, begins to whistle unsuccessfully then resumes singing. The sound of a door opening startles him. He jumps quickly out of the light. Enter CHLOE, jacket wrapped around her, she looks around, scared, upset, has nothing to wipe her nose, picks up some tissue from the pile of 2x4s, blows her nose, looks over the edge of the roof, shudders, withdraws from edge. She notices the 2x4s, kicks at the framing.)

BIRDYMAN (Still in dark.)

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I'll kindly ask you to refrain from that teen, destructive angst.

CHLOE (Startled.)

What? Who's there? (She moves closer to the edge.) Not another step or—

BIRDYMAN

Or what? You'll jump?

CHLOE

I, I'll. I might.

BIRDYMAN (Steps into the light.)

Well, if you do, could you please do so over there? (Points in opposite direction.) Or farther out there. (Points in another direction). One of my most conscientious bird feeders resides directly under your current potential launch position.

CHLOE (Moves away from the edge, considers

him.)

You're. Um. What are you?

(BIRDYMAN stands tall, smooths his feathers (or whatever), preening, and sings a bar from "Strangers in the Night".)

CHLOE

So, you're a delusional, really bad Frank Sinatra bird impersonator?

BIRDYMAN

I beg your pardon?

CHLOE

Oh, no offense. Not like I care, or won't as soon as I—(She steps closer to the edge, BIRDYMAN steps in front of her.)

BIRDYMAN

For your information, I'm a highly endangered, giant specimen of the North American song bird.

CHLOE

A bird that can talk?

BIRDYMAN

And sing in several languages.

---

CHLOE

No way! Like what?

BIRDYMAN (Puffing himself up.)

“Alonse de fant de la patria, la shur de goury teravay” —

CHLOE (Laughs.)

And you think a mangled bit of La Marseillaise makes you a song bird?

BIRDYMAN

Can you do better? (Singing, really badly and loudly.) “Contrevous de la teriniyah, letandar se la te la veey!”

CHLOE (Begins singing louder and louder.)

“Entendez-vous dans les campagnes, Mugir ces feroces soldats? Ils viennent jusque dans vos bras, Egorger vos fils, vos compagnes! (Looks at BIRDYMAN triumphantly.) HAH!

BIRDYMAN (Turns away.)

I detest a diva.

(He returns to his work, hammers. CHLOE watches a moment, nudges a board with her foot.)

CHLOE

So you’re a really bad singing carpenter bird.

BIRDYMAN

No to the former, yes to the latter. Will you hand me that square?

CHLOE

The what?

BIRDYMAN

The shiny thing. There. Behind you. Looks like a capital L.

CHLOE

Oh. Sure. Here. (Hands him the square.) What’s it do?

BIRDYMAN

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What do you think? (He holds it up then places it next to his boards.)

CHLOE

I don't know. And I'm sick to death of these damn pop quizzes. NO MORE QUESTIONS!

BIRDYMAN

All right. All right. Suit yourself. I was trying to be, what do you bi-peds call it? Humane?

CHLOE

Ha! Right. Any species is probably better at that than us.

BIRDYMAN

Really? What part exactly? Plucking each other's tender, juicy young out of their nests or skewering the neighborhood worm population?

CHLOE

Exactly why I am—was—going to be a vegetarian if I didn't...

BIRDYMAN

Didn't what?

(CHLOE points over the edge.)

BIRDYMAN

Oh, didn't become road-kill. (A train horn is heard.) Why not that method? Fast, efficient, quick...

CHLOE (Shudders again, pulls back.)

No. I wanted. Want. I want it peaceful. Not all that, you know, noise. And, and wind. When you get up real, real close to a train, the wind, the gust is so bad. So cold. It's not. I don't know. Free.

BIRDYMAN

Of all the roof tops, in all the towns, in all the world, she walks onto mine.

CHLOE

Only street entrance open.

BIRDYMAN

I'll have to take this up with building security.

---

CHLOE

And. I saw you. Circling up here. For a while now.

BIRDYMAN

Wait a minute. You've been watching me?

(CHLOE nods. BIRDYMAN puffs up, proud.)

BIRDYMAN (Cont.)

My very first stalker!

CHLOE

When you take off, I watched, you just jump and then glide—it's so, I don't know, thoughtless, so natural, so easy—

BIRDYMAN

Easy? Want to know the number of wing sprains I've gotten? Ever seen one of us hit one of your windows? Not pretty...

CHLOE

But you don't—any of you, have to learn this, right? You just do it. You just live to live. Instinct. It's got to be so easy. So beautiful. So peaceful. Right? Isn't it? Isn't it?

BIRDYMAN

Well, I don't—

CHLOE

All this screwed-up world they push us into, the useless shit they cram in our heads. Learn this, memorize that, are you ready for Friday's test? Regionals are next week, gotta' squeeze a couple more points on your SAT! A couple more seconds off your time! Then I see you—or one of yours, soaring, dipping, gliding. And I watch. For like forever, you weren't after anything, not even hunting that I could tell. Just soaring for the fun of it. The sheer fun of it. Because you could. And it hit me. Right then. I couldn't remember what I ever do for fun. Ever.

BIRDYMAN

Oh.

CHLOE

I'm not even 17 and I don't have the first clue what fun is.

BIRDYMAN

---

Oh.

CHLOE

Yeah. That's why I'm here. On your roof top.

(She steps closer to the edge, BIRDYMAN grabs her arm.)

BIRDYMAN

I find construction lots of, what was that term you used? Fun? See—I'm having so much fun I think I'll whistle while I work. See? (He attempts to whistle, can't.)

CHLOE

A bird that can't whistle?

BIRDYMAN

I'm a talking, building song bird, gimme a break.

(CHLOE laughs.)

BIRDYMAN

See? Right there! That ha-ha? That's good, right? That's a clear indication of, of human fun, right? Ha-ha! Right?

CHLOE

Wish I could tell you. (She takes another step to the edge.)

BIRDYMAN

No, no, see, if you really did like watching me, or us, or our kind, if you really admire our freedom, wasn't that what you called it? Then, you really should think about helping me. Here. I could use another—or to be more precise, one hand.

CHLOE

I'm sorry, I don't—

BIRDYMAN

Hammers clearly weren't designed for wings. Could you?

CHLOE

I've never tried this.

BIRDYMAN

Never tried flying either, I suspect, yet you seem determined to give that a go.

---

CHLOE  
Good point. Okay. What do I do?

BIRDYMAN  
Hold this. Or, hammer that while I hold this.

CHLOE  
Why are you doing this? I thought birds lived in—

BIRDYMAN  
Twigs. I know. I know. (Pause.) Think of this as avian evolution.

CHLOE  
Wow. I'm contributing to science. Can you let my mom know after I—you know—at least she'll have something to brag about. Soften the (she hammers hard) blow. HA!

BIRDYMAN  
So, are you having fun?

CHLOE  
Yeah. Maybe I am.

BIRDYMAN  
Excellent, so you won't—

CHLOE  
My mind is made up. I'm doing it right after we finish.

(He un-hammers the boards she has joined.)

BIRDYMAN  
Your call.

CHLOE  
Yep. (Pause.) And thanks.

BIRDYMAN  
You're most welcome. For what?

---

CHLOE

Not trying to talk—or whistle me out of it.

BIRDYMAN

Oh.

CHLOE

Can't tell you how good it feels to, to finally let go. It's a huge relief.

BIRDYMAN

I can only imagine.

(She joins some boards, he takes them apart.)

CHLOE

Do any of your kind ever, you know, do it? (She motions to the edge.)

BIRDYMAN

Except for those silly Lemmings, I don't think so. (Beat) Survival's a pretty big deal for us.

CHLOE

Yeah. Sounds nice. Simple. Clear purpose.

BIRDYMAN

In the middle of winter when food is scarce to non-existent, nice or simple are the last things I'd call it.

CHLOE

Yeah, but this, whatever this thing we're making will help, right?

BIRDYMAN

It should. I'm hoping.

CHLOE

Good, I'm glad I helped somebody or something. Finally.

(She continues to hammer boards together, he continues to disassemble them. She looks around, sees that nothing has changed and pretends to hammer while he takes boards apart. She stands. He looks up.)

---

I can't believe this shit.

CHLOE (Pissed.)

Oh. So you—

BIRDYMAN (Stands.)

Yeah. Figured you out. I'm actually pretty smart, believe it or not.

CHLOE

Look, I'm. Sorry, I thought if you had some—

BIRDYMAN

Purpose? Fun? Hell, you're just like them. Making me do something for you that will ultimately make you look more important, more *needed*. (She kicks at some of the wood.) You are no damn different!

CHLOE

(She takes a step closer to the edge, BIRDYMAN takes her arm and shoves her to the edge.)

This what you want? You sure? Okay, than take that step, jump on out there, make that decision that only you can make. But know this, my girl, you aren't going to soar like us. You aren't going to have that free-flight peace—oh, maybe for the 2.5 seconds it will take you to smack rock bottom, but it won't be lovely, you certainly won't soar, and you won't be free until you splat right there, on that street, right down there. (Holds her to the edge.) Still ready to fly? Then do it. Right now. But hear this: the instinct to survive is every bit as beautiful as the instinct to soar.

BIRDYMAN

(He pushes her again and, at the last minute, grabs and hugs her to him. She begins crying.)

The End.

**THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:** *I was watching a particularly athletic hawk soaring above my house and wondered what he thought of us (if anything). This led to the whole flight thing and the strangeness, the convoluted bravery of those who chose that way out. Not sure of my stylistic influence.*

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*I like a good story well told. 'Birds on the Edge' is a new script and has had a staged reading at The Imperial Center for the Arts, Rocky Mount.*

**BIO:** *I'm a lesbian playwright living and writing in rural North Carolina. Despite or because of this, my work has been performed around the country and a teeny bit in Germany--but I did win an award there, so I'm claiming it.*

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# Laughing and Crying with Vincent—short one act play

By Warren L. Jones III

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Almost like a medieval ‘morality’ play in which the ‘characters’ are universal qualities, personified for emphasis and entertainment. These were often humorous ‘burlesques’ but here the similarity ends. The light-hearted repartee soon reveals a darker secret. Are the voices those of Vincent, his brother Theo Van Gogh or the prostitute Rachel whom he gifted with his ear? Is psychological projection the only way to deal with it and remain sane? We published one of Warren L. Jones’ III flash fictions in Issue 2 and were impressed by both his imagination and literary craft. Ditto for this one. An excellent example of minimalist ‘bare’ theatre.*

Laughing and Crying with Vincent

-one short act-

L. What in the hell am I supposed to do with that?

C. How would I know? It has your name on it.

L. I didn’t order anything. Why would someone send me this?

C. You should just open it. It could be really cool.

L. Or totally bogus. A lot of what I get is awful.

C. I like the way it’s wrapped, though. Almost like some old lady with those glasses on a string got a hold of it. It’s so fuggin’ precise.

L. What if it’s bad news.

C. Well you tardo, just open the thing and you’ll know. Here, let me do it.

---

L. Wait, wait. Read what it says on the other side.

C. Alright, alright. “To my Li”. It’s addressed Arles. There are stains that look like gravy or something.

L. Really? Oh crap, didn’t your brother move to France. I wonder if it’s from him.

C. That loser. I thought he joined the Legion or something. Hey, re-light that thing and pass it over here.

L. Okay. Just a sec. Oh wait, it is from him. I recognize the pen stroke.

C. Hey, I’ll open it. Let me have it.

L. Well, just be careful. Use that jackknife.

C. My god. I can’t believe this thing. There’s three layers of tape.

L. Watch out you dooper. Don’t slice it up, whatever it is.

C. Well shit. Look at that.

L. Oh my fuggin god. That is sick. That mustuv hurt like hell.

C. I guess he really liked you after all.

L. I guess so. But, how is he gonna, I mean, you know...

C. Yah, yah. Howz he gonna hit his mark. Are you sure it’s his?

L. Oh yeah. Yeah. No mistaking that.

C. What do we do with it? It’s not like you can put it on the bookshelf or hang it on the wall.

L. No. Uh uh. There ain’t no more hangin’ for that guy.

C. Ha ha. You are some kinda fun-ny. Pack that pipe will ya, I’m coming down.

**THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:** *LACWV was inspired by a remark I thought I overheard at a bookstore. Two patrons were browsing the art book section. As often happens, my mind went in an odd direction and became the play when I sat down at home to write. I browse the local library aisles and choose books by jacket covers and blurbs. I accidently read many authors and*

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*subjects, and as a younger person read Bukowski and William Lee and and other odd beats. I have not seen LACWV performed. I'm not sure that is a wise direction to go in.*

**BIO:** *Warren L Jones III is a jazz bassist, composer, and writer working near the White Tank Mountains in Arizona. He has been published in print in Brilliant Flash Fiction, KYSO FLASH 2016: State of the Art, Fleasonthedog.com, and FOUR TIES LIT REVIEW magazine. Warren is color blind. Follow my music on facebook and buy my music on cdbaby.*

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# COMMUNICATION

By Thomas Misuraca

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *A short smart savvy little parody on the wiles of wily communication. Half sentences, snatches of dialogue, incomplete phrases force the mind to formulate the fragments into meaningful content. But what is meaningful? Neither character allows the other to finish what he's saying; body language and hand gestures are more baffling than explanatory and proper names trigger trajectories that spin into wild inference. Every reader of this play will take away something different in terms of the past behavior of the two men. This is theatre in which the viewer gets so mentally involved trying to nail down what's being said, that he/she becomes, in effect, a third character by association. A strong well written serio-comic performance without an ounce of fat. (Spacing is author's own.)*

## COMMUNICATION

by

Thomas J. Misuraca

**CHARACTERS:** DERRICK. An average man, same age as CHARLIE.

**TIME.** The present.

**LIGHTS UP ON:** (A generic street corner. DERRICK and CHARLIE enter at the same time from opposite ends of the stage. They cross, and stop in recognition. They turn to face each other.)

---

4. Charlie!

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

5. Derrick!

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

6. Wow. I haven't seen you since that thing they  
threw for what's her name.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

7. That's right. She was a character. Too bad about  
the...

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

(CHARLIE gestures  
to the top half of his  
body.)

8. She cut it off.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

9. It grew back.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

DE  
RR

---

IC  
K  
10. Really?

CH  
AR  
LI  
E  
11. Yeah, she may cut it off again.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K  
12. And her husband?

(CHARLIE shakes his head, sadly.)

DE  
RR  
IC  
K  
13. He was so young. Was it...?

(CHARLIE nods.)

DE  
RR  
IC  
K  
14. But I thought he-

CH  
AR  
LI  
E  
15. The baboon was incompatible.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K  
16. That's a shame. But how about you? You still over there?

---

(DERRICK points  
behind him with his  
thumb.)

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

17. I left there ages ago.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

18. You were so happy there.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

19. I wasn't.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

20. But you used to rave about-

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

21. They got rid of that.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

22. That was their signature service!

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

23. Blame the Japanese.

---

24. I thought your wife was-

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

25. Chinese.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

26. And she's-

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

27. Content.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

28. Whatever happened to-?

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

29. Seattle.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

30. How about-?

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

---

31. No clue.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

32. And-?

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

33. Excommunicated.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

34. I figured after the cardinal incident...

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

35. Do you still see-?

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

36. I saw him at a function last month.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

37. So you're still involved-

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

38. Barely.

CH  
AR

- 
- LI  
E  
39. Tough times all around.
- DE  
RR  
IC  
K  
40. Not as bad as back then.
- CH  
AR  
LI  
E  
41. At least back then we had all that other stuff.
- DE  
RR  
IC  
K  
42. We still have that.
- DE  
RR  
IC  
K  
43. We still have that.
- CH  
AR  
LI  
E  
44. It's not the same.
- DE  
RR  
IC  
K  
45. Things change.
- CH  
AR  
LI  
E  
46. That didn't have to.

---

DE  
RR  
IC  
K  
47. Nobody was invested anymore.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E  
48. Well, after Ellen-

DE  
RR  
IC  
K  
49. Nobody could prove that.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E  
50. It was pretty obvious.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K  
51. To whom?

CH  
AR  
LI  
E  
52. Everybody.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K  
53. No, it wasn't.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

---

54. Are you two still...?

(CHARLIE makes  
an odd gesture with  
his hands.)

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

55. No!

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

56. You are!

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

57. Not recently.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

58. But after the incident.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

59. So?

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

60. I'd assume...

DE  
RR

- 
61. She went to therapy. IC  
K
62. You repeat the same patterns, don't you? CH  
AR  
LI  
E
63. No. DE  
RR  
IC  
K
64. First it was Juan. CH  
AR  
LI  
E
65. Juan and I never- DE  
RR  
IC  
K
66. C'mon! CH  
AR  
LI  
E
67. You're jealous because you wanted to. DE  
RR  
IC  
K
68. With Juan? Ha! CH  
AR  
LI  
E
- DE

---

RR  
IC  
K  
69. You were stuck with Julie.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E  
70. Leave Julie alone.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K  
71. She can't use that excuse forever.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E  
72. Why not? You do.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K  
73. I do not!  
74.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K  
75. I do not!

CH  
AR  
LI  
E  
76. You used it the last time we-

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

---

77. You're dreaming!

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

78. Not any more, since Dr. Falk put me on that medication.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

79. You went to see him?

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

80. Yes.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

81. Did you tell him about me?

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

82. He knew.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

83. He did?

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

84. Everybody knows.

DE  
RR

- 
85. Not everybody knows. IC  
K
86. They will if you're- CH  
AR  
LI  
E  
(bizarre  
hand  
gesture  
again)
87. -with Ellen. DE  
RR  
IC  
K
88. It's nobody's business if I-  
(makes  
similar  
but  
differe  
nt  
hand  
gesture  
)
89. -with Ellen. Why don't you go-  
(third  
unreco  
gnizab  
le hand  
gesture  
)
90. -yourself! CH  
AR  
LI  
E
91. You're just as bad as you were back then. DE  
RR

- 
- IC  
K  
92. And you're just as suspicious.
- CH  
AR  
LI  
E  
93. I have to be with you!
- DE  
RR  
IC  
K  
94. You never were with Craig.
- CH  
AR  
LI  
E  
95. Craig earned my trust.
- DE  
RR  
IC  
K  
96. More like he bought it.
- CH  
AR  
LI  
E  
97. That was a gift.
- DE  
RR  
IC  
K  
98. Sure, because everybody gives gifts like that.
- CH  
AR  
LI  
E  
99. My friends do.
- DE

---

RR  
IC  
K  
100. Do they supply the U-Haul, or do you?

CH  
AR  
LI  
E  
101. Depends on the person.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K  
102. All of that but I still got Juan to... you  
know.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E  
103. I know! We all know!

DE  
RR  
IC  
K  
104. Your wife didn't know.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E  
105. Leave her out of this.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K  
106. You're the one who brought her in.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

---

107. Once.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

108. But she had the leather skirt.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

109. She borrowed that from a friend.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

110. Likely story.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

111. You're jealous.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

112. Of her? Never.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

113. The way she-

(CHARLIE looks  
around cautiously  
and then whispers  
something in  
DERRICK's ear.)

DE  
RR

---

114. Please, anybody with an elementary school education could do that.

IC  
K

115. Juan couldn't.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

116. Shows what you know.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

117. Juan could?

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

118. Like a pro!

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

119. You're lying.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

120. You're the liar. You lied to-

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

---

121. I didn't lie to her. I didn't get her involved.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

122. She's going to find out someday.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

123. She won't because she...  
(falls  
sullen)

124. She...

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

125. She didn't?

(CHARLIE nods  
sadly.)

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

126. Not with-?

(CHARLIE nods  
again.)

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

127. I'm so sorry.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

128. I thought she-

---

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

129. Me, too. The way she-

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

130. She was no Juan.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

131. But better than Craig.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

132. I miss her so much.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

133. I'm sorry.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

134. And I'm sorry for-

(CHARLIE gestures  
"everything" with  
both hands.)

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

135. That's very big of you.

---

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

136. I do miss you. The way you used to-

(CHARLIE makes a sly gesture.)

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

137. I miss that too.

CHARLIE

138. You had the best equipment.

CHARLIE

139. You had the best equipment.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

140. Juan liked it.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

141. And have you two-

(CHARLIE makes a gesture.)

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

142. Not since...

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

---

143. But you and Ellen...

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

144.

145. I'd rather not. But without Juan, there's nobody.

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

146. There's me.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

147. Is there?

CH  
AR  
LI  
E

148. If you want.

DE  
RR  
IC  
K

149. I want.

(They hug for a long time as the lights slowly fade.)

THE END

**THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:** I've always been fascinated in how people who know each other well communicate without saying much. I thought that would be a fun premise for the play, where the reader would not know exactly what the characters are talking about, but still engaged by the passion of their story telling. Please don't think the dialogue in Communication is random. I know exactly what they are talking about. It

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may be a little surreal, but what they communicate is linear. I'm not asking the reader to figure out what I meant, but instead to find their own meaning in these words. If any.

It will come as no surprise to hear my greatest influence for this one was Samuel Beckett.

Communication was first stage read at the Alliance of Los Angeles playwrights' yearly play festival, way back in 2009. It was then produced at PianoFight's ShortLived 3.0 in Los Angeles, where it won 2nd place audience favorite.

**BIO:** I studied Writing, Publishing and Literature at Emerson College in Boston before moving to Los Angeles. Over 80 of my short stories and two novels have been published. Most recently, my story, Masks was published in *The Writer's Cafe Magazine*. I am also a multi-award winning playwright with over 100 short plays and 9 full-lengths produced globally. My musical, Geeks!, was produced Off-Broadway in May.

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# RESTORATION

By **MARK ROSATI**

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Rough notes...Mephistophelian...moves from dialogue exchange to existential interrogation...seamlessly, without noise or colour, from material reality to transcendent reality—the dead looking down upon themselves, the taste of life still bittersweet on their lips—Falconetti has merged so closely with her—and the world's conception of her as the supreme actress--that the illusion has taken hold and truth has been pushed aside... 'to spend the rest of your life lost in your own shadow.' Nostalgic, haunting/Sunset Boulevard/The rescue and restoration of a famous lost film is poignantly played against the fragmentation of the actress it made famous and the disintegration of her legendary career...dear god, the heartbreak of it all...(Spacing is the playwright's own).*

## RESTORATION

*A Play in One Act*

By Mark Rosati

## CHARACTERS

Renee Falconetti, a French actress, 20s or 30s

A male bartender, age unimportant

The play is set in a bar in South America at some point in the past.

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## RESTORATION – INTRODUCTION

In 1927, a Paris stage actress capped her brief motion picture career by filming a silent film role. Renee Jeanne Falconetti's haunting performance in the title role of Carl Th. Dreyer's classic "The Passion of Joan of Arc" is considered perhaps the greatest in cinematic history. Falconetti never made another movie, and she died in obscurity in South America in 1946. Mystery surrounds her, including the cause of her death, the country in which she died, the exact number of films she made (some accounts have it as one, others two or three), and even her correct full name. The body of Falconetti, best known for portraying a woman who was burned alive, was cremated, and her ashes buried in her native France. For decades it was believed that Dreyer's masterwork was lost when the negatives were destroyed in fires, but a copy of the film was found in a Norwegian mental institution in 1981 and digitally restored to its former glory.

## RESTORATION

(A bar in South America. The light rises, revealing RENEE FALCONETTI, a French actress, and BARTENDER. The BARTENDER is always polite on the surface, but there is a probing, sinister undertone to his questions and banter.)

FALCONETTI

To create. That is all we will ever know of God.

BARTENDER

Not if you're a believer.

FALCONETTI

Is there a difference between a believer and a fool? Or a lunatic?

BARTENDER

Damned if I know.

FALCONETTI

Do you believe in perfection?

---

BARTENDER

I would if I ever saw it.

FALCONETTI

If you create something perfect, will it live forever? Will its creator?

BARTENDER

Nothing is immortal.

FALCONETTI

At this point I hoped to have more answers, not more questions.

BARTENDER

Life's disappointments don't die with us.

(FALCONETTI takes out a cigarette. The BARTENDER lights it for her.)

FALCONETTI

We all die more than once, don't we? I died the first time when my lover passed away. The second time, when I was forgotten--

BARTENDER

You know that's not the same.

FALCONETTI

The hell it isn't. I stood at the pinnacle, the greatest performance ever filmed, that would ever be filmed, and to be condemned to oblivion --

BARTENDER

That's different than dying. You of all people should know that.

FALCONETTI

And then the fires. That was my third death, when the negatives were destroyed. "The Passion of Joan of Arc" -- and I -- not just forgotten. Erased. Our masterpiece, my Joan, became a rumor, a fable, people heard of it but never saw it. The public adored me and then forgot me, like a lover from a summer fling. Twenty years later, you can't remember the color of her eyes or what she was wearing the last time you saw her. Can you?

BARTENDER

Some people can.

FALCONETTI

And then a miracle, for it to be found, 35 years later--

BARTENDER

Risen from the grave. A perfect copy found in a janitor's closet at a Norwegian mental

---

institution. How did it get there of all places?

FALCONETTI

How does anything get anywhere? But they found it, just like they found the “Mona Lisa” after it was stolen. And they restored the film, beautifully, lovingly.

BARTENDER

Still--

FALCONETTI

Hardly anyone ever watches it.

BARTENDER

That must be very painful for you.

FALCONETTI

I’m like Proust. No one reads his masterwork, no one sees mine.

BARTENDER

But you were magnificent. So I’ve heard.

FALCONETTI

You haven’t seen it either?

BARTENDER

Can’t say that I have.

FALCONETTI

I wasn’t an actress, I became a ghost of a woman who was martyred and haunts the soul of every Frenchwoman. The director was so cruel, like something out of Dickens or Tolstoy, hours and hours forcing me on my knees, hungry, cold, to torture every emotion out of me. But we gave birth to something, something eternal, something French, something universal--

BARTENDER

Even though you were so much older than Joan was.

FALCONETTI

Find me another actress at 35 who could play 19 without makeup. But that was just the face, the body. I gave my soul for that performance--

BARTENDER

I heard it looked like you were really crying.

FALCONETTI

I was really crying. I had hoped to charm Dreyer, the director, out of my promise to shear off my hair, but Carl was immune to charms -- mine, anyway. To cut off a woman’s hair is to de-sex her.

---

BARTENDER

Fitting, considering you were playing a woman killed for wearing men's clothes.

FALCONETTI

Yes, a man would say it's fitting.

BARTENDER

I thought you liked men.

FALCONETTI

I was a stage star in Paris, and men wanted me. I had furs and jewelry and a limousine with a chauffeur. Henri-- the Jewish industrialist who fathered my children --

BARTENDER

He died the year after "Joan" was released, didn't he?

FALCONETTI

When I went to sleep the night of his funeral, no bed ever seemed so silent, so empty. And then came the Depression, and no one wanted to put on the kinds plays I loved to stage. I wanted to sing and dance, but all the people wanted was to see me suffer and die, as nobly as possible. So I set up my own theater--

BARTENDER

But you weren't exactly a businesswoman, were you?

FALCONETTI

I was an actress nearing 40. That made me old. And Europe was in the process of committing suicide. Not a good time for musical theater.

BARTENDER

So you fled, you and your half-Jewish children to Switzerland. And then you abandoned them there and left for South America--

FALCONETTI

I provided for their care, the best boarding schools. I had to make a new life in the New World. Do you drag your children all across the globe with you?

BARTENDER

I wouldn't bring a child into this world.

FALCONETTI

Dreyer said I had reincarnated Joan, and perhaps that's why I was born, to give her life again. And I gave my children life. What about my own life?

BARTENDER

So you tried to reinvent yourself in Argentina, a strange country, no money, no contacts, putting on weight--

FALCONETTI

---

How do you have a second act when the first can never be equaled? I'm not educated but I read a lot. The German physicists talk about the atom and how nothing is real, it's only perception, until you see the electron smeared on a photographic film, that's reality. But I left more than a smear on film, I left transcendence, truth, and it will last--

BARTENDER

As long as there aren't more fires.

FALCONETTI

When I was a young actress, after the Great War, some of the soldiers had such terrible facial wound they didn't look human anymore. They lived in sheltered communities, deep in the forests, where no one would see them. But once a year they would gather to have contact with other people, and sometimes I would go and entertain them.

BARTENDER

Why?

FALCONETTI

I owed it to them as a Frenchwoman, for their sacrifice, for their mutilation. To sing, to dance for them -- a woman's beauty can rekindle a dead soul, restore him if only for a moment--

BARTENDER

What they say about war is also true of life -- long periods of boredom, punctuated by moments of sheer terror. And, sometimes, it leaves scars.

FALCONETTI

This last war - Dresden, Toyko, Hiroshima, Nagasaki. It seems the world's fate is to burn itself to death.

BARTENDER

Perhaps.

FALCONETTI

It's a wonder the bombs they dropped in Japan didn't go on splitting every atom on Earth.

BARTENDER

We got lucky -- except the Japanese, of course.

FALCONETTI

They called them World Wars but neither was, really. Most people in the world went about their business, their affairs, unaffected. Never even heard a gunshot. Some starved, but most went to bed with full bellies--

BARTENDER

Like you. You failed in theater here, too, then tried to make ends meet teaching acting and singing--

---

FALCONETTI

Hard enough to find students to teach in the midst of Depression and war. Those I had were idiots.

BARTENDER

Not worthy of your time or talent.

FALCONETTI

Would that I had Joan's faith. Her convictions, her purpose--

BARTENDER

So, instead, you ate a lot--

FALCONETTI

Yes, I gained weight. And I aged. Would that people could be reborn like lost films. Would that someone could reincarnate me like I did with her, bring me back to life, alive and young and vital--

BARTENDER

You tried to reincarnate yourself--

FALCONETTI

Yes, after the war, I was going to return to Paris and the stage. But I had to lose weight, and I lost so much I got sick and died in Buenos Aires--

BARTENDER

No. You had a breakdown, you became mentally unbalanced, and you committed suicide in Brazil.

FALCONETTI

That's a lie.

BARTENDER

You're guilty because you passed on your weakness to your son, who also killed himself.

FALCONETTI

Another lie! How dare you!

BARTENDER

It seems you were in need of a director for more than just motion pictures.

FALCONETTI

You will be forgotten an hour after your funeral. I—they—those who know me will remember me, and revere me, forever--

BARTENDER

Perhaps.

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FALCONETTI  
When I was in Brazil--

BARTENDER  
Yes, Brazil.

FALCONETTI  
This was in 1942, before I died --

BARTENDER  
Uh-huh.

FALCONETTI  
They screened a brilliant Brazilian film, "Limite." I was invited. So were many others, stars of the cinematic firmament, like Orson Welles. You know him?

BARTENDER  
Of course. Citizen Kane.

FALCONETTI  
He knew what it was like to have one giant triumph overshadow the rest of your life -- give it meaning and strip it of meaning at the same time.

BARTENDER  
He also gained a few pounds later in life.

FALCONETTI  
You're a cruel little man sometimes.

BARTENDER  
Guilty as charged.

FALCONETTI  
"Limite" -- it was about a small boat drifting on the ocean, three people stuck in it, all had lost hope, contemplating their shattered lives--

BARTENDER  
Must have been painful for someone in your situation.

FALCONETTI  
Afterward, Orson and I spoke, about spending the rest of your life trying to reincarnate past glory, a miracle of story, script, cast, director, of costumes and lighting, art becoming life, down to the flies buzzing around our faces. To be the best ever at what you did, to transcend and transform your art, to define it for every generation to follow--

BARTENDER  
A heavy weight to carry.

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FALCONETTI

To spend the rest of your life lost in your own shadow, everyone talking about you in the past tense. I asked him -- could we work together? Create something together?

BARTENDER

And?

FALCONETTI

He said, "In my opinion, there are two things that can absolutely not be carried to the screen: the realistic presentation of the sexual act and praying to God." But then he said--

BARTENDER

Yes?

FALCONETTI

He said, the exception was when he saw me in Joan of Arc, and realized what communion with God really is. When he saw it he thought he was seeing actual history, not a film. And then he said--

BARTENDER

Go on.

FALCONETTI

"A good artist should be isolated. If she isn't isolated, something's wrong."

BARTENDER

Depressing way to live.

FALCONETTI

The last thing he said was, "If you want a happy ending, it depends on where you stop your story." Then he kissed my hand and went back to America.

BARTENDER

Did you ever see him again?

(FALCONETTI shakes her head)

FALCONETTI

All I wanted was to leave one more brush stroke on the canvas.

BARTENDER

It was not to be.

FALCONETTI

"Joan of Arc" was based on the actual trial transcripts.

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BARTENDER

So--?

FALCONETTI

Those men, those petty, vicious, frightened, small men, they actually kept records, like the Nazis, like they were proud of torturing and burning her, that it would scare off other heretics. And we took those records, and we turned it against them, showed them for what they were, and showed Joan to be the saint she was. It took 500 years for them to canonize her.

BARTENDER

Why so long, do you think?

FALCONETTI

Because when the world isn't being cruel to women, it's indifferent. But we don't really choose the paths we follow, do we? We fool ourselves into thinking we do, but really, we just wake up floating in the middle of a river and pretend we're swimming. Creation -- all I will ever know of God.

(FALCONETTI extinguishes her cigarette)

FALCONETTI

Ashes to ashes. Cremation is the way to go, don't you think?

FALCONETTI takes out another cigarette and leans forward for a light.  
The BARTENDER strikes a match and holds it out.)

FALCONETTI

Someone wrote that to look at me, is to look into eyes that will never leave you.

(staring into FALCONETTI'S eyes, the BARTENDER is transfixed. She blows out the match.)

THE END

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**THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:** *My short play "Restoration" was born of insomnia. I awoke long after midnight, couldn't get back to sleep, turned on the television for channel flipping - and found myself face-to-face with Renee Falconetti in her extraordinary performance as Joan of Arc. I had*

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*known of the film but had never seen it - and I was transfixed. The play is a work of fiction, of course, but inspired by Falconetti's life and art, and the fascinating story of the film itself. The world can be a cruel place for artists of any kind - and, in my experience, women artists in particular.*

*'Restoration' has been performed in New York City in Between Us Productions' Take Ten Festival, the Midtown International Theatre Festival's Short Play Lab, and in Manhattan Repertory Theatre's 'February Event.' All were directed by Jake Alan King and starred Chelsea Clark as Falconetti; Guy Wellman played the bartender in three of the productions, and Julio Valentin performed the role in the fourth. I owe a great debt of gratitude to all of them.*

**BIO:** *Mark Rosati, a Chicago-area playwright, is the author of 23 plays and numerous short stories, and a member of the Dramatists Guild and The Company Theatre Group in NJ. His plays have had productions and public readings in New York City, Chicago, New Jersey, Boston, Michigan and Brighton, UK. Recent productions include "Exposed" in April 2019 at Between Us Productions' Take Ten Festival in New York, "Duet" at Theatre East's 5x5 Drama Series in all five NYC boroughs, "Restoration" in Between Us Productions' Take Ten Festival, and "Extinct/Extant" at Manhattan Repertory Theatre's February Event. His short story "Last Stand" was included in a public reading of new works on the theme of "sanctuary" by Cast Iron Theatre in Brighton in June 2019, and his one-act "Our Daily Bread" received a public reading in Boston in the "Pinning Our Hopes" pre-inauguration Resistance event in January 2017.*

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## **NON FICTION**

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# WRESTLING WITH GOD

By Jacob Dallas

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Apart from all the good writing we get to read one of the big perks about FOTD is discovering new talent. And when we do we're jumping up and down like chimps in a Chiquita warehouse. We love publishing the emerging writer and we're quite happy to overlook the inevitable rough edges that often characterize the neophyte---as we see it, that's just part of the reading experience. But Jacob Dallas is the exception. It's rare to find a young writer whose voice rings so true and whose easy going prose plays softball with the language. This guy knows how to write a sentence. Any sentence. 'Nah, I'm kidding. I stepped into the damn ring. I got my ass kicked, but I stepped in all the same.' And, I swear I hear the flapping of angel's wings outside my door. Tongues of flame tickle my toes. My little apartment seems to get smaller, my mattress gets lumpier, and my pillows turn to stone.' Watch him. He's got 'Genuine Article' stamped all over. Five stars.*

## Wrestling with God

*...Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."*

*-Genesis 32:24-28 NIV*

Trace the Dallas lineage back as far as you want, you won't find any Jacob's aside from me. On my mother's side (the Guthries) there is one Jacob smack dab in the middle

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of the 19th century, but nobody even knew he existed until yours truly went digging through old records. There's no chance *that* guy was my namesake (which is fortunate considering the man seems to have profited greatly off the Tennessee slave trade).

No, Jacob isn't a family name, it's a Bible name. My parents picked my title right out from the ranks of the Israeli patriarchs, and they were so pleased with the fit they proceeded to give biblical titles to all five of my younger siblings (Caleb, Joshua, David, Elizabeth, and Zechariah). Call me a trend-setter!

Here's a fun fact: in its original translation, Jacob literally means "heel grabber", or "grasper of feet". The leading scholarly theory as to the origin of this translation was that the Biblical Jacob was a life-long con-man who was constantly scrapping to get on top, grabbing at the metaphorical heels of his far more successful older brother, Esau. There is an alternate theory that none but I espouse that claims Jacob was the first person in history to have a foot fetish. As of now Biblical scholars are opposed to this suggestion, but I have a strong suspicion they're just kink-shaming the patriarch of Israel.

Regardless of the reasons for his (and my) unique etymological roots, Jacob's name eventually changed. The story goes that late one night before going to war with his twin brother, the one whose heels he was so intent upon, Jacob was attacked by a heavenly figure. Jewish and Muslim scholars alike agree that it was an angel, while most Christian scholars lean towards it being a pre-incarnation vision of Christ Himself. Whoever it's supposed to have been, Jacob wrestled with this fella, and he wrestled *hard*.

I've done my fair share of wrestling (I was on my school's team for 10 years) and I've got to say that I've never known anybody with the stamina to wrestle all night long. I consider myself a pretty tough guy, but even on my best day I wouldn't hold a candle to

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Ol Heel-Grabber. This man had such a brutal cross-face-to-half-nelson-hold that even after having his hip ripped clean out of its socket the angel (or Jesus, or God, or whichever celestial power you prefer) couldn't get away from him. Jacob won, and his opponent admitted it.

It was in that moment that this heavenly stranger gifted Jacob with the name "Israel", which roughly translates to "God contends". The guy literally earned the title of God's champion in single combat. Pretty badass. Reading the story for the first time as a kid, I had to pause to ask my parents why I got the name that means "heel grabber" and not "God contends", which of course goes to show that your average 8 year old knows embarrassingly little about global politics.

The story wraps up rather well for Jacob/Israel. He ends up living to a ripe old age in extravagant wealth. He has two beautiful wives with countless sons and daughters. His name is permanently solidified in history as a Judeo-Christian hero. And of course there's the whole having a country named after him thing as well. All in all its quite a bit to live up to when you're a skinny child dutifully doing his morning Bible studies. It terrified me to be honest. My name was Jacob! Did that mean I had to wrestle God too? I couldn't even do a pullup on the backyard monkey bars!

It turns out I didn't need to be so worried. Jacob's aren't specifically targeted to wrestle with God. *Everybody* has to wrestle God at some point, your name is irrelevant.

It's just a fact of life. Sooner or later at some midnight hour we all have to stare our Maker in the face and ask Him what His whole deal is. Some folks might call it an existential crisis, a come-to-Jesus moment, a period of questioning, or even "that really bad acid trip I had in college". Whatever the case, it's gonna happen. Nobody is getting

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out of this one. This has been our doom since the day our species became self-aware. Questions are the curse of consciousness, and boy do we sure have a lot of them. I don't need to run down the list because everybody has already got them in their head. These thoughts are ingrained in all of us, bouncing around our skulls like super-heated bouncy balls. I know *you* hear them boinging away in there on quiet nights.

I was born into an Evangelical family that's lived in the Southeastern United States longer than the term "United States" has existed. Needless to say, my home-environment didn't exactly encourage free thought. There *was* an answer to all those deep questions about life and it was *our* answer. Everyone else, bless their hearts, were members of the dead-wrong-hell-bound-unsaved-masses that we ought to pity lots and listen too little. With fear of brimstone brewing in the back of my brain it was damn difficult to wrestle with God. I'd tiptoe around the ring on occasion, sure, but I wasn't sure if I had the guts to step in. I always imagined that if I gave it a try the floor would open trap-door style and I'd plummet downward a couple million miles straight into Hell.

And so I blindly believed what Mommy and Daddy and Mammaw and Grandpappy and Pastor Bill told me for the rest of my life until the day I died. What else was I to do? This was my only option. I never once considered any other option and honestly freedom from choice was freedom indeed. I never wrestled with God because conflict is scary and uncertainty is terrifying. I lived meekly and went with the flow and proceeded to pass onto my own children that they better shape up or they'll get a one way ticket to fiery-Jesus-jail for a trillion and one life sentences without parole.

Nah, I'm kidding. I stepped into the damn ring. I got my ass kicked, but I stepped in all the same.

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I guess I was 17 years old, or maybe just barely 18, when I demanded that life, the universe, and everything “square up”. I didn’t have half an idea of what I was doing or where I was headed, I just decided to dare to ask the forbidden questions. And by “ask” I mean Google “How was the universe made?” under the covers at 4 AM on a school night and let my eyes wander over page after page of poorly moderated internet forums where wannabe scholars misquoted philosophers and hurled insults at each other in a desperate scramble to find truth. If there was such a thing as enlightenment then I wasn’t exactly getting warmer.

For a year or so I dreamed of Hell, read half-baked philosophy blogs, and fact-checked my pastor. Turns out the world’s *not* 6000 years old like my private school geology class said. Turns out Darwin *never* claimed a monkey had a human child. I was a full grown adult and I was learning what terms like “The Big Bang” meant and what geological periods were. I read about the Crusades and the Inquisition...*surely* Pastor Bill had heard of these things. Surely, surely, fuck, surely they had to have known. Is it a lie to withhold information? Is that why Mom and Dad didn’t let me use the internet till I turned 17?

It seemed like every night I’d dream of Hell. I would wake up screaming, my bed drenched in sweat. Once I’d clawed a couple gases of paint off my wall. My fingernails were bleeding, but I couldn’t feel the pain. I started sleeping with the lights on because the darkness of my room was suffocating. What if one day I flip my switch downwards and I never see light again? What if a doubter doesn’t deserve to see the light. I was a trembling mess, a mass of goosebumps, perspiration, and existential angst. Worst of all, I was completely and totally alone.

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Well, not altogether alone. I had some half-baked philosophy blogs I found on the internet, but all those did was confuse me. A Spongebob profile picture social media account named “Nihilist420” isn’t exactly an ideal source of help in a time of questioning and collapse, but who else was there to turn to? I limped my way through every school day. I’d sit in the back of Ms. Nancy’s Physics class, clicking my pen, grinding my teeth, doodling wildly on my lab notebook. I trembled my way through every end of class prayer Ms. Nancy would recite. Her words slammed my ears like hammers, or perhaps rather like a perfectly executed double-leg-to-mat takedown, a wrestling move I never could quite master. All I know is it stung like hell, and the process would repeat for seven class periods every damn day.

Church was worse. Every Wednesday night for youth group, every Sunday morning for normal church I’d be there. The band would play the same bland songs I’ve sung since I was old enough to sing. The pastor would hammer out a sermon. Sometimes it was tolerable, other times it was a bore, and still more times it was a nightmare.

There was this one Wednesday night we had a guest speaker who decided the Jonathan Edwards was in order for our “lost generation”. It was a big man, bald and black-bearded. He wore a leather jacket and a bloody cross T-shirt. Real or manufactured, there was wrath in his dark eyes.

“How can I begin to describe Hell?” he growled, pacing back and forth across the stage. Sixty or so high schoolers sat in the room, silent, listening to him pour out his vitriol into this sermon. “You see,” he went on, “Imagine the worst, most awful gut-wrenching guilt you’ve ever had. That feeling you’ve been caught in a lie or cheating on a test. Multiply that by billions and billions, imagine feeling that for one minute? Can

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you? Can you imagine that? Great. Now imagine feeling that way forever! You'll know nothing but suffering and agony and guilt for eternity, and you'll know it's never going to end, and you'll scream and beg and cry for your Mommy as fire and regret crush you, and you'll never escape. And you'll deserve it," he paused for dramatic effect, staring us all down, "You. Will. Deserve it. How does that sound?"

I was squirming in my seat, a vice grip around my empty coffee cup. It did not sound pleasant.

"Come to Jesus!" he bellowed, "Only Jesus can save you from your sins. You are unworthy of his forgiveness, but if you come forth and bathe in his blood he will lift you from the degradation of your own filth into his glorious righteousness. Come kneel before him and be saved!"

I don't think it needs saying that the majority of that room immediately fell to their knees. As for me I had my face on the old carpeted floor, desperately trying not to sob.

It was a whirlwind of soul-crushing months. My Junior year crawled by miserably, and it was all I could do to keep together. I couldn't decide what was real, I didn't know which way to turn. I was in the ring but I couldn't see my opponent, and he was treating me like a ragdoll.

Is this God thing a big trick? Oh c'mon, you know it's not a trick. It's gotta be something oh fuck fuck they're gonna fucking kill me wait it's my turn to pray at the dinner table tonight what the fuck am I gonna say because you can't approach God without a humble heart or He'll give you the Annanias and Sapphira treatment maybe but I wanna be honest and I wanna follow God I just don't want to be wrong, wrong, wrong,

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Hell is where you go where you're wrong, maybe this is Hell now, no wait this isn't Hell this is 4th period Chemistry class, shit am I fucking crying? ***Fuck.***

Sorry about that. I lost control there for a minute. Not literally. My fingers didn't slip on the keyboard or anything. I'm being pretty selective with what I write down and my heart rate is perfectly level, but if I'd summed up that last bit with nice little sentences tied up in bows it would have been a straight-up lie. My wrestling match with God happened to mirror your average wrestling match, a blurry, red-lined haze of sweat and filth where a string of curse words permeated my every action. But wrestling matches wrap up within ten minutes, this lasted the better part of a year. Or maybe hasn't ended at all? I don't know. There's no referee here. Nobody is keeping score.

What do you do when you have beliefs but don't have a belief system? Do you find the closest possible ideology and then stuff everything you have faith in through its mold and hope it comes out the other side intact? If you're really clever and have the on-hand cash you can start your own movement, I suppose. Or maybe you could decide you're alone in the universe, cry a lot, and drink and get emotional just a few too many days of the week. I'd like to say I didn't do any of these, but you may have noticed the last one was a touch too suspiciously specific. Yeah, that might have been for a reason. Who knows for sure though? I sure do. And now you do too.

I didn't have a big "Aha Moment" because those have never really been a thing for me. I have "Aha Months" and "Aha Years". Chalk it up to me being a slow learner I guess. An angel never slapped me upside the head and told me what's what. A prophet didn't put a hand on my shoulder and give me the rundown of the universe and all its

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naughty secrets. I didn't make a scientific discovery in my secret lab that sent me hurtling into a transcendent state of Humanist enlightenment.

I didn't win, I didn't lose, but I became comfortable with my opponent. I got used to the wrestling match.

Jacob/Israel/Heelgrabber dominated his match fair and square. He gave his opponent a true ass-kicking like only a legendary hero can do. Jacob put that angelic rascal in a chokehold and wouldn't let him hit the showers and go home until he got the blessing he was owed. My namesake must have spent a lot more time hitting the weights than I ever did, because I never stood a damn chance. I scrap like a trooper, sure, but I'm not the sort who gets named a champion of Heaven.

Nevertheless, I'm not the sort to give in. I let our duel reach a more comfortable pace. I circle the opponent for as long as he lets me, dodging and side-stepping attacks. I take long breaks in between bouts, I get better every day at popping back up when he sends me crashing to the mat. Occasionally I even manage to trip him up. I'm getting stronger as I go.

I'm stronger, but I'm not perfect. My stamina wanes at time. Now and again a sermon from my childhood worms its way into nights where it's hard to fall asleep. I swear I hear the flapping of angel's wings outside my door. Tongues of flame tickle my toes. My little apartment seems to get smaller, my mattress gets lumpier, and my pillows turn to stone.

On nights like that I just want to scream, "No, man, you've got the wrong Jacob. I'm not *that* Jacob. I'm *just* Jacob, no Israel's attached. I'm doing my own thing. I like to think and write, not to fight!"

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But the fight is in the thoughts. The war is in the mind or potentially the soul if there is such a thing, and the battleground is on a plane of existence I don't actually believe in all that much. This wrestling match has gone on far too long, somebody ought to be blowing a whistle by now.

Is it possible I will never have peace until I know everything about everything?

I will never know everything about everything.

But does that mean I can't know peace? I have to know peace. I *do* know peace. I know it all the time. It's not like I have an existential crisis every second of every day. I only have three on a good week and they never last longer than an hour or four. I make it work.

I'm not an unhappy person. I smile a lot and laugh plenty. I do well in school, alright at my job, and feel secure in my relationships. Even in the deepest pits of angst I do just fine for myself. Maybe that's it, right? Maybe that's the goal. To do the best you can with what you've got and to grit your way through the shit and seize the joy when it lands in your lap.

I'm figuring this out as I go along. Some people say that life is about the journey, not the destination. I have come to different theory: life is a journey *without* a destination. Sometimes there just aren't answers, only roadside attractions. If there's nowhere I'm going then I ought to do my best to weather the path with a smile and learn what I can when possible. The wrestling match continues forever, and that might be fine. Hell, maybe I'm addicted to the struggle.

I'm a Jacob alright, through and through. Wrestling by night and grabbing at the heels of concepts I'll never reach by day. I'm seeking and seeking and I'll find what I can

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when I can. Just know that when I fail to find out all the answers it won't be for a lack of trying.

Things will be just fine. Whether I win or lose, pin my opponent, get pinned, or simply run out of time to wrestle, I'll have given every molecule of my being to this fight. When it all ends I'll collapse in a sweaty heap on the mat, and as I close my eyes I hope I'll be smiling, clutching at the heels of truth.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *When you read about existential struggles and religious doubting, it tends to be written in such frilly language that you lose the grittiness of it all. I wanted to give an alternate view in "Wrestling with God". These kind of struggles are fucking dirty. They're brutal. Sure, there's some abstraction and high-mindedness to it, but a lot of it is fear and cold sweat and animalistic confusion. This isn't a story for people who consider themselves philosophers, but for people who are scared shitless by the universe and its enormity, especially if you come from a religious/spiritual background you just can't jive with. Hopefully someone out there reads this, relates to it, and can feel less alone. If not, I hope the ones who do read it at least learn something from it!*

**BIO:** *Jacob Dallas is an undergraduate creative writing student at Georgia College and State University. This story is his first publication that wasn't affiliated with his own school. Jacob is obsessed with writing of all genres that exposes the honest nature of life and humanity, no matter how weird, unconventional, or uncomfortable the path to that true reality might be. He believes that through honest and deep exploration we can all learn to understand and love each other in ways we never thought possible. His inspirations are Isaac Asimov, JRR Tolkien, Dave Eggers, Laurie R. King, and just a dash of Terrance Hayes. When he's not writing, he's wasting time sharing his garbage opinions on Twitter @Jacob\_B\_Dallas*

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# NEVER AT HOME AT HOME

By Robert D. Kirvel

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** 'We loved, that is, until skin and muscle and brain tissue unexpectedly seized before withering from an affliction so righteously viral in selective desiccation that a leader of the free world dared not speak its name.' *The devastation of AIDS that nearly wiped out and redefined a subculture is the subject of this trenchantly focused essay that stares unblinking into the heart of darkness. The gloves are off and every word, line and paragraph hits hard. His anger is visceral, his (our) loss immeasurable and his demand for the right to space, to love, resplendently confrontational and unflinching. But the thundering voice he raises that echoes in our collective conscience finds 'home' in a Romantic/Byronic identification with nature that is...* both a real place and a metaphor for the real me that once was possible when the light still shone for me on some possible tomorrow.' *We admit to being a little in awe of Robert Kirvel, who we first published in Issue 2 (Nonfiction), because as a writer, he's in a place we'd like to be.'* Culture the verbal denials I've encountered over the years and incubate for truth, and the results reveal themselves as false positives.' *When you're this good there's only room at the top.*

## Never At Home At Home

Don't say, "I don't know what you mean," when you mean something else. No one is deceived when the message is code for avoidance.

I used to socialize with dozens of people. Scores. We'd meet in the city every weekend to swap the melodies of our private lives, boogie afternoons into sunset, then breathe nocturnal aromas into dawn. We rejoiced in an illusory freedom from institutional and legal judgment, unshackled, we supposed, from the faith we'd given up to others who needed to believe in something at the expense of someone else. We were mistaken.

We were hundreds, thousands before the premature jubilation was overtaken by physical afflictions only a few survived. Several fell weekly at the outset, more than a hundred the first year. Hundreds of thousands eventually succumbed in the U.S. alone, many with only a small section of a patchwork quilt for a tombstone to commemorate second deaths. I'm talking about those who died a little at first on the inside of emotional alienation, then again from religious condemnation, quack "therapy," or plain old bigotry. You know the ones: the pasty boys who were egged in alleys or stabbed or shot in broad daylight or strung up on barbed wire; the swish or fem or shy disowned by moms and pops across Middle America; the macho men or bodies beautiful or leather guys who scoffed at

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narrow-mindedness only to die both inside and out during a plague witnessed by the world and reinforced by political denial because, after all, who cares about some social-sexual deviants?

If you say, “I don’t know what you mean,” or, “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” or, “No one can possibly understand what others lived through then,” I hear the words as something else. Culture the verbal denials I’ve encountered over the years and incubate for truth, and the results reveal themselves as false positives. “I don’t know what you mean” might imply disagreement, as in: I don’t want to discuss it further because you’re wrong in your thinking. Or it could mean I don’t care and never will. It could mean I wasn’t there and don’t know much about it, or we live in such different worlds we’ll never understand each other. But don’t say, “I don’t know what you mean,” to suspend the possibility of dialog in dismissal.

When I say now, I mean the vogue of shrugging memory loss. When I say then, I mean how life experiences construct an individual’s truth. This is what I mean. We were Turkish or Irish or Spanish in origin, African and Australian and Asian, every flavor of devout or secular. We were mostly in our 20s and 30s, and we usually lived and worked and loved in urban locations. We loved, that is, until skin and muscle and brain tissue unexpectedly seized before withering from an affliction so righteously viral in selective desiccation that a leader of the free world at the time dared not speak its name.

Can you tell from once-flawless skin all a youth might have become? Do you know how far someone’s hands might have extended the curative power of mercy to counter injustice, had they lived? These were the days of then, them versus us, deniers against a dying breed, and each time another of us died, part of me died as well.

It’s tempting to dismiss a man who’s lost patience with now because of then, and doesn’t cotton to rationalizations. But instead of crooning a tune about job or financial insecurities in the modern era, the era of alternative truths, tell me instead what you understand about endings. While you’re at it, forget the notion there’s something in this world called karma, because there isn’t. Full stop.

What you want, of course, is for people to forgive and forget. But remember: you might not realize how much you love someone—or someone loves you in return—until the person’s consciousness vanishes on some plague-filled afternoon.

The modern-day disease-spreaders keep coming to my door now, so let me remind you. Every time I start something, there they are again. If they keep calling and knocking, I will not be responsible, so I yell at them, “Go away. I’m not at home. Nobody’s here,” but they keep knocking or ringing or popping up on television and social media. It’s not nice to label someone a disease-spreader, is it?

Everybody plans for the future, thinking about grand times ahead or just down the road. The disease-spreaders have their minds entirely on the future, with their boxed cookies

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and plastic speeches and good-news pamphlets preaching faith everlasting in the current currency. They look forward to a brighter tomorrow beginning tomorrow, a happy tomorrow filled with prosperity and spiritual fulfillment, or even just another tomorrow like today, starting tomorrow. What they suck at is planning for a crap tomorrow, the one with endings where everyone you ever knew and loved lies under a quilt headstone. You know, a tomorrow like the one that is actually going to happen to every one of us in the end. A tomorrow as in reality. We stink at planning for that kind of tomorrow. Joan Didion said something like that somewhere or other, and she was right. Everybody loves beginnings—another baby and a new car with that new baby and new car smell—never thinking about the heap on which everything ends up being tossed, babies and lovers included.

Is that too bitter? Am I a fool? Is there a reason I sound angry?

You want everyone to be like you rather than to think as I think and remember what I remember. But the truth is every time I hear the righteous magazine and faith dispensers talk, I can feel my IQ plummet from atmospheric ignorance. What I hear is the same story from individuals—much like holocaust deniers—and an entire society that doesn't know enough to plan for an honest-to-god tomorrow. They're sweet though, right? The magazine and tube and cookie kids are sweet like hard candy, but with an intellectual core of denial that'll rot all the teeth in your head.

Maybe you've gathered I never believed in providence or pyramid power, in a god of vengeance and mercy, in the dichotomy of right and left hemispheres, in the gastrointestinal value of gluten-freedom or my bio-superiority. If all those things are nonsense to me, let me share instead something that's true, and then maybe you'll hear the truth in what I mean. It's about a physical place in mental space, but it's truer than anything else I ever knew.

Listen. Please.

Imagine you embark on a road trip into the Gallatin Canyon along a highway that clips the northwest corner of Yellowstone Park. Or imagine my taking that drive before the ones I knew and loved were gone, and before I even understood who I was. If you haven't been out to that Western territory of the United States, you won't understand what the country is like, and I can't do justice to the terrain by describing it in words. It's a real place you have to see for yourself and breathe in and allow the essence to penetrate the brain. The air. The pine and spruce growing there. As if everyone a person ever knew were still alive. It's a big horizon embroidered below by white-flecked streams alive with the living and echoes of the dead. Alive with the potential of who you really are as a person.

See? I can only use words here, and words can't do it justice. But let's keep trying anyway.

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I looked over my shoulder while driving that road the first time one autumn afternoon, and there it was. A dirt lane leading to a place set back from the highway, and I was certain. I knew. I belonged there more than any other place. Belonging has nothing to do with ownership, by the way, nothing to do with money or ancestry or orientation. The feeling of belonging there among the trees and streams was overwhelming and never left me. It remains as powerful now and indisputable as the day I first saw the place. It's nothing like the disease-spreaders around here who want to step into my life and give it "meaning," if I would only let them in. Only the place I'm describing is real to me in a personal sense.

I'm in that pine and spruce terrain in my brain every time I think about it. It has nothing to do with a decision or time. Or, rather, it transcends time. I'm in yesterday's windstorm with the gusts scraping twigs along an outside wall of the ranch house. I'm in the way the pine and spruce and wind call my bones and address something central in me. Something that is me. And if I can feel so enraptured by an image and feeling caught with a sideways glance, then I wonder: what else have I missed in life? Life itself? The genuine article?

I am the leaves piled in a corner the wood-rail fence makes with that ranch house. If you turn my leaves over, the damp underneath is the slight of old wounds left behind. Remember, I know something about wounds, the dead and dying. Some part of me has always been there and is there now.

Down deeper still, under the damp, lay the rot of last year, a season my better counselors tell me it's best to let go, as if letting go of feeling fertilizes the soil underneath to encourage my new growth. Just let it all go, folks try to tell me, to sprout new branches that will touch the eaves and scrape the outside wall of the ranch house in the wind for some future me standing inside to hear. A future me that was once possible. As if the place harbored curative spirits, and every time I hear the sound of wind in the branches, or image it, I am at home in the place I knew before seeing it. It is my place. The only place I ever understood for the life I wanted to live. Discovering the place was like being born while alive and given a chance at genuine life.

It's real, is what I want to say to you. It's both a real place and a metaphor for the real me that once was possible when the light still shone for me on some possible tomorrow. It's the genuine article. You don't have to like the place, my place. You don't have to approve. I'm not an estate agent trying to sell you property or a state of mind, but what you can't do is dismiss a place as wrong for someone else because it isn't right for you.

I walk up to the front door, and someone I've always known opens it wide. I'm in the past of that place with its pine and spruce climbing the vertical mountains behind the corral; I'm in the present logs and future decay that will return to nature my nature. I belong in that place in my head and heart every day of my life and with every part of my body, and discover there's a word for it. The word is authenticity. Authenticity. It's a

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physical place. It's an emotional place. I am that place, the me that once was before the world insisted my nature was somehow mistaken.

Now I'll tell you something else. Years later, I drove that road again, alone, longing for the place in the wild mountains, but finding it was not there. Which is the way the future lets a person down, the way time works. The way leaving a piece of yourself behind and uninhabited, along with those departed, sometimes means you can never get it back to it. If you miss such things in life, they're gone.

If you say, "I don't know what you mean; I don't know what you're talking about," I can only answer that maybe you don't know because you won't allow yourself to feel something like that. You were not there when we danced and sang, I know, and if what I'm describing now still means nothing to you, maybe you aren't really here either, now, listening to what I'm saying. Or are you listening?

Sure, I know you're supposed to like the well-intentioned among us because they're sweet and adorable, or the talking TV heads because they're so hypnotic, addictive, but that's not the story here, and neither is my rage. That's putting the fart before the horse. People come at me to spread their evangelical nonsense I think of as disease. The good-news missionaries of condemnation come pounding on the door expecting their phony cookies and pulp-fiction chasers will nourish a satisfying tomorrow, as if they know about a tomorrow I might once have lived or the real one that arrived ahead of its time with the death of almost everyone I cared about. People want approval, and when they don't get it, they believe I'm the enemy, though I'm not the enemy. So who is really the enemy? What is the enemy? You want to blame me because I make you uncomfortable? You want to blame me because you refuse to acknowledge another person's truth? So do you like my honesty? Do you love me the way anyone deserves to be loved? Will you love me in some magical future you think will arrive spontaneously with the sunrise of a harmonious tomorrow?

Right there: that's the problem. Magical thinking about how our problems can disappear given enough time and without expending any more effort than throwing a few dollars at a cause. Thinking how it's all so much better nowadays, and the injustice and ignorance that wiped millions of souls from the planet happened way back a long time ago, and it's not like that anymore today. And it's not your fault. And you didn't do it.

On top of that, I'm the lucky one because I survived. Right? So just get over it and move on, right?

Here's what I can do. In my head even now, as late as it is, I can walk in that conceptual forest of lodgepole pine and Engelmann spruce where streams trickle down the mountain canyons and rumble past a ranch house. I breathe in air where imagination is everything, as Einstein put it once, and inside my head and body, I am that place. Genuine and whole as I might once have been and remained. Being myself.

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You can decide there are two types of people in this world: the true-believers and the grumps out there, essentially the young and old, the upbeat versus cantankerous pessimists. But I say there are as many types as there are dreams and as many dreams as people who aren't dead inside, and in my head, I can return to the trees and wind and be alive again.

Now, I wait for my metaphorical tray of powdered milk and Pabulum. I hear the door to my room being locked every night by thoughtful caregivers. It's the same metallic click every night to keep me safe from myself. Or so some suppose. Click. Do you hear it? It's right there in my future and in yours.

It's the same, sad click I recall from childhood. Of playground exclusion and familial denial, the click of a gate locking worshipers in the church of intolerance, into the minds of family-value voters, inside the doors of county jail cells and psychiatric wards.

I close my eyes and return to those woods and am free to realize a vision of being complete at last. Of being myself. Now, when everything and everyone else I ever knew are gone, when it's dead quiet around me and no one is banging on my skin and the phone isn't ringing and breaking news isn't blaring, I close my eyes and inhabit a terrain where I cannot live too slowly.

I live slowly then, slowly, breathing in and out a final recollection on behalf of all the ones I knew or loved who never got to live and breathe what they might have been. Instead of the anger you think you hear me casting into the air tonight, might it be a song of mourning for so many lives?

Forgive and forget, I keep hearing people say, and my answer is yes. And no. Yes and no. No, never forget. Just don't say it to me again. Don't say, "I don't know what you mean."

#### **AUTHOR'S NOTE:**

*At a relatively young age, I'd lost more friends and acquaintances than many people know over the course of a lifetime. The hybrid story, "Never At Home At Home," is principally nonfiction seasoned with surreal imagery intentionally evocative and vexing. Distressing to write and harrowing to read, the essay, rather than mere venting, is a challenge to individuals with edited memories—or, worse, ignorance—about events only a few decades ago. Surviving a tragedy that cut short the lives of an estimated 330,000 gay men in the U.S. (<https://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/newsroom/docs/factsheets/cdc-msm-508.pdf>) and 32 million humans around the globe (<https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/fact-sheet>) also arouses in me what feels like an obligation to the silenced, and in the current political climate, a responsibility to remind our better selves about a fraught past. I want to say, "Understand, please, our recent history," especially in the context of ongoing expressions of social disapproval and*

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*partisan antagonism aimed at “those people” (immigrants, minorities, the disenfranchised, the LGBTQ cohort, and many others) who remain outside some mythical, mainstream “us.” Is the essay choleric, and is acrimony warranted? Yes, on both counts. A remedy then? One avenue suggested here is to recognize individual authenticity versus its absence—often manifest as witlessness and self-deception—riling those within and beyond our immediate purview.*

**BIO:**

Robert D. Kirvel is a Pushcart Prize (twice) and Best of the Net nominee for fiction. Awards include the Chautauqua 2017 Editor’s Prize, the 2016 Fulton Prize for the Short Story, and a 2015 ArtPrize for creative nonfiction. He has published in England, Ireland, Canada, New Zealand, and Germany; in translation and anthologies; and in dozens of U.S. literary journals. His novel, *Shooting the Wire*, was published in August 2019 by Eyewear Publishing Ltd., London. Most of his literary publications are linked on <https://twitter.com/Rkirvel>.

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# TURTLE BLUES

By Richard Stuecker

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *The two most important lines in any short story or article are the first and last. If they're not both bang on it takes a lot more for a reader to like 'what's in between'. We don't think you could improve upon the 'first' and 'last' in 'Turtle Blues'—they are like...beyond. The story is a bittersweet reflection about the glory days of Woodstock Nation (1969) and throughout the memoir there are flawlessly written passages of great beauty. 'We didn't speak for a while. It was hot on the desert. We could see big cacti along the road like in the westerns and roadrunner cartoons.' And this resonating line of dialogue: 'Hard to tell. Sex, drugs and rock and roll. Maybe. Live hard, die hard, make a beautiful corpse.' You know what they say. If you remember the 60's you weren't there. And here at FOTD we luv all those writers who don't remember a thing!*

## Turtle Blues

We heard the news about Jim Morrison in the bone-dry southwest desert, somewhere near the Petrified Forest. We were heading toward LA on a cross country trip, eventually to Alaska to work on the pipeline. Jimi in September, Janis in October, now Jim Morrison in July. All that day DJ's played the Doors hits.

“Another one bites the dust.” John said.

“So much talent. I saw Hendrix, in Charlotte.”

“No way!” John took his eyes off the road and looked at me in disbelief. We heard the tires rub the sandy edge of the highway and he pulled the car straight again.

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“Lizard Lenny asked me to drive so they could drop acid. The Coliseum, man, that was a funky place. Like, it looked like a butterfly. Packed with stone heads who smoked dope, dropped acid. I got high just sitting there with Lenny and his buds somewhere out in space. Hendrix was best when stoned, except for maybe *Super Session*. I got high just listening to that album straight. Anyway, after the concert, nobody moved. I mean, not only was everybody blown away by Jimi, but nobody knew where they were. Took us hours to move out, find the car and drive home.”

“*Super Session?*”

“Kooper, Stills, and Bloomfield.”

“Sounds like a law firm.” John leaned back and adjusted his body to relax and listen.

“I’m guessing the scene in Ohio wasn’t too hip to the drug rock scene,” I said.

“I don’t know. I was into the jock scene,” John said. “baseball, football, track. Scooping ice cream at Baskin-Robbins and delivering newspapers.”

“And homework.”

“Yeah, they piled it on.”

“Booze, plenty of booze,” I said, prompting him.

“One night I went over to my friend’s house and we drank so much I don’t remember how we ended up driving over the greens of the local golf club, but we made

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our way to my driveway where we fell asleep in front of my house. My sister knocked on the car window so I got the papers out.”

“You didn’t get caught?”

“Naw, and my mom didn’t ask about it. I think she was afraid to.”

“I didn’t drink in high school. Now it’s mostly with a pizza. Chemicals, that’s a different story. Joplin came to Duke. She had just formed ‘Kosmic Blues Band.’ I think it might have been one of their first gigs. Months later she was dead.”

“Heroin over dose,” said John.

“Yeah, can’t imagine using a needle.”

“Shit no.” My window was open. I looked out at the dry, brown landscape of the desert and rolling sage brush.

“I saw her at a party after the concert.”

“You lie,” John said, giving me a darting look.

“I do not lie,” I said firmly.

“I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t know how she got there. Lizard Lenny’s off-campus house in all its hippie glory. I mean there were India print cloths hanging on all the walls, beaded curtains in the doorways, and a hookah in the middle of the dining room table. Dayglow posters of Hendrix and Morrison hung just above tables that were sort of altars where he

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stood statues of Buddha and other Hindu gods and goddesses. Elephant headed Ganesha and Kali.

“Most of us had started dropping or smoking. I smoked a blunt with Lenny and lay back in a chair Lenny had gotten at the Goodwill. There was a noise at the door, the place was packed, suddenly the sea of people parted and four guys who looked like former Marines carried this tiny girl holding a bottle of Southern Comfort. They lay her on Lennie’s couch. It was Joplin. She drank all through the concert. She knocked me out with my favorite “Turtle Blues.” I loved just listening to Joplin, especially if I was down. Hendrix was better for getting high, so was Morrison. Sometimes John Maclaughlin ‘My Goal’s Beyond.’

“So there she was, drunk, calling everybody loser muthafuckers, until she passed out. Then her body guards carried her out. She looked to me like she was dead.

We didn’t speak for a while. It was hot on the desert. We could see big cacti along the road like in the westerns and road-runner cartoons.

“I think I’ve only been happy when I’ve been stoned the last four years.”

“I see that. But isn’t that just an escape, like a trip for fun but then you come back to reality?”

“I don’t want to come back to reality.” I said, “it fuckin’ sucks.”

“I’ve seen you down a lot.”

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“Hate who I am,” I said. “Pretty good, but never good enough. That’s how I feel. Good enough to ride the bench. Then there’s the fear I’m not normal. Not like other guys. Not knowing what they know, feel. I mean, I could smack the ball out of the park. But I could field like shit. Could barely throw the ball to first. We won the Catholic Championship in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. But had to give the trophy back because the coach’s son was two months too old to qualify. It’s kinda like that. All the time, Like this brown desert. I’m missing Kentucky green, east coast mountains and seaside.”

“I wanted to go to Columbia and play baseball,” John said. “I had the scores and grades and the coach said “see you next year.” Then the letter came. Rejection. That’s how I got here. To Duke.”

“Place is full of people who wanted the Ivy League but didn’t get in.”

“I’m not going back.”

“Where you going?”

“NYC..CCNY. It’s free.”

“Do you think they meant to overdose?” I asked.

“Hard to tell. Sex, drugs and rock and roll. Maybe. Live hard, die hard, make a beautiful corpse.”

“Or maybe they were just fucked up with all their talent and all the hangers-on. Morrison was beautiful. How come male rock stars tend to be androgynous?”

“We’ll have to ask them when we get to the other side.”

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“You believe in the other side?” I asked.

“Maybe. I don’t know. I’m not Catholic or anything.”

“Sister Raymunda said we’d meet all our friends and relatives and everyone we know, only they’d be glowing, like perfect. I can think of a whole lot of people I’d like to avoid up there if that’s true.”

“Like those muthafuckers who beat the shit out of me,” he said. John was still pissed at some drunk football players who took turns holding him up and punching his gut.

“Dr. Boo gave me the *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. It says you see monsters but they’re guides. There are many levels and just when you think you’ve got there, it’s the ego, and we start to fall and come back and do it all again.”

“I think we just die. Like plants. Rot and turn to dust.”

“If I don’t swim out to sea until I can’t come back, I want my body burned and dropped off the coast of Scituate. I want it like I was never here at all. No mass, no funeral home, no gatherings. Unless my friends wanna get high and have a party, that’s another deal. But I want to be anonymous.”

“You’re fucking grim,” John said.

“Guess so. I mean there’s so many religions and so many different Jesuses. Judge Jesus who sends you to hell. What’s that about? Loving Jesus, does he send you to hell? And Buddhas and all those pagan gods, BC. I think you’re right.”

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“Jim Morrison, American Dionysius. Dead.”

We turned on the radio. They must have played “Riders on the Storm” 500 times that day. “Into this world we’re born/Into this world we’re thrown.”

But where do we go?

LA, I guess.

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *“Turtle Blues” is part of a series of memoir essays that relate the adventures of my friend and I who, having been recently freed from the draft by receiving high draft numbers, take a cross country trip from Provincetown to the Pacific Coast Highway on our way to Alaska in 1971. Our ultimate goal was a job there promised by an ad we read in the underground newspaper Boston After Dark. It read “\$1,000 a Week in Alaska.” We never made it. But the trip changed our lives. These essays have given me the opportunity to look through the lens of time at that trip and our friendship that has lasted nearly 50 years. In this essay I attempt to examine both the freedom and lack of responsibility of that time in my life as well as its darker implications. It is my intention to both capture the spirit of the end of the Hippie Sixties and at the same time examine my personal and my friend’s life then as we began to grow into men, unsure of ourselves in many ways, and where we might be headed in the future. I suppose boys growing into men still wonder, dream and fear the future as we did then.*

**BIO:** *Richard Stuecker is a poet and writer who graduated from Duke University in 1970. A Pushcart Prize nominee, he is a student at the Bluegrass Writer’s Studio MFA program at Eastern Kentucky University. His poems have appeared in or been accepted by Tilde, Former People, Pegasus, Main Street Rag and District Lit; creative nonfiction in Hippocampus, Connotation Press, Brilliant Flash Fiction, Crambo, Louisville Magazine and Delmarva Review; book reviews in the Louisville Courier-Journal. A collection of essays on conscious aging, Vibrant Emeritus, was published in 2014 by John Hunt Publishing (London). 3107 Teal Avenue, Louisville, KY 40213. 502 749 7678 [asunbear123@gmail.com](mailto:asunbear123@gmail.com)*

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# GROUND STATE

By Merrill Gray

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *A middle-aged woman struggles to put her life back together after her husband of many years comes out as 'bi' and wants a divorce. Themes of betrayal, guilt, self-recrimination, suffering and resolution are all explored with a sure hand and steady, illuminating prose. But this is familiar territory. What makes Gray's literary equivalent to cinema verite' stand out is the innovative use of 'ground' as both a structural device and a resonating symbol. The characters of both husband and wife are convincingly drawn and the voice is by turns sharp, pained, passionate, ironic and skewering. Quote: 'Divorce is like hitting black ice at 115 km/hr in cruise control.' And, 'You shoved the glass slipper onto your foot. You wanted someone to say 'come with me in my pumpkin coach...it will be a smooth ride. You are the other Cinderella. Cinderfuckinella. You are on your hands and knees scraping up your life.'* *High end Creative Nonfiction.* (Spacing is the author's own).

## *Ground State*

Your husband confessed he's bisexual and had been having an affair with a gay friend for seventeen years. 'I'm so glad I finally told you,' he says. That was a year ago; you just signed the divorce papers. You celebrate by getting a bacterial sinus infection; hives cover your body. Every time you cough, the hives quiver. Your grief is contained in the jelly-like fluid. The tiny water sacs of oppressed bubble wrap are ready to burst. You'll need antibiotics. You are at your lowest energy state, yet words ooze up like a fever. 'When do I get to tell my story?' You ask your counselor. 'Any time you like,' he says. You write this.

### *1. Ground down*

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Divorce is like hitting black ice at 115 km/hr. in cruise control. At first you don't know what's happening and then you realize that some 'thing' has control of the steering wheel. You do not put on the brakes...you try to hold on... swerve... you must let go ... you cross the center line and hit the ditch ...spin, spin, spin...and stall...you don't die...you just feel like you did. And you hear your counselor say, *'Your marriage is over, you've just missed all the signs.'*

You did see some signs. You were floundering around in the snow without winter boots. Because he asked you to. *'I love you and our relationship is very important to me'* he wrote in an email, *'after 25 years, leopards are not going to change their spots dramatically nor should that be expected.'* You thought he was having an affair with a woman. When you questioned him, he responded *'If I get testy it is because it is work, and things have not been as busy as I would like and this creates pressure.'* You believed him.

Now, you find yourself in a basement suite with only a scattering of items you didn't sell at your garage sale. Kept mainly books. You gave away everything that reminded you of your twenty-nine-year marriage. There's no sunrise for you anymore...not through these small windows. The curtains your sister made from leftover fabric hang hopelessly. You wish someone would peer in. You had a peeping tom in your teens but now you really don't care if anyone sees you naked. You are past the age of wearing backless dresses and your knees have somehow become the largest part of your legs. You can only see the basement parking on the house next door. Grey...it's all grey.

## 2. *Ground level*

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He, at first insisted that he had fallen out of love with you. *'I've ruined your life...I'm wired wrong.'* You still didn't get it. You believed in the fairytale until your prince left with another not so handsome prince. You shoved the glass slipper onto your foot. You wanted someone to say 'come with me in my pumpkin coach ...it will be a smooth ride.' You are the other Cinderella. Cinderfuckinella. You are on your hands and knees scraping up your life.

You eat soup; it's all you can swallow. Your overly sympathetic friends have been a soup kitchen. You go for blood work to get tested for every sexually transmitted infection. And you go again three months later. You can never give blood again because you've slept with a man who slept with a man (unintentionally)...they usher you out the back door and say *don't come back EVER.*

### 3. *Dumping Ground*

You ponder changing your name back to your maiden name but going backwards doesn't feel right. Your biological father was an alcoholic asshole who wasn't in your life, and he died seven years ago. You realize that you married someone just like him. Your mom and you both married con artists. You didn't know it at the time of course.... fell for them like dogs for treats. You begged for more, believed them, became their pillars, and stood tall like disciples. You listened to them preach their sermons, trusted them. Like bible salesman they dispersed their deceptions and you abided. They were not good treasurers and you forgot to audit them. They were patronizing thieves who pilfered your money, embezzled your hearts and ditched your dreams bankrupt. And at the last

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supper you were deceived, by your very own Judas. Your father takes the honor of the greatest bastard you have ever known. Your ex is the second greatest bastard. His gay lover is too. He emailed you to apologize with the title 'from the other asshole in your life.' It's hard to keep them all straight.

#### 4. *Hunting Ground*

People don't know what to say to you. It's like when you had your first miscarriage and the nurse said, '*It was God's will...*' and you wanted to slap her. What do you say to a friend whose husband tells her that he is gay or bisexual or whatever? You should say, *that's some weird fucking shit* or *that might take some good counseling*. Do not stand in a room at a Christmas party and in front of fifty people shout 'HE WAS FUCKING GAY'...over and over. Do not say, *you must be so shocked! How could you not know? I'm sad for you...At least you know now. What were you thinking? ....etc. etc.* Don't try to cover it up with sentimental phrases.

You want to go to Europe; preferably where they do not speak English. You don't want to talk or explain your situation. You are close to sixty and you are wondering if anyone, ANYONE is going to date a woman whose husband was sucking dick for 20 yrs. and interspersed a few affairs with women. *How did you not know? Why didn't you leave?* You can honestly say *you never knew.... you had no idea...you thought you were the love of his life.*

What were you thinking?? Well, you were thinking that marriage is a union of love. That people can commit to each other and be faithful and plan a life together. You put your head down and you ploughed through; raised three children, drove to sports, school activities, music lessons, had various pets; dog, rabbit, guinea pig, hamsters...fed,

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watered, loved. You bought gifts for his family and arranged family get-togethers...because look at us WE ARE SO FUCKING HAPPY. You demonstrated it over and over...each season you placed decorations outside your front door, .... wreathes you made from a willow branch hedge, Easter Bunny prints, pussy willows in a pot in the spring, pumpkins carved with a variety of faces...some even smiling. Let's celebrate...celebrate the FAMILY that lives here. You were in a couple's world and that's where you wanted to stay. You are scrubbed off the social calendar in that circle. Now they talk about you at dinner parties '*Well I never saw that coming....can you believe it?*' '*I guess she didn't suck hard enough!*' HA HA HA. That's so funny.

##### 5. *Go to Ground*

You are a stigma. There's a splotch on your character. '*A place that bleeds during mental states, as in hysteria.*' You go underground in your basement bunker. You pass time watching late night television. Your children buy you an Apple TV and sign you up for Netflix. They show you which remotes to use. When you finally find something you want to watch, it's not on your cable plan. Did Bill Maher just proclaim on his show that he would like to challenge the Guinness book of records for the longest orgasm? Is he that good? Is he single? On *Girls*, Hannah's dad comes out of the closet. OMG, you could have written that episode. And now on Netflix there's a new series, *Grace and*

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*Frankie*. Their husbands ‘come out’ and profess their love for each other. They want you to feel sorry for them. It’s been soooo hard cheating on their wives for twenty years. All you really need is some peyote and organic yam lube and you’re all good. Obviously, the writers have never experienced ‘it’ and ‘it’ appears to be everywhere. You get well-meaning emails from friends commenting on the series, ‘*See you’re not alone.*’

6. *Stand one’s ground*

You go to yoga five times a week. Meditation, Yin, Restorative...do it all. Any position that helps you surrender and absorb grief. You lay on your Madara mat, hug in your personal space... tears on your bolster...you want to levitate ...rise above this. Who is on this journey with you? Who? You are shuddering solo on the surface of this shaky dumping ground.

And so, you continue with counseling. Twenty times in the past year. And your counselor tells you that maybe you are one of the 3% of women who get through things like ‘this’ without having a breakdown. And this is good news? You start to believe that you might be strong. Or in denial. Or have PTSD. And why is your bi-ex-husband now dating a 44-yr. old woman? ‘*He’s just found someone more naïve than you,*’ your counselor says. ‘*Gee thanks,*’ you say.

7. *Shift one’s ground*

You think about writing your own questionnaire for *The Rosey Project*. Have you ever lied? Tough to answer that one without being a liar. If he says NO ...that makes him a liar. Do you like women? Are you heterosexual? Are you the cheater or the one who was cheated on?

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You ponder joining an online dating site. How would you introduce yourself? Fairly intelligent, although recently duped for 29 yrs., heterosexual woman with plenty of experience, seeks heterosexual man who is not a liar. Your single friends have been online for five years and the pickings are not promising. Some men criticize their body, the way they speak, their children. Some have anger issues towards women; others want to borrow money. Some promise extravagant trips but have no money. Some are dating three or more women at the same time, skyping young girls, send photos of their penis. Some are looking for a Sugar Mama. All are needy and sexually confused.

8. *Proving Ground*

You tell your children to be honest with their partner. If you are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Pansexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Intergender, Asexual, Ally or anything else...you can still love someone and not be a cheater. You choose to be monogamous, faithful and trustworthy. Just because he wasn't, doesn't mean all bisexual people are. You want your children to love with all of their being. To own their sexuality and be true to themselves and others.

You bi-ex said that it was his 'right' because you couldn't give him what he needed. To justify his actions. On the grounds that he deserved it. He told you he couldn't give you more than 60% or himself. A little over half was all you were worth. The other 40% went to his gay partner. Is it just about sex? You suggest they add a new letter to the gender list... O. LGBTQQIIAA+O.O for other, O for 'out of it', ordinary, outcast, objectified, outsider, odd, off beat, off-centre ... choose one....or zero. You now want to be zero gender. You just want people to leave you alone.

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You are sleeping better now. And your counselor says *'You know that anxious person you were? Well, you're not anxious anymore because now you know the truth.'* *'Good to know,'* you say.

#### 9. *Ground Rules*

Your hair dresser notices that you have a bald spot. There have been handfuls of hair coming out in the shower. She tells you to try a product for thinning hair. Biotin for men. *'You should also take vitamin B and a multi-vitamin,'* she suggests. It's great that people are so helpful. *'I'm so excited, I'm getting married this summer,'* she states. You want to say, *'Don't do it.'* Your fake smile could crack the mirror.

At home, while doing a scalp treatment, you realize that the shower in your basement suite can steam up like a 'sweat' and you let your skin get as red as a bruised peach. You stay focused and soak away your sins. You feel like you could go through the 'fourth door', the round that burns out the last impurity in the body. ...you are ready to forgive.

Instead of crying at every counselling appointment, you are laughing at your naïve self. You are laughing at the person you once were. You know that you trusted too much; held on too long. You know that you were emotionally present and loved your children unconditionally. You know that you were living your truth. In the future, you know you need to have necessary conversations. You know that you need to set boundaries. You know that you want someone to value you for who you are. You know you will not be deceived again.

#### 10. *High Ground*

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You are grateful. You send emails to thank your friends for supporting you. You even send one to your bi-ex to thank him. *Thank you for telling me the truth about your life and thank you for letting me go. I hope that you can find inner peace and live your truth now.*

You get your divorce certificate, sell your wedding band for \$45.00 ‘*Don’t spend it all in one place,*’ the jeweler says. You laugh, ‘*I’m buying an expensive bottle of wine.*’ You change your last name, get a new passport, quit your job, jump in your new car, and move to your new province. You get off the ground.

**150. AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *I wrote Ground State the year after my divorce. It’s a story that no one wants to talk about or publish (until now). It’s a story that I didn’t want to be in. I was happily living in a heterosexist world, tightly grasping at coupledness. I was even smug about it. On discovering my then husband had been in a relationship with a gay friend of ours for over 17 years, the shaming comments from homophobic former friends led me to re-examine my beliefs. Ground State was written to pick myself up off the ground. By sharing this experience, it is my hope that people recognize this societal problem and the discrimination that we all feel when we do not accept different sexual orientation.*

**BIO:** *Merrill Elizabeth Gray’s writing has appeared in Grain The Journal of Eclectic Writing, Temenos Press, Silver Birch Press, Birds we pile loosely, S/Tick, Blue Skies Poetry, Worth Architectural Magazine, Crazy Pineapple Press, Fieldstone Review, Four Ties Lit Review, Spring vol viii, Misfitmagazine, Sugar Mule Literary Magazine, CBC Canada writes Stranger than Fiction and Joy, Interrupted an anthology on motherhood and loss.*

**151.**

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# On Black

By Harrison Sheranian

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Literary grinchers will tell you not to start a short story/essay with paragraphs of description because you will lose the reader's interest. Okay. But we couldn't STOP reading the extended opening in 'On Black'. Technically, black isn't a colour. It's defined as 'the absence of light'. And for this reason—as a word—it comes loaded with symbolism. A beautifully written panegyric in a nuanced voice on the many literal, imagistic and mytho-poetical footprints of humanity's favourite non hue. Quote: In the summer, Black gets hot. My body gets too warm under any black clothes, my feet burn on the black tar of the road in my black shoes and the black mop of hair on my head cooks my scalp.*

## On Black

Watching the sun slowly inch closer to clash with the moon, I marveled at the change to the earth it created. The shadow of the leaves left crescent dots on the warm cement and the fairy ring of mushrooms seemed to stand a little taller, ready to engage with the mystic forces in the sky. The sped up sun set shifts the colors on the grass, greens turning yellow turning red turning blue with the false night. The minutes pulled into hours. The time slowed to a crawl as the euphoria of the celestial bodies met, plunging the world into their dark passions. The toadstools glowed near the sleepy square-eyes of the goat and the chickens cooed, ready to roost. Nearby, the farmhouse breaths in relief from the moon blocked heat while the horses waltzed lazily towards the barn, confused and sleepy despite the morning chimes of the clocks. The explosion of ecstasy in the sky sent fiery rings of color to the horizon. Yellows, golds, reds, and greens surround the nighttime sky as if the Northern Lights migrated south. Billows of leftover sun ringed the dark hole that now stands in its place, giving Atlas a moment to stretch his overworked arms. The blackness spread from hill to hill all around me and I felt comfortable. I'd always felt comfortable in blackness. Light made me feel seen; in everyone's way. Now don't get me wrong, I'm not obsessed with black despite what this sounds like. I don't wear eyeliner, don't paint my nails black, I just like the ability to dissolve into the background. Avoid the attention. Hide in the black.

I've always liked wearing black. Shoes, Socks, Underwear, Jackets, Shirts, Scarfs. Everything; black. I used to think that it was mostly for the sake of being "cool" or

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“different” than the other brightly colored clothes the kids at school would wear. But I soon realized that I used it more as an invisibility tool. I wanted to melt into the back row of class, hide in the shadow under the tree when all the athletic jocks ran around in their tight, white wife beaters. I used to scoff, thinking that I was a deeper person than these guys. That I was more intelligent and more focused on academics than on physical success. It was only after I started to realize I would stare at those toned, tanned guys that I realized I didn’t hate them, I wanted that, wanted to be like them, wished desperately that white could look good on my chubby frame rather than looking like a marshmallow mascot. My motivation to actually change never worked. I would always fall back to the tasty breads and sugars that kept me round and covering myself in black clothes. The boys would grow taller, their muscles larger, their faces sharper, and I, I would be tall sure, but I would stay round and my cheeks would mirror my middle. The lack of facial hair couldn’t hide any of the chipmunk face that I had and scarves could only do so much and only when it was cold. I think that’s why I like winter.

In the summer, Black gets hot. My body gets too warm under any black clothes, my feet burn on the black tar of the road in my black shoes and the black mop of hair on my head cooks my scalp. I couldn’t see attraction in my own body like the toned physique of the other boys. I felt like a malfunction on the processing plant. That after making the perfect and pretty cookies cut into the thin shape, I was the leftover dough plopped in the corner of the tray just to avoid going to waste. My misshapen personal image didn’t help when I started to realize that I was attracted to those same boys that I couldn’t look like. I feel that it might be different for men that are interested in women. Women’s bodies are so different and interesting to me because no two look the same. I felt that a woman could be a twig or thick without causing any harm to their beauty. Women are strong and powerful and I also wanted to be like them. Damn, I wished that I was interested in women. It would have probably helped my feelings of isolation. But there I was, little gay boy wishing to look at all attractive compared to those male classmates.

Black made me feel smaller. I’m not the tallest person I know nor the heaviest but being in my own skin sometimes made me feel like I take up the room. I look at some of my family and friends, petite and short as though you can sit them all onto one chair without so much as a thigh touching another person. There’s a story I always fall back to. Someone asks the question “would you rather be able to fly or turn invisible?” This is usually split pretty evenly in any room you ask. Personally, I always say flight. Shocking. You probably expected me to drone on and on about the power of invisibility and the way I’ve been saying I want to disappear into the shadows. Wrong. Flight. Oh, just imagine. Carried into the sky like the Eagles from Tolkein. Cascading through the deep blue of the night, being in such a large, empty space where I can’t feel trapped or in the way. Not having to hide but instead performing like a phoenix or some mystical cherub. No one thinks that cupid is ugly or clumsy. But the daydream of flight must always come in to roost. I’m placed gently back onto the earth, my wings clipped and wrapped back up in black layers to try to hide again.

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Recently, my eyes were opened to a new kind of role model. Ursula. The sea witch that tricks and traps the little redheaded mermaid might be an unusual role model but let me try to explain the raw power that I've realized she holds. This woman so commands her space that she fills up any scene she is in. She doesn't hide her body or use any black to cover herself up, rather she uses her darkness to take up even more of the space around her. Her massive tendrils wrap and weave throughout the cave we first meet her in. She is horrifying but commands the viewers awe. Her personality doesn't match the darkness she uses, rather she embraces the flamboyance, the charm and glee that surrounds her. Her hearty laughter rang through me after watching the film with a new lens. Her power, not including her magic just her raw, personal, fat power of blackness really hit me and I realized that I should try to be more like that. More outgoing, more confident, more sea witch.

Of course, another role model character has appeared in my life. Leia Organa is a fierce and dedicated fighter in the early Star Wars films and that has not changed with the newer ones. Her character, now aged and more plump, is just as much of a fighter; just as strong of a character as she was in the eighties. One scene struck me in particular. When she is blasted into the darkness of space her willpower and family magic gives her the opportunity to pull herself back into the safety of the ship. Flying. She looks like Superman here. Oh, to fly and not have a care in the world. General Leia may not be as young and thin as Princess Leia but the way that she commands the empty space she's floating in, is the exact same way that Ursula commands the sea. No one I've ever talked to has ever complained about Carrie Fisher's weight or age in the new films. No one has ever said that she is not beautiful or that she is weak. In the film, Leia is a fierce and commanding presence that gave me another figure to look to and try to be. Maybe I don't need to be more like Ursula, flamboyant and improper, perhaps I need to be more like Leia, calm, wise, quiet but not because she is hiding, because she doesn't have to speak to be seen and respected.

Ironically, I grew up scared of the dark. So petrified of the empty silence of the black that I filled it with the hum of a muted television or the cracked door to a lit hallway. That darkness would drive me to nightmares. Reading stories that were innocent enough in the light, petrified me in the dark. The form of Golum, written in Tolkein's novel, with his flabby legs silently rowing his unblinking eyes towards me; the woman in the bathtub with her watery, bloated corpse, smiling and laughing at me in the dark. Creeping ghouls that felt more at home in the shadows than in the light were the bane of my sleep and I would start myself awake, cringing into the light. This like the ghosts that haunt Ebenezer Scrooge followed me and I was just as deaf to their whispers and lessons. These dark loving figures were not demons waiting to pounce. Rather, they were showing me the solitude and comfort of the darkness. As I got older, and started to understand the call to the black, I ventured closer. Walking past the two goblin figures, I'd encounter beauty in the night. The grace of a bat, nearly invisible as it acrobats through the air. The chill against the skin and the warmth of someone lying next to me. The steady beating of my heart, never exposed to the light, is thought to be red but without the light, isn't it only blackness.

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No better time in my life did I feel so fully hidden in darkness as when that eclipse cast its shadow down on top of me. The prying eye; the judging eye of the sun was sent away abruptly. The cool breeze of the fake night pulled at my skin and I became extremely aware of my surroundings. The mushrooms a few yards to my left and beyond them the goat and chickens. The barn and horses to my right and the family surrounding me that I felt I needed to hide from too. In the moment, I was happy. Content and enthralled by the celestial shift. Only months after did I realize how excited I was to be able to disappear into the shadows, to shrink down like Alice going into Wonderland. Or perhaps the eclipse is giving me my chance. My chance to jump up and fly. Fly into that minute long night and control that dark sky. Spread out and feel comfortable. Be like Leia. Explore those same mushrooms and horses from a new angle. Untethered to the smallness and crampedness of the Earth and fly into that dark, magic sky.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I was inspired to write this work by Alexander Theroux's essay "Black" that goes in depth into the color black and its history as well as other connections. I noticed that it did not have much emotion or personal experience and I thought it would be unique to dive deep into that view of the color. My essay in turn is much more personal and has much more inner dialogue about black than Theroux's.*

**BIO:** *Harrison Sheranian is from Orem, Utah and is a senior at Utah Valley University studying English. His usual writing is in fiction but he has recently been expanding to other genres of writing.*

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# UPRIVER

## By Gerard Sarnat

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *This is a writer who always hits the mark and his creative nonfiction is the kind of exemplary 'gonzo' journalism Hunter S. Thompson could get jealous about. Sophistication 101. Read it and weep. Then read it and learn. Quote: From nowhere, a gibberish of Wounded Knee, Slippery Rock, and Captain Ahab jangle my head. Good job, Sarnat, no point fooling around if there's any possibility he didn't understand or wouldn't be deterred by the international ramifications, the big hurt that would descend if he ate an American. (Spacing is author's own.)*

### Upriver

Last night's festivities behind, it's last-chance-for-adventure time before we head back home.

Wolfing down blood oranges and poached eggs with the family, I head out alone east along the northern shore. Kadavu musk-parrots shriek "KANDAVU!" -- probably the reason natives add an "n" when pronouncing the island's name. Marveling over exquisitely spiraled yellow, pink and white scallops, conches, whelks and starfish; the world is my oyster.

I follow the creek inland. About a hundred yards upstream, zany Dr. Seuss-ish skipper fish, heads up like alert water skiers, surf the surface on their flipperlike tails. Another

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fifty Darwinian yards inland, they've increased from small guppies to medium trout. An owlish turtle's head bobs up from its shell like Captain Nemo's periscope. *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* was one of my favorite kids' movies. Exquisite slithery slivery fluorescent geckos and red smushy newts slide underfoot.

Sand gives way to rock as I ascend southeast. The lush green canopy shelters the cut-glass crystal-clear blue lagoon from the rain. Black and white millipedes inch along the ground. Monarchs surge overhead, reflexively triggering my humming, "Zippity do dah, Zippity eah. My oh my what a wonderful day. Plenty of sunshine heading my way. Zippity do dah, zippity eah." I flashback to childhood Ur-memories of the amazing butterflies in the animated feature film *Uncle Remus*.

Leaving the rainforest's cover, it's drizzling pleasantly. Slipping on the sharp boulders, I break off a sturdy tree branch to better support cartilage-less knees. My internal soundtrack flips to Doc in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, "Hi ho, hi ho, it's off to work we go."

It's a regular Disney moment out here.

Thud! My glasses and I fall. Although body parts seem no worse off than before, a palm and elbow sting and drip blood. Feeling a bit like Piggy in *Lord of the Flies*, I fumble around for my glasses. Luckily, my searching fingers find them unbroken. Reaching over, I'm startled by two bare brown feet a foot in front of me. Looking up, I gradually

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see raggedy filthy shorts, a broad tattooed chest, a tangle of disheveled hair on a young man with nose bones holding a wood pitchfork with three sharp metals blades. This guy looks just like the hundred-plus year-old cannibal photos in the museum. What's going on? Who is this dude?

Be real, Ger, no time to panic, learn from past mistakes when you've overreacted. Within a millisecond, my spinning mind retreats into a flood of loony-in-retrospect family jokes I'm the butt of, stories I'm constantly kidded about.

On safari in Kenya, a horde of tall thin red-robed spear-bearing blue-black Masai tribesmen wade across a river toward us: I yell for my wife and two small kids to get behind me, I'll protect you; the warriors cross over... smiling, sheepishly offering to sell trinkets, trade a spear for Eli's camera.

Stripping to undies, jumping into the Pacific to rescue a capsized middle-aged lady...who turned out to be a most ungrateful master kayaker.

In Belize, the brute jumping out from nowhere toward my younger daughter, three hours into what felt like a forced-march through torrential mud looking for Indian ruins...to give her an umbrella.

Alone with my older daughter deep in northwest Thailand's rice paddies, hours after leaving the Lanu Red's village, a man runs at her wielding what looked like a club...a

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generous, if blottoed, Lanu White extending us his opium pipe, inviting us -- *Come Over to My House, Come Over to Play* -- to stare at a receptionless blank TV screen.

So, cool it, man. I gather myself, rise to stand tall (all five feet five inches of me), and summon a hearty *Bula! Bula!* Unlike every other Fijian, who's out-smiled and out-*Bula Naka'd* me back, this fellow just stares, suspicious, clearly not happy to see me, arms on spear, holding his ground, not moving on. I hold my walking stick firmly in front of me.

Although last night I'd dismissed Susan's news as so much gossip, I reconsider. The owner of the adjacent resort recently fell to his death from a cliff. He catered to the high-end \$3000 a night likes of Madonna, offering cement bunker security and isolation instead of our up-close-and-personal bourgeois experience. Rumors have it that he abused the Fijian staff, which may have had something to do with his accident.

Now I'm totally focused, no yucks or campy drama-king inner giggles about what a cool story this will make. I pause to look briefly into his ghostly eyes. Then, careful not to touch, I slowly walk around him as calmly and confidently as I can muster. Not looking back, I proceed up toward the suddenly threatening misty peaks. From nowhere, a gibberish of Wounded Knee, Slippery Rock, and Captain Ahab jangle my head. Good job, Sarnat, no point fooling around if there's any possibility he didn't understand or wouldn't be deterred by the international ramifications, the big hurt that would descend if he ate an American.

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Not hearing rustling or steps behind me, the self-recriminations and second-guessing start. My god, what if you've violated his tribe's territorial boundary? You idiot, he was just as shocked as you, he's probably hightailing it back to the village where you attended church yesterday. You ridiculous wimp!

Nevertheless, relieved to be safe, my adrenalized fight-or-flight rush turns romantic, into a Wordsworthian *Intimations of Immortality* natural high. A half-eaten honeycomb and an intact tiny blue egg generate sublime epiphanies. I go forward. The ecstasy proves short-lived.

Way too full of myself, not concentrating on my next step, I collapse into a mud hole. Skittish crookedly black crabs scoot from their holes under my feet. Delusions of grandeur instantly shift back to dread. Pulling myself up, tubers become snakes entwining my ankles. Twigs become giant walking stick insects snatch at me. Low-slung gnarly black-hooped mangrove trellises, strangely rooted in the sand at both ends, come alive to entangle me in the nasties. My sweat and blood attract every kind of bug. Sheets of rain bite into my skin. I retreat under a tree -- until I see smell lightening char. The rocks are impossibly slick. The path is sometimes underwater, sometimes washed out.

With that, I'm done. No trouble convincing myself that I've got a good excuse for the family, that after two hours in the elements, they're all worrying about my whereabouts. We've got a plane to catch. Time to turn around, retrace my steps down.

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He's nowhere in sight as I return to the point of our brief encounter. The storm rat-a-tats the now black lagoon like a machine gun. A black and tan water snake -- the tan camouflaged by the sandy bottom making it look like a string of undulating black diamonds -- swims toward my open sandal. Making it back to the open-spaced beach, I stumble on sharp shells, cutting my big toe...

Now showered and comfy, I wonder what the hell actually happened.

I'll bet if the kids had been in my shoes, they'd have made friends and invited him back for tea right now.

Although sympathetic, my family obviously doesn't know what to make of my story. In any case, enough is enough for me at sixty. Back in time for a quick nap and snack.

Before lunch, I pull *Papagena's* Canadian manager aside. "Don, I have no idea what really occurred, but you should know about it. I'd appreciate your being discrete if you make inquiries..."

Don said he'd never heard another like this before, that all tourist-Fijian meetings have been friendly. "Every once in a while, the villagers chase off a hunter spotted poaching game on Naikorokoro land, but it's never happened on the resort side."

After lunch, Mele comes over, formally but sheepishly. "I apologize to you and your family." That was all. He left without further explanation.

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Then Samson sidles over, putting his arm around me. A huge affable brown New Zealand Maori who's been the divemaster here for six years, he often serves an intermediary role between the Fijians and the Westerners. He's the only person who eats at both the staff and the guest tables. "My little white man, I heard you had a scare today. You encountered Mele's brother. He's the village idiot, an idler, no good. Never works, a longhaired hippy. He was sneaking off to spearfish in the ocean when you came upon him. At times he gets stoned into oblivion, so bad he can barely talk or walk. But you needn't worry, he's meek and mild and wouldn't hurt a fly."

With all remnants of a Kurtzian mystery dispelled, I join the family on the *Nunu Moi* to motorboat to the local airport, then puddle jump to Nadi before jetting home into our routine California lives. But before we hop on, our hosts, the sweetest people in the world, place *leis* around our necks and hold us around our waists as we sing our last four-part harmonies together. After kisses and hugs, we jump on board, wave, and toss our flowers back toward shore, leaving our hearts in Kadavu, our intention to return.

*Au sa liu mada*, see you later, not goodbye.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I thrive on adventure travel, and have indulged such with each of my three kids when young, both individually and as a family. Upriver was conceived when visiting our son, an entomologist "ant man" doing fieldwork in Fiji.*

**BIO:** *Gerard Sarnat is a physician who's built and staffed current homeless and ex-prisoner clinics as well as a Stanford professor and healthcare CEO. Currently Gerry is devoting energy/ resources to deal with global warming. Sarnat won the Poetry in the*

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*Arts First Place Award plus the Dorfman Prize, and has been nominated for a handful of recent Pushcarts plus Best of the Net Awards. Gerry is widely published in academic-related journals (University Chicago, Stanford, Oberlin, Brown, Columbia, Harvard, Pomona, Johns Hopkins, Wesleyan, University of San Francisco) plus national (Gargoyle, Main Street Rag, New Delta Review, MiPOesias, American Journal Of Poetry, Poetry Quarterly, Free State Review, Poetry Circle, Poets And War, Cliterature, Qommunicate, Texas Review, Brooklyn Review, San Francisco Magazine, The Los Angeles Review and The New York Times) and international publications including Review Berlin. He's authored the collections Homeless Chronicles (2010), Disputes (2012), 17s (2014), Melting the Ice King (2016). Gerry's been married since 1969 with three kids, five grandsons with a sixth incubating.*

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# Incredibly Large Dildos

by Meghan Marzella

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Marzella examines every inch of this issue exploring in depth some penetrating questions before reaching a decisive climax. Snickers aside, this is a cogently written, well researched essay that deals with the problem of sex education and its relation to the porn industry. You won't be laughing at the end of it—you'll be thinking seriously about the place of porn in society and what we can do to better educate upcoming generations when it comes to sex and sexuality. Quote: When we see toys that deviate from the average looking sex organs, we get intimidated. We see porn stars successfully using these massive dildos and we feel like our vaginas are "different." We see 12 inch dildos in a sex shop and we think our penises are too small.'*

Incredibly Large Dildos

Meg Marzella

My boyfriend and I recently took a trip to our city's local "adult outlet." A sex shop: an honest to god sex shop where they checked our ID's at the door. We were let in and immediately overwhelmed by, easily, the most pornography either of us had ever seen in our entire lives. Being in the store was somewhat intoxicating, as if they were pumping laughing gas through the vents. So, we made our way stumbling clumsily through the aisles, giggling and bumping into each other. We were the only people in the store other than the clerk, so the red embarrassment in our cheeks drained quickly, only returning when we were brought face to face with an especially obscene toy or product.

We oohed and ahed through the packs of nylon rope and fuzzy, cheetah-print handcuffs and past the shelves of vibrating cock rings, which ran parallel to a rainbow of condoms and lube; like an x-rated, adult version of Candyland. We sauntered through racks and racks of gay porn films and school-girl themed lingerie. It was all very silly and exciting until we got to the back of the store. It is hard to call anything there especially salacious when the entire store is plastered with porn from wall to wall, but the jungle of dildos that stood before us was as obscene as it gets. We stood there, afraid to get any closer. "No way. Are there guys that are really that big?" my boyfriend whispered to the empty store, and I just shook my head, mouth still agape.

The dildo began humbly: a phallic shaped rock for the Neanderthals, bread smothered in olive oil for the Greeks, and eventually gorgeous, bronze dildos in the Han Dynasty. Today's modern silicone dildo was brought to us in the 1970's by Gosnell Duncan, a man

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who sustained an injury that left him paralyzed from the waist down and therefore in need of a penile substitute.

His injury began his advocacy within the disability movement. Though he originally invented the silicone dildo as a substitute for people with disabilities, the modern dildo has become popular with people of all abilities, consequently resulting in a \$15 billion industry.

But, dildos aren't the problem; they and other kinds of toys help all kinds of people and couples enjoy their sex lives and personal sexuality in different ways. I mean that's why I was in the store in the first place. The problem is some dildos. The some dildos that are absolutely fucking massive. The ones that I can't fathom possibly fitting into a human vagina. The ones that made my boyfriend say, "Man will never beat machine." The ones that made me think, should I be able to fit that up there?

The average vagina (vaginal canal to cervix) is approximately 7 inches deep, give or take. In the U.S, the average erect penis size is 5.1 inches long, with an average width of 1.5 inches. However, most sex toy providers sell dildos that are up to a foot or more in length and about 3 inches wide (think about half an inch wider than a can of soda). So, if the average vagina can only accommodate around 7 inches, why is [bettystoybox.com](http://bettystoybox.com) telling me that I can save \$34.06 on the Au Naturel Big Daddy 14-Inch Sensa Feel Chocolate Dildo? Which, in case you were wondering, weighs in at a whopping 2.02 pounds. Upon further research, I'm finding that there really isn't a limit to how much you can stretch the human rectum (if you do so in increments of course), which explains some of the demand for these incredibly large dildos. A study from multiple hospitals in Stockholm found that 40% of retained foreign rectal objects that required surgical removal were sex toys (the other 59% was made up of things like bottles, cans, candles, and other phallic shaped objects).

I find myself at a point now where I understand the demand for larger dildos. Are all of these toys necessarily useful vaginally? Not really. Are these toys realistic for myself? No, but that doesn't mean that they aren't right for someone else. And I think that this is bringing me to what really scared me about being brought face to face with dildos of such stature. When we see toys that deviate from the average looking sex organs, we get intimidated. We see porn stars successfully using these massive dildos and we feel like our vaginas are "different." We see 12 inch dildos in a sex shop and we think our penises are too small.

The problem here isn't the sex industry or even the porn industry as a whole. Pornography is more readily available today (to a generation of media-guzzling visual learners) than it ever has been. A study by the University of New Hampshire found that in 2008, 93% of male college students and 62% of female college students had watched online porn before they were 18. Today's generation of teenagers don't have to try to finagle their way into an adult shop, they just have to open up a computer and lock their bedroom door. And still, this isn't the problem. There are many porn producers and kink

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communities that adult film stars have specified to be especially ethical with momentous importance being placed on consent and safety at all times. The problem is finding that porn. The problem is that teenagers are being exposed to unethical and unrealistic porn without their knowledge.

They're watching "barely-legal-lesbians-love-dick-all-girls-squirt" sex scenes where consent and safety aren't explicitly specified, where actors are performing sex acts that a lot of people aren't capable of, and where unattainable standards are constantly being presented. "Q.," a teenager who was interviewed for The New York Times article, "What Teenagers Are Learning From Online Porn," sums up the concept perfectly: "You are looking at an adult... The guys are built and dominant and have a big penis, and they last a long time. And if you don't do it like the guys in porn, you fear she's not going to like you." The type of porn that teenagers are finding is leaving them to make assumptions about how they're supposed to have sex before they are even ready to do so; assumptions like not having to ask to perform certain sex acts, that all men or women like sex in a certain way and it doesn't need to be clarified, and that the sex they're seeing in porn is what sex is supposed to be. Assumptions like if a porn star can fit this incredibly large dildo inside her, I should be able to too. This is leading to an assortment of problems. They can absolutely range in seriousness; the problem can be as surface as acting the wrong way toward a potential sexual partner because you thought that's what they wanted, or as complex and serious as feeling pressured into sex or certain sex acts that you aren't comfortable with.

As adults, we're able to take a step back from the situation, even in the heat of the moment, and think, Is my partner comfortable with this? Is this something that both of us are enjoying? I want to try a particular sex act, let me have an open conversation with my partner to see how they feel about it. Teenagers can't yet think like this. All they're learning of consent in health or sex education (if they're lucky enough to have it), is that saying yes to sex means yes and saying no to sex means no. Not, yes means yes to some things but if there's anything specific I would like to try I should make sure my partner is comfortable with it. They watch porn and they're curious and they want to experiment. That's fine when they're learning by an example of affirmative consent. But this isn't the case. Though (most of the time) porn films are made by consenting adults, they don't show the actors asking, "Can I kiss you?" or "Would you be comfortable with trying this?" or "Can I put a thumb in your ass?" They don't often show the actors putting a condom on and half the time they don't even show them having a goddamn conversation first.

I was a teenager once too, not knowing if a boy would like me if I gave him a bad blowjob and thinking my high school boyfriend might dump me if I didn't put out. In the second grade, a girl named Becky took two stuffed animals and laid them on top of each other and told me, "That's what sex is." I remember actually having nightmares about my parents finding out that I "knew" what sex was, because I knew it was one of those things I wasn't supposed to know. I remember thinking I was a badass when I lost my virginity. I remember telling myself that sex is okay. I'm an incredibly sex-positive person; safe,

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consensual sex is a perfectly normal, healthy part of life. But it is so delicate, so influenceable. I believed Becky that day in second grade that sex was two stuffed animals stacked on top of each other. The same way that I'm sure young teenage boys and girls across the world are believing that the porn they find online is what sex is supposed to be.

We like to deny the fact that we are influenced by what we see others doing. We like to think that everything we do is a novelty of our minds. But we cannot sit idly by when an impressionable demographic is getting such little and such bare-bones sex education, while being exposed to a world of unrealistic online porn. My partner and I made this trip to the sex shop because we both wanted to. We are still taking time to learn about one another's sexual preferences; the things we like and don't like. We are old enough now to understand that porn isn't an indication of the kind of sex we should be having; that there is good (real) porn and that there is exploitive porn. An empty sex shop on a Sunday is a wonderful place to be when you're there with an open mind, when you know the limits and boundaries of your partner, when you know the difference between sex and porn.

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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *This essay was originally written in my Creative Nonfiction class for the wonderfully supportive Katie Marks. My classmates and I were prompted to write a piece centered around a specific item. Had my recent trip to the sex shop not been so prominent in my memory, I'm not sure what would have become of the prompt. The sex shop in my college town is almost always void of shoppers, but definitely full of the most absurdly sized dildos imaginable. It was an intimidating sight that made me stop and think about how a sight like that could leave an impression on a younger person with a less realistic understanding of healthy, comfortable sex. My sex education in school was minimal, but it was more than so many young people get. When teenagers don't get a competent education on sex, they will find a way to learn themselves. And I hate to break it to you, but porn is not proper or realistic sex ed. Mom, Dad, if you ever find this essay please don't bring it up at family dinner.*

**BIO:** *Meg Marzella is an undergraduate student studying writing at Ithaca College in Upstate New York. She is an editor for one of the college's premier literary magazines and spends her time writing saucy and niche personal essays and creative nonfiction.*

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# SEOUL SEARCHING

By Donnia Harrington

*WHY WE LIKE IT: The only 'soul' searching here is for public self image in a neon synthetic midnight mondo-singularity where no relationship is deeper than nail gloss and personal space (privacy) is viewed as some kind of social aberration. We like the adroit depiction of aimlessness and fetishistic narcissism that run through this beautifully realized 'confession/memoir' of present day South Korean club culture. The author's matter of fact prose style is the perfect fit for the subject. Quote: Jenna mastered the craft of dancing alone. Her boyfriend would try to bring her close, but she would always find a way to drift away from him, dancing freely to the beat without any restriction. And: A midafternoon nap before she began her nightlife prep: another shower, music blasting from her laptop. A makeup tutorial on the screen, the smokey eye and bold lip that she wore so well. And the outfit—the most important part—her favorite pairs of black from shorts to a leather skirt, the platform heels that she found in Hongdae, and a flashy top.*

## Seoul Searching

Clubbing in Gangnam. I never thought I'd see myself there; out with the kids dressed in all black, wearing mouth masks as a fashion statement and not because they were ill. Trips to Hongdae usually ended with me impulse buying in an attempt to mimic the confidence that so many naturally possessed. I was already accustomed to the curious eyes focused on my braided hair and blood red lipstick; I only stared back to take mental note of their personal style.

What was it like to look like a badass? I spent most of my nights at Angel-in-us coffee with Amy, trying to write, but mostly procrastinating and browsing gossip sites. Before Angel-in-us, we would hop from café to café looking for that coveted 24-hour

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location. Our search took us off campus at odd hours of the night, walking the crowded streets of Seoul where teens and young adults casually roamed as if it were mid-afternoon.

I admired their commitment to nightlife. Even Angel-in-us was packed. Most of the customers were students pulling all-nighters, but there were some like Amy and I, introverts in need of fresh air from cramped and humid dorm rooms. Amy's roommate was Tatiana, but we amiably agreed that I would've been a better fit.

I attributed the bond to our compatible star signs—Virgo and Scorpio—but in reality, our creativity and silent passion for self-expression drew us close. We entered Angel-in-us with laptop-heavy backpacks in tow, found a corner and stayed there for hours. I thought I would spend the rest of my nights like that, but I began to tire of the same routine.

Whenever I walked past a group of girls after midnight, I wondered where they were going. Their makeup was fresh, their voices loud. Their night was just starting. I watched them in awe and envy—would I get that chance? It came to me in the form of a question. When Tatiana asked if I wanted to go out with her and her friends, Jenna and Limbo, I said yes without hesitation.

Tatiana was a seasoned party girl. While I was checking into bed after a night of web browsing, her nights followed the same path as those girls I always saw. Sometimes she doesn't get home until early morning, Amy would tell me. My envy changed to curiosity. My entire adult life had been spent in comfortable silence, a secluded shelter. The one party I went to during freshman year ended with me leaving early, deciding to

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end my night with Netflix. It was difficult to branch out since I was always an introvert. And yet, my usual restrained and thoughtful response was replaced with the urgency to be spontaneous. The moment I agreed, I knew I couldn't back out. I was suddenly terrified.

Wear something sexy, Tatiana told me. I now owned all black, which was sexy to me. My former wardrobe that consisted of florals was quickly discarded the moment I discovered the intimidating power of black in Hongdae.

On the eve of our outing, I was at the regular spot with Amy. She had already declined Tatiana's invite. Are you sure you don't want to come? I'm drowning in homework, she responded. Homework. Something I wasn't trying to think of this weekend. I wanted to be carefree and weightless like those girls. They weren't worrying about homework.

That night was crisp, perfect bomber jacket weather. It was almost as if Mother Nature herself decided to work in my favor, so my crop top and tight shorts didn't have to be covered by my parka. My anxiety was lurking close behind as I walked with Tatiana to the train station. She was effortless with her look; coolness came naturally for her.

Her afro mimicked my jumping nerves as we walked, her hair with a life of its own as the breeze kissed our faces. As if on cue, I soon felt myself surrounded by the same groups that I encountered on my walks to Angel-in-us. An instant relaxation took over. I was here. I was with them. I blended into the scene. I finally knew where they were going.

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The passengers of Line 2 on Seoul Metro were filled with young adults with similar ideas for the night. No kids on this train, it was almost eleven and the oldest person wore a suit and carried a leather briefcase. I wondered if he was going home, or if his night was just beginning like the rest of us.

I remembered reading an article about drinking culture in Korea; businessmen would go out on workdays to drink with their bosses and colleagues, even if they didn't want to. The pressure to fit in, to look good in the eyes of their superiors even as they drank themselves silly. In contrast, friends sat next to each other in pairs, scrolling through their phones and whispering in ears.

Ten stops south of my university was Gangnam Station, our destination. I had never met these friends of Tatiana's; she hardly knew them outside of their mutual interest of clubbing. They stood waiting, Jenna alongside Limbo with two others they invited, their figures illuminated by the bright lights of an Artbox stationary store in front of the station exit.

This part of Seoul was new territory for me, open stores and neon signs brightened the dark skies into visibility like every other part of the city, but the vibe of Gangnam was undeniably different. I was reminded of Hongdae and the people I would see there, dressed impeccably from head to toe, every piece of clothing and jewelry intentional for the statement.

Just like the businessmen trying to impress their bosses, nightlife culture for Seoul partygoers consisted of drinking before any event. We huddled together at a small table of a local barbecue place; the refrigerator was right behind us so we could easily reach

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for alcohol. I held my nose at the whiff of raw meat being prepared in front of me, and politely declined when asked if I want any. I'm a vegetarian—and don't worry, I already ate. The table erupted in laughter.

Although I did fill my appetite before—cheese quesadillas at Dos Tacos in Star City Mall—my tolerance had always been light and I quickly felt that familiar buzz, a carefree daze that was easy for me to achieve. My usual quietness was replaced with the need to be social; Jenna and Limbo were perfect for the sudden exploration, natural extroverts like Tatiana.

One of their friends was sitting closer than usual to Jenna, closer than one could be crammed in a corner. That's her boyfriend, Tatiana told me. She likes white guys. Despite his obvious attention on her, Jenna was more interested in catching up with Tatiana. A few drinks later and a final look around the crowded table of empty, green-glassed Soju bottles had me prepared for the next stage.

Limbo led the way as we rushed by a variety of bustling streets and alleys, taking routes that tourists wouldn't be aware of in their preoccupied state. Tatiana and I held onto each other throughout, arms linked and minds racing. I'll be next to you the entire time, she reassured me and I only nodded, that previous anxiety long gone, a confidence fully taking over.

The club was unappealing on the outside, a hole in the wall in the form of black doors against black brick. But the muffled music told a different story, an invitation to enter if you dare. Inside was indigo blue with flashing white lights that reminded me of

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being in an igloo. Mirrors lined the walls, reflecting the backs of people who leaned against them.

My head mimicked the throbbing thumps of EDM as we reached deeper in, past bag checks and lockers, past bouncers in muted colors who blended in with the partygoers that they kept a watchful eye over. The lower level was where the action was at; I peeked over the metal balcony and saw a mass of bodies. Dancing bodies, jumping bodies, one unanimous form. Tatiana grabbed my hand and we delved into the belly of the beast, her friends—my new friends—close behind.

Things happened fast after that; hand holding turned into bodies pressed against each other between giggles. The DJ—I somehow remembered his introduction the next day—was popular in his native Scandinavia and was currently on a country hopping tour. I had no idea who he was at the time, and it didn't matter. He played music where I could close my eyes and feel vibrations ringing through my body and that was what I needed, the combination of alcohol and excitement sending me to euphoria. I'd never considered myself a good dancer, in fact, I hated to dance. But the feeling of weightlessness left me confident to do anything.

I love your vibe! A light touch on my shoulder snapped me out of the moment and I turned to face Jenna, who moved closer to me and away from her boyfriend. Yeah, I don't usually... My voice died out with the beginning of a new song and before I knew it, I was back on an indescribable high. When I felt a pair of hands on my hips, I think it's someone from my group but one glance at Tatiana's mischievous expression told me that

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this was a complete stranger. I let him grind against me, I would never see him again.

Wasn't that the fun in it all?

My drunken confidence left me feeling unnaturally capable, even teasing the thought of getting laid in the moment, but my tinge of rationality dismissed the idea. Even when he started to whisper not-so-sweet nothings in my ear, I didn't pay attention to it. The mystery flirt eventually disappeared into the crowd and Tatiana was on me again, laughing. She alternated between dancing on me and Limbo. When she noticed that I didn't mind the lack of a partner, she backed away, sensing my independence.

Jenna mastered the craft of dancing alone. Her boyfriend would try to bring her close, but she would always find a way to drift away from him, dancing freely to the beat without any restriction. My glances at her ended with a smile at how peaceful she appeared to be despite the heavy bass and EDM drops that surrounded us. For my first night out like this, I truly believed I could last until sunrise.

But my stamina was nowhere near Tatiana's. I felt my body tiring, not as bouncy as it was before as the aftereffects of Soju crept up on me, casting a spell that left me craving sleep. I'm kind of tired, I started to say. Tatiana pouted when she heard the fatigue in my voice. It's only two AM, she tried to persuade me and the look I gave her was comically serious. She didn't protest any further, recognizing that I'm not experienced like her. I had no idea if I ever would be. Our group decided to end the night there, *a little early* in their words but their expressions masked tired smiles.

We gave tight hugs through mumbled chatter in front of the club. People still crowded us walking in and out of the doors as if it wasn't four hours to sunrise. But this

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was the life, the night didn't end until the night was actually over. There was a bittersweet feeling to departing these newfound friends of mine. Although they knew nothing of my personality, of my interests, of how introverted I actually was, we found a bond—albeit brief—in this outing.

Limbo offered to help find us a cab and as we departed with him, Jenna shouted to add her on Kakao. I waved at her, confirming that I would. I knew that even if I didn't see any of them again, at least I'd have some connection to them over social media. We waved down a cab. Tatiana and I used broken Korean in an attempt to tell the driver to go to our campus. His response was a confused expression.

Limbo chuckled and told the driver instead in his perfect native tongue; we thanked him in unison, too drunk to feel embarrassed, completely grateful that he was there to help. He closed the door. As the cab drifted away, I rested my head against the window, my vision blurring from a combination of heavy eyelids and watching the lights of passing buildings shine bright in my hazy state. I could fall asleep right there.

A nudge on my arm from Tatiana told me that we were back home. We fumbled for money in our purses. I never carried cash on me, a habit I couldn't seem to break even in a city where loose change was a necessity. Tatiana paid the fee and we walked the hilly path to our dorm. On the walk, she told me about the crush she had on Limbo and I racked my brain, trying to remember where she dropped possible hints of liking him. I couldn't remember. Or maybe I wasn't paying attention.

I told you it would be fun. She gave me a smile when we stood outside of the doors to our rooms. She knew that I enjoyed myself more than I expected. Another plea

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to go out with her soon, and I said I would consider it. No more thinking of clubbing tonight. I needed sleep.

I was back at Angel-in-us the following weekend. Tatiana asked the day before if I wanted to go out with her again and I declined, citing a hiatus was needed before I could imagine hopping weekend-to-weekend with another an exciting all-nighter. Is Jenna going to bring her boyfriend again? I asked her, suddenly curious about their dynamic. They actually broke up, Tatiana told me. Well, she broke up with him.

I wasn't shocked by this revelation, even when Tatiana went on to say that she was pretty sure Jenna had another boy toy. I could only chuckle, thinking of how whoever—a foreigner, tall, conventionally attractive—was enchanted by her charming spell was sure to snap out of it brokenhearted. Tell me what happens with Limbo, I reminded her of her confession and her response was an eye roll that failed to hide her blushed cheeks.

Amy had asked me how the outing was, and I shrugged, a nonchalant move that I hope hid my smile. She noticed, but didn't press for an answer. I was back to real life, back to the quiet corner where we hid behind our laptops, discussing schoolwork and quarter-life crises stemming from a lack of creative expression.

Our little spot felt like returning home again—students in study groups, loners with coffee at hand while the other typed away at keys, the random couple who decided to stop by for Angel-in-us' signature strawberry-topped Belgian waffle—the things that

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grounded me in reality, reminded me of the solitude that I sought out in the chaos of nightlife.

I thought of Tatiana, of what she would be doing at this same moment. When I stopped by their dorm room to meet with Amy, she was just getting out of bed. A midafternoon nap before she began her nightlife prep: another shower, music blasting from her laptop. A makeup tutorial on the screen, the smokey eye and bold lip that she wore so well. And the outfit—the most important part—her favorite pairs of black from shorts to a leather skirt, the platform heels that she found in Hongdae, and a flashy top. Always making a statement. She was a part of that world.

As Amy and I walked back to campus in the late hours, I wrapped my arms around myself to block out the brisk weather, clutching onto the same bomber jacket I had worn on my outing with Tatiana. It was her suggestion for me to buy it, one of those items that all the cool Seoul kids were wearing.

It sounded like a good idea initially, an easier way to blend in with the scene. With Tatiana by my side, I even believed it. But passing by those stylish nightcrawlers making their way to the next bar or club had me feeling restless again, spontaneity sparking at the sight of their presence. That same envy crept up on me in a rush before leaving just as sudden, a fleeting remnant remaining as the distance between us increased.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *'Seoul Searching' was one of the many essays that I wrote for my MFA thesis. I was taking a course on writing from memory when this particular experience came back to me. From there, I started to write about my time in Seoul. I was surprised at not only how much I remembered but also what those experiences meant to me as I reflected on them in the present day. A driving theme in 'Seoul Searching' and the other*

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*essays I wrote is self-discovery, and how that journey can take you down unexpected paths. Although this experience is unique to me, self-discovery is universal.*

**BIO:** *Donnia Harrington received an MFA in Creative Writing at The New School in May 2019, where her concentration was Nonfiction. She also graduated with Honors from Columbia College Chicago with a Bachelor's in Film. Her work has been published on Columbia's website, Audiences Everywhere, soulhead and ComicBook Debate. When she's not writing, she enjoys foreign cinema, female-centered video games, movie scores, and Scandinavian crime novels.*

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# MEETING A WHITE MENNONITE

*By Iftekhhar Sayeed*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *The well-known Bangladeshi writer and activist argues against the 'truism' that democracy is the best form of government for those under military rule. He explains how Christianity rationalized and justified the democratic model—and by extension, its own religious primacy—when in fact, as the records show, it condoned racism, violence and oppression. In Thailand, Bangladesh and other places, military rule was characterized by civic stability and overall peace. But this, of course, was exactly what rankled Western powers in their quest for exploitation. Choice examples of the author's word colour: '...Thailand has never been colonized, so they're not coconuts like us—brown outside, white inside—starving for the approval of white people.' And 'This was daylight racism...She was white, we were brown. It seemed natural—almost rational—that she would know what was best for us.'* (Spacing is author's own).

## Meeting A White Mennonite

by

**Iftekhhar Sayeed**



The British after the Battle of Plassey 1757: still here

Mrs Norah Martin was my colleague at the Notre Dame College English course.

She was a Mennonite Christian, a fundamentalist. She was Canadian.

She was white.

This was in the early 1990s. Some of us teachers gathered together and, during break, over sugary tea, did what we usually do when we have nothing better to do: hold a corroboree on the nation's future.

After a brief discussion, a consensus was reached: military rule was the way forward (the military had just been ousted by western donors).

Gormless as we were, we took Mrs. Martin into our confidence.

“No!”

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Her entire body stiffened. Her pointy nose signalled disapproval, pointing downward, as though averting our collective gaze.

“No! That’s not the way.”

She was treating us like misbehaving students. We were children lost in the woods. We needed adult guidance, a firm hand to deal with our errant ways.

This was daylight racism.

It would have occurred to none of us to dictate to Mrs. Martin how *her* country should be governed. We felt incompetent.

She was white, we were brown. It seemed natural - almost rational - that she would know what was best for us.

None of us contradicted her, none of us stood his ground. We accepted the scolding in stupid silence.

Her effortless assumption of white superiority hardly offended. We look up to white people as our natural superiors.

We felt like negroes post-Reconstruction, Uncle Tomming to our erstwhile masters. We are [the Dr Azizes](#) of South Asia, [brown sahibs](#), coconuts, mental slaves.

It didn’t occur to her that we were rational human beings assembled in the little office at Martin Hall, Notre Dame College.

She never bothered with evidence or arguments. There was no appeal to the facts or reason.



Notre Dame College: no haven for student thugs

(Many in Bangladesh want military rule, but the elite, under western inspiration and western financial coercion, conceal the facts. Modon Shahu, editor at the most widely circulated English daily, the Daily Star, told me: “We know people want martial law, but we can’t print that.”

The motto of the rag? [“YOUR RIGHT TO KNOW”](#)).

As a Mennonite, she was against evolution. She didn’t believe, despite the evidence. True, it’s “only” a theory, but it shows her disregard for data. Later, Fr. Banas, a Catholic priest, told me, sotto voce, that Mennonites have a literal interpretation of the Bible. Even he found it preposterous that one didn’t believe in evolution.

As a fundamentalist Christian, Mrs. Martin no doubt believed that democracy is God’s gift to mankind. It would never occur to her that it might be a gift from the other guy. After all, didn’t Christ perish for each and every one of us, and doesn’t democracy affirm our essential equality?

True, so does Islam, but Islam affirms hierarchy and subordination, thereby nullifying equality *in this world*. We are a vertical society; a Christian society is horizontal, like a democracy. (Never mind that hierarchies are universal: what matters is belief, not the facts on the ground.)

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Joseph Schumpeter, mystified by the contemporary belief in democracy, despite all evidence to the contrary, concluded that this was an evidence-denying religious belief - in fact, Christianity redux.

He meant the democracy-as-Christianity thesis as discrediting democracy, for religious belief ignores - “transcends” - the evidence.

I am in total agreement: you may believe in the goodness of God despite the evidence, for that constitutes religious faith - goodness is “evidence-transcendent”. For all we know, it may ultimately turn out that God is good.

But the goodness of democracy must be based on the evidence only - along with its rationality. The voter has been elevated to the level of an infallible demigod, when [experiment after experiment by social psychologists](#) have shown him or her to be thoroughly irrational.

But there’s more. While for Schumpeter the “[democracy = Christianity](#)” thesis is evidence of irrationality, recent thinkers like Larry Siedentop and Nick Spencer affirm and glorify the equation.

They really put democracy beyond all rational enquiry, like Mrs. Norah Martin, the fundamentalist Mennonite Christian.

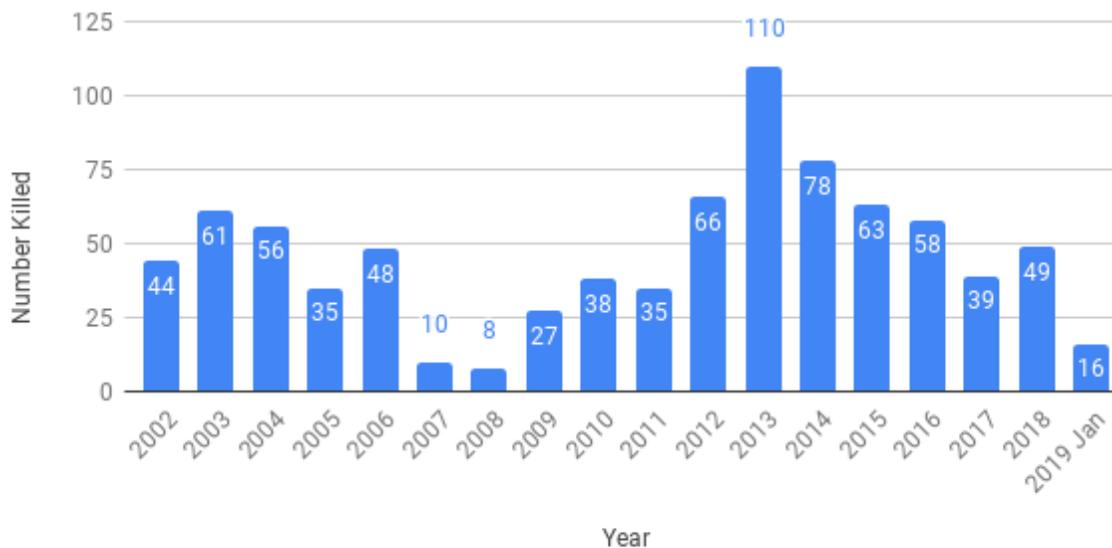
If she had spent a few minutes conferring with Fr. Banas on the use and abuse of students by the political parties, she would have got an earful. (For the big picture on democracy in Bangladesh, click [here](#)).

Had she listened, she would have learned how the priests have kept student thuggery out of campus (Notre Dame College motto: *diligite lumen sapientiae*), how they nearly left the country 45 years ago rather than allow [student thugs](#) to run amok, to the eternal gratitude of parents who, when warned by the padres, would immediately take their child out of politics, the boy quavering in his shoes and dumbstruck before the relieved father and mother.

But then, being a fundamentalist, she might just have stuck to her credo.

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## Newspaper Headlines Announcing The Murder Of Student Politicians in Bangladesh (military rule: 2007 to 2008)



Student thugs kill each other over a division of the spoils: notice the plunge in numbers under military rule (2007-8)

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In 2011, my wife and I went to Bangkok.

The city was flooded.

There were sandbags everywhere - even in the hospitals. It was feared that the hospitals would have to shut down, like other parts of Bangkok already had.

My doctor failed to keep his appointment because his house was under water. Another had moved out of her house and onto higher ground - an apartment.

It was widely believed that the government of Yingluck Shinawatra would collapse. It had dismally failed to forewarn citizens of the impending disaster. It was a massive case of government failure.

What saved Yingluck's skin was not her good looks, so to speak: there was a more sinister complexion to the matter.

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Yingluck was the sister of the demagogue, Thaksin Shinawatra, a wildly popular personality.

Thais still fondly recall his trigger-happy ways: [he killed over 2,500 people](#) in less than three months in extrajudicial murders ([including in the Muslim South](#)), which made him very popular - on top of the generous pandering to the poor.

It took the military to defenestrate him and finally exile the divisive figure.

The army's investigation revealed that most of the murdered were innocent people - never mind if they were innocent; guilt and innocence are to be decided in a court of law, not by a lynch mob.

As is typical in Asia, his sister took over.

She engineered [a disastrous rice-subsidy scheme](#) - again to appeal to the poor, the majority - that nearly bankrupted the exchequer.

Again, the junta defenestrated her and "allowed" her to escape abroad.

The army created modern Thailand. It instituted a constitutional monarchy in 1932, since when [it staged 18 military coups](#), of which 12 were successful. Now, the junta is trying to -and succeeding in - caging the democratic beast.



Getting shirty in Bangkok: how democracy makes us civic enemies

In Bangladesh, parents, elders and teachers perpetuate the canard that military rule is not good for a country.

Where's the evidence?

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In Bangladesh, under military rule from 1975 to 1990, we had peace and stability: no one was [burnt alive](#) or beaten to death in hartals; no woman was [raped for voting for the “wrong” party](#); no judges were leaned on to pronounce for the government; no politics meant no hatred, no US versus THEM polarization of society. We were not civic enemies, then.

Again, in 2007, in Bangladesh, it was the army that “prevented a bloodbath”, [to quote the Economist](#).

Thailand, South Korea, Taiwan and Indonesia all developed and modernized under the military.

Today, the Thai military is performing its decades-old patriotic function. It can do so for two reasons.

First, Thailand receives no foreign aid, so western imperialists have no stranglehold - “full nelson” or, rather, “surfboard backbreaker”- on the country and its people.

Second, Thailand has never been colonized, so they’re not coconuts like us - brown outside, white inside - starving for the approval of white people.

And since we can’t be genetically white, we try to be politically white - by voting, just as the white man does.

Rudyard Kipling exhorted his white brethren to:

“Take up the White Man’s burden...”

Today, Kipling would have been barrel-chested with pride: regiments of brown sahibs – “half devil and half child” - carry the white man’s burden for him.



John Bull and Uncle Sam bear the White Man's Burden by carrying the coloured of the world to civilisation

### **AUTHOR'S NOTE:**

*After our so-called democratic transition (1990), many have been burnt alive, beaten to death and raped for voting for or belonging to the opposition. Democracy has made us civic enemies, with the two political parties/dynasties unleashing their student thugs on each other and on innocent bystanders. Under military rule (1975 - 1990), the state had a monopoly of violence, which it then lost. The Cold War over, western donors pushed General Ershad out and forced democracy on Bangladesh, as on many other countries.*

*My intention in writing the essay was to vent. The two groups of people who are in a position to look honestly at the facts and speak up - the hyper-educated, cringy elite here and westerners - are too blinded by the religion to utter a squeak of heresy. Democracy's goodness is evidence-transcendent.*

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*This is not the first time that ideological blindness has led to misery. We've clearly not learned. Essays like these may winkle out readers who eschew the extra-rational and proportion belief to evidence.*

**BIO:** *Iftekhar Sayeed teaches English. He was born and lives in Dhaka, Bangladesh. He has contributed to The Danforth Review, Axis of Logic, Enter Text, Postcolonial Text, Southern Cross Review, Opednews.com, Left Curve, Mobius, Erbacce, Down In The Dirt and other publications. He is also a freelance journalist. He and his wife love to travel.*

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## Review of Fred Russell's "Nightmare" by the Editors

The story begins with a man waking up after 8,000 years who had been cryogenically frozen due to a terminal illness. He states, "It was cryogenics, everyone was doing it."

He wakes up in the 11<sup>th</sup> Millenia and had had a choice of eternal life, cure date of one's illness or a random date. He chose the Eleventh Millenia. Reasonable fees for the cryogenic process.

In his past "robots did the dirty work," and humans, "were buzzing around in Space."

We are not told of the exact date of his life, but it seems it was about the 23<sup>rd</sup> century.

In his time, the big screen in one's home is the primary mode of communication in what appears to be virtual reality

He says of his own time, "The wrong people are running the world." Namely "politicians, entrepreneurs and journalists."

He wants to see the future. Which is why he awoke, at such a distant time.

His son had said, "It could be a nightmare."

When he awakes he is one of the "Cryos."

His illness is gone, and he is youthful. He is soon joined with his wife and extended family. They had all chosen to awake in the beginning of the Eleventh Millenia.

In his time DNA had been blown wide open and all diseases were about to be cured. It seems like all disease had now been cured.

In his new life, he is given a smart phone to read what happened.

Space and medicine were the priorities of 3<sup>rd</sup> Millenia, despite the wars.

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Wars killed 3 billion people on Earth. And outside the NYC dome is said to be a wasteland. And wars continued through the Millennia.

He reads a smart phone to tell him of the history in which 5 billion Cryos had already been created.

It seems like in the Fourth Millenia, everyone lives in domes, and it was the end of agriculture and artificial nutrients came into being.

In the Fifth everyone became partly digitalized and in the Seventh = totally digitalized. In the Eighth, everyone is integrated into the Central Unit.

People just take pills for sustenance and don't need a toilet or drugs and showers are not water, but rather a different liquid, and everyone seems to be immortal so there are no children. Wars have apparently laid waste to the outside of the walled city of New York.

But the New World wants to turn everyone who wakes up into a "Replicate," and digitalize everyone.

"You will have a mind life copies, but the computer will be inside of you and you'll still be yourselves."

Then he meets his wife and extended family and it is bliss. But he is tempted to love the android love dolls. However, his wife is eternally youthful, and he loves her.

The first stage of his New World is being assessed for health. The second phase is getting acclimatized. And the third and final phase is psychological counseling for the replication of one's brain.

And digitalization.

News is largely uplifting stories and announcements. Everyone watches every day for an hour.

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Replication was the reality.

“Instead of having the experiences of one phase or another, you have this simultaneous experience in one place or another and experience the both as you experience them consecutively.”

But the protagonist decides to fight the digitalization and starts a rebellion, wondering if the Authorities are able to read their minds or are prepared to put down a rebellion. The action is swift, and the ending is somewhat of a surprise.

This book is exciting, and action packed with a number of unique ideas. It is a tour de force of science fiction.

Just like in our lives, it is all in your head. And no matter what World is agreed on, there will always be dissenters, radicals, etc.

Russell’s novel is a very real portrait of a possible future. There are many hypothetical possibilities for the future, this one is a standout in terms of its realistic plot and likelihood of coming true.