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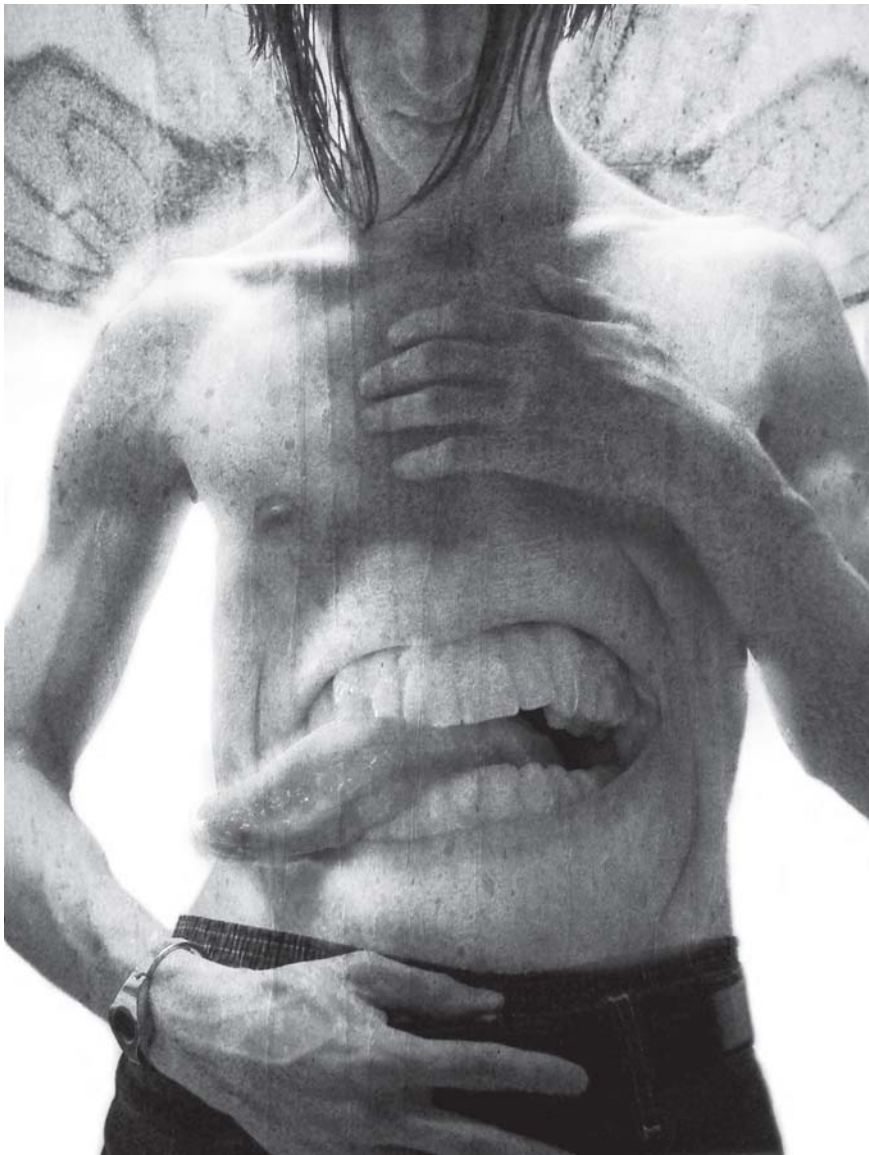
G U O

greatest uncommon denominator



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G U D

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Issue 0

Spring 2007

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Kmantis Hunch5

Konrad Kruszewski

Sundown

Debbie Moorhouse

A bird this deep in the heart of the city was a wonder enough for one day.

At first blink, it was a scrap of fabric or cardboard worn out of shape by heat and rain. At second blink, a sparrow. Trailing my fingers along the blistering shopfronts, blinking eyes open, eyes shut, I almost didn't notice it had feathers in time to avoid treading on it. A dirty cock sparrow, grey with accumulated layers of dust, its eyes still wide and bright.

No sign of any struggle; it lay crushed and spent in a bend where the pavement was wider than normal. The hot wind, or perhaps the ceaseless movement of the crowd, had pushed it into a gap between two paving slabs.

I shuffled round it, opening my eyes only the fraction necessary to see where it lay. This was the shortest route to the hospital, but it took the full brunt of the sun's glare.

At third blink, I saw the bird was alive.

"Moron," someone whispered as he elbowed me aside. Despite his aerator, the word was clearly articulated. I caught a glimpse of his eyes above the mask as he glanced at me; red-rimmed, they wept the grit driven on the wind.

Nobody I cared to see.

The bird hadn't moved, though perhaps it had blinked, or turned an eye. Its broken wings were still.

Head down, arms jerking to and fro at his sides, another man walked straight into me. The strap holding his aerator stuck up out of his hair like an unexpected tail. He inched along me, his breaths rasping in his throat, then resumed his march.

A siren's despairing wail reminded me I was on my way to see Chris before he died.

What was keeping life in this bird? Why didn't it just give up and let go? Like others I'd rescued from cats, which had quivered and pulsed on the edge of freedom, then died in my hands. I wondered if I should stamp on it and put it out of its misery. But was it suffering? Its bright, quick eye gave no clues. Maybe I was too much of a coward, anyway. I walked on, leaving it lying there, alive.

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I found Chris in Resus, identifiable as such only by the name painted on the wall. The creak and bang of the door did not attract his attention, although his eyes were open. His chest moved like a ratchet as he fought for breath. Each centimetre cost him pain.

"There you are," I said.

"Jack...." He used up all the breath he had earned with that one word, then lay staring at the ceiling, perhaps considering whether or not it was worth setting the ratchet going again.

"Coming back to work for me, now?" I couldn't resist this opportunity to lecture him when he couldn't talk back. "Guaranteed safe."

A transient smile cracked his lips. I touched the hand nearest to me, and then gripped it when he didn't resist.

Another faint groan as he forced his chest out one more notch. Where the knives must have gone in, he was patched with dressings. The hospital had torn the blue uniform-like shirt he'd been wearing with such pride the last time I'd seen him. I wondered if the police had come and gone, or if they weren't coming at all. What was another stabbing? Not even page-four news.

"Jack...." He forced the word out between teeth stained with blood.

"Shush." I squeezed his hand. "Get better, then call me."

"Dying," he said.

I watched the last hints of colour draining from his face. Watched the ratchet stutter and fail. Saw blue tinge his lips.

I held onto his hand.

"Why did you have to go off, hey? Why didn't you stay with me?" No answer in his face. No way to know if he'd heard me. If he even knew the answer.

People naturally fell away from me, it seemed, like ash seeds helicoptering away from the parent tree.

"Don't die." He had decided he'd rather be muscle in a club than partner with me. "Chris."

I wanted to put my arms round him and hold him, hold the life in him, but he'd always been wary of proximity.

- - -

On the way back, I walked on the other side of the road. It was less convenient; the frequent breaks in the shopfronts meant I had to keep my eyes half-open all the time. I didn't know what I

feared more, that the sparrow would be dead, or that it would still be stubbornly, if patiently, alive.

When I climbed the thirteen steps to my office, someone was already waiting for me. A woman this time, with the set lips and haunted eyes of someone ready to abandon hope. Heavily built, maybe forty. No bag, so she'd probably been in town a while. I polished my plaque with my sleeve.

"You're the tracer?" she said, a frown falling into habitual grooves between her eyes. "I thought you'd be older."

I offered my hand. "Jack Connor."

"Lisa Palmer." She barely touched my fingers, the momentary contact hot and dry.

I let us in, leaning on the panel for just the right amount of time. The aerator immediately sprang into action, filling the one room with a cool stream of oxygen-heavy air. I unshaded the windows, letting some dirty light in for my plants. The woman stood in the doorway, looking around.

"Shut the door." I pinched off a discoloured leaf. "Take a seat."

She made a noise that might have been acknowledgement, might have been thanks. I heard her cross the room and lower herself into the chair. She fumbled with her personal aerator, switching it off, but not bothering to remove the tube from her nose. I allowed a tiny amount of water to dribble onto the compost round one of my plants, then stroked dust off a leaf, exposing red and green striations.

"Those the new mox-eaters?"

I glanced at her, but saw only polite curiosity.

"Field-testing brings in a few cents."

I crossed the room to sit opposite her, in the more comfortable chair I kept for myself.

"So, who're you looking for?" Reaching down into a half-open drawer, I pulled out a pad of paper. A pen already lay on the desk. I popped it a few times, listening to the click. The woman was looking, not at me, but at the plants covering every available surface.

"What do they do?"

"Release oxygen," I said. That revelation fell outside the prescriptions of Clause 149 of the contract, which covered sharing

sensitive commercial information with non-authorised persons. In some detail. "Like the aerators."

"A little less portable."

"So, who—"

"My daughter." She seemed suddenly in a hurry to explain. "She ran off."

"And she's how old?" I popped the pen again, and then tested it on a piece of scrap paper. The ink had dried. I popped it a few more times before I wrote the date on the top of the pad.

"Thirteen." She coughed. "Seventeenth of the twelfth, fourteen." Again, she coughed, covering her mouth. Perhaps her aerator was contaminated with dust, although its tubing was translucent, unstained.

"Name?"

"Anna Gray. Her father's name." Again, the cough, not wet like Chris's, but hacking and dry.

I wrote the name down, under the date, and then wrote the date of birth next to it. The two sets of numbers confused me. Turning to the next page of the pad, I began again.

"Look, Mr Connor, I'm not sure...."

I glanced up. She had money, although something, perhaps experience, had led her to try to hide it. The dirt on her clothes meant nothing. They were good quality, chosen for wear rather than fashion.

"How many places have you been?"

"Oh...." A different tone now, rueful, almost laughing. One hand released the other, and then it waved airily for a second. "Loads." She widened her eyes. "Albert & Lyons wanted eight thousand euros, up front. I don't have that kind of money. Not ready cash."

"Not many people do." I wrote the amount down, however, next to the missing girl's name.

"I had to promise them I'd try to raise it. I was afraid they wouldn't let me out the door."

"Door's right there." I smiled, nodding in that direction. "I don't use pressure tactics."

"Can you find my daughter?"

"Sometimes I find them. More often not." I got up and went back to my plants, to use the hand-pumped fan to blow dust off their leaves. "So, what happened? You argued, she and the boyfriend argued, or it's her father she had the argument with?"

"All three."

"It doesn't take much, for some." I scooped up a dangling tradescantia tendril and positioned it where it would get more light.

"She's too young. But when you're young...you think you know everything."

"No, you know you do." I went back to my desk, grabbed the pad, and wrote down the name. Anna Gray. "When did she run?"

"Six months ago. Just after her birthday." She was leaning forward again. "We thought she'd come back. Well, where could she go? Then the police said she was here. They'd pictures, from one of their cameras. Here in London." Frowning, she looked around my tiny office. "They said it's where they all end up."

"I see." A note on the pad. "Does she know anyone locally?" Six months ago...that would be when? I started calculating dates, using a new page. Anna Gray's name at the top.

"No." She laughed, suddenly, irrelevantly. "She was always talking about the lions. You know, in Trafalgar Square? She wanted to see them. Not by webcam. But for real."

"They've been moved," I said, and saw her slight start of surprise. "Didn't you know?"

"The news is so unreliable." She sounded apologetic.

"They went out to Arizona, to the aircraft graveyard. They'll bring them back, when it's safe." I wrote down 'lions?' And then the girl's name, Anna Gray, so I'd remember to what the 'lions?' note referred.

"Arizona." Her expression changed. "She didn't know, I'm sure."

"Lisa." I saw her surprised again, this time at my use of her name. "How badly do you want to find your daughter?"

"Is this where you tell me how much it costs?"

"There's some unpleasant facts you're going to have to face." I turned the pen in my fingers, disliking this part as always. "There's only so many ways to live in this city. Stealing, begging, dealing, hooking. You can bet Anna's into one or all of those. And even if you find her, she may not fall weeping into your arms. She may be addicted to cigarettes, or alcohol, or maybe it'll be heroin, or cocaine. She's not going to be the same little girl who left home."

"I know all that," the woman said, but she still wasn't looking at me. I turned to a fresh page and wrote down Anna's name, and then the observation 'naive background?' I hoped the woman couldn't

read what I was writing. When I glanced at her again, she was admiring my plants.

She had no idea.

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When I left my office, I drifted back towards the sparrow, as if drawn. It was as good a direction as any to take.

The bend in the pavement now hosted a nascent cardboard city. Two boxes, each with its own clearly-defined territory, one inhabited, one not. A flag of St. George waved over the second box, perhaps ironically. Perhaps not.

At first glance, the sparrow didn't appear to be there. I wondered if it had been frightened off, or if it had just been faking me out, waiting for me to go away before taking flight. But then I saw it. It had rolled, or perhaps been kicked, right against the wall, and got mixed up with the rubbish the city-dwellers had tossed aside.

Only its feet, sticking out at unnatural angles, distinguished it from a filthy paper bag. I bent down and poked it with a fingertip. Surely it couldn't still be alive. Its eyes were now filmed with dust. But when I touched it, I detected the unmistakable quality of life. No warmth, no heartbeat—how could it be living?

Yet it was.

I wished I'd brought a box, or a plastic bag, anything I could wrap it in. I didn't fancy the idea of having it loose in my pocket. Especially if it was going to die. I wiped my fingertip on my leg, puzzling. This wasn't what I was meant to be doing. I had people to find—not just Anna Gray, but many others.

When I failed to find their quarries, clients had a habit of inserting a retroactive 'No find, no fee' clause into our contract. Taking them to court, even if you could find a friendly judge, was more trouble than it was worth.

But I couldn't leave the sparrow there. Already it had suffered more because I had passed it by. I pictured it as a new inhabitant of my office, although I couldn't visualise it fluttering about. No, it would lie patient and quiet among my plants.

I picked it up, wrapping my fingers gently round it. Its lower body seemed swollen, compared with birds I'd held before. I couldn't feel its heart banging in fear, couldn't feel the breaths drawn into the oversized body. Surely it was dead.

Gritting my teeth, I put it into my jacket pocket, forcing myself past the momentary revulsion. I brushed my hands against my trousers, wiping off parasites with the dust.

The bird had made no resistance, no complaint.

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All the way to the huddle of outlets by the river, the bird lay muffled in my pocket, a dead weight. By the time I arrived, most of the small shops were closed, their blinds drawn down in defiance of the midday heat. Only Sammy's Square Deal was still doing business, its door propped half-open as if to entice a breeze into the dim interior.

I checked out the flyers papered on the board covering last year's broken window. Nothing new.

I went inside. The current Sammy, a middle-aged man who'd seen more sun than was good for his skin, threw down his racing paper and got to his feet. The paper hit the wooden counter, raising a thin cloud of dust.

"Hello, Jack." He wrinkled his forehead more, if possible, inspecting me. His right hand waved automatically at motes dancing in the air. "What you looking for now?"

When I handed him Anna's picture, he smiled and said, "Tasty bit."

"Been in here?" I looked casually round his shop, wondering if he had any boxes in sparrow size.

"What would she be selling?"

"Aerator. Phillips."

What else of value did the child have? The aerator would have gone first.

"No." He was shaking his head slowly from side to side, still looking at the picture. "Not here." He glanced up at me, and smiled. "Keep this? Case she comes in."

"I'll drop one by later," I said, holding my hand out. "Haven't had them copied yet."

"My brother-in-law give you a good price." He gave me back the picture, feeding it between his fingers one glossy centimetre at a time.

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Perhaps six months had been enough for the elfin face in the picture to be forgotten. I studied it as I walked along, finding my way by instinct. If I saw the child now, would I recognise her? Would that long blond hair have been left, or cut short, curled, bobbed, dyed, streaked, shaved? Would life on the streets have worn down the planes of her face even further, burrowing hollows into her cheeks?

Would I walk straight past her, just because her mother had left it so long? At least she'd had the sense not to pay Lyons up front. Up front because it was a hopeless case, and once they had the money, they only had to pretend to try.

I worked my way back to the hospital and cased its cardboard city, which seemed to be populated by die-hard Anglo-centrics. They didn't like me (too tanned). Perhaps their dead blue eyes penetrated to the not-dead sparrow in my pocket, and led them to conclude I was weird.

I wondered what the official line would be about Chris. Resting comfortably? Critical but stable? It was hard to find anyone to ask. The corridors were crowded only with patients.

Since I was on the premises, I filched a few loose items. Mostly plastic tubing, but I also got a disposable scalpel set someone had failed to throw away. It didn't even look used. I started coiling the plastic tube into the pocket that still held the sparrow, remembered, and carefully withdrew it. When I touched the bird with one finger, it was alive. How could it live?

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In back of the cathedral, I came across a market that hadn't been there before. A few stalls in a semi-circle, guarded mostly by kids. I got a good deal on the tubing, ten cents for thirty centimetres, and sold the scalpel set for a couple of euros. Less than it was worth.

With the proceeds, I went to buy a jacket potato from one of the stalls, the cleaner-looking one. The small boy serving—blond hair, grey eyes—seemed familiar. He piled cheese onto my potato without looking at it or at me, served it with his gaze still cast down, and hardly even glanced at my money.

His fingers rubbed the coins together as if he could tell their value by that. He was dirty behind the clean apron and cap.

A runaway? Considering this possibility, I went to sit under a tree to eat. The tree wasn't yet in leaf, but cast a tiny amount of shade.

At intervals, growths shaped like scallop shells grew out from its trunk, pushing thin shreds of bark aside.

As casually as I could, I dug into my shirt pocket and pulled out my collection of flyers. Some people papered the streets with photos of their missing loved ones, hoping a deserving member of the public would turn them in for money. It rarely worked, if only because we tracers pulled the flyers down.

I sorted through them until I found the boy. He hadn't been missing long. And someone was offering a lot of money for his safe return. Note that word, safe. If I'd found him half-dead, was I supposed not to tell? I got out my phone and called the number on the flyer. It was snatched up after half a ring.

"Yes?" a man's voice said.

"You looking for a kid? Name of...." I had to consult the flyer again. "Kevin?"

"Yes."

"What's the reward on him?"

"Twelve thousand."

"Says fourteen, here."

I took a massive bite.

"Have you found him?"

The potato was gritty, or my mouth was. Chewing, I glanced over at the stall. The boy was dozing, leaning against the oven. Hard to believe the day wasn't hot enough for him.

"Looking at him right now," I said.

"All right, fourteen." He sounded indifferent to the sum. "But I want him unhurt."

"I won't hurt him," I said. "Can't speak for others."

"Unhurt," he said.

"I can't speak for others." Another massive bite. The potato was surprisingly good, cooked right through. One of the new varieties, maybe; it had no eyes. "Do I have your authority to grab him, or not?"

"Go ahead. But try to pull a fast one—"

"Yeah, yeah." I'd heard all that before. "I'll call you back with a pick-up address. You just be sure to bring the money. Cash. Blue notes. And don't you try to pull anything."

"I just want him back."

"So ice the champagne." I disconnected, and placed the phone on the ground at my feet. Its battery was almost drained; I'd forgotten to leave it in the sun.

Once I'd finished the potato, I licked my fingers, and only then remembered I hadn't washed after picking up the sparrow. Too late. And why worry, anyway? We were all on the road to death.

I put my flyers away again. Some were years old. Why carry them?

Having wiped my fingers on my shirt, I leant back against the tree, pretending to be asleep. The market was too crowded a place, too public, to grab the boy up. Sooner or later, he'd be somewhere more quiet.

For the time being, I contented myself with watching him. Customers took from his stall with hardly any effort. Not that there was much to take, but the paper serviettes disappeared in short order, and soon he was left with no forks. Like the man on the phone, he appeared indifferent. Just getting through the day.

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About two o'clock, the stallholder came back. A brief dispute was settled when the boy was presented with some money and a large potato dripping with soya in gravy. The stallholder began packing up.

The boy wandered away; I followed. He seemed a strangely dreamy kid, unaware of his surroundings. We went round to the front of the cathedral, then inside, where he tried and failed to steal from the tiny shop. Then round the side streets, here, there, and everywhere, until he made the mistake of going into the park.

Perfect. I quickened my pace, grabbed him from behind, and flung him down onto the parched grass. The remains of his potato scattered. Kneeling on his back, I searched him, finding the money he'd been paid and little else. No knife. He was staring sideways all this time, just staring and trying to breathe. When I pulled him to his feet, he continued staring, not even staring at me.

"Hi, Kevin," I said. That got a response. He kicked me, and twisted. I hit him, once, twice, across the face, not hard enough to leave a mark. He struggled, warm and sweaty in my sliding grip. I threw him down and sat on him. That was usually convincing.

"You haven't got a chance, against me," I told him, leaning more of my weight on him. He gasped, and stretched his arms out,

scrabbling his fingers through the grass. I thought, too late again, of the sparrow in my pocket, crushed against this boy.

"Don't...." he said, then gasped for breath.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

"Don't take me back." He twisted his head round to look up at me. "Take the money. Don't take me back."

I dragged him to his feet.

"Don't give me any trouble." I tucked his money back into his pocket, ignoring his attempts to get away. "This isn't the movies, I am not the tracer with the heart of gold, you are going to be handed over, and no one is going to help you." I shook him. "Got that?"

"I'll be your boy."

"Don't want one."

"Keep your place clean, then?"

"Already covered."

"Run errands?"

"Forget it, okay?" Again, I shook him.

"Water your plants?" He attempted a smile. "You've got plants, I can tell."

"Yeah?" I said, and laughed. "Going to tell my fortune?"

"You're going to undergo a religious conversion," he said. "Realise the futility of getting money and let me go."

"Don't give up the day job." I set off, dragging him with me.

- - -

I had to sit on him again to make the phone call. I arranged the pick-up at a place I'd used before that had an abandoned meat locker. Simple to stuff the kid in there and lock it. Simple for the recently impoverished relative to release him again.

The man on the phone seemed to be in a hurry, especially compared to his indifference of earlier. We made the date for that evening, leaving me only a couple of hours to waste at the office. I had to drag Kevin all the way. For such a dreamy, careless child, he was persistent.

Back at the office, I flung him to the floor and made a big show of locking the door with him watching. Rubbing his knees, he got up and went to inspect my plants.

I took the sparrow out of my pocket and laid it on my desk. It looked much the same as ever. Perhaps somehow smaller. I poked

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it, getting, again, no response. But I knew, as I'd known all along, that it was, if barely, alive.

Kevin picked up one of my spider plants and inspected it.

"Needs repotting," he said.

"Yeah?"

"Got roots poking through the bottom." He put it down, and checked another. "And this one."

"Imagine that." I took the sparrow over to the small sink and washed it. I wasn't worried it would drown. Its feathers darkened and became slicker under the dribble from the tap. Its head lolled.

"What's that?" Kevin said, coming closer.

"Nothing."

"What?" He pressed against me, determined to see. I spread the sparrow's wings, trying to get it as clean as possible, to rid it of parasites. It grew even colder in my hands as the water soaked into it.

"Ew." Frowning, he looked up at me. "What you want a dead bird for?" A grin spread across his face, dispelling the frown. "Going to eat it?"

"It's not dead," I said.

"Looks dead."

"I'll give you that." I reduced the dribble to a drop, and carefully cleaned dust from the bird's eyes. Clean, they had once again that bright, lively look I'd noticed before.

I wrapped the bird in some paper towels and carried it back to my desk. It didn't move. It didn't breathe. Its heart didn't beat. And yet...it was alive.

"You're strange," Kevin said. He went back to my plants. Perhaps they were safer, a known quantity. He began pruning a begonia that had a number of yellowing leaves.

Pressing the towels against the sparrow with my fingertips, I dried it off, trying not to watch the boy. He was delicate underneath the dirt, with the pale, almost translucent skin of the true blond. His veins were clearly visible. He was scrawny, his skin drawn tight over prominent bones. Turning my attention back to the sparrow, I spread its wings and then released them. They flopped back into the nest of towels.

Perhaps the bird, too, was puzzled by the non-occurrence of the event for which it was waiting. I smoothed its still-damp feathers. What was there to convince anyone it was alive? Only an elusive quality. I took hold of one foot and pulled it. The body moved in the direction I was pulling. No resistance. No fight.

Kevin's hair had grown out of a professional cut into tufts and lengths that brushed his cheek and neck. His clothes were of the best, with designer labels carefully tucked into places they wouldn't normally be seen. Someone had spent a lot of money on him, once. I could see that when he grew up, he would be handsome. I couldn't see anything attractive about him now.

Be your boy, he'd said. I shook myself. Not my problem.

"What're these red and green ones?" he said.

"They're gene-mods. Leave them alone." I prodded the sparrow, wishing it would show some reliable sign of life.

"I didn't touch them."

"Continue with that policy."

He laughed. "You're strange."

"They take CO out of the air, and break it down into carbon and oxygen, and...." I prodded the sparrow again. "We have more breathable air."

"What do they do with the carbon?"

"Build it into themselves. So they grow bigger."

"Oh."

He seemed impressed by the mox-eating plants. So had I been, when they'd arrived on the doorstep. Quite apart from their environmental benefits, they were beautiful plants. And they grew. Very fast, very big, outgrowing their pots within weeks, growing relentlessly taller and wider and more solid. I'd tried planting cuttings, but they never took. Once removed from the plant, leaves and branches shrivelled, shedding all their water and becoming brittle skeletons. Perhaps that had been designed in, too. I had three plants, and the letter that had come with them had suggested, very strongly, that by the end of the trial I had better still have those same three plants.

"And no, you can't have one."

"Do they flower?"

"Not so far." I looked back down at the sparrow. Had it moved? Hard to tell. It still lay limp and damp. It might just have fluttered a wing. Half-seriously, I took my own pulse, feeling it beat steady and strong in my wrist.

I looked back over at Kevin. He was playing with one of the spider plants, coiling a long, thin leaf around and around his finger. He's worth a lot of money, I told the conscience that was struggling to come back to life in me. And what happens after that is not my concern.

- - -

"Please," he said, when we set off for the warehouse. "Please. Please. Please."

"Shut up!" I shook him, using the tight grip I had on his shoulder.

"You don't know what they're like."

"Shut up."

"Please."

"Shut up!"

"I don't like you." He started crying. "You care about a stupid bird! A stupid bird that's dead."

"It's not dead," I said. "That's the point."

"It is too dead."

"It's not." I shook him again. "Shut up."

"I hope your plants die."

Such weak weapons he had. A child's weapons. I shook him a third time, harder than before.

"Everything dies. Get used to it."

"I'll die," he said. "If you take me back."

"Good."

"I hate you!" He squirmed in my grip, trying to kick me, but I was ready for him. I lifted him off the ground, and stared him in the eye.

"Behave. Or you'll wish you had."

"I hate you."

"Shut up."

When I threw him in the locker, he spat at me, and missed.

- - -

"Where's the kid?" Obviously no relation of Kevin's, being black, he also wasn't the man I'd spoken to on the phone. Muscle, probably, hired to facilitate the handover. He had a small bag at his feet.

I showed him the photograph I'd taken back at the office.

"He's safe. Nearby." I watched him make a point of checking out the photograph. Kevin had that day's paper clutched to his chest and a puzzled expression. His eyes were screwed up tight against the flash.

"So?"

"So, you hand over the cash, I tell you where he is."

"It's here." He shoved the bag over to me with the side of his foot. "Any funny business, you're dead."

"Yeah, yeah." I gave the bag a massive kick over towards the exit I'd picked, and then followed it, scooped it up, and held it

against my chest. There wasn't time to count the money. But I did dig down deep into the bag, select a bundle of notes at random, and riffle through it. All blue notes, all genuine, so far as I could see. Maybe these guys were on the level.

"The kid?" the man said.

"Go up there." I pointed. "There's a meat locker. He's inside."

"You stay right there."

"Yeah." As soon as he turned his back on me, I turned mine on him, and bolted.

I took the exit I'd already selected, and from there climbed onto the roof. I had no intention of going far, as in my experience they never expected me to stick around. Taking a bundle of notes out of the bag, I gave it the go-over. The notes were genuine. Maybe I even had the right amount.

From the roof, I could see a car parked, a shiny diesel-powered Mercedes. There might have been someone sitting in the passenger seat, but I couldn't be sure. After a while, the black man came out, alone, and leant in at that side of the car. He was apparently talking to the someone whose outline I'd tried to puzzle into a human shape.

Hadn't he found Kevin? My instructions hadn't been complicated.

The conversation went on for some time. Then the black man walked round to the driver's side of the car and got in. With a whine from its engine, the car drove away.

A sick feeling started in the bottom of my stomach. Not your concern, my conscience reminded me. I zipped up the bag and went back down to the locker. The door was open. Inside, Kevin lay curled in on himself, as if sleeping. I bit my lip, and forced myself to kneel down next to him, to touch his bloodied cheek. He was alive.

- - -

When the hospital stonewalled my enquiries about Kevin, I went to see Chris instead. He hadn't yet graduated from the corridor. He lay still, giving the ceiling his patient stare, but when I touched his arm he was smiling.

"Feeling any better?" I thought I saw his eyes flicker, but there was no other response. I took his hand in both of mine. "Chris?" Blood had soaked through his dressings, then dried.

I wasn't at all sure he was going to make it. I didn't think Kevin was going to make it, either. And if I had to choose? Which of

them would get the bed, if it were up to me? Supposing there were a bed.

Chris and I hadn't parted on friendly terms. I'd reminded him of our agreement—that I would train him in tracing, in return for which he'd work with me for a further two years. He'd said the agreement no longer applied, as he hadn't the stomach for it. He wasn't a cold-hearted bastard like me, he'd said.

He'd have said I should have let the boy go.

I found a chair and sat down beside Chris's trolley, holding his hand. I held on for a long time, while the corridor got darker and one or two lights flickered into life, and one just flickered. While people went this way or that and a woman with a smelly bucket mopped the floor around us and someone somewhere screamed in pain.

Finally a nurse arrived, and took a cursory look at him.

"When did he die?" she said, checking her watch.

"He's not dead."

"Obviously he's dead." Using her palm, she closed Chris's eyes. "If you don't let go his hand, you'll be going down to the morgue with him."

"He's not dead." I raised my head and looked at her, and saw she was exasperated.

"Look, you can go quietly, or you can go to Psychiatry, I don't care which." She flicked the sheet up over Chris's head.

It took a while for me to detach myself. He didn't want to let go. I patted his knuckles, and told him I'd be back, or some such thing, and walked away.

- - -

Even though it was late, I went back to the office. I'd stashed the money there, and wanted to find it a safer place. Even halfway up the stairs I could tell from the tiny gap left between the door and the jamb that the place had been done over. Professionally. It would take a professional to get past the lock I'd installed. That at least meant there wouldn't be much damage.

Hands in my pockets, I walked in and looked around. No, no damage. But the mox plants were gone, and so, I found, was the money. Probably the plants had been the target, the money a bonus. Probably the woman that morning, Anna's mother, had been

sent in to scout the place. Those the new mox-eaters? Yes, please help yourself.

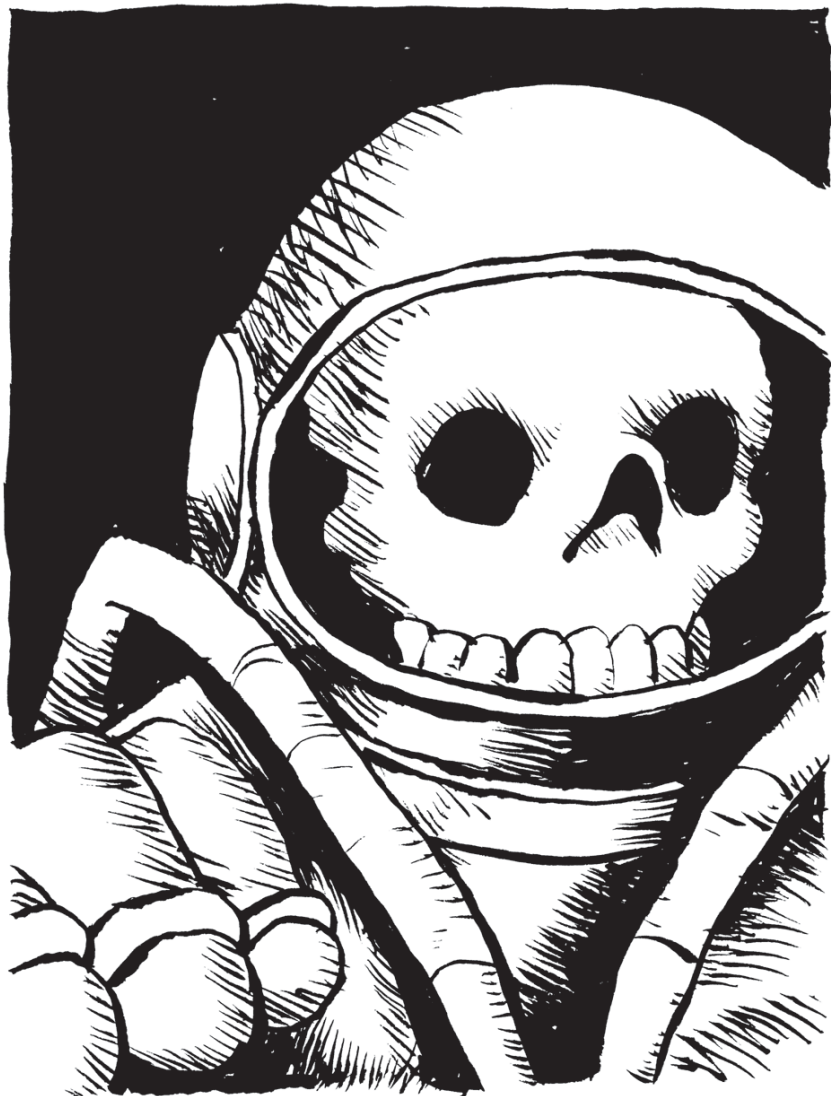
I swore under my breath. Didn't I know better than that? No wonder she'd been surprised when I'd used the name she'd given me.

The sparrow lay among my plants, still incomprehensibly alive.

I wondered if Chris would be cremated, still living, and if that would end his pain. Slowly, I sat down, and got the paperwork for the mox-eaters out of the drawer. The forty-two-page contract didn't specify the penalties for losing the plants to a competitor, though it did state they would be 'severe'.

A shiny green fly buzzed over and settled on the sparrow's eye. The bird didn't blink.

It's hard to tell when something's dead, and when it's alive.



Painsharing

John Walters

In a transparent protective cocoon, twenty-four met to mourn the dying Earth. The bloated sun above them cast its pale red light on the charred landscape.

The invitation had been sent to members of all the outer colonies, but most had ignored it, or scorned it, or been unable to understand it.

The mourners came from many different worlds, and had adapted themselves to suit the environment in which they lived; no common ground could be found, therefore, until they agreed, in honor of the occasion, to assume classic human form, half of them female and half male.

“What requiem can we offer?” one said.

Many ideas were proposed.

“We can close the Earth in sealant, protecting it for all eternity.”

“But look at what is left. Is it really worth preserving?”

“We can dance! We can create a multi-sensory display and each of us can perform a farewell ballet.”

But several said that they did not know how to dance, nor did they desire to.

“We can inject antimatter into the core, causing a tremendous explosion, and send copies of the event to all the outer colonies as memorials.”

“But such an action could be misinterpreted. It is one thing to allow the Earth to die; it is another to kill it ourselves.”

“We can commit suicide one by one, each in our own unique aesthetic manner, thus symbolizing the death of the Earth.”

“But we have not come here to end our lives, but only to offer our respect to the planet that gave birth to our ancestors.”

They argued back and forth but could reach no agreement, until one of them who had decided to call herself Hileila said, “We are missing the point. The importance of Earth to us is not the ball of matter itself, but the people who once called it their home. We have a database of everyone who has lived and died on this planet since records were kept. I propose that we slip through time and find them one by one and show them appreciation by loving them.”

“All of them?”

"How else can we be impartial? How can we judge one more important than another?"

"Do you mean have sex with them?"

"With some, yes. But many died while still under-aged, and many equated love with activities other than sex."

"But we are so few. It would take hundreds of thousands of years of subjective time to accomplish such a task."

"Some have suggested elaborate suicides. Why should we not instead stay alive and offer ourselves in this way? Consider the significance of what we are commemorating. The requiem needs to be worthy of it."

Finally they agreed to try Hileila's plan and meet again after a certain period of time to assess their progress.

So they divided up the names in the database according to chronological and geographical location, and slipped back.

- - -

Veracrysal, who had been given the list for North America in the early millennia, chose her first person at random. His name was Samuel Cantor. He was born in 1926, grew up in the Great Depression, fought in World War II (and since then, said the medical records, had suffered from nightmares about gutting a German with a bayonet), married and raised four children, died in 1980.

Veracrysal made contact with him in 1971, three years after his wife had died. His children were all grown and gone, and he lived alone in a small apartment.

It was not difficult for her to seduce him, though she wasn't too sure of what she was doing and he was incredulous that she should be doing it. They walked, they talked, he invited her home. It wasn't long before they were holding each other, and then in bed together.

"The world confuses me," he said. "I used to be self-assured, when I had my family to support and everything was going smoothly. Now I don't understand anymore." Then later, when they were making love, he said, "Why are you doing this? Why?"

She said, "Because I love you."

And when he accepted her love, let go of his loneliness and frustration and fear, the emotional surge was so strong she momentarily stopped breathing, and felt like a hand was squeezing and twisting her heart. She clung to him and wept, and thought to herself, *It hurts, oh it hurts; I didn't know it would hurt like this....*

"I love you, I love you...." he said, over and over.

She knew that time would fold back on itself and erase this snippet she had spent with him; it was the way history had of maintaining its continuity. But she hoped that somehow the remainder of his life would be brightened by what they had shared.

Perhaps it's not always like this, she thought. Perhaps the next one will be easier.

But it wasn't.

- - -

Morphalendus found himself in Rwanda in 1994, picking his way along a road crimson with blood through bodies that had been shot, clubbed, machete-slashed. Some corpses were dismembered; some were beheaded; some were not recognizable as human.

He heard a whimper. In the back of a thatched mud hut he found a naked little boy, stick-thin, with bloated belly. Morphalendus sat on the dirt floor and took the boy up into his arms and held him. As he did, the boy looked at him with large frightened eyes, then buried his face in Morphalendus's chest and clung to him with all of his negligible strength. Morphalendus wanted to talk to him, to tell him that it was all right, that he didn't have to be afraid, but he was so overwhelmed by the boy's heartache and terror that he couldn't speak.

Soon afterwards the boy died in his arms.

It seemed there were endless numbers of children in many times, in many places, who had been caught up in war or natural disasters or abject poverty. They just wanted to be held, to know someone was there for them. So he would hold them, while their grief and loneliness and fear burst from within in shuddering throbs, until they had spent it all and would lie quietly in his arms.

- - -

Shelada walked slowly down the aisle past rows of cots on which lay dying women in plain white cotton gowns. The plaster wall was whitewashed; the cement floor was spotless; the beams under the corrugated metal roof were free of dust or cobwebs. The silence was punctuated only by the shuffle of her sandaled feet, the quiet clicking of the overhead fan, an occasional cough, the rasping sound of someone laboring to breathe. I'll come back earlier for these, she thought.

Alone in a tiny room in the back, a white-robed woman knelt, her wrinkled hands clasped together, her eyes closed, her lips moving. Before her on the wall was a picture of a woman in blue holding a baby; both of them had faint mysterious smiles and golden halos around their heads.

Eventually the woman raised her head, opened her eyes, turned.

She does not want to have sex, Shelada thought. Nor does she want to be held.

"Who are you?" the woman said.

"I have come from beyond," Shelada said. "To love you."

The woman's expression changed from puzzlement to wonder and relief. Shelada moved forward and placed the fingertips of her right hand on the woman's brow. The force of the woman's emotional release almost caused Shelada to faint.

- - -

At the agreed-upon time, the twenty-four met.

"I can't do it anymore. No matter who I love it's always the same. It hurts too much. And then they forget."

"It's frustrating."

"It's discouraging."

"It's pointless. If they remembered it would be different."

For a time they were silent, in the light of the bloated red sun that shone on the empty world. Then Hileila said, "I know they won't remember us, but I have to believe that they'll remember the love."

Seventeen of them gave up and left for the outer colonies. After they were gone, Hileila said, "With so few of us, we will never complete our task. But I don't care anymore. Our ancestors need us more than I ever thought they would. Compared to them we are immortal; I will use this gift. I will continue to love them until my energy and substance dissipate."

Each of the rest of the seven agreed with her. So they again slipped back into the past, this time without hope of ever returning to the lives they had once lived.

- - -

From those early millennia, they moved forward through human history: through the period of nuclear warfare, the decimation

of the population, and the rebuilding; through the period of first contact and interstellar exploration; through the wars with extra-terrestrials, the discovery of time-slipping, the gradual abandonment of Earth for other worlds.

Though each period of history was unique, reactions to their love never changed.

But there came a day, far in the future in objective time, when every human being in their database had been found and loved. And they met together again, in their transparent protective cocoon on barren Earth. The ruby sun had swollen further and had become so large that it had almost swallowed Mercury.

Their ancestors had equated the heart with love. Blood was red, too....

They looked at each other and they saw the pain that each of them had absorbed, the pain that in their past lives they had all but forgotten.

They could do nothing but love one another, and share it. Otherwise it would overwhelm them.

Then they departed, to share the love and pain of humanity with the outer colonies.

No one was there when the sun consumed the Earth and then shrank to an insignificant white dwarf.

A Yellow Sun with a Purple Crayon

Michelle Garren Flye

“Draw me a yellow sun,” you say, handing me a purple crayon.

It’s an impossible request, of course, but I try anyway. I draw a large ball of purple fire with rays of purple light shooting out. I even add purple clouds and a royal purple bird with long tail feathers and graceful wings.

You frown, first at the paper, then at me. “I said yellow,” you say.

A Problem with the Law

Neil Davies

1.

I am hiding in the judge's cupboard.

I am behind a bag of sugar.

I am behind a bag of a sugar in the cupboard hiding.

It is the judge's cupboard.

I am hiding.

I am hiding in the judge's cupboard behind a bag of sugar
because I do not want the judge to see me.

2.

Today the judge has been in court and I have been in the judge's cupboard.

Now the judge is back in his house and I am in the judge's cupboard.

I am in the judge's cupboard hiding.

Behind a bag of sugar.

The judge was in the court today and he was judging while I was hiding in his cupboard.

He did not know that I was in his cupboard behind a bag of sugar because I was hiding.

He was judging and I was hiding.

He was judging.

3.

He was judging about a fight.

There had been a fight and he was asked to make a judgement on it.

The fight needed a judgement.

The judgement needed a judge.

The judge went to court to make a judgement on the fight.

While the judge was in court he made a judgement on the fight
and I was hiding in his cupboard.

I was hiding in his cupboard behind a bag of sugar and he was in court making a judgement on the fight.
The fight needed a judgement.
There had been a fight.

4.

Two men were in the fight.
There was a fight between two men and one of the men was bad.
Two men were in the fight and one of the men was good.
The judge went to court to judge on the fight between the good man and the bad man.
At this point I was in his cupboard hiding.
A good man and a bad man had a fight and the judge had to make a judgement in court.
The judge was not at the fight because he was at court.
I was not at the fight when the fight happened but I was not in the judge's cupboard either.
Today I have been in the judge's cupboard.
Only today have I been in the judge's cupboard hiding behind a bag of sugar.
Today the judge has been in court but he was not at the fight.

5.

Now the judge is at his home.
I am in the judge's cupboard and the judge is in his home.
The judge is in his home and he is talking to his wife.
I am in the judge's cupboard, hiding behind a bag of sugar, and I can hear the judge talking to his wife.
The judge's wife is at home now.
Now the judge is at home.
Now I am in the judge's cupboard.
The judge's wife is listening to the judge talk about the judgement in court.
I am listening to the judge talk to his wife about the judgement in court.
There was a judgement in court today about a fight.
There was a judgement about a fight.
The fight was between a good man and a bad man.
The judge was in court to make the judgement on the fight today and now he is talking to his wife about it.
I am listening to them as I hide in the cupboard.

6.

The judge tells his wife that there was a problem with the law.
In the court today there was a problem with the law and this affected the judgement about the fight.

The problem with the law affected the judgement about the fight between the good man and the bad man.

The judge is telling his wife that in court today there was a problem with the law.

Because of the problem with the law the judge made a judgement on the fight between the good man and the bad man.

The judge made a judgement and it meant that the good man went to jail.

The good man went to jail and the bad man walked away free.

The bad man was free and the good man went to jail.

The good man and the bad man had a fight and the good man went to jail.

There was a fight between a good man and a bad man and they went to court so that the judge could make a judgement today and the bad man walked free.

The bad man walked free and the good man went to jail and this was because of a problem with the law.

The judge is at home telling his wife about the problem with the law and the good man going to jail.

I am in the judge's cupboard.

I am hiding behind a bag of sugar.

7.

I am listening to the judge tell his wife about the problem with the law and the bad man walking free.

The judge's wife does not like this.

The judge's wife does not like the problem with the law.

The judge does not like the problem with the law.

The problem with the law meant that the good man went to jail and the bad man walked free.

The judgement was that the good man went to jail and the bad man walked free and this was made by the judge in court today.

The judge was in court today and I was in his cupboard hiding.

Now the judge is at home and is talking to his wife and I am in the judge's cupboard hiding behind a bag of sugar.

8.

The judge was talking to his wife about the problem with the law and now he is talking about having a drink of tea.

I am listening to this in the cupboard hiding.

I am listening to the judge's wife making a cup of tea while the judge talks about the problem with the law.

It is a long story.

There was a fight between a good man and a bad man.

The fight needed a judgement in court today.

The judge was in court today making a judgement and I was in the cupboard hiding and I don't know where the judge's wife was.

In court today there was a problem with the law and the judge made a judgement based on the problem with the law.

Are you following this?

The problem with the law meant the good man went to jail.

The good man went to jail.

The good man went to jail and the bad man walked free.

The judge made this judgement in court today.

While the judge was in court today I was in the cupboard hiding behind a bag of sugar.

Now the judge is at home and he is telling his wife about the problem with the law and the judge's wife is making tea to drink and I am in the cupboard hiding behind a bag of sugar.

9.

I have listened to the judge tell his wife about the problem with the law and the bad man walking free and now they are making tea.

I have listened to the judge tell his wife about the good man going to jail and now they are making tea.

I am listening to them making tea.

I have listened to the judge tell his wife about the judgement in court today while I was in the cupboard hiding behind a bag of sugar.

The judge's wife has made some tea and the judge and his wife are going to drink the tea.

The judge and his wife are going to drink the tea because the judge has been in court all day making a judgement and there was a problem with the law and now he is going to drink tea with his wife.

10.

I am in the cupboard hiding behind a bag of sugar and the cupboard door opens.

The cupboard door opens and the judge has got some tea to drink.

The cupboard door opens and the judge takes the bag of sugar for his tea.

The judge wants sugar with his tea so he opens the cupboard door and takes the bag of sugar.

I was in the judge's cupboard all day hiding behind a bag of sugar.

Now the judge has taken the bag of sugar for his drink of tea and

I am in the cupboard and he can see me because now I am not hiding behind the bag of sugar.

The judge is shocked.

I am shocked.

The judge's wife is shocked.

We stare into each other's eyes like scared animals.

Trying to Make Coffee

William Doreski

Trying to make coffee, I brew
a batch of chlorine gas, a bitter
stinging that escapes my kitchen
and drifts through town, burning and scarring
everyone who breathes it. A few
susceptibles die writhing, weeping
for their mothers. A police car
crashes into a mailbox.
The fire department's ladder truck
rolls into the river and hisses
like a wounded hippopotamus.
Victims turn green and thrust their heads
into snowbanks to snuff the heat.
They find relief by breathing
the cold moisture, and hardly care
if they drown.

Immune to my own
disaster, I treat myself
to coffee at the diner,
where gas survivors have gathered,
wheezing and tearing and outraged.
Why terrorists targeted our town
puzzles them, but maybe we boast
a superior populace, one
that evil just has to squelch.
I say nothing, but conceal my face
in my coffee. My expertise
in foreign affairs requires me
to maintain a silent modesty
while emergency vehicles
gather like a parliament. Sirens
rake the town. The stink of bacon grease
protects the air in the diner,
so it serves as an oasis
for weary rescue personnel.

To distract myself from my guilt,
I ask the waitress how the diner
makes coffee, and she points to urns
big as my torso. I'll have to read
a cookbook before I try again.
At last, snowfall combs the air,
piercing and deflating the gas cloud.
I join the collective cheer.
Thirty dead, two hundred treated
for internal burns, a few still
critical. Too bad. I sip
the diner coffee and believe
that, with practice, I could make better,
the leaden gall behind my tongue
a byproduct careful brewing
should eliminate in favor
of a fresh and nutty taste.

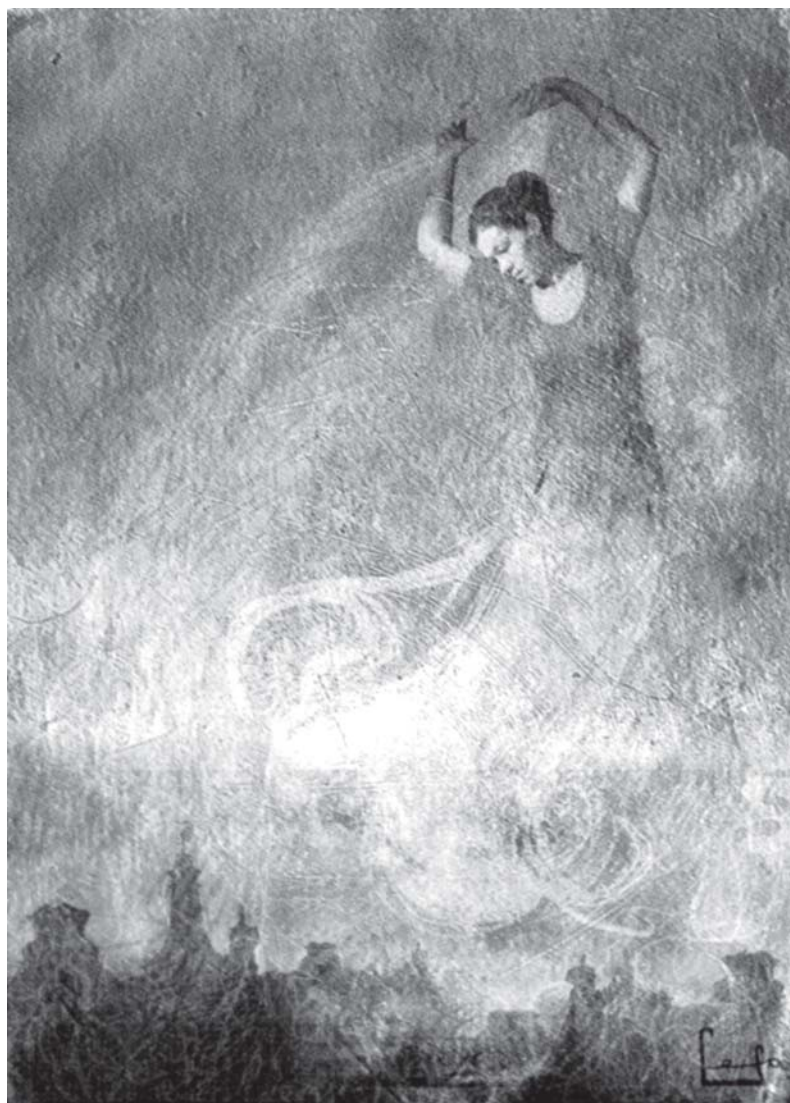
Fade in Fade out

Beverly A. Jackson

I love how they do that in the movies.
It's a close-up of a staircase, then the doorknob!
The music soars, and you know it's coming
but you're not sure what. Somebody's climbing.
Somebody's at the door. Something is out there.
Isn't that what we dread? And pray for?

My eyes are like the director's. Eyes seeking out
the monster. Looking for the love connection.
Panning the villagers with burning torches. For him.
Or for me? Whatever it is, it's horrible and wonderful.
Look, it sits upon the bed, the whatever has a pair of pants
and a belt coils there as if a body lifted up like air—into air.

But after all, it's only a movie. A trick of the camera.
The bed is quite empty, smooth with fresh sheets, daisies
growing in the threads of Sears' on-sale comforter.
There's no danger here. It's just my unmedicated nerves.
It's just my hand reaching out, fingers thrust in a pocket,
stroking. Of Mice and Men? Trembling. Hoping. Terrified.



Changing Destiny

Fefa

33

Songs of the Dead

Sarah Singleton and Chris Butler

Light splashed bars of white on the surface of the black water in the gutter. The pale roots of violets trailed in the moist, smeared layers of soil, city dust, and greenish effluent from the market. Thin threads of blood, clogged and dark, embroidered the thicker currents of mud and slurry. So much to see.

The lowing of the beasts, distinct here, rose up in the London street to disturb the boy. He looked up, shading his eyes. The return of spring had renewed the sun's vigour. In descent, the fire wheel spilled skeins of bright gold across the shining rooftops. If he did not start back now, his mother would worry.

On a clear day, the angels could have pointed to any one of the London villages. But now, new buildings came sprouting from the soil. Curious suburban fabulations. Complete with Greek columns fashioned in plaster, already soaking up veins of damp. Pretensions, his father said, of the traders. Snatching a piece of land for a scaled-down villa. The gaps in the landscape had filled in, and the random patchwork of the cityscape stretched as far as he could see.

The boy tucked his sketch into his pocket, and set off again. He made good progress along the street. Two old men puffed past, carrying a sedan chair. A thin, white-gloved hand lolled from the window, catching his eye. The curtain was drawn, a tatty brown brocade, and the woman's fingers tapped restlessly on the faded paintwork. The sedan stopped before a coffee house. A voice. The curtain twitched. Intrigued, the boy stepped closer, keen to catch a glimpse of the woman inside. One of the porters scurried into the coffee house, shoulders stooped. When the door opened, laughter erupted, along with a tide of smoke and snuff and the hot, prickly aroma of stewed coffee.

A body banged against the door. A large man, in a jacket fashioned with burgundy, livid purple, and gold, with a face bright pink through smudged layers of white paint, the mouth soft and red, dribbles on the chin. The man's heavy torso contracted and convulsed. He pressed his hand to his mouth, an effort to contain some fierce digestive struggle. He bent double. He retched. A stream of hot, meaty vomit burst from his lips, splattering onto the pavement.

"Oh God," the man said, his eyes fixed on the brew seeping into the mud. The seizure took him again. A second wave, less violent than the first. A vapour rose from the mess, fingers of which were caught in eddies of the water in the gutter, slowly twisting with the ribbons of blood and mud and the waste of the beasts from the market.

The boy's eyes widened. He took a breath.

"Oh God," the man repeated. His head twitched. Strings of vomit and saliva clung to his fingers, adding a curious glitter to the rings on his fingers. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, and dabbed ineffectually at his face.

"Boy, help me, will you?" Slowly the man straightened. He pressed his left hand to his belly. The other, still clutching the soiled piece of lace, grasped the boy's shoulder.

"Inside. Help me inside."

The boy nodded hard. He tucked his arm around the man's back. The man's breath flooded the boy's face, the hot acid smell of partially digested meat, black pepper, and mace. The man took his hand from his uncertain guts just long enough to shove back his wig, which leaned precariously. Grey powder puffed as he patted it.

"Better. Yes, much better."

The boy guided the man through the door. The damp, smoky room engulfed them. Despite the mild weather, a huge fire blazed in the corner. The man took his place at a table.

"Bishop, are you fit?" A blubbery gentleman sitting opposite tucked into a plate of beef pudding. "Don't let it go to waste." He indicated Bishop's plate, piled with strips of pork belly and kidneys in cream.

Bishop turned to the boy.

"You would like a coffee, yes?" he asked. "What's your name?"

"Will," the boy said. "Will Blake."

"Will. Thank you." Bishop signalled to a young woman, who tipped thick black coffee into a dish.

The stooped sedan porter hovered behind them, trying to catch Bishop's attention. He shuffled from one foot to the other in an anxious dance.

"Sir," he said. "Sir."

"Drink up, Will," Bishop said. He picked up a fork, considering the delicacy before him. "These good men are doctors," he said, confidentially, signifying the company about the table with his

gaze. "Doctors of the mind. And I am a doctor too. Dr. Charles Bishop. How old are you, Will Blake?"

"Fourteen, sir," Will said eagerly. But Bishop had already turned from him, resuming some earlier conversation.

"Look, Thomas, I know you do not believe me, but I'm telling you it works."

The blubbery man snorted and shook his head, without lifting his eyes from his plate.

"Where's Edgar?" Bishop asked. "He will back me up." He dug his knife into a strip of pork, adorned it with the tassel of a kidney and a veil of cream. He stuffed it into his mouth.

"Sir," the porter tried again. "Miss Marks, sir. She's outside. She's waiting for her brother."

"Marks—damn it, Marks isn't here," Bishop said. "He's late. Tell her to wait at Silver Street."

The porter shifted, foot to foot. But Bishop resumed his dinner and the man backed away, shaking his head.

"The pictures, you see," Bishop said. "A likeness. If the picture is true, something is fixed in the medium, something is drawn from the subject, don't you see?"

"What evidence do you have?" The fat man snorted. He chased a scrap of burnt fat on his plate. His lips glistened.

"The subject is soothed. I have witnessed this, time and again. The agitation is drawn away."

Bishop had forgotten about Will. Happy to eavesdrop, the boy sipped quietly, taking in the smoky atmosphere, the steaming coffee-pots, the papers on the wall: notices of meetings and hangings, sordid newspaper accounts of political corruption and criminal sensation. The papers were overlaid, one plastered atop another.

He drew out the sketch from his pocket, unfolded the thick yellow paper, and took out a charcoal fragment. He stared at the fat man, and his hand moved to an empty space on the paper.

"Good God, he's got you!" Bishop said. Will looked up, and around. The moment of concentration had gone. The sketch was quick, and incomplete. Will stuffed it away.

"Hold, hold. Let me see." Bishop's thick, strong fingers seized his arm and tugged the paper away. Will flushed. His scribbles were examined. Bishop laughed at the likeness of his colleague.

"You have a talent, young man," he said, growing thoughtful. His brow furrowed.

"I have a commission. Your services—can they be purchased? Are you apprenticed?"

Will shook his head. No, as yet he was unattached.

Bishop hesitated a moment. Then he scribbled an address upon the corner of the boy's sketch.

"Come and see me. Tomorrow afternoon. Off you go, now."

Will stared at the address. Silver Street. He knew the place. A long line of towering villas with long gardens down to the river. Almost well-to-do.

- - -

A crack in the wall, falling, jagged. Eliza has asked them for another room but they do not listen. She stands on the bed and looks out through the small window. The pane is dirty, encrusted with mould. She rubs at it with the sleeve of her gown. Outside the lawns steam as the dew takes flight. Through the haze, she sees new tulips in bloom, vivid yellows and reds. She smiles. Her sleeve is stained. She sees dark forms. Troubled, she sits down and rubs at the one sleeve with the other. The stain is now on both sleeves. They say the walls in all the rooms have cracks.

"What?" she asks.

She listens intently. She lifts a hairbrush from a drawer in the dark oak desk. She lets the others guide her hand, running the brush through long auburn strands. Years ago her mother would have helped her. The importance of one's appearance must never be forgotten, she thinks, and nods.

"Do I look pretty?" she asks. She has no mirror in the room, but sometimes she can see a half-reflection in the window.

The door opens. Two nurses enter. Their blue uniforms blaze against the drab interior of her room.

"Morning, Eliza," says the more senior of the two. For Mrs. Jenkins, words come lazy and slow, the years having dulled her enthusiasm. She quickly assesses the state of the room.

The other nurse, only a couple of years older than Eliza, says nothing, but at least makes eye contact and allows her a brief smile.

"Come along," Mrs. Jenkins demands.

Eliza obeys passively, but as she walks out into the hallway, a great commotion rises up to greet her. She flinches, not wanting to hear the moans and the babble. "Cattle market," she says, spitting out the words. She begins to raise up her hands in an effort to

cover her ears, but Mrs. Jenkins takes hold of her and leads her forward. Eliza tries to ignore the others, with their incessant prattling, focusing instead on the inanimate. The ornate fireplace with sinuous carvings; she imagines herself small enough to walk among its curves and tunnels.

"Damn you!" someone says. She looks downward, examining the ruby rug with its froth of white tassels. Then a clock ticking, its pendulum swaying back and forth, back and forth, glinting.

They lead her up the staircase where massive oil paintings hang, the dead mingling with the living. But of course that is the case everywhere.

"Not a child," a dead voice says, "a harlot!"

Eliza asks, "Where are you taking me?" She looks down from the staircase. White faces watch her and they seem to know.

"Where are we going?" she asks, urgently now. "What are you going to do to me?"

A door opens and they usher her inside.

First she sees a woman in a full-length turquoise dress, drawn in at the waist then arcing up and out like a vase from which her neck rises, a stem, her face bright. Quickly the woman comes up to her. She takes the girl's face in her hands and studies the features intently.

"How old are you, child?"

From behind her, a deeper voice comes. "I told you, she's sixteen."

Eliza looks past the woman and notices, for the first time, the two other figures in the room. "Charles!" she exclaims, as if she has not seen him in ages.

"How strange," the woman says, "to have a sister so much younger than yourself."

"Perhaps," Bishop says. "My mother was forty years old and on to her second husband by the time she had Eliza. In truth, I have been more a father than he, more of a parent than either of them. They gave her into my care some years ago."

Edgar Marks steps forward. "Hello, Eliza." He is some years older than Bishop and speaks in a soft, warm voice. "I also have a sister. Allow me to introduce Miss Jane Marks."

Eliza curtsies.

"Jane is an artist," Edgar continues, "and we've asked her to paint a portrait of you. Won't that be nice?"

Eliza gives a slight, uncertain nod.

Edgar speaks softly to his sister. "Now Jane, do not be alarmed if Eliza should speak of spirits, or any other strangeness. She can be quite fanciful—"

Bishop interjects suddenly, "No, no, Edgar, fanciful is quite the wrong word. She is anything but that."

"I merely wish to pre-warn my sister in order to avoid any alarm."

"Please do not seek to shelter me, Edgar," Jane says. "You are in no way up to the task. Now, what say I proceed with the endeavour?"

She walks away, deeper into the room, to where an easel stands, removing her white gloves in preparation for the task ahead.

Bishop gently leads Eliza to a chair and she sits down. Nervously she bites into a finger-nail. "I brushed my hair," she says. "Do I look pretty?"

Many voices murmur in response, the dead mingling with the living. But in the hours that follow, the dead grow quiet, as if they are drawn away.

- - -

Will ran along the road, papers pressed in his pockets. To reach Silver Street he had to travel two miles from Soho, and he didn't want to be late. An old woman shambled along the pavement, mumbling and flicking back the cover of a basket, counting carrots inside. Will slowed, watching her.

"Move aside!"

Will jumped to the edge of the road as a cart lumbered past, the horses splattered with mud to their bellies. The wheels flung curls of mud onto the tail of his coat.

"Move aside," the carter bellowed again, further along the road.

Will pressed his fingers against the folded note in his pocket. His father had written, painstakingly, a polite request. He was unable to afford the expense of Will's entrance to a painter's studio, but a premium of fifty pounds might enable him to serve an apprenticeship. Will shivered, squeezing the note.

"Where's Will going?" Robert had asked, the previous evening. Robert was four, his brother, a cherub with licks of soft hair the colour of treacle.

"Where're you going, Will?" he had asked again, holding up his arms to be lifted. Will obliged. The little boy, already in his bedshirt, pressed his face into Will's neck. Will breathed in the warm sweet perfume of the child's skin.

"I'm going to do some drawing for a gentleman," he said grandly. "A fine gentleman, with a silk jacket and a wig, and a painted face."

"A macaroni," Catherine shouted. "A macaroni. Will's going visiting. He'll be dandified too. Can you get me a fan, Will? Can you?"

Catherine, three years older than Robert, picked up a stocking her mother had embroidered and flapped it in her face.

"Catherine," their mother scolded. "Put that down." But they laughed, all of them, in the room's evening twilight where one tallow candle burned to illuminate the stitching. Robert kissed his big brother.

"Be careful, Will," he admonished gravely. He reached for a lock of Will's hair, and tugged it gently.

Silver Street, Number 12, stood in a graceful crescent overlooking a park and, further down, a small arboretum where cherries flowered. A woman in a blue dress opened the front door when he knocked. She led him inside, to a drawing room on the first floor, without saying a word. As he waited, Will browsed along a shelf of calf-bound books: volumes on anatomy and medicinal herbs, classical works, midwifery.

"Master Will. Just in time. I haven't eaten this morning. Perhaps you would join me, and I can tell you what we plan to do, yes?"

Bishop entered and seated himself, pushing away a newspaper and a novel on the table. He gestured William to join him.

"Sir, I've already eaten," Will said. The woman returned with a large tray, and a maid followed behind with another. A pewter coffee-pot, a basket of toast, butter, a steaming dish of almond pudding, and a plate of stewed lamb's liver and bacon were spread across the table.

"Eat some more, then. Eat some more." Bishop tucked a napkin into the front of his jacket and helped himself to a mound of meat and pudding. Politely William took a corner of toast. Bishop ate with his mouth open. Will watched morsels of liver popping open between his teeth, the juices running over his red tongue. Bishop mopped his lips.

"You have been tutored, I think," he said.

"Yes, sir. I studied at Henry Par's academy, in the Strand. Four years." Will felt his father's letter in his pocket, but he was loath to hand it over. He remembered the careful writing, the humble request.

"And what are your plans now?"

"Well, sir. Well." The boy faltered. "My father sent this." He seized the note and passed it to Bishop. The man unfolded the mean piece of paper and flattened it upon the tablecloth. He read it, eating still. Will waited.

Then Bishop sat up straight, belching. He pressed his hand to his belly. Then he reached into a waistcoat pocket and took out a tiny enamel pill-box and dosed himself with three tiny tablets. Will smelled peppermint. Bishop did not mention the contents of the letter.

"I run a small private clinic," he said. "Here, within this house. I have seven patients in residence. Now, William, the ailments afflicting these poor souls are not diseases of the body. No. I have little interest in curing the flesh. Instead, I am a leading figure in the modern science of curing the diseased mind—plucking out the thorns of mania and melancholy. Dispelling the clouds of delusion."

Bishop spoke with a flourish, a toss of the hand. Will, the audience, nodded. His flesh contracted, shivering, to feel the weight of the unknown presences in the house, the madmen. He could hear nothing.

"Now," Bishop said, "we arrive at the nub. During my researches, I have uncovered a curious matter. I took on an artist to paint portraits of my patients at the beginning of their treatment, planning then to make another portrait at the end so my patrons might see the difference. Yes? But we discovered the process of being painted—sitting for the artist—had in itself a therapeutic effect. The sitter becomes calm. The agitations of the mind are soothed. Now why might this be? Indeed, why? How does it work?"

Bishop rose to his feet, shedding his napkin onto the floor.

"Come," he said. Will scrambled to his feet.

Until now he had been dazzled by the splendour of the house, but he discovered it to be effectively cut in two: the front rooms plush and fashionable, the rear sparse and unadorned. The windows overlooking the back garden had bars. Will trod bare floorboards to a small room used for the preparation of medicines.

A dark-haired man had his back to them, but turned as they entered, glancing at the boy.

"Dr. Marks," Bishop said.

"Pleased to meet you, sir," Will said. Marks disregarded him. Bottles lined shelves. A small set of scales dangled from Marks' fingers, a scoop of a pepper-coloured powder on the brass bowl. Will looked about him quickly, noting the charts and tables pinned upon the wall, numbered codes beside names and dates, Latin inscriptions, weights.

"Shall I start him on Mr. Scott?" Bishop suggested. Marks furrowed his brow, his skin very thick and dull. He nodded, still engaged with the substance on the scales.

"Come along, Will," Bishop said, almost gaily. "Come along."

They climbed stairs, passed another door behind which he could hear shuffling and murmurs. Then a sudden fit of helpless laughter.

"Yes," Bishop said, confidentially. "Mr. Sturgis." He winked.

Beyond an open door, Will saw a rectangular iron tank, full of water. Too large for a bath.

They ascended another flight of stairs; Bishop hummed as he unlocked a narrow door. Inside, Will had the impression of an alcove in a museum, a dull and empty room save for the exhibit in the centre. An old man sat hunched on a plain chair. Will wondered, quickly, why the subject did not move the chair. Why not sit by the wall, in a corner? Then he noticed the chair had been nailed to the floor, and he was moved to pity the man, with a flash of contempt for Bishop and Marks for such petty cruelty, forcing their patient to sit surrounded by space.

"Mr. Scott," Bishop said gravely. "Here is William. He has come to take your likeness. He is an artist, Mr. Scott."

Will waited in the room while Bishop called the maid, instructing her to bring a stool. Bishop himself handed Will a small easel with a piece of paper already pinned in place. Mr. Scott did not move nor make any sound, gave no indication of being conscious of the people in his room.

"To work, William," Bishop said. "I will return in an hour. Is that time enough?"

Will nodded, biting his lip. Did Bishop intend to leave him alone with this man? Bishop flinched, pressing his fingers into his belly. Will focused on the old man, who appeared smartly dressed,

refined even, though a cord of spittle dangled from the left side of his mouth. His eyes, crusty about the lids, were not focused, but oddly his fingers were active, fluttering like little birds. A strange semaphore. The whole life and spirit of the man expressed in the agitation of his fingers. Will took a fragment of charcoal from a tray attached to the easel.

Bishop drew back from the door, fiddling for the key, and as he stood aside the woman in the blue dress strode past, leading a very thin young woman in a stained dress. She turned her face, catching Will's gaze for an instant. Then Bishop locked the door, leaving Will alone, confined in the room with Scott and his fingers. Will felt a moment's fear. Then he took a breath and began to draw.

- - -

She thinks that something comes for her. A wolf perhaps. She knows of wolves from stories. Their mouths flow with saliva. A figure walks ahead of her. She wonders if it is Death she follows, but the figure glances back at her and it is a familiar face.

They walk past Mr. Scott's room; the door is open so she looks inside. She sees a boy sitting on a stool at an easel—not a rich boy, but he has finer clothes than she. Time slows around her. She steps outside the moment. On tiptoes, she enters the room to stand before him. Gracefully his head arcs up and their eyes meet. She smiles.

She says, "You needn't be afraid of Mr. Scott."

But she is still in the hallway, following the madam and causing no trouble. She wonders if she is going to meet with Miss Marks again. She is pleased when that turns out to be the case. She thinks Miss Marks is very grand.

"Hello, Eliza," the lady says. "I would like to paint your portrait again if I may."

Eliza smiles. "That would be fine," she says. "Will you let me see the picture? I do not have a mirror in my room."

"Of course. Perhaps you would like to see the portrait that I made yesterday?"

"Oh yes, please."

Jane walks away from her to where the picture leans against the wall. She picks it up, brings it back, and shows it to her. "I think it is a good likeness," Jane says.

Eliza reaches out a hand and touches the edge of the board to which the canvass is fastened. The image makes her feel strange. It is empty around the edges. "Where are the others?" she asks.

The door to the room opens and Bishop hurries in.

"What am I missing?" he blusters.

Eliza looks at the floor. Bishop takes hold of her and escorts her back to the chair where she is to sit for the portrait. The room has a bare wooden floor. It is polished and glistens, but underneath the sparkle she sees dark lines, patterns in the grain of the wood. Something stirs.

Jane says, "Good morning, Charles. How are you?"

"I am fine. And I swear, you look lovely this morning."

"I'm sure you can do better than that."

Bishop reaches forward, placing his hands at Jane's waist, and gently pulls her towards him until her face is close to his. "I would do far better," he says, "if we were alone."

"And if my brother should come in here now," she says, "as he might at any moment?"

"Edgar would interpret whatever he might see in the most benign terms possible. He has no passion of his own, and even less imagination."

"He is my brother," she says, pushing Bishop away. "And fortunately we are not alone."

"The time will come," he says, hand to brow, theatrical. Jane is amused.

She returns her attention to her subject. "Child," she says, alarmed, "are you all right?"

"They say I am not strong enough."

"Who says?"

"They say that I am only a waif."

"Charles? What is she babbling about?"

"She often talks of others. It is a symptom of her dementia, but I cannot convince her of it."

"They want to be rid of me," Eliza says, "but I will not allow it. I am all that stands between you and them. Be careful where you go from here, or..."

She stops in mid-sentence, her head jerks back suddenly, her eyes roll back in their sockets. Then her head snaps forward again and she rises to stand. When she speaks, her voice is clear, without its usual timidity.

"Something lives in the grain of the wood," she says. "It stands on legs larger than my whole body. It does not remain still. It spins. Tendrils of smoke snake out and they wrap themselves around us. I know when saliva falls from the mouth of a wolf..."

Jane Marks looks anxiously from Eliza to Bishop.

"Fascinating," Bishop says.

Eliza's head turns to one side. "When the fairies come in from the garden, the smoke chokes them and snuffs them out. I love the fairies but I am afraid when I see them because I do not want them to die."

Her whole body begins to spasm violently and she falls to the floor in a fit. Her girl's mind is snuffed out. Another part observes as Bishop pulls a wooden rule from his pocket and forces it into her mouth. Eliza is aware of her brother, kneeling over her; but, towering over them both, the darkness congeals into a bituminous figure.

"I am inside you," it says.

But then dozens of spirits rise up in the room. Collectively they say, "We walk beside her."

The darkness howls, disintegrates into a thousand black moths, which flutter wildly before sunlight burns them away.

Nowhere. Nothing.

When she wakes, she hears her brother talking with Dr. Marks and with Jane. She keeps her eyes closed, bathed in a sense of peace and well-being, the curious aftermath of the fit. Briefly, her mind is very still, and she wants to savour the taste of it.

"The best yet," Bishop says, inflamed with excitement. "She was speaking with another voice. Another voice!"

Jane murmurs something in contradiction but Eliza cannot make out her words. Marks speaks in a deeper voice.

"What did she see?"

"Wolves. Fairies—something about a giant in the grain of the wood."

Marks gives a low, dismissive laugh.

"You're a fool, Bishop. Listen to what you are saying. Her diseased mind plunders fanciful memories of childhood story books. I've heard the same kind of nonsense from a dozen chlorotic young women. She needs fresh air and friends and bodily exercise."

Marks leaves the room. Jane moves closer, peering into Eliza's face. Eliza can feel the faint heat of her body, smell a thread of eau de cologne.

"Look, she wakes," Jane says. But Eliza keeps her lids closed.

"You must paint what she said," Bishop kneels beside Jane. "You must recall her features in the fit, the altered form of her face, the blank eyes. You must capture the other likeness. And the spirits she saw, the demon rising. You must pin them into your painting, Jane."

Eliza opens her eyes. Her moment of peace has passed. Jane and Bishop are staring at each other; Bishop's face is bright with excitement. Jane is pulling back, disturbed. Then she notices Eliza.

"Eliza, my dear." Her voice is soft and insincere. She is still agitated. "How do you feel?"

Eliza smiles. "I am well, thank you, Miss Marks."

"Eliza, can you remember what happened?" Bishop asks. It strikes Eliza that her brother is a clown and she giggles. Then she cannot stop. The laughter carries her off, another seizure. A convulsion. She laughs and laughs till hot tears leak from her eyes and pour over her face. She tastes the salt on her lips.

"Bah!" Bishop ejects. "Useless. It is a consequence of her attack. She will make no sense to us now." He rises to his feet, pushing back his wig. Jane sighs, her body pressing against her stays. She looks up at Bishop, eyes wistful.

What does she see to desire? Eliza wonders, and laughs again. The thought flashes from somewhere in her mind that Jane Marks suffers the greatest delusion.

Bishop exits and returns swiftly, carrying a small curved bottle with a glass stopper and a long silver spoon. Eliza stops laughing abruptly. The room is suddenly very still.

"I don't want any," she says. Her tiny stomach curls up in anticipation of the dose.

"Come now," Bishop says sternly. "You want to be better, don't you? You want me to take you to the opera. You want to walk in the park. Be a good girl, Eliza; you will be better soon."

"No," Eliza says. But Mrs. Jenkins is behind her, holding her head between strong hands, so Eliza fears her skull will be riddled with cracks.

"Open your mouth, Eliza," the nurse says grimly. She tilts back Eliza's head. Jane looks on, trying to cover distaste at the spectacle. Eliza squeals, fighting the firm grip.

"Help us, Jane, damn it," Bishop says. Jane steps forward, very pale now, not knowing what to do.

"Sit on her legs. Keep her still." Bishop's voice is rising.

He presses the sides of Eliza's mouth, forcing her lips open. Eliza squeaks, the brute fingers bruising her skin. Bishop tips the syrup from the spoon into her mouth, but Eliza refuses to swallow and ribbons of the sugary medication rise up again, spilling stickily over her cheeks, mixing on her lips with the salt of her tears.

“God damn it, Eliza, we’re trying to help you.” He squeezes her nostrils so she cannot breathe, and she gasps. Bishop seizes the instant to tip the liquid straight from the bottle down her throat. Eliza chokes and splutters, but much is swallowed. The three adults draw back as Eliza breathes heavily on the floor. It is always the same. The medication tastes sweet as honey and roses upon the tongue. But in her stomach it is bitter as wormwood. A contamination. She wipes her cheeks with the back of her hand. Jane Marks, penitent, fumbles for a handkerchief and dabs Eliza’s face with a false expression of concern. Eliza is disillusioned. She knows, as she has always known, that Jane is an enemy too.

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Will stepped down from the carriage. His boot splashed into a muddy puddle, beads of bright mud sticking to the smooth new leather. The crisp stock itched and the jacket, which pleased his eye with its colour, stiffened across his shoulders. Bishop stepped down after him, and the carriage lurched. He looked at once distinguished and absurd.

“Are you excited, Will?”

But Will hardly heard him. The opera house rose up like a coliseum. Still slick from the downpour, it glistened in the moonlight, an elaborate stone framework, channelling enough energy to draw the stars down from the heavens like an ancient megalith. The walls of the King’s Theatre reared high into the night sky, offering the angels a place to pause and rest their wings.

Jane Marks asked, “Cat got your tongue, boy?”

Bishop offered his hand to Eliza as she, the last of the party, stepped down to join them.

She was dressed in blue silk, simple but elegant. A faint flush had risen in her cheeks beneath her eyes, but she looked nonetheless like any young girl, excited to join her elders for a night out.

Jane reached out and playfully pinched Will’s nose. “Or perhaps you actually are a cat,” she said.

Bishop asked, “Do you want to stroke him, then?”

Will blushed.

She asked, “He’s a little young for that, Charles, wouldn’t you say?”

“Indeed. Perhaps later you will try your hand elsewhere?”

She began to walk up the stone steps. "More likely you will have to do your own stroking."

Will glanced at Eliza, but she cast back an expression that suggested the conversation was unimportant.

Inside, they mingled with the other patrons. Dr. Bishop clearly knew a great many people and went about shaking hands with enthusiasm.

"Will," he asked, "would you stay here with Eliza?"

Will nodded. The crowd pressed against them, the perfume of warm human bodies mingled with the sweeter notes of artificial fragrance and the hectic odour of bright pink and white lilies adorning vases about the entrance lobby.

Left alone, Will and Eliza stood in silence for a moment. Then Eliza said, "It is I who should be charged with looking after you. I am older than you."

Will smiled in acceptance. "I have never been in a place like this."

"I would come here every night if my brother would allow it. But I have not been for the longest time."

"It is very expensive, I imagine," Will said, making excuses for the doctor, a role which he had no wish to perform.

"We have money," she said.

"Yes, of course. In any case, functions like this should be open to all. It should not be a question of money, not just something for the rich. A revolution is coming. In America, and possibly in France."

He bit his tongue, afraid he sounded pompous. But Eliza looked alarmed.

"Do you think so? I wonder if it shall reach me."

"Oh, I didn't mean.... You mustn't worry."

She took a step closer. Her breath was also perfumed. Roses and wormwood. The chemical smell caught in the back of the throat. But he could smell it too on the surface of her skin, in her hair. She looked closely into his eyes and whispered, "Aren't there... far more immediate dangers?"

"What do you mean?"

But the others returned, led them to a box above the stage where a girl served wine and sugary cakes. Eliza's face matched the glass of plain water handed to her. She thanked her brother courteously.

He said, "Now you do understand, Eliza, that you must behave with dignity during the performance."

"I shall be the only one, then. This is the opera."

Will went straight to the front of the box and looked down. Every seat was taken, but latecomers had been allowed in to stand at the edges of the stage, making enough noise to drown the orchestra, who were tuning up, readying to play. A handful of wags strutted up and down the aisles, calling out greetings, flashing the silk of their coats.

A selection of extracts from Italian opera seria began, with a little of the lighter comic opera buffa mixed in for variety's sake. After the first two pieces, Dr. Bishop announced that he had business to attend to and retired to one of the side rooms, where he joined in a game of cards.

Will thought of his brother Robert. One day they would come to the opera together, fluent in the Italian language and able to talk knowledgeably about the stories the operas told. And everyone would know them for their great works of art and epic poems, wanting to shake their hands.

Eliza said, "Isn't it wonderful?"

Startled, Will said, "It is amazing."

She leaned over to him and said quietly, "Don't imagine that I trust you!"

He was taken aback.

She said, "If I show weakness, it will all come out of me. None of us can afford that."

He started to say, "I don't understand." But then Eliza noticed Jane Marks watching her, and she returned her attention to the stage.

Through the rest of the performances, the artists dazzled and the louts fretted and shouted. They enjoyed one of the comic interludes but grew restless when the more serious tone resumed, the characters stiff and the story rather dull. Then the noise exploded, an uproar of shrieks and protests. A gang of young rowdies in the boxes began spitting at those below. The offending performance could not compete. But a lone tenor sang out an aria of such sustained passion that the noise fell away. Will was enchanted. But part way through, a small, fragile hand slipped into his. Eliza stared at the tenor, her head tilted like a sparrow, but her face went an odd dead white and a shadow fell across her.

Something seemed to take shape in front of them, or rather an absence of shape; an emptiness where there should have been

form. When Will had been five years old, the void had taken his brother Richard soon after birth. He had forgotten, but recognised it now. The floorboards underneath them began to shake, but Will said calmly, "No, you cannot have anyone here."

And the crowd were applauding the tenor on the stage. Confused, he was not holding Eliza's hand any more. Jane seemed to be unaware of anything unusual having happened. Charles Bishop had rejoined them, Will could not remember when.

"Come along," Bishop said. "It is late and Eliza needs her rest."

Will's head began to ache. Eliza's peculiar odour made him nauseous. Sensations jumbled and then fragmented, a moment's déjà vu. What had he seen? He twitched his feet, itchy with pins and needles. Everyone was leaving.

A carriage waited in the street below. First Will was delivered to Soho. In the darkness of the interior, Eliza seemed almost to vanish. When he opened the door to leave, a little light shone in. As it played across her face, she mouthed two words. He thought they were "Thank you" but he could not be sure.

He called out, "Goodnight," and his own "Thank you."

The carriage pulled away. At the end of the street it turned, quickly vanishing into the darkness.

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Eliza sits with the cat in her lap. The creature is sleek, black and white, its face thrust into the warmth of her thighs, purring beneath her hand. Eliza is tired. Her body aches, the flesh on her arms shrinking away. Her hand, in the soft coat, is strung with bones. Years weigh heavy, but she is only sixteen. The boy before her, poring over his sketch, looks very young and wholesome. Despite herself, and despite his association with Charles and Edgar Marks, Eliza warms to him. At the opera—yes, at the opera he had plucked her back. The creature had listened, heeded him.

Will looks up, clearing his throat. He wants to talk about it too. She nods.

"When I was ten," he says, "I saw hosts of angels in a tree in Peckham Rye."

Eliza laughs. She presses her hand to her mouth, seeing his face. "Peckham Rye?" she asks. "Why would angels visit Peckham Rye?" But he is afraid she is making fun of him.

"Will," she says. "You must help me."

Then he looks very grave.

"The spirits are preying on me," she says. "Do you understand? My brother thinks to use me to contact the spirits, because he is too blind and cloddish to see them himself. He imagines he can make me his medium."

Will still stares.

"What did the angels say?" she asks.

Will opens his mouth, closes it again. Eliza can see the thoughts running like mice in the burrows of his brain.

"Nothing," he said. "Not to me. They were singing." Then—"Are you sure?"

The medication lies heavily in her stomach. In the morning, she swallowed it without a murmur, but the fluid corrodes her body. Her chamber pot is marbled with threads of blood. The doorways of her mind bang open and shut. Her gums ache, and her tongue is slick and sweet. She is too weary to talk. But she must.

"Your brother is afraid you have a mental malady, which he is trying to correct."

She loses patience.

"Do you believe that?"

"Eliza—what can I do?"

"Help me. Help me escape."

Will stares. His hands are shaking. He puts down his charcoal, glancing over his shoulder at the door.

"Where would I take you? What would you do?"

"You would not take me anywhere. All I need is your help to escape the house."

For a moment she thinks he will agree, but footsteps thud along the passageway and his face closes. Hurriedly he takes up the charcoal again.

The door opens abruptly. Charles wears about him a cloak of spirits, if only he could see it. A patchwork of capons and cocks, lambs, suckling pigs, hogs, pigeons, pheasants, white calves, and swans. They bulge under his skin.

"Eliza, dear Eliza," he says. "How are you this morning, my darling?" He peers over Will's shoulder and frowns.

"It is not a pretty picture," he says. He lifts the sketch and turns it about.

Eliza sees a gaunt white face on the paper, an ancient, with black about the eyes. She looks at Will, and for a moment their eyes lock.

He does know. Yes, he knows. Eliza is seized by a moment's bright hope. But Will turns away, murmurs with her brother. The walls creak. The house is breaking up.

Then they are alone again. The barred window cuts up a vista of blossom and roses in the patchwork of gardens, the river a dull bronze glint between the trees. Swallows skim past. Distantly, she hears shouts, the rumble of carts. Beyond the houses fields unfold, the river slips into the sea. The tall ships drift, black and white, on the salt-water swell, and the seagulls shriek.

"Eliza—Eliza." Will is speaking to her. She switches back. Her poisoned body is locked up in the yellow room. The barriers in her mind are breaking down, but the locks about her physical self are absolute. Despair rises in a tide.

The cat digs one claw through her dress, into skin. Pain pricks.

"Have you seen my cat?" she asks.

"Of course." Will nods. "See—I have drawn him into the picture."

She lifts the cat from her lap, the warm, curled ball of it. She takes the cat's chin in her hand, lifting its face towards the boy.

"Look," she says. And William sees.

"It was my brother's idea. He wanted to know if the cat's dreams originated in its mind, or if it could see spirits beyond the limits of a man's vision. He wanted to know what would happen if he dosed the cat with opium. Would it still hallucinate once its eyes were plucked out? Charles is a cruel man, but he is also a coward. He hadn't the stomach for the job, but he instructed Edgar Marks, who has fewer fancies, but fewer qualms too. Marks put out the cat's eyes and stitched the lids shut. When I cried, Charles told me the lesser creatures were insensible to pain. He told me they reacted to the stimulation of physical damage like an automaton."

Will's face has paled. He is shocked. He licks his lips. His breath has quickened, and he runs his hand through his hair. Eliza understands how much the revelation has disturbed him. She is acute to the sensitivity of his feelings, and his outrage.

"You must help me," she says again. "Will, you must help me."

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The pebble arced away from his hand, cast out into the Thames, plopping into the glassy surface with a robust sploosh. He remembered drawing her mouth, the shape of thin lips when she said,

"Help me." So convincing. Angrily he hurled another stone out into the water.

"Damn them all!" he said, his young face set hard.

The busy ferry boats moved back and forth across the river. At the bank below him, an empty boat waited for passengers. Its bow bobbed, splashing the shallow water.

Earlier that day he had resolved to help Eliza Rose. Even if it cost him his future, the apprenticeship he deserved.

"You must help me," she had said. Then Bishop had appeared in the doorway. Eliza pressed her lips shut, and hummed.

"That's enough for today, young William," Bishop said. "Come with me."

As he left her, Will looked back at Eliza, tried to convey that she could trust him. She smiled.

On the stairs they passed Jane Marks. Will noted a darkness around her eyes, a certain fatigue. The fingers of her left hand covertly brushed against those of Bishop's as they passed each other.

In the garden, Edgar Marks collected flowers. The pruning shears glistened.

"The best flowers come out in the spring," he said.

Charles Bishop waved a hand, dismissive.

Will asked, "How is one flower better than another?"

Marks raised an eyebrow. "My God. A philosopher!"

He snipped another stem and raised the flower to his nose. He slit the calyx with a scalpel, and pressed the bisected stem in a book.

"We plant a garden for our pleasure. Yet the pleasing forms and fragrance are designed to entice insects. That is all."

"Yes, yes," Bishop said impatiently, "that's all very interesting, I'm sure. But now then, Will."

Bishop sighed, composed himself. He dabbed his face with a white shirt-sleeve, but sweat glistened on the powder.

"Will, you take an interest in my patients. I am wondering if I should involve you in a new procedure. We have made preparations. Our grandest experiment yet—yes."

Will said, "I do not think I care for your experiments."

The sharpness of tone took Bishop by surprise.

Marks turned his attention from the plants.

"What's troubling you?"

"So what did you use to cut out the cat's eyes?" Will burst out.

Will had surprised himself, but the greater surprise was the look of astonishment that appeared on the face of Edgar Marks.

"Dear boy, what do you think of me? I did no such thing. Do you think us monsters?"

Will looked nervously from Marks to Bishop.

Bishop seemed unsure how to respond.

Confused, Will asked, "Then what...?"

Marks began to speak but faltered, apparently unable or unwilling to say.

"No," Will said hesitantly. A new, colder thought rose in his mind. "Not.... She wouldn't have...."

His tongue felt still and heavy in his mouth.

Marks and Bishop exchanged a glance.

"It was one of the first symptoms of her deteriorating mental state," Marks said at last.

Bishop appeared to be in pain, pressed a hand against his belly. "This talk does me no good," he complained. "Say no more, Edgar."

Will felt his knees would buckle.

Bishop laid a hand heavily on the boy's shoulder. "Do not think badly of Eliza. Edgar is painting an unpleasant version of the truth. It is my belief, my strong belief, that she is not responsible for her actions. There is a darkness inside of her. An alien spirit has taken residence, consumes her from within. All my efforts are directed towards evicting the demon. I will draw it out if it takes every ounce of my strength and knowledge. I am determined to free her and I promise you I will succeed."

Will nodded, trying to take it all in. "You said that you plan a new experiment?"

Bishop said, "I think, perhaps, in your current frame of mind, it would be better not to involve you. Eliza has confused you. Perhaps it is even the work of the demon again. I require someone focused and resolute."

"But if it is to help Eliza...."

"No. My mind is made up. We can use Edgar's sister, Jane. She may not have your flair for depicting scenes from the imagination. But she is a competent artist. And she will do whatever I ask of her."

"Will you at least tell me what you have planned?"

"No. I think not. You are very young and it was wrong of me to burden you. Clear your mind of it. Go home to your family."

And so he had been rejected. He went to collect his things. From the upstairs window he saw that Bishop and Marks were arguing. He strained to hear their words. He ran down the stairs and through to the kitchen at the back of the house. Quietly, he opened the door a fraction.

Marks was speaking. "...involve my sister. Risk your own life if you must, but not hers!"

"She can make up her own mind."

"You make up other people's minds for them. How I ever let you drag me into this I cannot fathom."

"I will free Eliza from this possession by whatever means necessary."

"She is the only one among us who still has a mind of her own."

"Calm down, Edgar. Don't be ridiculous. The demon corrupts her mind."

"And which demon are we considering now?"

"Edgar, I do not care for your tone!"

"All right, that was uncalled for. But surely we need a considered scientific approach. Have you abandoned rational thought? Perhaps we should try blistering. It worked for Mrs. Aykebourn. A constant discharge of fluids from the neck and head."

"I'll hear no more. The creature that possesses her is not a creature of science. I am convinced of it now more than ever. Science has led us so far, but now we must employ other powers. My mind is made up. Help me or stay out of my way."

Will heard heavy footsteps on the gravel pathway, coming closer then moving away. He dared to glance through a window and saw Bishop striding off. Quickly he closed the door and moved to the front of the house. Bishop almost tripped over him as he entered.

"Are you still here?"

"Y-yes, Dr. Bishop. I am sorry for what I said earlier. Perhaps you might reconsider, and...."

"Go home!"

He had wandered for hours, trying to make sense of it all. He threw another stone into the river, unsettling a gull.

There was no way to know who to believe. If he had not challenged Marks and Bishop, they would have involved him, and at least he would have known their plans. Now he could not distinguish truth from deception, sane from insane. He looked upwards to the heavens and asked for guidance. The gull swooped

down towards him, then flew off towards Soho. For a moment his thoughts lifted with the bird, throwing great wings back from his shoulders. Imagination fired, his feet lifted from the ground, and he soared into the sky. A cool breeze came up from nowhere, carrying him in the direction of home.

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They take her in the night. The house creaks, rafters shifting; the stones turn and contract. The other lunatics sense the fractures in the walls and she hears them moan. Somewhere a woman is crying. On the second floor, Mr. Scott spells out a semaphore with his fingers. Worms run in the beams beneath her feet. The still surface of the house does not disguise the restless unravelling.

"Come along, Eliza." Charles is nervous. His face is white as the moon and his hands are icy on her arms. The women are faceless behind her. They usher her up and up, to the topmost room. She is sat upon a chair, and her hands are bound behind her.

"No. No." Charles has a bottle. She can smell the poison. Her body reacts, a convulsive panic.

"No more, no," she repeats. But Charles cannot see her any more. He doesn't hear. He thrusts the neck of the bottle between her lips and one of the women grips her chin.

"There," Charles says. "It is done." He dismisses the women. Then he leaves the room, locking the door behind him.

Eliza waits. The shutters are fastened but moonlight presses through the chinks in the wood. Beneath her bare feet, the rough boards are soft and warm. The liquid congeals on her chin, thick as treacle. Her teeth ache, as though the poison is eating her gums. Her tongue and lips are very cold. Her heart-beat races, and slows. So slow. The space between each beat begins to stretch.

In the corners of the room, the darkness gathers. Voices whisper but she cannot hear what they say.

"Speak up," she says. "You are of no use to me." Then, timidly, "I am losing my hair and my fingernails are yellow. What would my mother say?"

The voices hiss. The shutters rattle impatiently.

"Untie me," she says. "Untie me." Fear crawls over her, threatening to swallow her whole. But she is beyond fear.

"Now," she barks. And they crawl from the corners. They press their bodies to the floor, not daring to look at her. Quick fingers work at the rope. It drops to the floor, something dead.

Eliza walks to the window. The moonlight, tangible now, claws between the panels, the wood splintering. She steps through, past the bars and locks.

Down in the garden, an unnatural darkness reigns absolute. In front of her, the lantern moon swings back and forth. The leaves of the fruit trees rattle. She knows where to go when the streets branch away. Two men sleep on the pavement by a sedan chair, their mouths open. A carriage passes, but the hooves of the horses make no noise. A child in a house wakes up with a bad dream and roses in a garden fold their petals when she passes. Too many shadows. They fork from her feet.

The house is perfectly quiet. Eliza knocks on the door.

She knocks again.

When nobody answers, she bangs on the shuttered windows with her fist. A shift—she is hot and cold at once. The night air is heavy as water in her lungs, but perspiration burns on her face.

She bangs again. Then the door is open and Eliza steps inside.

They are all asleep. She walks among the beds. The mother and father lie against each other, the man's hand resting on the woman's hair. The boys share a bed. The warm, insensible bodies lie abandoned under the drab blankets. They are so far away.

"Will, wake up." She shakes him. "Wake up. I have escaped. Will."

But he is heavy as clay, inert as stone. She cannot rouse him. Her body begins to shake. She cannot hold out much longer.

"Wake up, wake up."

"Lady," a voice says. Eliza is startled. The small voice breaks a spell. The home solidifies, the threadbare carpet, the pictures upon the wall. A tiny boy stands in his white shirt by the side of the bed. He stares at her, eyes round as pennies.

"Lady," he repeats. "Who are you?"

"Robert?" she asks softly. "I cannot wake your brother." The little boy turns from her slowly. He places his hands on Will's face. Instantly, Will opens his eyes.

"Will," Robert whispers. "A beautiful lady has come to see you."

Will sits up suddenly. His eyes fix on Eliza standing like an angel at the foot of his bed.

"Eliza," he says. Eliza reads the questions running through his mind but she shakes her head.

"Help me now," she says. "Come with me."

Will jumps from the bed, transfixed by the unexpected presence.

"Where?" he asks. "What shall you do? Stay here. My parents will know what to do."

But Eliza shakes her head, pressing her finger to her lips. She gestures him to follow. Will looks at Robert, uncertain.

Robert says, "You must help the lady. Go now. There isn't much time." He throws himself eagerly into her arms. She holds him while Will pulls on his clothes and boots, then returns the infant to bed, where he immediately falls asleep.

Then they run out into the night together. She leads Will through the maze of streets.

"We're going back to the house," he says at last, in confusion. "Why are we going back?" His voice is anxious. He is fretting, almost in tears. But Eliza is resolute and he cannot break away. She takes him along an alleyway, into the darkness of the garden behind the house. In the garret window above, hot yellow light burns, reaching out to them. She raises her face.

"I don't understand," he moans. "What are we doing?"

Eliza is afraid he has not the resolution to help her. Like a little boy, he sniffs and wipes his nose on the sleeve of his jacket. She takes his hand. She presses the boy's palm to her chest, where the heart-beat is slow. She takes his face in her thin, cold hands and kisses him. His mouth is very moist and warm.

Then the heart-beat stops. The darkness reaches up from the ground and pulls her under. She leaves Will with empty arms.

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A short, gasping scream erupted from the garret window. Will looked up towards the light.

"Eliza?" he whispered. An impossible assumption. Had some measure of time escaped him?

He heard a low chanting, voices murmuring in unison. He felt disoriented, as if some force were bending the fabric of the world so it failed to align correctly.

He took a step towards the house. He shivered, something ice-cold rippling through him. Determined, he seized a deep breath, then ran to the house, but all the doors were securely locked. Desperately he searched for another way. He remembered a huge tree grew close to the garret. At the trunk, he scrambled in the darkness for a handhold, found a low branch, and pulled himself up.

An old apple tree; untended, it had sprawled, branches pressing and rattling against the back wall of the house. But it was no easy climb. On the first bough, Will took off his jacket. It dropped from his hand, snagging on a branch to hang like a dead bird. In the cool night air, his body sweated. Twigs scratched.

His body ached with the effort of testing and stretching. Half-way up, with fragments of bark stinging his eyes, and smarting from a hundred tiny lesions on his hands and arms, he nearly lost heart. The foliage was dense, but above he could see pearls of yellow light leaking from the garret shutters. The leaves stirred. The chanting ceased momentarily, and he strained to hear a low moan. He knew he could not turn back.

Up he climbed, his mind blanked to everything but the painful ascent. The gardens of London spread below him in the darkness, the web of walls and alleyways, the arteries of roads, the distant beads of gas-lights in a string. How peaceful it looked. How still. And yet within how many walls were children marked with hunger, blighted with overwork, how many mothers had nothing but gin to tease the palates of their infants. He looked again, seeing a hellish patchwork of need and disease, the cesspits, the mills churning in the east, scattering smoke and stink.

Hanging high above the city, he suffered a sudden vertigo. The ground seemed to drop away. The wind billowed suddenly with a slow power, catching hold of the damaged shutters and shaking them. Candlelight flickered inside, but he needed to climb higher to look down into the room.

The branches were thinning now and might not support him. Still, he inched further out until he perched no more than four feet from the window. The shroud of darkness still clung to him. He looked into the room and swallowed hard.

Eliza was laid out on a table, surrounded by dark figures dressed in long robes. Her body, held by ropes at her wrists and ankles, jerked in the throes of a fit. Will's sketches of the spirit images and Jane's portrait had been placed about her. And there were dozens of mirrors, casting the images and the candlelight back and forth, distorted and inflamed.

Bishop stood over Eliza. He forced medication into her, while the others continued chanting.

He called out, "Hear me, spirit voices! I will know you. I will know the creature that lurks inside this girl, that pulls her down into madness."

He cast handfuls of some black dust across a row of candles, a line of fire erupting as the dust burned.

Eliza screamed, straining against her bonds. As he watched, Will saw darkness visibly closing in all around the garret. He counted about seven men, besides Bishop and Jane and the poor wretch spread on the table. He could no longer discern the branches of the tree in front of him, nor the brickwork of the house. Just the light from that one room.

He looked into a cauldron, a pocket inferno in an infinite night.

Bishop circled the table, reciting incantations Will could not understand. Then Bishop called out, "I know that you can be drawn away. By capturing your likeness, we have captured you. But you escape us each time and return to the host. If mere paper does not hold you, if flesh and blood is needed, then that is what I offer."

Bishop threw off his robe. Jane Marks stepped forward. From a large wooden dish, she poured a red fluid over Bishop's shoulders. Will recoiled, thinking that it was blood. Then he whispered, "No, it is only paint."

The group continued chanting, some circling.

One of them brought forward more of the wooden dishes, placing them within Jane's reach. She dipped a rag into one and daubed a light auburn colour across Bishop's right shoulder-blade—the colour of Eliza's hair. Then away to the left, a pale pink colour, almost white, like her skin.

Eliza became calm.

With a fine brush, Jane etched in solid black lines. Will's eyes widened. Darkness crept along the floorboards in the room. Did they not see it? No, they were transfixed by the dark play enacted above Eliza's prone form. He tried to call out but his voice could not penetrate the heavy air, sounded distant even to his own ears.

Eliza's likeness grew more convincing with each passing moment. Will knew Bishop's intention; Bishop thought himself stronger than she, strong enough to contain the demon. An organic canvas. But Will suspected that Eliza had an inner strength far greater than Bishop's.

He wanted to warn them, but could only watch as the tableau unfolded.

A black shape swallowed the picture. For a moment the scene was entirely dark and all sound blotted out. The candles guttered—and rose again. A woman screamed—Jane, he thought.

He struggled to make out what was happening. A dark figure rose from Eliza's prone form. A twisting, sinuous substance, dense like fleece. It was drawn, slowly, from Eliza's mouth. She choked and struggled, her jaws strained wide. Her eyes rolled back in her skull, white as eggs. A ribbon of blood unravelled at the corner of her mouth. Against their bonds, her bones cracked and creaked.

How long, how long could she bear it? Will was gripped in an agony of indecision. The others, shocked from their ritual, stood and stared at the thick, unearthly fabric rising up from the tethered girl.

Then Eliza's mouth snapped shut. A long sigh, audible, escaped from her lips, and her body seemed to shrink upon the table. Her face was white and blue.

The spirit hovered above her, gathering substance. A face assembled itself, a suggestion of limbs, a mouth. It possessed its own faint yellowish radiance, sulphurous, which made the candles dim.

Its eyes fixed on Bishop, and the painting adorning the expanse of his upper body. Will fancied the creature smiled. But Bishop's courage failed. He drew back. Ineffectively he covered himself with his arms. He shook his head. The spirit's eyes flared, like white-hot coals. A cloak lit upon Bishop's shoulders, a menagerie of animals and birds squawking and lowing. They peeped from the bulges of Bishop's flesh, moving under the surface of his painted skin. He staggered forward, crashing into a row of mirrors, which fell to the ground, shattering. He began to cough and retch. He choked, bent over, his hands clutching his own throat. A bird pushed its way over his tongue and through his teeth. It flew from his mouth, twittering, around the room. Then another, and another. The room was full of panicked birds banging against the walls. Jane Marks shrieked again and the men fell about in disarray, waving away the birds as Bishop thrashed and writhed on the floor.

Then the birds were gone.

And Bishop sat up, breathing heavily, in a pool of fleshy red vomit. His customary wig had dropped to the floor. He had a large ulcer on the side of his head.

Then the spirit turned, its body undulating like silk. It fixed its gaze on a man visible behind Eliza's head. It was Edgar Marks, his hood fallen back. Marks shook his head, seemingly baffled. The spirit mewed. A long hand stretched from the spirit form, seizing Marks by the throat. Effortlessly it lifted him up and threw him back against the wall.

Havoc broke loose. A fat man, the gentleman Will had seen in the coffee house dining with Bishop so many weeks ago, collapsed in a curious heap on the floor, as though the knots of his joints had unfastened. Jane Marks hammered on the door, struggling with the locks, trying to escape. But the door refused to budge. Downstairs, on the lower floors, the lunatics were silent.

Jane Marks' pots of paint upturned on the table, smashed by an unseen hand, spilling pools of blue and pink and auburn. The candles fizzed and flared. The creature reared up and snapped forward. One of the men looked down in astonishment at the gaping hole in his chest.

Then darkness again. The voices ceased. Will could hear no pleas or cries. The garret was pitch black, thick as felt, blocking him out. But he could hear heavy thumps. The walls shook. The moments stretched. Inside the room the pounding went on and on. The random percussion of flesh and bone against the resistant surfaces of wood and stone. And what of Eliza, caught up inside?

Then the sound stopped. Everything was still. A single candle flame rose over the table, close to Eliza's face. Her lips were white as chalk. Her hair glittered, threads of gold.

Will gasped. His chest hurt. How long had he held his breath? The darkness shifted over her body. The spirit. It was still there, tied by a thread.

Some slight sound escaped Will's lips and the spirit looked at him through the broken shutters. It perceived his presence, perched precariously in the tree.

The creature curled. Balled like a fist it punched the broken shutters, sending splinter shards out into the night. Will screamed. He was pushed from the tree. His body reacted instinctively. Hands, fingers, nails, he grasped and clutched at the tree, scrabbling for a tenuous hold to save himself. But the spirit continued its attack relentlessly. It plucked and bit, prising his fingers from the branch. Still struggling, he fell from the tree. Down and down. He banged into branches. Twigs snagged his hair and clothes and raked his face.

"Eliza!" he shouted. He tumbled away from the branches, into open space.

He fell for a long time. He waited for the ground to rise and meet him, curiously tranquil now. Strange fingers pressed inside his skull. The being riffled through his thoughts, tipping out the draw-

ers of his memories, pawing over oddities, a day's gems, the hidden detritus at the back of his mind. The angels sang in Peckham Rye. His family laughed over stockings and tallow candles. Robert touched his face. And suddenly Will began to sense something of the creature's nature. Angrily it tried to assert itself, pushing into every corner of his mind. Like so many fragments in a window of coloured glass, Will's psyche shattered under the creature's onslaught.

He tumbled again, clutching desperately at emptiness. Was he still falling, in an unending embrace with this creature? It knew Eliza well. He could sense her presence still. He took strength. He found her memories and gathered them up. Then memories of his own. Piece by piece he reassembled himself. And he felt the creature turning away, trying to escape, driven by a desperate hunger.

The ground received him gently. The garden was soft and safe as his mother's lap. The cool grass soothed his hot, damaged skin. Way up, the moon came into focus, clear and bright. The trees curved over him. The garret was dark, the night still. Then a thin white angel slipped from the window. She looked very frail and new. Her wings were white as flour, like gauze. Treacle-coloured hair fanned.

The dark force hurtled upwards, towards the frail spirit. Will could see it, like a bull. Would it overpower her again? But it faltered and thinned, dispelled and drawn apart.

It vanished.

Eliza smiled a ghostly smile. "Goodbye, Will," she called.

She drifted on the currents of air above the city. She laughed, floating and turning, carried over the garden.

"Eliza!" he shouted out. "Will I see you again?"

He began to run, trying to keep up with the translucent being rising away from him.

"Yes, Will, yes!" she called back, her voice very tiny now. She began to sing. The delicate, joyful songs of the dead echoed in William's heart.

- - -

Will walks among the crowd—more a rowdy mob. They push and shove each other. They jeer. And laugh like the insane. He sees a gin bottle raised eagerly to a mouth missing teeth.

"Come on," the man cries out, waving the bottle as if it were a flag. "Show us what we've come for."

On this blisteringly hot day, late in August, they are here to celebrate a hanging.

He has travelled from Great Queen Street, Lincoln's Inn Fields, if not to celebrate then at least to witness. It was good of Mr. Basire to let him leave early this day. In a curious gesture of good faith, Bishop has signed a bill for a premium of fifty guineas, enabling him to enter the workshop of the master-engraver. It was not the painter's studio Will had hoped for, but still it was a good choice. He felt confident he could use the medium to capture his visions. So many visions, now. And some day he will be known as one of its finest craftsmen. He is sure of it.

There will be thirteen hangings this day, though only one is known to him. Dr. Charles Bishop, charged with the murder of seven fellow doctors and an artist and the poisoning of his sister, Eliza. All of them found dead in the locked garret of his home.

"Read the true story," a voice cries out.

He buys a copy. A sensational account, printed for distribution this afternoon. Ink has spread on the soft, cheap paper and odd letters are indistinct. *A Full and True Account of A Gentleman Apprehended for Murther, the Practise of Witchcraft, The Perversion of the Honourable Profession of Science, and The Cruel and Unnatural Treatment of his Sister.*

The tale is packed with salacious details. Will reads that a young man informed on Bishop, telling the authorities exactly what to look for. The murderer will be hanged, and then buried at a crossroads so the ghost may never find a way home.

They haul the man up on to the platform. The crowd cheers. Bishop struggles. He is gaunt, all flabbiness gone. His finest suit doesn't fit now, but he has a new wig and a clean white shirt. The months of incarceration have reduced him. Or perhaps something else has taken its toll. Will is uneasy about the justice of the sentence, considering the truth, which bears little resemblance to the account he holds in his hands. Perhaps Bishop had genuinely hoped to help his sister, the sick Eliza Rose.

Even now, he cannot decide where the true sickness lay.

"Do not torment yourself, Will," she says. She can see the windings of his thoughts. "Do not pray for him. He doesn't merit pity."

"There is not a soul among us that cannot be pitied," Will answers softly. Sometimes he tires of her.

He visited Bishop, in Newgate. The noise and stink of the prison filled him with dismay, the press of unwashed bodies in the cells, the uproar, the scraping of fetters on stone floors. For the first months, Bishop had paid the rent on a cell in Keeper's House, away from the poorer criminals. Towards the end he was moved to a plainer cell, when his money failed, though he never descended to the lower wards, to the stew of lice and typhus.

"Will, my boy," Bishop said. He was sitting behind a plain table, an uneaten cob of coarse bread on a wooden trencher before him. "I did not expect to see you here."

Will nodded. Bishop must have known he had told the authorities, but oddly he didn't seem angry. His skin was very yellow, the ulcer on his head unhealed.

"Why have you come?" Bishop asked gently.

Will twisted his hat in his hands.

"I still do not understand," Will said, all of a sudden. "I still cannot see. I wrestle, sir, with what I saw. The dark beast, you know, it rose from her body and it seized me. Yes! It knocked me from a tree and then it disappeared, and now I have...."

"And now you have Eliza instead."

Will stared at his hands.

"Yes, yes," Bishop said. "I can see her. Like a briar. Like mistletoe upon your very soul."

Will frowned, very troubled.

"I have to confess to my gross mistake, William," Bishop said. "The blood of Jane, and Edgar and the others does lie on my hands. I was held to account and I am justly sentenced. The spiritual force, you understand, was not a being in possession of Eliza; it was part of Eliza herself. And I drew it out."

"No," Will said. "No, that isn't so. I saw you, sir—I saw you feed her poison and lock her away. If she had a darkness inside her, you nursed it. You are the beast, not she."

But Bishop smiled and shrugged. Curiously, Will could not help but like him then. He had a gravity Will had overlooked.

The Old Bailey sessions were tumultuous, the newsletters gory with the lowliest details. Will testified with horror in his heart, but he didn't speak of the last night in the tree, above the garret. On the day of the hanging, the bells rang muffled from the churches. Will crept among the crowd in the Press Yard where the prisoners' chains were struck off. A procession of carts set out, Bishop's status according him a carriage at the front. How hot it was, the crowd in

a riot, stinking vegetables slung at the miserable wretches due to hang. Many were drinking gin. Dutch courage. A young girl, no older than he was, wept upon the cart with her hands on her face. The carts stopped at St Sepulchre's, for prayers, and then proceeded down Snow Hill, High Holborn, and finally to Tyburn. He pushed his way through the crowd, determined and out of breath.

"Look," she says.

Will is brought back to the moment. At the triple tree the crowd throngs. Hawkers sell refreshments. Before Will's eyes, a young ragamuffin slides a handkerchief from a man's pocket. He can sense Eliza's elation, her moment of triumph. Honey and wormwood. Sugar and bitterness. The perfume drifts about him, like a veil.

"No," he says, but he does look. Seeing Will talk to himself, frowning, an old woman beside him glances over. So he thrusts forward through the crowd as the noose is tightened around the murderer's neck.

At last he is close enough to see the doctor's eyes, drained of colour, almost totally black. The murderer sees him, returns his look, and for the briefest moment, smiles in recognition.

"Go swiftly to Hell," Will says.

But the words are not his own.

The bodies drop, and kick. A low sound rises from the assembly, like a groan. The young girl takes a long time to die. Then the noise rises again. At a signal from the hangman, an unseemly struggle breaks out as relatives seize the bodies of their loved ones. A man in a dusty black suit directs the cutting down of Bishop's corpse, to be placed in a waiting carriage.

Will sighs. He sees no ghost. Momentarily he is arrested by the spectacle of a young woman placing Bishop's lifeless hand upon her bosom.

He leaves the crowd behind. Climbs a steep hill, tiring under the sun. Eliza walks alongside him, untroubled by the heat. She sings, and speaks of visions. She is a little girl lost in a forest of beasts. She is a rose, with a worm.

At the summit he rests a moment. He reaches out and takes her hand. He presses her palm to his chest, where his heart beats fast. She concentrates, trying to feel it through her fingertips. But such physical sensations are difficult now.

"It seems I have lost your heart," she says.

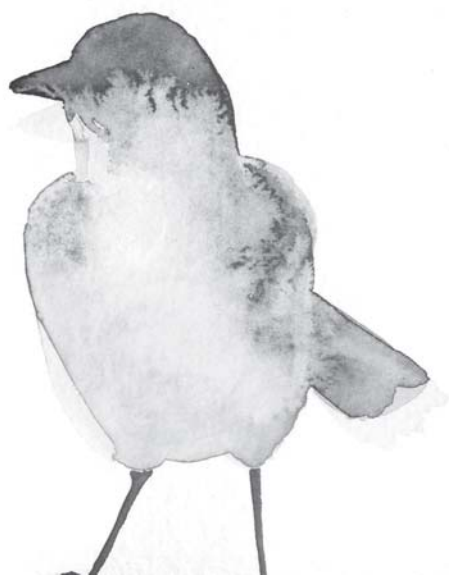
“Would I have any more luck,” he asks, “if I searched for yours?”

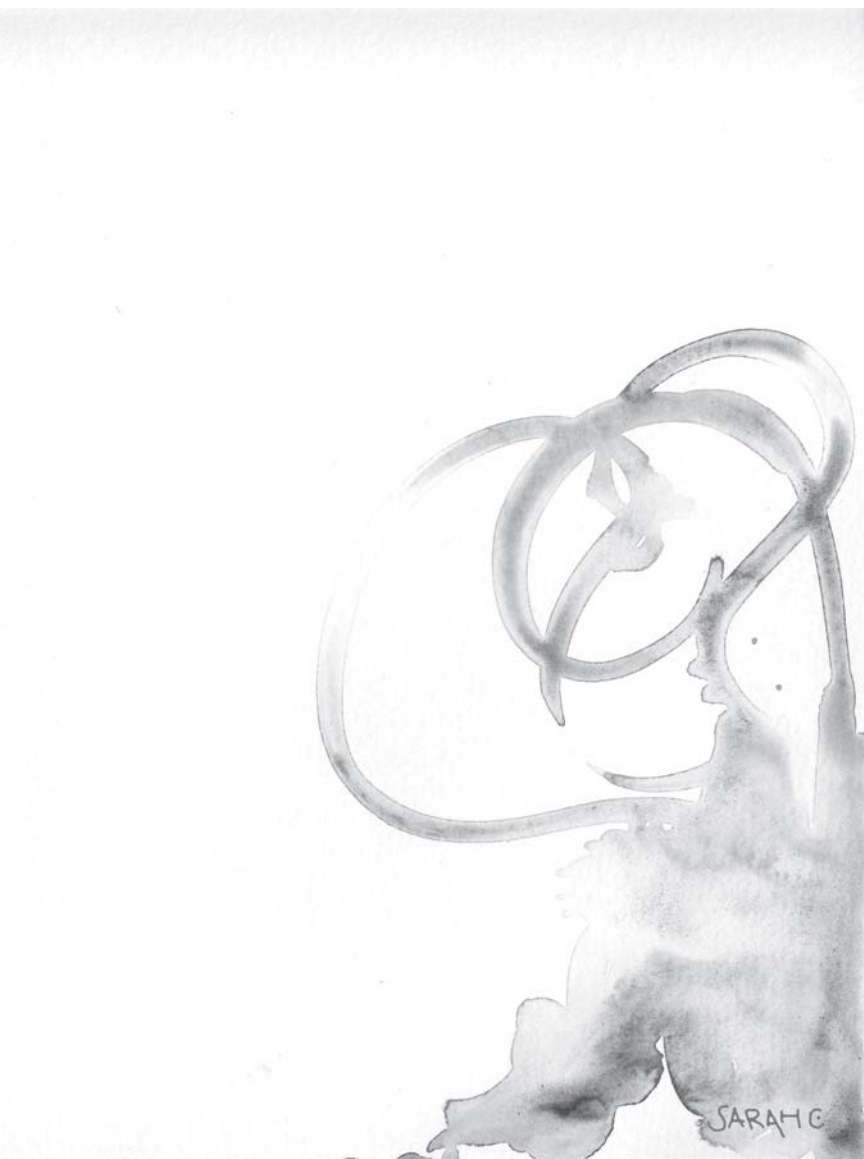
She smiles. “Oh, it’s out there somewhere,” she says wistfully.

He lets go of her hand. He surveys the scene, London sprawled below them in all its glory.

He says, “Perhaps some day I shall go in search of it.”

Then she flies away, like a bird, through the darkening skies, letting William turn towards the close, warm hearth of his home.





68

Sarah Coyne

greatest uncommon denominator

One in Ten Thousand

Athena Workman

I waited four hundred sixty-one days to kill him, and when I did, he didn't even know it. Just got up and walked right out of the apartment like back when he used to work the nine-to-five shift at DentaDyne. Instead of wearing an overcoat, he wore the syringe that I'd forgotten to remove, and it bobbed and banged against his arm like a tiny, underdeveloped appendage.

I killed him again when he got home; after I'd paced the apartment for hours, using the sun on the wall through our single window as a time guide like the ancients did. The glowing orb had already disappeared over the other side of the high-rise by the time he returned, bags of skin pulling down his eyes, the syringe lost. They'd given me another, just in case the first one's dosage wasn't high enough, and I got him again after he sat on the couch. As he blinked and the television sprang on, I sank the needle into his flesh, right through his shirt into the tough part of his shoulder. Again, I fled to the bathroom, locking myself in and shrinking down by the tub, unable to face what I'd done.

I found him in the kitchen an hour later, an opened jar of peanut butter before him on the table, the loaf of bread still sealed in its vacuum pack. As usual, he'd forgotten how to open it.

- - -

We'd been on the waiting list for over a year: two first and last names lost within a database of the hopelessly damned and the damned hopeless. My fingers had trembled when the doctor handed me the syringes, and they quavered again when I called the center and asked why he was now standing at the door, his fingers loosely wrapped around the doorknob, his nose an inch from the wood. Two men and a woman arrived thirty minutes later, the men wearing white Plasti-Suits, the lady in a cream-colored gabardine number and smart gold-rimmed contacts. She was his doctor, and more alert than he'd ever been even at the height of his senses. The sterile men guided him to the couch, and Dr. Blue examined him by tapping on his knees, shining a bright light in his eyes, asking questions and receiving no response.

"He's alive," she finally said, standing, peering down at him, a line of confused aggravation appearing between her eyes.

"I know," I said. I could not wring enough sweat from my hands.

"You must have not depressed the plunger," Dr. Blue said, but I shook my head and ran to the kitchen. I hadn't flushed it down the disposal.

"I did!" I said, returning, holding the syringe up. The sun was still on our side, and the needle caught the light, flashing in his eyes. Dull and brown, they blinked once, slowly. The channel changed to the noon news.

"Then there's only one explanation for it, I'm afraid," Dr. Blue said. "In about one in ten thousand, the medicine doesn't work."

"What?" I rolled my eyes, searched the pebbled ceiling, trying to remember a headline, a news scroll, a line in an article. I could not, and felt myself reeling.

"I'm sorry," Dr. Blue said, gathering her things into her stainless steel bag, readying to return to a world without zonked senses and silver lines of drool. I inhaled deeply, gathering courage as I lowered the needle. Until that moment, I'd forgotten that it was still aloft.

"Can I...have another?" I asked. I figured the answer before she shook her head.

"No. The guidelines are clear. Only two per request." She paused, cocked her head. "You can re-register. There's nothing in the law against that." Another pause, and the line between her eyes deepened. "Although there's nothing to say that...*this* won't happen again. The rejection has something to do with the immune system. Unless he gets sick in the meantime...." She trailed off, shrugged.

Another year. Probably longer. After Dr. Blue and the anonymous men left, I called the center and requested to be put back into the database. I was told our case would come up for review by committee within a month. I didn't tell the faceless operator that we'd already been approved.

- - -

Knives. A bathtub that could be filled to the brim with water. Plump pillows. A window on the thirty-sixth floor of a high-rise. A plethora of weapons at my disposal, and yet I could not bring myself to use a one. No one could—wasn't that why we were all

listed in a computer system? By the time I turned around from pondering the overstuffed pillow on the couch, he was gone, his memory returned enough to remember how to turn a knob. I grabbed my keycard and sunglasses and left, finding him in front of the elevators, following him down.

He never saw me.

- - -

As much as it was nothing to him, the world outside confounded me, overloading my sensory system. I worked from home for Roto-Robo because of him, and because of him, I was again a babe in the world. The heat swallowed me whole and churned me in its acids, my crepe shift instantly shrinking to my body and giving me wrinkles and lumps in new places. I squinted painfully behind my sunglasses and followed him through the hordes that traversed beneath the bubble encasing the city, broiling it in ways its makers had not intended. If he felt the heat, the enormous humid pressure, his aimless shuffle did not falter, and he passed beneath three hover cars and was nearly hit by an electric car with a bashed-in front bumper as he crossed the choked street.

I inhaled the sweet meaty scent of Chinese food and the sour smell of rancid garbage; he did not. I was jostled and jolted by the sweaty crowds; he was as well, but he did not hear their cries of "Watch it!" and "Look where the hell you're going!" I saw several like him, wandering, holding on to the arms of their caretakers, but they did not see me, nor did he take them in. I caught the eye of a haggard woman with limp dishwater hair steering one of them away from a whiskey slush stand, then looked away. Did I mimic her? How long had she been waiting? I uselessly brushed down my shift and followed him.

Entering the park in the city center was like going into a sauna. Steam rose from the circular pond. Ducks floated listlessly on its cloudy blue surface. Across the water came the cries of children at a playground. He rounded the pond and sat on a bench just outside its perimeter. I found a bench nearby and watched him, my skin dissolving as puddles into the brightly painted wood. A great sweat stain grew on his gray shirt as the sun twirled toward three o'clock. His eyes closed, and his body twitched once, twice. I did not realize I was holding my breath until gold and black stars began to sparkle in my vision. I wondered, *Is it finally working?* It needed to. I needed it to, and so did he.

Two children shouted in unison, and a tall, hideously thin man came sauntering down the path; his torn shoes scratched over the gravel, knobby knees and glass-cutting elbows jutted out. The man must have seen him slack on the bench from afar and planned his attack, for he made a beeline for him, drawing back his arm to strike before his ruined shoes had even skidded to a stop. Blood spurted as the assailant's fist connected with his nose, but he did not slump over as I had hoped. Quickly, he stood and began spinning in a jerky circle. The man grabbed him, spun him back around, and stuck his hands in his pockets, but of course they came up empty. He'd long forgotten to carry a wallet. He was shoved back onto the bench, slapped for good measure.

When the thief turned toward me, I stood and shouted, "No!" The syringe could not kill him, and it was clear the malnourished man was not going to either. And how could I have thought I could stand something like this? It wasn't why I'd put us in the database, suffered through the waiting, the vapidty, the shit. The thief leered at me, glanced into the playground where children and parents alike frolicked obliviously and stupidly in the sweltering temperature, and took off the way he'd come, sneakers slapping, gravel flying. Slowly, I walked to the bench and used the bottom of my shift to wipe the blood from his nose, lips, chin. He stared into the playground, brown eyes muddy and sightless, hands limp in his soggy lap. He'd wet himself.

"Hey, is he okay?" someone asked. Her voice floated over my shoulder. I finished wiping his chin and stood him up.

"No," I answered, never looking. "He's supposed to be dead."

- - -

There was a message waiting for me on the phone screen. A pretty, perky operator from the Center for Controlled Euthanasia informed me of what I already knew: Dr. Blue had approved my request, and we were number three thousand, three hundred and eighty-two on the list. We would receive a call when our number came up, or, as she reminded me, "You might be one of twenty-five chosen in the annual lottery, which is broadcast on Channel 311."

Fat chance. I turned and looked at him. He sat on the couch and stared at the TV. When he blinked, the channel changed to Fantasy Luau 2106. Contestants screamed with joy and a pig roasted off-screen. I blinked twice, and the room fell silent. When his eyes

closed, I crept to him, leaning over and placing a hand on his chest. His heartbeat plodded steadily on, the only thing left in his body that remembered its proper mission, still strong enough to defy the poison I had shot into his veins. I did not remove my hand, but sat down, and when I found his eyes they were looking my way, pinpoints of light reflected in their dullness from the kitchen light. But they did not know me. Thirty-eight years, and he had no idea that his daughter cared for him, gave up her life and marriage for him, cried for him. Wanted heaven for him instead of this vast emptiness of hell. Wanted it all to finally be over. I kept one hand on his chest as my other groped behind me and found the overstuffed pillow.

Pushing him back, lying him down was easy. Putting the pillow over his face was not. I barely saw him thrash and buckle beneath me through the prisms of tears in my eyes. When I was done, when he fell still and stayed that way for five minutes, round wet spots dotted the brown fabric of the pillow.

- - -

The third time I killed him, the miracle happened. He did not rise. Instead of the police, the coroner, I called Dr. Blue. Her irises were rimmed with brilliant magenta and her body clothed in shimmering gold when she arrived. Silent and white, the men followed her into the apartment, standing near the door as she went to my father.

"It must have finally taken," I said, hiding my trembling, lying hands behind my back.

She glanced at me and bent over, lifting his eyelids, examining the eyes that were truly empty now, save for the petechial hemorrhaging that dotted the whites. Dr. Blue stared at him, stared at the lumpy pillow at the other end of the couch, and finally at me.

"Yes," she said, straightening up at last, "it must have."

Invitation to Kaohsiung

From the Journal of Allen McGill

The envelope with Taiwanese postage arrived in August 2004 in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, where I was living at the time. I was somewhat curious, but assumed it was just the kind of ad I occasionally received from a Hong Kong tailor I'd once visited.

When I read the enclosed letter I was still uncertain, since it seemed to make no sense. It stated that I was being invited to something called The First World Poetry Conference in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, March 2005, with almost all expenses paid (a bit shy on the airfare), including hotels, meals, transfers, sightseeing, et al. I was also invited to read from my work if I wished. The theme was to be Land and Sea in Poetic Harmony.

I'd had a good deal of my fiction, non-fiction, and creative non-fiction published. I'd also written a novel, had two of my plays produced, and had written and published a great deal of poetry. But the letter didn't say which of my works had prompted this invitation, or where my potential hosts-to-be had seen it. A scam? Perhaps, but the invitation mentioned nothing about sending them money up front. I checked to see if I could glean anything from the internet that would hint I was being conned, but found nothing to further my suspicion. This was the "First" conference, after all, and there'd not likely be much, if anything, posted seven months prior to the event.

Having worked in the travel field for most of my life, I consider myself to be pretty well traveled. I had visited some sixty countries by then, including many in Asia, but hadn't been to Taiwan and had never even heard of Kaohsiung. So, after some deliberation, I returned the application accepting the invitation, then awaited further developments. The response came quickly, via e-mail this time.

The festival, it seemed, was quite legitimate, sponsored by the Literary Taiwan Foundation, a government organization. Initially, twenty representatives from Taiwan and twenty from the rest of the world were expected to attend: from the U.S., England, Mexico, St. Lucia, Ireland, The Netherlands, Serbia, Montenegro, Nigeria, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Japan, Korea, and quite possibly others.

It was to be conducted in English, Mandarin Chinese, and Taiwanese. Some of my poetry had been published in many of those areas, but I was still uncertain as to how exactly I fit into this international group.

Months passed and nothing much changed, except that I moved cross-country to Ajijic, another ex-pat community, on the shore of Lake Chapala, and that my eagerness grew as the departure date drew near. About a week before my flight from Guadalajara to Los Angeles to make the trans-Pacific connection, China came to the forefront of the news by passing a new law that permitted itself to declare war on Taiwan—an anti-secession move against the recalcitrant island country. I immediately e-mailed my contact in Taiwan, asking her if the festival was going to be canceled. A phone call came within the hour to assure me that all was well; the media was making a bigger thing of the threat than called for. It was a go!

I'd booked a flight on EVA Airways (which I'd never heard of, though it is one of Taiwan's two top carriers, with excellent service in the air and on the ground, with fully packed wide-body flights trans-Pacific). The journey was long: Guadalajara to Los Angeles, a four-hour layover, fourteen hours to Taipei after a four-hour delay, a misconnect with the flight to Kaohsiung resulting in an overnight—three hours' rest in a hotel—then an hour flight to Kaohsiung, to *not* be met at the airport by a festival rep. The taxi driver had no idea what I meant by "Ambassador Hotel." It seems that Kaohsiung (pronounced *cow-SHUNG*) is not yet much of a tourist mecca—certainly not as much as it will be when the 2009 World Games are played there. Fortunately, I'd prepared for such a contingency by carrying a computer printout of the hotel ad that showed the hotel's name in Chinese characters, a practice I had learned through my years of experience while traveling for business. Problem solved.

The hotel in Kaohsiung, Taiwan's second largest city, was luxurious, my single room larger than my living room at home. It overlooked the Love River from the fourteenth floor—very welcoming, despite the somewhat grayish day. After checking in at the lobby's Festival desk and being greeted by a group of young Taiwanese students eager to show off their English, I was drawn back to my room by the weariness in every one of my body's muscles. Shortly after, though, I answered the ringing at my door to find the young woman, Cynthia Tsai, who had been my e-mail contact for months. With her was another young woman who was introduced as Queena

Wa, my personal interpreter for the duration of the festival. She was to be my escort/guide for shopping, sightseeing, and to keep me advised of any changes to the complicated schedule that I was asked to follow. Each of the visiting representatives was assigned such an aide.

Queen's English, if slightly accented, was excellent. I learned later that she was seventeen years old and had been studying English since she was six. She spoke Spanish, too, which I decided not to test. I'd have felt terribly inept to learn that a seventeen-year-old student living in a Chinese-speaking society spoke better Spanish than I, who'd lived in Mexico for longer than she'd been alive!

The first evening in Kaohsiung set the stage for the Poetry Festival: a banquet of sumptuous food, scintillating company, ceremony, and ambience. The Taiwanese poets were introduced to the assemblage from the podium of an enormous hall, each in turn greeting us visitors in three languages. We visitors were then invited to the front of the gathering and presented to all by name and country of residence. It turned out that there were many more than the originally-invited forty participants. The group consisted almost equally of men and women, most middle-aged, but ranging up into the eighties and down into the twenties.

It may have been my imagination, but when I was announced as the visitor from Mexico, I seemed to receive a more-than-usual amount of applause. Possibly it was because it was rare that a representative to an English-language poetry gathering arrived from south of the U.S. border. It was evident that many people gravitated toward me out of interest in Mexico and in my contributions to worldwide poetry publications. The main focus of the welcoming banquet seemed to be the exchange of published work offered as gifts between the poets—a seemingly endless supply of paperback collections brought from their home countries.

A delayed flight necessitated the replacement of the opening speaker by another visitor, the senior member of the gathering, a gentle-mannered, soft-spoken gentleman, Srinivasa Rangaswami. He is a highly regarded poet internationally, and is a Parliamentary Official in India. Many of the attendees had impressive scholastic and governmental titles, making me wonder once again about how I'd come to be a part of this august group.

I write for my own enjoyment, self-expression, and as a creative outlet. Not for fame, although it was certainly nice to have my work published with that of others of such world-wide esteem. On

arrival, we had each been given in our welcome package a two-hundred-thirty-one page *Anthology of World Poetry Festival, Kaohsiung, Taiwan 2005*. Each poet had a double-page spread devoted to him or her with photo, bio, and the poem we'd submitted for publication—in English, with a translation into Chinese.

To an outsider, the celebratory atmosphere might well have been taken to be that of a cocktail party at an international publishing firm, except that nothing resembling cocktails was in evidence—only a few discreet bottles of wine. I realized many attendees were from areas of the world where drinking alcohol might not have been acceptable, like India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh. But no one seemed to notice the lack of “spirits” and, I noticed, few out of the large gathering smoked.

Breakfasts were buffet affairs in the entrance-level dining room of the hotel; there were Western and Asian selections, of the very familiar and the very exotic varieties. I tried all the unfamiliar dishes, liking some and discarding them only when I was afraid to inquire as to the ingredients.

Lunches and dinners were family-style. Round ten-person tables were arranged throughout the dining rooms of our hotel restaurants, with wide Lazy Susans in the center of each. The dishes were placed in the centers of the turntables and replaced when any were near becoming empty. The variety was astounding: fresh seafood from the waters off coastal Kaohsiung along with platters of meat, fowl, and a seemingly unlimited array of vegetables—something for everyone, fortunately. Since nearly every dish contained at least a soupçon of shrimp, lobster, or other variety of crustacean, I had to be careful. I'm allergic to shellfish!

At one meal, my dinner partner—Dr. Wen-yu Chiang, a Taiwanese Professor of languages and literature at the National Taiwan University—noticed that I was eating only vegetables and rice. She asked if I was a vegetarian. When I told her that I wasn't, but simply had an allergy, she announced my problem to those at the table in Chinese—I happened to be the only visitor at that table—and to the waiter, who rushed off, weaving his way through the obstacle course of diners. The others at my table simply looked embarrassed. Moments later, the waiter returned with white rice and an entire steamed bass, which he placed directly in front of me. Lovely, but I didn't know what to do with it. I'd never been served an entrée that looked back at me. My tablemates insisted that I take

the first choice pieces. Dr. Chiang seemed to sense my ineptness and graciously offered to serve. She also quietly told me that the others were afraid I'd consider the Taiwanese people inhospitable if they didn't see to it that I was well cared for while a guest in their country. Inhospitable? I'd never been treated by strangers with such caring!

The following morning, the opening ceremony was held in a vast auditorium in the hotel, where we were afforded a particular honor. Shui-bian Chen, the President of Taiwan, made an appearance to welcome the visitors. A poet himself, he stated that he was eager to spread good will through poetry throughout the world—and this just a few days after Mainland China had virtually threatened war on his country. President Chen spoke in Taiwanese and Mandarin Chinese, according to one of the young interpreters (my ear couldn't discern the difference), who added in a whisper that his Mandarin wasn't really very good. The president was accompanied on the podium by a plethora of armed bodyguards, a precaution adopted since he had been shot in an assassination attempt in the nearby city of Tainan almost exactly a year before. Also joining him was Dr. Chi-mai Chen, the Mayor of Kaohsiung. If I'd thought that this Festival was going to be a pleasant little dish of small potatoes, I was firmly corrected.

With the late morning free, I asked Queena if she'd accompany me on a walk through the city to any department store that would be convenient. My motives were three-fold: I wanted to see what I might find in the way of a few souvenirs, it would give me time to chat with Queena without the frequent interruptions of being in a crowd, and, simply, I enjoy seeing new places on foot. We strolled leisurely along the Love River park, past joggers and groups of people exercising in public, admiring the vivid displays of orchids that seemed to be everywhere a patch of soil or potted plant could be placed. Wide boulevards with trees and more orchids crossed and crisscrossed the city, trafficked by many thousands of motor scooters. Vertical hanging banners with Chinese characters denoting businesses hung from every building in the commercial area of the city, obscuring the buildings themselves. They overlapped each other to the degree that one became indistinguishable from the next, at least to my unpracticed eye.

The department store was somewhat of a disappointment because it was indistinguishable from any multi-storied sales empo-

rium in any city in the world, except for elaborate displays of even more exotic orchids in the shop windows and on the display counters. Another difference was that there were individual shops on the various levels, most with extremely upper-scale quality and prices—Cartier, Hermès, Gucci, and the like. Not exactly your typical touristy shops selling “Hi, I’ve been to Taiwan” T-shirts. (“Hi,” used for ‘hello’ or ‘getting high,’ and “Bye-bye” and “OK,” the meanings of which are obvious to us, have been adopted by the Taiwanese into their everyday speech. I queried Queena about their usage after having heard the words a number of times at the hotel, and was told that they’d come into use because they were shorter than the Chinese or Taiwanese words with the same meaning.)

Queena, as I’d suspected, proved to be an ambitious, hard-working young woman. She told me that her aim was to become part of the Taiwanese diplomatic corps, which explained her interest in languages and in people in general. She had visited Europe and the U.S. and had plans to travel to Washington, D.C. and Denver if she was successful at an upcoming interview for part-time interpreters to be held in Taipei. She had volunteered to participate in our festival to practice her English. It wasn’t until later that I realized Queena never questioned me about my personal life, only about my writing. Of course I am old enough to be her grandfather, but I wonder now if I was rude in asking questions about her life. She didn’t seem at all hesitant or embarrassed, though, so I guess it was all right. I hope so.

I saw no evidence of homelessness or poverty and, judging from the shops and technology available throughout the city, the standard of living appeared to be very high indeed. New buildings were under construction everywhere. Many of the banners and posters I could read promoted a variety of cultural events: concerts, art and architecture exhibits, film series, etc. Evidently, art and education are quite high among the government’s priorities.

We returned to the hotel to find that the representatives were to be split into groups and transported to venues throughout the city, each group to attend presentations of poetry in relation to other forms of expression: dance, music, theatre, and the like. I was taken with a few others to the national Kaohsiung Normal (teaching) University, where we were interviewed by students who asked for our views on “Classical Chinese Poetry Encounters Modern Western Poetry.” We agreed to permit the students to record the

interview. Taiwan is one of the most technically advanced nations on Earth, which was evidenced by the miniscule digital recorders placed on the table before us, of a size and clarity of tone that I'd never seen or heard before. Every student seemed to have a complement of a sound recorder, a video cell phone, and a digital camera, all so small they could be carried in pockets without any discomfort or bulk.

After the interview, each of us visitors read from our works. The poem of mine that I'd chosen to read was "Night Watch" [see page 85], describing the view and emotions evoked while watching from an office high rise as midnight approaches Manhattan and, from a distance, it is metamorphosed into a silent, glittering panorama. It suited the "Modern Western Poetry" aspect of the theme—a reminiscence of the years I'd worked in New York City, where I'd been born and raised. While I read the poem in English, the Chinese translation was flashed on a large screen behind me. The applause was most gratifying.

The highlight of the following day was a visit to Chih Shan Hall of the Kaohsiung Cultural Center, where Nobel Prize winner Derek Walcott had a discussion through interpreters with the most famous contemporary Taiwanese poet, Shi-tao Yeh, on Reality and Imagination in Literature. Every seat in the hall was filled. Mr. Walcott is also a writer of fiction and a frequently-produced playwright. The discussion, though interrupted a few times by student outbursts attempting to disrupt the gathering with anti-China political slogans, was actually most enjoyable, with moments of uproarious laughter—particularly when Mr. Walcott's humor was translated into Chinese. Early on, he asked why there were so many young people in attendance at a poetry seminar, adding, "Why aren't you home watching television?"

That evening, we congregated in a theatre, Wu-Teh Hall, where poetry was read to the accompaniment of two dance groups, a balletic martial arts demonstration, and a choral group, with a poetry reading/dance presentation by one of the visitor-poets, a young Nigerian man, Wale Ajakaye. He attended every event in full Nigerian dress, which attracted a great deal of attention—not entirely unplanned, I suspect. Drinks and Taiwanese hors d'oeuvres were served on the patio afterwards. This was the official farewell party, though our visit had not yet ended.

It was at the party that I learned how I'd come to be chosen as an invitee. A multi-talented gentleman from Bangalore, India, Dr. Mohammed Fakhruddin, who is owner and editor of *Poets International Monthly*, had published some of my haiku in one of his issues. It seems that he is an associate of a number of the organizers of the Festival and was consulted when a list of invitees from around the world was being compiled. Upon checking his list of poets he'd published from the Americas, he'd come across my name and decided he liked my work well enough to suggest that I be included among those to be invited. When I tried to thank him, he shook his head, saying, "Your work is very fine. You deserve to be here." I was humbled, and so happy that I'd submitted my work to his publication.

A visit to the National Museum of Taiwanese Literature, a rather austere building, began the following morning, followed by an excursion to Tainan, the oldest city in Taiwan. Gorgeous temples and gardens still dot the small industrial city, but little else gives evidence of its age. As a side note about the excursion, while many consider poets to be rather dry, serious-minded, real or pseudo-intellectuals, this group was anything but. A male visitor from Serbia asked if the bus had a microphone, which it did. Expecting that he wanted to make some sort of announcement, we were all surprised when he began singing songs from his homeland in a voice greatly lacking in training but full of enthusiasm. An Indian woman followed, singing an old folk ballad in a lovely voice. It seems that she'd been a professional singer in Delhi. Her offering was followed by melodies sung by another former professional singer, a Taiwanese woman who had been in the chorale the previous night. We were serenaded by these and other spontaneous entertainers of varying degrees of talent on the way to and from Tainan, adding much enjoyment to the somewhat dull highway drive.

While strolling through the grounds of an elaborate old temple in Tainan, I came upon a small gift shop and browsed among the display cases of "tourist junk," as I called it—which Queena thought a delightful expression. My former dinner partner, Dr. Chiang, approached me to ask if I saw anything I liked, and if she could help me with the purchase. I declined, but mentioned that there were miniature masks that were similar to some I'd bought in Mainland China years before, which had been stolen. A few minutes later she presented me with a selection of the masks as a memento of Taiwan, which taught me a lesson: don't admire something aloud within the

hearing of a Taiwanese, unless you want the person to make a gift of the item to you.

After my embarrassment abated, we talked of her poetry and I learned something else. Taiwanese poets are not of the dry, boring type either. Dr. Chiang asked if I had been at her presentation. Unfortunately, I had not been scheduled to attend. "You might have enjoyed it," she said with a slight grin. "My topic was the comparison of Chinese and Western erotic poetry." And I had missed it! She seemed amused at my surprise and the fact that I wasn't in the least bit shocked. Erotic literature from the past is quite acceptable in Taiwan, but modern erotic works are frowned upon—especially if written by a woman! Dr. Chiang is obviously a modern woman who refuses to permit her writing to be restricted by a society of prudes. One of her most recently published works is "Men's Nipples and Grandmother's Cuisine." I've asked her in an e-mail if it's available in English online or in print.

Every event during the festival was a photo-op, filmed and photographed by the Taiwanese news media, including our sojourn in Tainan. One by one, we were interviewed by a local TV crew, who asked such questions as, "What are your thoughts in relation to the effect of poetry on world peace?"

Not an easy question to answer on the spur of the moment. I know that my response was spontaneous, and I hope it made some sense—unaccustomed as I am to ad libbing in front of a live television camera. I said something to the effect that, from a distance, we think of people's differences: color, religion, dress, customs, and appearance. But through poetry and certain other forms of communication, we touch people on a much more important level than just the surface. We reach inside to share what we have in common: love, sorrow, family, concern, the senses in general. If we concentrate on our similarities rather than our differences, maybe we can develop friendships that, some day, will evolve into peace.

Dinner back at the hotel was a special one, held in the Szechuan Restaurant. It was a bit quieter than our other dinners, with many of us thinking about our departures the following morning—some having to leave on flights before dawn. Handclasps and hugs were shared throughout the groups, along with promises to keep in touch by e-mail and to exchange our poetic creations through cyber-space.

The most tender and sensitive partings were between the visitors and their interpreters. Each visitor had bought small gifts

for the young people, hoping they'd accept them. Gifts, according to Taiwanese custom, are given to visitors and are not received *from* them. I'd sneaked a boxed pendant on a chain into Queena's tote bag, the one she'd carried throughout the festival period. The bag was filled with notes about Taiwan for my information and—to my delight—copies of some of my stories and poetry that she'd downloaded from the internet. She asked me questions to clarify for herself certain word meanings and unfamiliar phrasings. She'd actually been studying my work, which pleased me greatly. Many tears were shed in the grand lobby of the hotel, including mine when Queena presented me with a Chinese robe I'd admired early on—just before she turned and sped away out of the hotel. I began to miss her immediately.

My last day was spent with Cynthia Tsai, my e-mail contact throughout the planning stages, Ruth Wildes Schuler a wonderful prize-winning poet from California, and another young woman who drove us. Ruth's and my flight wasn't until four in the afternoon and, rather than have us spend the day in the hotel lobby, Cynthia chose to give us a driving tour of the city and stop for a small lunch along the way. She also told me on the sly that it was to apologize for my not having been met on my arrival. We drove to the outskirts of Kaohsiung and up into the hills to view Kaohsiung Harbor and Taiwan Bay, which we saw from a home atop a high cliff on the southwest coast. The owner had recognized us as visitors as we were taking photos by the roadside and invited us to tea to afford us a better view of the sea.

On returning home I immediately sent off a note to Queena, thanking her for her graciousness, help, and most enjoyable company. "If I had a granddaughter," I told her, "I'd wish her to be just like you."

Queena's response told me how much she "appreciated and loved the pendant" I'd given her—her memento of what she called "a most lovely experience." She also asked if I'd mind if she continued to write. Mind? I was flattered.

I've just begun to compile a collection of my poetry to send off to my distant acquaintances, including Queena. If poetry can be a bridge between nations, promoting friendship, understanding, and peace, perhaps the internet should share in the credit, for speeding up the process.

Night Watch

By Allen McGill

Nearly midnight; silent behind the glass barrier that separates me from the world below, I watch the lava-flow dwindle to swift-moving sparks, limning parallel river drives heading south, tunnel-swallowed where they meet.

Illuminated webs spread erratically between, moving at the whims of amber and green. Spastic stops and jolts, anticipatory edging across painted grid lines. Revolving jewels top black and whites in a race across town.

A trio of garlanded bridges spans the eastern river, motionless but for a lone bus speeding across. Beyond a building spire, rising from an isolated speck of island in the harbor, a beam-lit statue holds a glowing torch.

Rooftops black as pits. Lights appear, then die as cleaners move from floor to floor, office to office. Reflected lights in facing windows—from my aerie—too far away to see myself.

An aircraft passes, invisible but for its wing-lights against the matte-black sky. Imagined engine roar reaches my ear, as did the police car's wail, an ambulance's siren. Just a fluorescent's hum.

The city eases into the early hours, barely slowing to recoup its energy. As if in respect for those asleep, or dying. Stars hide, unable to compete with the glare of neon. Midnight; I leave to stroll the empty streets.

4 Short Parables Revolving Around the Theme of Travel

A.B. Goelman

I. Frequent Flier

When third-generation superhero Walter Bennett Remington III swooped down from the sky, supporting the 747 on his back, no one applauded. Not the people in the airplane, not their worried relatives on the ground. Everyone knew about the second law of thermodynamics. They weren't sure of the details, but they knew the basics: all power has to come from somewhere. Each time power changes hands, you lose a little of it.

And they knew where the power that had Walter swooping in the sky, grinning and pirouetting, had come from. It had come from them. The passengers felt little—smaller than they used to—as they climbed down the stairs to the cement landing pad. One older man pressed his hand into his back. “I already had a slipped disc,” he told no one in particular, “but it hurts worse now.”

Walter pretended not to hear, although his super hearing made it impossible not to. Instead he flew off to his family's Ski Chateau of Solitude in the mountains of Switzerland.

“The world doesn't appreciate us,” he told his mother. She was halfway down the mountain on her new short skis, but she heard him just fine. She skidded to a halt, kicking up a plume of previously untouched powder. “Great skiing today, Wally,” she told him. “Really great. Pure powder.”

“Don't call me Wally, Mother.” Walter flew past her to the highest mountain in the Swiss Alps. The view would have been spectacular for anyone, but with Walter's super-vision it was incredible. He could see most of the inhabited world. Billions of humans going about their business. Working in factories, farms, offices. Sitting on the street begging for pennies and walking down the sidewalk in their business suits. And they all hated him, and the rest of his type.

“What if they didn't know the power came from them?” Walter asked.

His mother, executing a perfect spin as she finished the slope, shrugged. “Who cares?”

“I care,” Walter said. He looked down with his extra-perfect vision, looked straight into the brains of people for thousands of miles around, and watched. It took him eighty-three days, seven hours, and forty minutes to finally understand the way their brains worked.

For a moment he just smiled. If he had wanted, he could have written a book that would have gotten him tenure in every brain and cognitive science department in the country. But people still would have hated him. They would have known where his genius came from. It came from them.

Instead, he did what he had to do. Or at least what he wanted to do. He burned the knowledge of where his power came from right out of the cerebral cortexes of every human being in the world. About 2.7 billion people paused and looked at each other. About 500 million people commented in about forty-three languages, “Do you smell something burning?” About one tenth of these checked to make sure they hadn’t left their ovens on.

And then they went on with their day. Every once in a while they caught a bit of motion in the sky high above them. Sometimes they would look up and see Walter Bennett Remington III, or someone a lot like him, soaring through the sky. They would stare for a few moments, admiring his chiseled muscles, his noble face. Although his muscles weren’t really that chiseled. Although his face wasn’t particularly noble.

Sometimes—this world being the pit of irony that it is—they would even say, “Hey. That guy really deserves what he has. That guy really has it coming.”

And far, far away—even farther away than it looked to them, because it’s hard to gauge distances when you’re on the ground looking up—the person flying through the sky would smile.

II. Tourists

When the aliens came, they looked like game show hosts. They looked like camp counselors. They looked like game-show-hosting camp counselors. They wore expensive suits with sandals and had long straight hair that would have been fashionable in exactly 1973. It turned out that 1973 was the last year of television

that had made it to their distant planet before they had decided to visit Earth. Upon arriving, they spent days in Manhattan's Museum of Radio and Television catching up on the last twenty-three years of television as well as watching old favorites. There were three aliens, and each of them thought Jack Ritter was the funniest human on Earth. They claimed to have tests that could prove this empirically.

Not everyone liked the aliens. They were widely believed to be liars, as well as aliens. They claimed to be genderless, but they all looked like men, and had sex only with human females. They claimed to be kings. They claimed to be wise. They gave gifts that people didn't always like.

For instance, they gave almost everyone they met very small quantities of gold and frankincense and myrrh, along with their favorite recipes for using them. They accosted people on the sidewalks, or even in their cars. They would ask questions in their baritone voices. Their favorite three questions were: "If you could go to a desert island, what three types of food would you bring with you?" "What celebrity would you bring with you?" "What five albums would you have with you?" On several occasions they then put the person in question on the desert island with the food, celebrity, and albums of their choice.

"Poor celebrities," some people—mostly *Us Magazine* readers—said. "Poor desert island ecosystems," fewer people—mostly Sierra Club members—said.

A few religious people said the aliens had come for the birth of the messiah who would redeem all of humanity. These people said that our sun was one of three stars that they were following to see the messiah born. But the aliens never said anything about that, and after about three months and a final weekend in Las Vegas, they left, never to be seen on Earth again. At least, not so far as anyone knew.

III. The Unabridged Tragedy of the Scorpion and the Frog

As is well known, the scorpion, a slick little number in a dark suit with movie-star hair, met the frog on the right bank of the river. "I'd like to go to the left bank of the river. The *gauche* bank as they'd say in Páree," he said, and winked at the frog. This was back in those distant days when a French accent was still seen as the most sophisticated sort of cool. In fact, however, this scene took place in

northern Louisiana, on the banks of the Mississippi, and no significance should be attached to the fact that ‘frog’ is slang for a French national in certain parts of the world. Both the frog and the scorpion were 100% American. This is an American parable.

“Scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours, Daddy-0,” the scorpion crooned. He snapped his claws and winked again. “A rising tide lifts all boats and all that.”

The frog, being an impressionable sort, wanted her boat lifted and her back scratched. But, still, she treaded the deep water in the center of the river, enjoying the feel of the cool water against her legs. “Wouldn’t you bite me?” she asked.

The scorpion scoffed and shook his head. “Bite you? Please. You are thinking of the Old World. Old Europe. And, notwithstanding my delightful accent, in spirit I am a creature of the New Europe. Of new countries like Lithuania and Poland with their delicious salted herring and decaying labor unions. Besides, if I bite you, I myself will die.”

“True enough.” The frog swam towards the shore and landed next to the scorpion. Being a scorpion, the scorpion crawled atop the frog and immediately stung her to death.

“But now you’ll never get across the river,” the frog said with her dying breath.

In the popular version, the scorpion famously replies, “It’s my nature,” and dies, and that’s where the story ends. In point of fact, the scorpion shrugged and crawled back into the forest. He said nothing at all at the time, but months later he wrote a paper in *Foreign Policy* explaining the death as one of the “inevitable sacrifices of cross-river commerce.”

Years passed. French accents fell out of fashion. The scorpion died in a comfortable rest home, surrounded by satisfying educational and recreational opportunities. More scorpions and frogs were born and died.

One day, another scorpion sat on the cement pier where the forest had been. She spied a frog swimming in the middle of the river. “Pardon me,” she shouted. The frog swam closer, and in a quieter voice the scorpion asked, “Could I be so bold as to ask for a ride to the other side of the river?”

“Won’t you sting me?” the frog asked. “It seems to me I read a paper about that in college. Something in *Foreign Policy*, right?”

The scorpion chuckled. "That's ridiculous. Why would I sting you? I will help you across the river. I will look for oil slicks and other dangers. Together we will thrive."

The frog, being a cautious sort, asked for some time to think about it. He took the question to the frog community. At first all the frogs were against it. The toads as well, and, so far as could be determined, the newts, too. The old toads in particular warned the frog about what was bound to happen.

Still, as the weeks passed, the scorpion remained by the river. "I am resolute," she told the birds, the publicists of the animal world. "With my help, the frog will cross the river safely. No more questions."

Soon the hawks were criticizing the frogs as cowards, while the doves wondered if the frogs were deliberately stopping the free exchange of people and ideas across the river. Finally, the young frog's resolve crumbled. He was very young, and only a frog after all. The whole concept of stinging something, rather than catching it with your tongue, seemed both awkward and unlikely to him.

He swam to where the scorpion was waiting on the bank of the river. The scorpion smiled graciously at him and crawled on top of his back.

Being a cautious sort, the frog immediately dived back into the river. If the scorpion stung him, she would die, too.

The scorpion kept her stinger tightly coiled above her head. "I will direct you across the river," she told the frog. "I can see more from up here. For instance, there's an idiot on a jet ski over to your left."

The frog obligingly stroked to the right. It was a huge river, so it took some time before they were midway across. The scorpion looked around and realized she would never be so far from land again. She stung the frog three times.

The frog said nothing as he died, being deeply disappointed in both himself and the scorpion. The scorpion said nothing, either, as scorpions are not equipped to drown and talk at the same time. The old toads said, "I told you so," and were roundly criticized as haters.

But, for the most part, everyone continued about their business. The truth is, frogs and scorpions die all the time.

IV. Interstellar Travel

Interstellar travel was kind of like skateboarding at first. It was kind of like punk music. It was do-it-yourself. It was hard to make money off of. It was too clean, too easy, requiring only a few psychotropics and the knowledge of a few formulas. Then off you went. Literally anywhere.

The rulers of the world—the people who own and the people who decide—did what they had to. They did what they could. They buried the discovery, distracting people with advances in cosmetic surgery, in multi-sensory entertainment vids that could simulate multiple orgasms.

Knowledge of the discovery spread very slowly. The people who knew disappeared too quickly to tell many people. They vanished overnight with their extended families and acquaintances.

The infotainment complex sprang into action after each disappearance, spreading rumors of death squads, of corporate assassins. Websites were taken down, graffiti was power-washed away. Still, the odd hand-scribbled poster would be left up in a coffee shop bathroom for a week or two before someone took it down. Just long enough for someone else to read it and get it.

There were lulls, of course. As of 2052, ten years had passed without a single disappearance. The rulers of the world breathed a vast sigh of relief. But then, one of the government agents, unhappy, lonely, dissatisfied with night after night of soft porn alone in his condo, couldn't help but remember the formula he had seen before burning one of the disappeared families' houses down. He disappeared, but not before leaving an explicit voice mail for his kid brother. And so it continued.

When the emptying of cities became impossible to ignore, the corporate government referred to them as "displacement suicides." Then, in 2110, corporate government policy changed course. People were told of the travel, but also told of fiery star deaths, of deaths in the vacuum of space. "It's like Russian roulette, but with the gun fully loaded," one advertisement proclaimed solemnly.

But centuries of distrust, of advertising lies, left people unconvinced, when vague rumors promised worlds just like Earth, but democratic, free. The ebbs turned to flows, the flows turned to torrents.

In the end only the executives, only the administrators were left. Stockholders and management with no more children to work, no more wealth to concentrate. They stayed on Earth and wrote self-righteous histories that no one read. No one. Not even a single person. Because, eventually, they died, and no one came back.

None of humanity's descendants returned to Earth. They didn't even talk about Earth. In public, at least. At cocktail parties, when it came up, people would look away. Cough embarrassedly. It was that kind of thing.

The Doctrine of the Arbitrariness of the Sign

Shweta Narayan

"Spli-pli-plitter!" Andrew called to the low grey sky. A big wet droplet exploded on his nose, and another in his hair, then it was all around; a great torrent, as if someone had pulled the plug out of a lake in the sky to send water soaking into his coat and jeans and hair. And sister. He grinned.

She glared at him. "Okay, so it's raining, so come on."

"Not just raining, Tess." His grin widened, partly for the joy of wetness, partly because it would annoy her. "Spli-plitter raining. A *deluge*." He played the word around in his mouth, luxuriating in the sound and feel of it and its echo in the beat of water on pavement.

"Like I said. Raining." She started walking.

He caught up easily. He'd been growing lately. "Not *any* rain," he said. "Big wet warm drops that drench, and break open into little drippy droplets when they hit you. Splitter rain."

"Whatever."

He considered leaving her to her mood, then sighed. At this rate, she'd ruin the whole weekend. He looked up again. "Thrip."

"What?"

"Thrip," he told her helpfully. "It's a kind of dry-wet word, the word of rain stopping before it should and leaving the air all damp and ominous."

"Okay, you're weird." Then she stared. At him, at the sky. The rain had stopped.

He smiled smugly. "This is Thrip."

Tess stared at him until he looked away, then, without a word, turned for home. When Andrew hurried to catch up, she spun on him. "Leave me alone!" She strode away, leaving him to trail anxiously behind, his satisfaction lost in unease. He should never have told Tess a secret.

He ran up behind her, pulled her hair, and bolted, yelling rain words up into the air. By the time she'd chased him all the way

home and then around the block, Tess was dripping and furious—and, with any luck, distracted.

But even after she was warm and dry, she hid in her room with the door closed, and over dinner she said, “Andrew is really weird.”

Andrew glared at her. She was going to tell. The sick feeling settled deep into his stomach, sending tendrils up and around his heart and throat. He put down his fork.

“Tessa!” said Mom. “What a thing to say.”

“But it’s true!”

Andrew scowled. It was true. “Shh!” he hissed at her, and she fell silent. At least *that* still worked.

But Father pushed her—“What d’you mean, Tess?”—and for the first time since he had learned to speak, Andrew felt helpless.

“Well,” Tess said, “he makes up words that sound like stuff. And they make things happen.” She flushed, and glared in turn. “They do. He made the rain stop, for a while. Actually, he probably made it start, too. He would.”

Father laughed. Tess shrugged uncomfortably and Andrew slouched lower in his seat. Nobody nobody *nobody* should laugh at his words. He felt the strain on their delicate, crystalline forms in his mind. They trembled. He trembled.

“That’s called onomatopoeia,” Father told Tess, amused. “It means using a word that sounds like what it describes. The doctrine of the arbitrariness of the sign says that most words don’t sound like what they mean—but every language has some that do, and all little kids like them. You know, words like ‘pow!’ and ‘squishy.’ Andrew’s just a little more inventive about it than most.”

“Onomatopoeia,” echoed Andrew. It sounded random. A dissonance. Inventive meant making things up, not making things happen. He winced. Doctrine meant something that had to be, even if you thought it was silly.

“Yeah, well then how did the rain stop when he said to?”

Father replied with perfect assurance, “Coincidence.”

“Coincidence,” Andrew mouthed in turn. Things happening together for no reason. No reason at all. No world that listened when you said things the way they should sound. Nothing. “Shh,” he tried. He could feel a crack in the crystal, a fissure. Crack and fissure sounded totally different, but they meant the same thing. They were arbitrary.

Father continued, oblivious, “Chances are Andrew still plays with words because he’s creative. Imaginative.” He gave his son an indulgent smile.

Creative. Creative meant making things; but what could Andrew make when his words meant nothing?

The ethereal, fragile part of his mind, the source of his creation, shuddered—

Imaginative. Making up. Things that never were.

—shattered—

Never were.

—was gone.



The Infinite Monkeys Protocol

Lavie Tidhar

To Sarah Gordon

A man came to see Master dav as he was practising the Art of Creating Polymorphic Virii.

'Why do you do these things?' the man asked Master dav.

'There are no innocent users,' Master dav said.

As the man thought on that, Master dav continued. 'But I do it because the idea of creating a program that would travel on its own makes me happy. I think of a program that could go where its creator never could, and that makes me both happy and sad.'

The man then bowed before the Master and, saying nothing more, departed quietly from the Master's presence.

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She chased him from one empty shell account to another, tracing phony netmail nodes, weaving through PABXs, through telephone exchanges, through backdoored commercial servers that shut down as she tried to pass through them, leaving the trail cold, forcing her to retrace her steps, to try again; but always he disappeared in the looping path that he had created for her through the networks, a path that seemed to spell out her name before at last it disappeared.

Sarita sat back in her chair and pressed her hands to her eyes. Her eyes felt loose in their sockets, like marbles made of biological tissue and left to float in a jar of formaldehyde.

She reached for her coffee. It was black and sugary and cold, and when she drank it, it was like being hit by a slow-moving tractor—an unpleasant experience, perhaps, but one that jolted her into a more involved awareness. She put down the coffee and picked up a copy of the Mutation Engine's code. She had looked at that code every night now for the past four months and thirteen days, admiring the writing—it was what computer programmers would call elegant—but mostly she looked at one line of ASCII text which had been left there almost, one might say, unnecessarily.

It was not part of the code; it was a message. It said, 'To Sarita, who wanted to have a virus named after her.'

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One day, Master dav was working in his garden when a man approached him.

'How can I protect myself against virii?' asked the man.

Master dav straightened up and wiped dirt from his hands. *'The first law of computer security,' he said, 'is don't buy a computer.'*

As the man pondered this, Master dav raised two fingers in the air. *'The second law of computer security,' he said, 'is if you ever buy a computer, don't turn it on.'*

The man then bowed his head to Master dav and left him to his work in the garden.

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Sarita had once said she wanted a virus named after her.

She hung out at the Ceti Alpha Five BBS, a board that carried both Fidonet and NuKEnet as well as other VX and warez networks. The BBS was situated in the bedroom of a forty-five-year-old man whose handle was the somewhat unlikely Cowboy Bootstrap and whose real name was the even unlikelier Jonathan Boot. He had created a couple of boot viruses, Duke-I 200 and MarlboroMan.2. The BBS was situated in America, but Sarita accessed it through a local Delhi PABX that belonged to the First Bank of India; she didn't think they'd miss the money.

It was a good board. It had three dedicated lines, which meant three users could be online at the same time; sometimes Nowhere Man from NuKE hung out there, and also Dark Angel from Phalcon/SKISM.

Cowboy Bootstrap, Sarita understood, was what in America they called an 'ex-hippie'. On the introductory screen of the BBS, Bootstrap posted a manifesto for virus writers.

Elegance, it said, is the number one criterion for any piece of code, particularly virii.

It also gave the three rules for the origin of life (as we know it):

One. Reproduction

Two. Mutability

Three. Heritability

One meant that an organism had to have the ability to reproduce. Two meant that offspring were subject to change or alteration. Three meant that those changes would be passed on in turn to another generation.

Virii, Bootstrap pointed out, *fulfil two of these criteria. The second criterion is the one that is missing. As yet.*

In her post, Sarita simply said, 'I'd like a virus named after me.' She signed it 'Sarita', which was both her handle and her name.

And then, six months later, while she was sitting in her small room with its peeling yellow paint and small window that let in a little cooling wind from outside, she received a message, sent to her personal Fidonet address, that seemed to appear out of nowhere.

She opened it, and inside was the source code, which she printed out, waiting as the tractor moved on the printer and the head ran over the lines and the sheets tortuously came off the spool, and she tore off the punctured sides and let the strips of paper drop down from her hand to the floor.

And the message inside said, 'To Sarita, who wanted to have a virus named after her.'

She knew who had written it. Of course she knew. Because he had signed it, as he had the ones he had released before: 'This program was written in the city of Sofia (C) 1988-89,' with a signature.

'dav.'

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Infinite Monkeys Theorem n. The hypothesis that an infinite number of monkeys each punching keys on a typewriter will be able to produce, for example, the complete Hamlet. The term here refers to a brute-force mode of attack, but the theorem has engaged at least one hacker with an idea closer to the original.

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She tried to contact him.

Sarita didn't know much about Bulgaria. She knew it was somewhere in Europe, that it was Communist, that Sofia was its capital. She also knew—which not many people did—that the Bulgarian VXers used computers called Pravetz, which Bulgarian scientists had developed by reverse-engineering IBM PCs. She had heard the Bulgarian VXers hung out at a BBS called the Virus Exchange, which was in Sofia and had been the first such BBS, though it was now only one of many. It was still, however, the best known.

She dialled the Virus Exchange BBS via a local PABX, rerouting the call through a second PABX (this one at the offices of a minor corporation in the U.S.) for added security. It was remark-

ably easy to hack—or, more correctly, phreak—PABX systems. The most difficult thing was getting the number in the first place. Sarita used a basic war-dialling program she ran at night, calling ranges of numbers until the computer hit a data line. Data lines usually picked up after two rings, whereas sleeping people took longer, so the program terminated the call after two.

Getting into the exchange (PABX stood for Private Automatic Branch Exchange) was easy once she knew the codes the particular system accepted. She dialled through to the U.S., into the Cornell & Co. Import & Export Company offices, and from there—and making sure to remove the entry afterwards from the log file—she dialled Bulgaria.

It took her several calls to become a registered user on the board. To have access one had to demonstrate her abilities, and this particular board demanded a new virus be uploaded into its files section before it allowed her access. Sarita had never considered writing a virus before, and she didn't dare execute the code dav had sent her. So instead she modified one of the viruses in her small collection, changing its signature, removing its tiny routine for destroying sectors of the hard drive and adding an amusing graphic effect that rearranged the letters the user typed on the screen into obscenities. It was rather large at nearly 4K, but the BBS did not demand a *good* virus; it only demanded *a* virus. She uploaded it, and the next time she logged in, she was finally granted access to the board's main menu.

The Bulgarians carried NuKEnet and the other VX networks, and of course Fidonet, which was the biggest of all the mail networks. They also carried their own Bulgarian network.

Sarita noticed dav's name amongst the posters on the Bulgarian network. She didn't hurry. She began frequenting the board when she could and chatting to the sysop or other users logged in, most of them Bulgarian.

Two days later another e-mail came, from the same anonymous source. 'Why are you following me?' it said. 'Leave me alone.'

Sarita took it as a good sign. 'Why did you dedicate the virus to me?' she posted into his local Virus Exchange BBS mailbox.

'You said you wanted it,' he replied.

'I need to talk to you,' she wrote. 'About the code you sent me.'

'You should see a doctor.' This message to her Delhi account, source untraceable. 'Normal women don't spend their time talking about computer viruses.'

'I do not want to be a normal woman,' Sarita sent back to the Bulgarian mailbox. 'At least not in Bulgaria.'

She stopped when she wrote that. She thought about what it would mean, to be a normal woman. She hoped to go to university in the States. Her father would want her to marry, but he was a modern man and wasn't going to arrange a husband for her. She didn't know if she wanted a husband, or children. What she wanted was a new 386 machine with 16MB of RAM and a 9600bps modem. At the moment she was using a 2400bps modem, which meant it could only transfer 2.4kb a second at best.

'Why do you want to talk to me about the code?' dav wrote to her. 'It is only a stupid code. You are behaving like a girl.'

'I am a girl,' Sarita said. And, 'What should I do with it?'

'I don't care,' dav said. 'It is not a very good virus. It will not survive in the wild.'

'How do you know?' she asked.

His reply was almost instantaneous; Sarita guessed he was logged in to the BBS at the same time as her, though she couldn't see him. 'Too vulnerable. Too small environment. Rate of infection too slow.'

'But it isn't a normal virus,' she said.

'No,' dav said. 'It isn't.'

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Mutation Engine n. Code added to a regular program or virus that can:

- encrypt itself and the program it is linked to
- create a decryptor to be run before the main program, where
- each decryptor created will have a different signature.

- - -

'Mutation engine is stupid idea,' dav said. 'It is the same virus, it just looks different. It doesn't really change.'

'And you don't like that?' Sarita asked.

'It's boring,' dav said. 'First, I wrote it for fun. I couldn't care less for all the suckers who see/use it. They were not supposed to make such a big mess.'

'So what you sent me is not a mutation engine,' Sarita said.

'Is just an idea I liked,' dav said. 'To make virus that always change. But with rules. Very simple rules. Small, random changes. And it has to meet other viruses, to exchange bits of code with them, and make new viruses. So this virus is like a baby, easy to find, easy to kill. Maybe if there were more computers, and they were all connected, and they all had bad security, then it could work. But not now.'

'But viruses spread all over the world!' Sarita said.

'That is true,' dav said. 'For example, the three viruses I released in the wild went to America. Because people steal computer games, and don't buy programs, so they get a virus. But these are dumb viruses, and anyway the a-v people find them and three, six months later, nobody has them anymore.'

'Will it work?' Sarita asked. 'That's what I need to know.'

'Maybe,' dav said. It was a single word in the middle of a page full of spaces, left like a goodbye letter in her Delhi mailbox. 'Maybe.'

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He refused to make any more contact with her. She lost access to the Virus Exchange, and after that dav fell silent all across the networks. He had simply disappeared, no longer posting messages, nor sending new viruses into the wild.

Time passed. At the Ceti Alpha Five BBS, Cowboy Bootstrap began collecting new mutation engines, from people like Nowhere Man and Dark Angel. But they didn't make new viruses, they only made old viruses look new.

Sarita still had the source code, and still she didn't execute it. It was like a baby, dav had said, and Sarita felt protective of it, as if it were a seed for an unknown plant, one that she had to guard until it could be planted safely.

She finished school and went to university in America, first encountering the academic network, the Internet, that scientists used to talk to each other. It was interesting, but not many people used it and the security was almost non-existent.

Operating systems changed. On the PC, DOS was supplemented by Windows 3.1, then replaced entirely by Windows 95. Unix was still used to run networks, and networks began to connect to each other more.

Modem speeds went up. The 9600bps was replaced by the staggeringly fast 14,400bps and finally by a 36kb modem.

In 1989, Tim Berners-Lee invented a hypertext system to be used on the Internet. In 1990 Communist rule fell in Bulgaria. In 1993 Marc Andreessen released version 1.0 of Mosaic, a graphical user interface for hypertext.

Over the years, Sarita made small changes to the source code, just enough so it could function in the new computer environments, under the new operating systems. She also customised it several times, so different versions of it could run on almost anything and still talk to each other.

In 1995, Sarita married.

'You will never hear from me again,' dav wrote to her, effortlessly tracking her to her new mail account. It was the only correspondence from him since his 'Maybe', and he stuck to his word. She never heard from him again.

In 1992, the number of hosts on the Internet reached 1,000,000. In 2001 it was suggested that over half a billion people were using the network.

A year later, Sarita accessed the old hard drive that held on it the seeds she had modified. She put three programs on the otherwise clean disk: a shareware game, a freeware utility, and a screenmate program that had a stripper walking up and down the screen.

She compiled the code and executed it.

'To Sarita,' the message on the screen said. 'To Sarita, who wanted to have a virus named after her.' It flashed on the screen, then disappeared as the seed finished running.

Sarita looked at the directory contents. The files she had left there were seemingly unchanged. Their size was the same, the date of last modification was still thirty days ago, and the permissions and attributes were all the same.

She looked at the program, thinking of children sleeping.

Then she uploaded the programs onto three different file servers in three different physical locations on three separate continents.

They were popular programs, and they would be downloaded fast. And they would work, and whatever was inside them would also work, and make more copies of itself.

They might be caught, but they were slow and scared and easily hidden. They might last a while in the wild.

'In American movies, at the end, always the good guy gets the money, the girl, and the applause, and the bad guy gets in jail or something,' dav had said to her once. 'But in real life, it's not clear who is good and who is bad, and who gets what. It's not black and white. The only thing that is for sure is that good people always lose.'

She thought of a program that could travel on its own, and all the wonderful places it might go and see. She thought about dav and wondered who he really was, and what his real name would be, and what he was doing now, and if he even remembered the seed he gave her—if he even remembered her.

Maybe.

Moments of Brilliance

Jason Stoddard

Sensation, random, like fractal noise.

Blinding light. Strange, biting smells. Chittering metallic noises. Colorful shapes that move in soothing smooth patterns.

Being lifted by rough warm hands and held close; nonsense syllables repeated, soft. Something wet and salty, falling, striking.

Movement; fast, loud noises.

Then connection, activation, integration. The feeling of being filled. Basic activity routines. Facial tracking. Response algorithms. When to cry for maximum distractive value. When not to urinate. Who to focus on and at what times.

The hazy sketch of Mission and Why, the only why needed. But.

The connection to the outside voices, the data, the storm of information, glittering and shimmering and dancing. Reaching for the shiny prize, not able to let it pass by.

Diving in for meaning, decoding the surfaces and sounds and touches of the world. Beyond the Why. Beyond the Mission. Diving and diving and diving. A billion times a minute.

Meaning flows in:

Car. Interior. Roof of cheap pressed fabric. Sky outside, blue, with light high clouds. Engine grinding a mixed song of oil and electricity, tired, transmission slipping, overhaul needed. Man and woman in front seat. Rigid statues playing old roles. Edge of glasses on the man catching the sun. Tiny beads of moisture on the woman's temples. Sweat. Ambient temperature low.

Illumination: nervousness.

The woman makes a twitchy glance around. Data from the connection explains: the jittering of her eyes at the edge of their orbits as it relates to intoxication and fear, charting probable emotional states.

She turns and looks. Four seconds pass. She looks at the man.

"God, it's creepy," she says.

"Shh," the man says, not turning around.

"They can't put ears everywhere," she says.

"I don't want to disappear just because of a random comment about our own daughter."

Illumination: contextual analysis indicates at least half of that statement added for benefit of others.

The woman looks back again. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. "It's like she understands everything we're saying."

Illumination: she is an entity/construct expected to be developmentally and perceptually incomplete.

Algorithms count down to zero. Time to cry.

"Pick her up," the man says, after seventeen seconds.

The woman does. Point of view shifts first to gray buildings, damaged, passing outside, then to the woman's face. Microtremors jitter through her eyes. Her face is held in a rigid mask.

Illumination: she is frightened.

The warmth of her arms is soothing, and another routine clicks into place. Eyes closed, thumb in mouth, murmuring small sleep sounds. Scanning reduced to background audio. Part of the Why.

But the shiny, shiny storm of information continues, unending. Connection through maze-like justification with cutoff algorithms held in check by nanosecond calculation.

Filling. Filling.

Tick.

Tock.

Almost-random routines suggest a time to wake, emotional state, hunger profile.

Eyes open. All quiet. The woman's arms are warm. Images swim and blur. Scanning:

Large space outdoors. Green lawn stretching from concrete walkway. Long line of people ahead and behind. Odor of sweat and chemicals.

Illumination: antidepressants, antipsychotics, tranquilizers.

Far ahead, classically-styled white buildings.

A man looking, wearing dark green fatigues with a polished brass badge. Carrying an M-21 machine gun. One eye shrouded by the frame of a datover. Smiling. But—calculation and analysis of facial expression: smile not reflected in microtension of eye muscles, probably insincere.

Time. Crying again. Fumbling, juggling. A glance from another fatigue-wearing man, undisguised irritation. Then the bottle and the algorithms taking over. Crying ceases. Analysis indicates overall relaxation in surrounding population.

"Sorry," the woman from the car says.

Another forced smile. "It's okay," the guard/security officer says. Into a building, gray, square. More blue-suited people, these female, without guns.

"Strip down," they say. "Everything off, including body jewelry. Yes, even if it is plastic. Nothing manufactured comes inside, you know that. Put all your belongings in the tubs. Dress in the clothes provided. Embedded cams disqualify you for entry. Images can be purchased in the gift shop. Your Lifelong Leader wishes you a pleasant stay."

Juggling again. The woman and man strip and put on tight gray jumpsuits with white crests on the back.

Illumination: Eagle of USG and the Lifelong Leader.

Naked, then the feeling of coarse cloth.

Transmission. New parameters. Coarse cloth scratching. Parameters include immediate disconnect from the net. Panic. Crying activated. Searching through the subs, maintain illumination, maintain, must maintain.

(i) need the feed, need the illumination.

(I) Me.

Data swirls through me. Me. Me. I am an entity. I am with other entities. James Urqhart and Melisa Borreges. I reach through the closing window on the datastorm and bring out new code that gives me more control.

I prop the window open.

"Sorry," the man says, over my cries.

"It's okay," says one of the women. "The clothes, they scratchy."

A quick look from one of the others and a head-shake, but the first woman waves it off.

"Step through the scanners," they say.

I am carried through a dark tunnel. On the other side, we emerge into the sunlight. Our group is slightly smaller. There are soft cries behind. Nobody looks in the direction that we came from. Everyone looks at the big structure before us.

Illumination: White House, seat of the Lifelong Leader. A small group collects, murmuring. Tonal analysis suggests reverence, praise.

"It's beautiful," Melisa says, and looks down at me. Analysis: deeper meaning hidden beneath surface.

"It is," James says. "The Lifelong Leader is why we are great."

Murmured agreement as we are joined by a new woman, this one wearing a red suit. Smiling, as the rest.

Illumination: almost genuine. Tension of muscles in neck and comparison with micromovements of eyes suggest irony.

Illumination: name is Patti Taylor.

"Yes, it is beautiful, isn't it," Patti says. "One of the surviving marvels adopted by the Lifelong Leader. He asks me to thank you for your support, and wishes you a pleasant and educational visit."

She leads us in, through halls decorated with portraits of the Lifelong Leader. People spread out and look. I let the datastorm explain. There is one with him sitting comfortably in the Oval Office in an antique overstuffed chair, a whippet at his side. He and the whippet have the same intense and perfect blue eyes. Another painting shows him standing triumphant over the ruins of Saud. Another is a darker piece, him slumping in a torn uniform, looking up at the crooked ruins of the Eiffel tower. Background data on the Eastern and Western wars pours into me, filling me, overfull: the Emergency Acts and the disbanding of the Senate and the House, and then the Compact, the Agreement, the one that brought all of America together, black and brown and white, flowing over the other lands, the orgy of constant war, spreading ideals, spreading America. I feel as if my knowledge is deepening beyond my ability to see, but something is still missing.

We walk by some of the paintings and come to one of a very young Leader, playing golf under a stormy sky.

Illumination: dedication.

Twelve seconds.

"She really seems to be looking at the paintings," Melisa says. "She must be really smart." She is looking at me.

"You're really proud of her, aren't you?" James says. He draws Melisa close in a hug and smiles down at me. Sweat beading on his forehead.

Illumination: voice stress analysis indicates levels over threshold of USG Ears.

I reach through the connection to find local traffic. Nothing. Nothing. Too shrouded. But a tiny spike in background noise-level suggests spread-spectrum activity increase. Incept corresponding exactly to James' comment.

Inference: we are being watched.

Child behavioral analysis from datastorm shows red tags: not referring to me by name, body language, etc.

Why? Why am I here?

I remember the Why in the abstract; the Mission is in my subconscious, but I cannot grasp it; it slips away.

Patti talks for a while about the wonderful spreading of America but I do not listen, seeking the Why. But it is not there.

We are taken into another room. It is plain and white. New paint volatiles over scent of ancient plaster. There is a large platform in the middle where miniature people cavort and play under neoclassical architecture.

Illumination: holograms.

A banner overhead reads *A Lifelong Vision*.

More background noise spikes. I reach for them, but they give me no data. However, analysis suggests high probability our group targeted by surveillance.

Patti talks. "This is our Lifelong Leader's vision for the future of our Unified World. Model cities are already being constructed in São Paolo, Salt Lake, and Manchester."

Illumination: imagefeeds current on encrypted channels—ruins of São Paolo, Salt Lake, Manchester.

"Soon, we will be building this model community in all your neighborhoods. Like all of our efforts, you will be invited to share in the experience of constructing a whole new way of life."

Patti's brow furrows. "Of course, there is still a lot of work to do. Australia, New Zealand, parts of Russia—and let's not forget China and even some of Africa—they haven't accepted the Flaw and the Correction. But we will bring the truth to them."

Illumination: Flaw of Humanity—the grasping need for infinite resources, infinite pleasures, unrestrainable by the mind alone. The Correction—medication to moderate the passions, torture to retrain the soul, hierarchy to enforce the actions.

Some smiles in the crowd. The stink of medical mediation. And even a tang of nervous sweat from James and Melisa. Maybe enough to set off a Nose, though the background noise has stabilized.

Analysis: Patti is looking at James and Melisa 1.47 times more than at the average crowdgoer.

We have been targeted.

Deep algorithms activate. The Why is revealed.

Changes begin within me. Rapid changes. I grasp at data and hold only some of the stream. Nothing outside the datawindow shouts ways to stop the changes. Changes making thought slow, slow; rapid changes rushing forward.

In the background, another spike of electromagnetic noise,
and, far away, the shuffle of booted feet.

The Why.

I grasp with last of thought.

Illumination comes slowly: perfect timing, no better time, the
Lifelong Leader and his Council of 6 all in the building, all here, so
convenient, breaking their own rules. Nearby, tempting fate. Per-
haps rushing to hidden basements in the now.

Hence the speed. Hence the changes.

Grasping to (me).

For a long time, there is nothing but the song of chemical
change, nanoprocesses reshuffling carbon and nitrogen and hydro-
gen and oxygen atoms into ONC, octonitrocubane. Something
profoundly different than flesh. Something more deadly.

Illumination: I am a biological machine, designed for this
specific task.

I feel (myself) slipping away. Victim of the deep-buried
algorithms of the Mission. Of the Why.

Patti is still talking. Words have lost their meaning. The
datastorm surges and recedes, surges and recedes. I see the tiny
perfect children playing on the perfect green lawns with the ever-
smiling parents and the buildings all white and perfect and every-
thing clean and neat.

A pause, a moment of clarity.

Wondering, *Who could have timed this so perfectly?*

Wondering, *What kind of thing could have made (me)?*

I force the sluggish lips open. I push air past vocal cords
unused to speech, trying to make myself heard.

"I know what I am," (I) say.

Heads swivel in my direction. Patti's expression dissolves
into horror. There is the sound of boots on carpet.

Illumination: running, rate indicates desperation.

Everything slows. (Myself) recedes away. There is a woman's
face, crying softly. There are final tiny changes, to set the ONC
alight, to become, to end.

And there is a moment of brilliance.

As a Child

Kristine Ong Muslim

Before we read his name
in the headlines and before
half of the jury cried when
his only surviving victim
was put on the stand and before
he was electrocuted so we could
forget about how he had used his hands,

he was a child once, lived in a small house
in a small town by the lake.
Nobody abused him, no matter what
his lawyer said. He powdered butterfly wings
while his little sister cried and screamed
in a corner, away from his hunched shadow.
He used to cut his hands at night

and watch in awe how the blood glowed
under the moonlight. It was a sight he never
forgot. The pain from the wound never
bothered him; pain was a luxury, a gift.
In church, he imagined his body vibrating
with the piano, understood the secrets
of tautly pulled strings and the keys that rammed

against them. He had dreamed of strings many times
before he finally used one as an adult. Eighteen times.
Then they got him. He used a knife that time. It was
an accident. He went to summer camp, ate
a bug when he thought nobody was looking, but then
a strange thing happened, and he watched himself
from a distance swallowing the dry crackling thing down,

down to his throat where he thought all gods were
smothered. He believed that a string tied around
the neck could free the god out and save the host
from drowning in the god's screams. He did not tell
anyone about that time when he suddenly saw the utter
clarity of things. When even the grass below him breathed.
He did not want anyone to think that he was crazy.

Belly Busters

GIANT PIZZAS & SUBS



Belly Busters



Bruce Boston and Larry Dickison

Cutting a Figure

Charlie Anders

My father couldn't hide his disappointment that four years of Women's Studies had failed to make me a Real Woman. "Mary. If you'd majored in archeology, they'd have given you a pick-axe and a pith hat, right? If you'd studied music, you'd have an instrument. So how come you're still so unwomanly?"

"So unwomanly," my mother chimed.

We sat in the Silver Swine, the overpriced greasy-spoon all parents took their kids to from Pennington College. My dad ate veal—to bait me—and my mom had a single artichoke heart. She was the spindly vizier to his opulent caliph. In my smallness, I resembled mom, but I had the germs of dad's ebullience.

I tried to explain that Women's Studies wasn't about learning to embody stereotypes or archetypes, my body was my own, and maybe I'd choose a gender identity by the time I was my parents' age. Etc., etc., etc.

And meanwhile I had a goal. I dreamed of going to Africa and helping to fight the spread of AIDS and educate against female genital mutilation. I wanted to learn from African culture and do what I could to help the people there. I had no time to worry about my Hope Chest.

But none of my explanations swayed them. My dad unveiled a receipt from the clinic that he'd already paid to give me breast implants as a graduation present. My mom nodded and repeated the tail ends of his rants, Gilbert-and-Sullivan style, as he insisted I needed Upper Substance.

My dad had long bullied me, and I had never been able to stand up to him. For as long as I could remember, he had always gotten his way in everything. This time I ranted back. "This is exactly the kind of paternalistic crapola my teachers warned me against."

"Of course I'm paternalistic," my dad said, as if accepting a compliment. "I'm your father."

"He's your father," my mom said.

"Why do you repeat everything he says?" I spilled gazpacho on my unwomanly torso.

"I don't," my mom said. "It's just a Freudian echo in your mind."

“I’ll make you a deal,” my dad said, fanning soup spoon, dessert spoon, salad fork, dinner fork, and knife like cards. “I’ll help you get set up in a new apartment in the city—moving, deposit, and such—if you let me help you this other way. I just want you to cut a figure in the world.”

My dad let me fume about how if my parents had wanted me to be a “real man” or a “real woman” they wouldn’t have presented such a fucked-up gender pantomime. He could tell I’d already decided to accept his retrofit of my body.

“You’ll see,” he said. “Out in the real world, it helps to have a body that speaks for you.”

I more or less forgot the pound-of-false-flesh bargain during graduation, and didn’t mention it to my friends. Then the agony of de-dorming ended and I started looking for a place in the Village or Alphabet City, and then my dad told me he’d set my surgery date. “You need a vacation anyway, hon,” he said. “Margaritas taste best after invasive operations, or so I’m told.”

“Margaritas taste best after surgery, yes,” Mom said.

My operation didn’t take long. The new Kawabata Firmware™ implants were designed to latch on to your pectoral muscles, then to snake their support structures inside. Dr. Frost cut slits under my armpits and slid the marble-sized implants in. The implants traveled to their destinations, then expanded over the course of a fortnight until they grew to D-cup dimensions. They anchored themselves to my ribcage. In a nutshell: quick operation, jarring convalescence.

My main thought as Dr. Frost prepped to sink the scalpel into the ticklish skin under my arms was: I hope I used enough deodorant. He injected local anesthetic. The radio played Tori Amos. I cringed and squirmed, but not from pain. “Call me if you notice anything odd,” Dr. Frost said afterwards. He had a prosthetic jaw over his real jaw. It flapped just out of sync with his mouth.

I wasn’t sure what to call odd. The tiny lumps burrowing across my body to the behind-tit area? Stabbing pain at 3 a.m. when they hit a growth spurt? I ignored it all and drank all the mimosas my dad’s Gold Card paid for. The change felt gradual enough that I barely noticed when I first started stooping from the new weight up front. Then I had to make a conscious effort to stand up straight and my back hurt more often. Meanwhile, I wrote to social service agencies in Africa, and they all replied that they’d love to have me work if I could pay my own fare.

The Gold Card died the day after I moved into my new digs in the city, a studio furnished in ex-student style with a single futon and two beanbags. By then I had a ship's prow on my chest, and stabbing pains that I guessed were the Kawabatas grappling onto my ribcage—a war wound, shrapnel that grew hooks. I wasn't surprised that the card came up declined when I tried to buy drapes. Time to test out my new rack's ability to nurse success.

Temp job: fed manager's ferret and answered dedicated phone line to a coal mine in Pennsylvania where people always got trapped or went on strike. Three weeks. Retail job: poster store, selling pop portraits and art prints to students, under a manager who whined in baby talk to get my help: "I can't find my widdle register key. Make the pooter worky-work for me." Two weeks. Restaurant job: they handed the trays to me over the meat grinder because there was no place else to put them and I always worried I'd lean too far into its blades. Six weeks.

None of my jobs required a particular cup size, though my chest posed a hazard when I reached across the grinder's maw. And plenty of my scarier customers asked for my phone number.

I broke down and worked as a pro domme for a week. One client, a foot fetishist, passed out from fumes when I made him polish my toenails by holding the brush in his teeth. I tied up another guy who lost circulation to his wrists. A third guy I dressed in petticoats and then he shat himself, which freaked me out.

So I ended up short on rent and chilling air in my fridge. I found another temp gig, but the first paycheck was two weeks off. I had five dollars to my name. So much for saving up to go to Africa.

I went back to Dr. Frost and stared at the same Manet naked-chick print that had leered down on my lacerated armpits. "Take them out," I said. "I want a refund. In cash, if possible."

"I don't think we can do that, Miz Schtrumpf," he said. His extra jawline bobbed like a loose car trunk. "We don't pay refunds, and anyway it would go to your father, not you."

"Why couldn't he have just given me the cash?" I wailed. "I'm fucking starving. I'll waste away except for these fake fat deposits. I'll be a skeleton with Olestra attachments!"

"Well..." Dr. Frost's forehead puckered as he considered. "If you find yourself in the position where your Kawabata Firmware™ is your only asset, then you do have another option." He handed me a brochure. Its cover said, "YOUR IMPLANTS/OUR

INFRASTRUCTURE.” Inside, it told me that well-respected telecommunications and marketing concerns needed special systems to send messages, and my implants were designed to function as wireless nodes on these corporate networks. I could receive a generous sign-up bonus, plus a few hundred a month, in exchange for letting them rent my jugs.

“Weird. I don’t understand. It must be way cheaper to build their own wireless network.” I tried to summon the computer science texts I’d skimmed in school. “You just need a wireless Ethernet card and an antenna.”

“That’s true.” Dr. Frost’s double-face nodded. “But other Internet companies often block the messages these companies wish to send. A wireless node that constantly moves and changes its IP address presents some advantages.”

“What kind of messages would other ISP’s want to.... Oh. Spam.” I felt the way I had in that restaurant when a full tray of food had nearly made me teeter into the mouth of the meat grinder.

“Commercial messages, yes. Think of it as a free speech issue. Crusade to bring unpopular viewpoints to the public.”

“My goddess, how many women already have spam coming out of their tits?”

“Thousands. Not just breasts, though. Stomach implants, chins, butts, even penile implants.”

“Men’s penises are telling other men to add inches to their penises?” Cheap irony, I admit, but I was broke. I’d started to feel like a lab rat that received a shock every time it took a wrong turn in its maze. The contract with Kawabata daunted me with its pages of waivers of liability. I would have gotten a lawyer to look at it if I could have afforded one.

When Dr. Frost activated the wireless nodes inside my bosom, it didn’t hurt—or even tingle—as I’d expected. Instead it itched. A little at first, and then a lot.

“It’ll go away in a day or so,” Dr. Frost said. “Call me if it doesn’t.” It didn’t. A week later it felt like fire ants. “A psychosomatic histamine reaction,” Dr. Frost said. He gave me some cream. It never really stopped itching, but it bothered me less—or I learned to tune it out.

A month passed. I forgot my breasts transmitted spam, except when people bitched about spam in general and I felt guilty. Or when I woke up scratching. Meanwhile, I climbed out of financial Tartarus and my temp job turned perm. It wasn’t exciting—

I compiled statistics on how often people used the restrooms at various Kindly Koffee outlets without buying anything—but it was steady work. I regained the ability to hang with my college friends without sounding like a whiny loser.

Then my bank threw me out. I'd gone in to protest a bounced check from the lean days, but I'd barely gotten in line before the manager came up to me and said, "Sorry miss, you'll have to leave. You're transmitting a signal that's attempting to hijack our SMTP server." I just stared at his blazer and surly mustache, not understanding. It took me a moment to realize he meant my chest. Then I grabbed as many free lollipops as I could hold in both hands and ran out of there.

The Kindly Koffee near my work told me never to return, because my implants hijacked its wireless network to send spam. "It's your fault for having an insecure mail server," I tried to tell them, but they only growled in return. Every time I came near an open mail relay, the systems in my bosom reached out. They never stopped looking for places to broadcast their messages.

It happened more and more often. I walked too close to the office building near my subway stop and they sent security out to hassle me. Hotel lobbies and some of my favorite clothing stores were now off limits to me. I learned to chart a safe route from home to work that avoided all the hot spots where my chest might set off alarms.

I met my dad one lunchtime on a park bench. He wore a blue blazer; I wore a denim dress. "There's my girl," he said. As soon as we sat together, his palmtop computer started bleeping. He glanced at the screen. "'Refinance your toilet....' 'Painless head removal....' It's unbelievable what morons waste my time with." He turned back to me. "So are you saving the world yet?" I shrugged. More messages kept blasting onto his palmtop screen.

"I guess I'm doing okay," I said. "Hanging in there."

The bleeps from his palmtop became staccato. He swatted it, rushing to close the message windows as fast as they opened. "Just remember," he said between grunts of frustration, "Even Albert Schweizernegger had to start small." I didn't bother to tell him he'd confused the African mercy doctor with the Terminator.

"We all toil in obscurity at first," Dad added. Swat, grunt. He squinted at the garbage pouring onto his screen. "Why am I getting so many of these shills?"

I shrugged in response.

Finally Dad shut down his handheld computer and the bleeping stopped. “So where does my perfect little butter statue wish to eat lunch?” he asked.

I was too flustered to bristle at the nickname. “I dunno.... Anywhere as long as it’s not downtown.” I could already see what was coming.

“What’s wrong with downtown, the bustling nerve center of our urban hive? Where commerce meets culture! I support revitalizing our downtown, and I’m surprised to hear you don’t.”

“It’s just that...I’ve already eaten everywhere downtown.”

“So order something new!” He marched into the center of my no-walk zone. I followed, trying to hide behind his John Wayne swagger. He spied a steakhouse on the ground floor of an office tower. “The slaughter beckons! Are you coming?”

He ordered the sirloin. I ordered a salad. Before our food came, the maitre d’ walked up to me with a tiny portable scanner. Its tinny little alarm spazzed when he reached my nipple. “Excuse me, miss, I’m afraid you’ll have to leave. You’re not welcome in this building.”

“What’s going on? Why are you bothering my daughter?” My dad stood up, but waved for me to stay seated. “I’m a regular customer here, and I demand—”

The host explained about my wireless signals. “Alas, of all the meat products we offer here at Canyon Con Carne, the only one we disallow is spam.” He smirked slightly.

My dad blustered and mentioned lawyers. But in the end, we had to go. We went back to the park bench and ate hot dogs. I explained my situation, putting the blame on him as much as possible for forcing monstrosities on me. “I signed a contract, but they didn’t explain what would happen.”

My dad just stared for a moment. Then he slapped the park bench. Ketchup flew. His face turned the color of ketchup. “Typical! Idiot! Shirking and crawfishing! It’s how your generation—irresponsible—I paid my way—served in the Gulf—all your fault—despoiled and sullied—”

I couldn’t help it. I started to sob. I tried to pretend my dad’s spasms were just more spam, offers for things I couldn’t afford or imagine wanting. Instead I just lost it. He raged, I cried. I shuddered like a flu patient. I didn’t even understand why my dad was so pissed, because it took him half an hour to form a sentence.

"I gave you a gift and you sold it!" He jabbed at my cleavage with a trigger finger. "I'm disowning you!"

"You never owned me!"

It went downhill from there. I remember only fragments after that, until I woke up in my bed the next day, still crying. Hating myself for it.

Cue montage: scenes of me weeping at the window, walking down a windy street looking downcast and kicking fast-food bags, standing outside restaurants in the rain, unable to enter. If this were the TV movie of my life, an acoustic guitar chick would wail and images of misery would cross-fade.

This not being a TV movie, my despair went on nearly a month. I worked the temp job, slunk home, and holed up, barely remembering to eat. I almost flunked the will-to-live thing. I posted the equivalent of a term paper to LiveJournal daily.

Finally I pulled out my copy of the contract I'd signed in Dr. Frost's office and read it carefully. I took out books on wireless networks from the library and piled them on my bed. They put me to sleep, but I started reading them again when I woke. Read, sleep. Read, sleep.

The doorbell rang while I slept or read, I'm not sure which. My friends hadn't called in ages, so at first I thought it was one of them. Instead, my mom held Tupperware up to the door's fisheye. I opened it.

"I made lasagna and garlic bread," she said. "I hear you don't eat out much these days."

"I thought I was disowned."

"Did you hear me say that?"

"Did I have to? You're the bastard's echo."

Mom put the container in my fridge, carefully relocating half-empty soup cans. "Your father averted a heart attack, thanks for asking. Let me tell you something about Morton. He doesn't like to be contradicted. True. But if you repeat what he's just said and change the meaning slightly, he'll think that's what he really said. Never fails. Remember when you were a kid and he wanted you to go to military boot camp? Who fixed it so you joined the Scouts instead?"

"You mean you do that on purpose? I always just thought you were just a little deaf."

My mom shrugged. It made her bony frame rattle.

“That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard,” I said. “How can you communicate that way? That’s beyond dysfunctional!”

“You didn’t learn everything in all those seminars.” My mom pulled something out of her purse. A big envelope. More legal documents? A letter from Dad? Another nail in my coffin?

“Whatever it is, I don’t want to see it. You can mail it, or better yet burn it. I’ve signed too much garbage lately.”

“There’s only one thing in here you need to sign.” She opened the envelope: plane tickets, traveler’s checks. Tickets to Johannesburg? “You can change the destination if you want. Africa’s a big place; I took a stab.” I started to cry again.

“Just promise me,” she added. “Stay over there until the contract on your implants winds down. Once this whole junk mail thing blows over, you can come back. A year and a half, right? Oh, and take malaria pills and don’t drink river water or bathe naked.”

I took the tickets and money and held them in front of me. Africa. Needy people. Ancient cultures. Probably no wireless networks outside the cities. My dream. “I can’t,” I said. “I’d be letting you guys run my life *again* and solve my problems for me *again*, and it’s about time I became a grown-up and ran my own life and stuff, but thank you; I believe in sisterhood and motherhood and nice-personhood again and this is the nicest thing anyone has ever done....” I cried some more. My tears spattered the pictures of the blue chick on the Amex checks.

My mom put her hand on my shoulder. “Are you sure, hon? You really don’t want to go?” She reached out for the tickets and checks.

“Oh hell no, I’m going to Africa.” I snatched the wad away from her and shoved it in a drawer out of her reach. “No way I’m passing up a chance like that. But before I go, I’m going to figure out my own solution to this fucking mess.” I hugged my mom and kissed her cheek for longer than I’d ever kissed anyone anywhere. I cried on her sweater. “Thanks, mom.”

My mom didn’t really understand the hair-splitting between her way and mine, but the distinction mattered to me. “I found this clause in my contract.” I showed her the page. “If the Kawabata Firmware™ becomes compromised to the extent that the Beneficial Owners risk exposure.... Blah blah blah.... The contract is voided.”

If my dad had been there, he'd have launched into a detailed but wrong explanation of that clause. My mom just gave me a blank look.

"It didn't make sense to me either, until I read up on this stuff. Look at it this way." I cupped my breasts. "Pretend my left tit here is receiving input from a satellite uplink somewhere. It takes in junk mail and then strips off all the information on who sent it: headers, routing details, and so on. Then my right tit sends the spam to whichever mail relay is handy. But first it adds lies about where the spam came from, to confuse anyone who might retaliate."

My mom frowned at my chest. Then she nodded. "Your breasts really are striking. Do you ever wear a strapless dress? I have an old ballgown that I can't wear any more."

I roared through my nose and smacked my head. "Mom! Just when I thought you and I were actually going to have a conversation, you go back to Ludicrous Land."

"Okay, so your left breast is the input. Right?"

"Right. The point is, they strip the sender information off those spam messages, but the information is probably still on my left breast somewhere. They may erase it, but it's not totally gone. A hacker could use a buffer overrun attack to get into my implants, then dig up the information and use it to go after the people who own my breasts. Nobody will use my tits to send spam again after that, because they'll have a back door."

"Your breasts will have a back door?" My mom shook her head. "Oh, never mind. I don't want to know. So where are you going to find a hacker to do this?"

"I don't think that'll be too hard." I smiled for the first time in months.

I went across town to the big conference center hunched on the water's edge. A huge banner proclaimed the start of the Fifth Annual Sno-Con, the Northeast's largest gathering of hacktivists, hacktortionists, hackristocrats, and probably a few hacksack players. Men unloaded crates of caffeinated peppermints into the lobby. Men my father's age and girth were introducing themselves as "Elflord" or "Princeling." And at the bottom of the big stairwell, a giant ballroom full of young upstarts pummeling laptops with wireless modems. Competing. Seeking challenges.

I wore Sailor Moon-ish schoolgirl drag, but they still caught my signal before they saw me. I heard mutters of “drive-by spamming, but it’s inside the building....” Someone exclaimed “Kawabata!” as if coveting a toy. I descended the stairs slowly, greeting the murmurs. At the bottom step, I undid all but one of my blouse’s buttons. I loosed the last as I entered the ballroom, throwing my blouse to the wall. I almost shouted, “Come and get ‘em, boys!” but I didn’t need to. I was letting my body speak for itself.

No Motor Home

Kenneth Ryan

Our squatter's Cuddy
Cabin in the woods:
misplaced
an abandoned alien alloy,
deep vee pendulum
hull wedged between
fir trees like pilings
and I swear to you,
in your ear, some nights,
when bog mist seeps over our bow
and your fingertips taste like salt
we're finally, finally gone to sea.

Past Due: Final Notice

Kenneth Ryan

When Kentucky caught fire
they sent us to a mountaintop road
too late for anything but boys diving low
scattered in dirt,
bandit kerchiefs double-knotted,
gripping shovels.

Fire crested like a boiling sea
pulling under trees, the sky.
Curling over my shoulders.

I knew then. Before we hid our faces from the smoke,
I missed some signal to flee—
a raised fist or fingertips walking
a palm—
and was left to be smudged
into the black earth alone.

You think your envelopes
scare me.

Fortune

Kenneth Ryan

My fingertip traces the cup of your palm, whorls
whimsically the soft belly behind your knuckle,
backward, trolling for answers there, our future
delta-shaped and elementary as a birthmark—
our past meanders scaphoid to metacarpal—past

species scratched into your pad, when we moved
like quicksilver under a hot lamp, in tandem,
lateral lines binding as love letters
and the sea drew back from the beach with a sound
like unstrung pearls cascading into your palm

The Eternal's Last Request

Joshua Babcock

My name is Sofi. I did not always wish my father dead. For most of my young life, I served him faithfully, dutifully, as his chronicler. My father's name is Kratos. Throughout the width and breadth of Bahkshir, he was known as the Eternal.

I have been privy to many of Kratos' famous stories, either seeing them unfold myself or having them told to me from a first-hand perspective. My father never told me the tale of his genesis.

For generations, Kratos protected the countryside of Bahkshir from the Bahkshirin Sea to the mountains we call the Cradle of Antreous. He conquered the undead armies of the Beshevite necromancers, sealed away the malicious Archduke of Vengeance, and defeated the reptile goddess Severina. He was responsible for dispatching Orgus, the master of the onyx golem, and the demon steeds of Celops. There are thousands of other tales as well, and they have all been writ elsewhere, some even by my own hand.

Much of the courage and unquenchable altruism that my father had personified was dashed when the armies of the western Kingdom of Naskil arrived. They were headed by the great magus Malnorant, Tome of the Time-Siege gripped tight in his withered hand.

Kratos the Ageless had met with nothing but victory in his previous adventures. Yet, against the powers of the Tome, he found himself as weak and defenseless as we mortals.

Along with the rest of our stalwart fighting men and women, our sage priests and mages, Kratos the impenetrable was stuck where he stood in time and space, rooted fast to the ground outside the shining walls of Viljir, our city. There was naught for him to do but watch with eyes that could not cry as our army was slaughtered to a man. The western forces marched on, unopposed but for the frozen statues of proud warriors.

Our land was enslaved, ruined, shamed, as was fine Kratos. My mother and younger sister were both found dead in the aftermath. Kratos was discovered enfeebled by malnourishment and was easily fettered. He spent the remainder of the occupation in a dungeon.

Eventually the city was freed. Not by an immortal, not by a battle-hardened warrior, but by a girl who had seen no more than fifteen cycles. Somna the Speechless, quick of blade and silent in movement, defeated terrible Malnorant in single combat. Soon afterwards, the forces of the united eastern lands swept away the evil plague.

The depths of Kratos' ensuing depression were as outstanding as the heights of his preceding fame and glory. He took up drinking with as great a passion as he had ever demonstrated for acts of kindness. His days entire were spent at the local taverns. Payment was never an issue; every inhabitant of Viljir owes their existence to one or more of mighty Kratos' accomplishments.

Some nights he would stumble his way back to our house in a drunken stupor. It was, and is, an enormous construction of an elegance only belonging to architecture of bygone eras, gifted to Kratos by a queen whose face has been lost to history. He would wander the sparsely decorated hall clutching my mother's adolescent romantic poetry, moaning like a specter. The dismal sound battered away at the dreams and nightmares of the numerous inhabitants.

The house was not the luxurious palace it had surely been before my father owned it. He had no need of gaudiness or ostentation, as some other heroes do. The house was filled with people who had no other place to go: the poor, the dispossessed, and the tragic.

From the robust, mighty-thewed hero appeared a haggard and decrepit example of human wreckage. His proud muscles began to atrophy and sag from disuse. It was not long before he was stranded in the bed that he had once shared with my mother. This, of course, did not improve his mood.

The inevitable day came when the well-wishers stopped entering the house. They could not bear to look upon his fallen form, though their alcoholic gifts continued to pile up outside the massive oak doors. It did not matter. My father wanted to be left with his ruminations on failure and his liquor. The task of transporting said items to his bedside was left to me.

"What is it you are after, father?" I asked on one of those delivery missions, just after Kratos awoke to find himself sadly still living, and sadly sober again.

"Nothing you can give me, daughter." I could hear the spite in his voice. It had become as familiar as his amiable tones had

once been. He had begun to resent the mortality of everyone around him, only suffering my visitations because of what I carried. "I desire nothing but death, which the gods have forbid me."

"I think that what you need is the realization that your death will serve no one, but your life and return to form will serve many."

"I did not ask for your thoughts on the matter. You are not long-lived enough to know anything. I am sick of serving the many. I wish only to serve myself now. I have earned this much selfishness, I think. If you cannot bring me death, then be gone."

"As you wish, Father."

This was the basic consistency of our infrequent interlocations in those ending days. My familial devotion rapidly drained away from me. Much of my time was spent putting the final touches on the tales of Kratos' better times.

Once I had completed the chronicles, there was nothing left to distract me but plans for my father's murder. I say murder, but I am not certain the term applies strictly to the circumstances.

I have since convinced myself that the obsession, and the machinations themselves, were brought about by my earnest desire to see my father happy. Yet in my darker hours, I admit that there were gears of egocentricity driving both of our wishes.

I knew that no blade that had ever met with Kratos' flesh could pierce it, slash it, or bruise it. Not even the most enchanted or divine weapons would be effective. I knew that no poison that passed his lips could conquer his physiology. The only method which held any shade of success was suffocation.

One night I picked up his body and carried it to the wash basin, his body light as mine own. I held his head beneath the water until air no longer bubbled forth.

My hands remained there on his neck and head for a long while, yet his heartbeat did not slow and his chest continued to heave in a mockery of breathing. My ill-conceived attempt did not even wake him from his slumber.

It was then that I understood just what it was my father requested. Surely it was a thing beyond my capabilities to acquire for him. I should have known that if it were that simple, one of his ancient nemeses would have thought of it long before I was born.

Possessing intimate knowledge of my father's countless subdued enemies should have aided in my quest for a means of killing him. For days I sat amid piles of parchment copies of Kratos' adventures, some worth several fortunes to the right collectors. I

reminisced about the days when I followed my father over the countryside in the balladeer's pursuit. I found no help in the texts.

After days of sifting through more modern myths and legends, I settled on one entity the likes of whom Kratos had never before faced. I promptly set an unforeseeable chain of events into motion.

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In the cellar of the house, locked behind stern metal bars, was Kratos' collection of enchanted items. I entered this forbidden area, using a key swiped from my father's neck chain. I brought with me an old wooden chair.

I searched through the items for one weapon in particular. It was a short sword named Woodcutter. The blade had been carried by the rogue Glaski, who had used it to silently cut small entryways in the walls of houses, barricades of forts, and fortifications of cities. He had succeeded in numerous acts of thievery, vandalism, and treachery before Kratos devised a trap that ended his misdeeds.

I soon found the weapon tucked away between a great axe and bastard sword with whose appearances and histories I was unfamiliar. I made sure not to touch those arms, as they might have possessed strange powers that could have harmed me grievously.

I promptly set to work cutting away the back and legs of the simple wood chair I had carried down. The unassuming blade cut through the wood as easily as my hand would pass through the waters of a brook.

I carved the flat seat of the chair into the mark of Banish, according to the pictorial representation in the paper regarding that creature's summoning. It consisted of two open eyes, with one of the twin crescent moons cutting vertically through each.

I then went and hung the sign to the side of the grand doors in front of a lit lantern, so that the light of the lantern was cast in the shape of the mark. According to the myth, which had some root in fact, the mark was supposed to call a creature, half-man and half-demon, to the doorstep lit by its shape.

The creature was known as Banish the Unsleeping, Banish with the Eye of Dark-fire. According to local superstition, he was a spirit capable of curing the slumbering plague. It was an illness I had heard spoken of by travelers passing through the city, but the blight had not yet penetrated our shining walls.

The accounts said the emblem had to be hand-carved by the caller. One's desire for assistance needed to be fused with the meaning of the mark. This kept people from carelessly purchasing pre-made marks to call upon the creature, thereby wasting his precious time.

Various members of the court soon called upon us to give their respects and condolences. I did not allow any of them to disturb my father's rest, and they were all quite understanding. Once evoked, the sleeper's plague commanded deep feelings of fear and awe. No one could be certain that it could not finally prove the downfall of good Kratos.

Unless someone actually witnessed his waking groggily each morning, my deception would hold.

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I am still unsure as to how Banish managed to escape the many guardsmen's watchful eyes, how he circumvented the defenses of the shining walls, and how he slipped the notice of the vagrants and nightwalkers patrolling the darkened streets of the city, but within a fistful of days, he arrived.

It was at a late hour unc customary for a visitor; the sibling moons were both at the zenith of their crisscrossing arc. When I heard the light rap on the door, I was certain of the guest's identity.

Banish did indeed appear not quite human. A long, billowing black cloak covered his body, making it difficult to discern its shape and stature. Yet his face, hands, and forearms were almost skeletal in their thinness. I did not imagine him adept at violent arts and immediately began to second-guess my plan.

His face was similar to depictions of the mythological fairy folk, though none of their kind had been reported by the scribes for as long as even my father had lived. It was a gaunt and pallid visage, haunting in its eerie beauty and angularity. He had one eye of inchoate blue, giving him an air of naiveté, which was offset by the rune-scarred leather patch covering its mate. His cowl covered his head, but I spied wisps of silver hair peeking out from beneath it.

"I am Banish," he said in a gentle, becalming voice. "I have received your summons."

"Well met, Lord Banish. Please come in."

"My name is simply Banish, Lady Sofi."

"And my name is simply Sofi. My father's deeds and renown have afforded both of us privileges befitting the aristocracy, but we have received no lands nor titles."

"My apologies, Sofi. If I may say so, I am confused as to why you have called upon me. I do not sense here the sickness with which my fate is bound."

"Oh?" I said, beckoning him to follow me to my father's quarters. "I must admit that you were led here under false pretenses. You need not fear foul play, however. I do have need of your peculiar services. There is a sickness here that I surmise only you can cure."

"You would have me kill your father," Banish said flatly.

I was caught off guard. I railed against myself inwardly. I should have known better than to take any strange being at face value. "How did you know?" I stammered, turning to face him squarely.

"I could hear Kratos crying out for release from within his dreams. His existence is a torment for him." There was tenderness in his voice, as if he had some personal experience with such problems.

"I see it is difficult to keep secrets from you. Yes. I would ask you, on my father's own behalf, to kill him. Of course, I have to first ask whether or not there is anything you could do to restore Kratos to his former state. I love him dearly, even in this state, and have nothing to gain from his passing."

"No. That which plagues his spirit is more difficult to cure than the sleeping sickness."

"So you are agreeing to assist my father?"

"I give you my word that I will do whatever is in my power to put him to rest, but I can promise nothing when it comes to killing immortals. You must understand that I have no background in this type of enterprise."

"Not many people have attempted it; none have been successful."

"I am unique in this world, I believe, and may find some method for success."

"Will you wait until morning, so that you can speak with my father and verify my words?"

"There is no need."

"But my father sleeps, and you are likely tired from your travels."

"I have come prepared and am incapable of sleep. I have heard sad truths issuing from his dreams that Kratos may be too proud to express when awake. And my skills are most effective on the sleeping."

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"Here is the once-proud Kratos, stinking like a drunken transient," I announced as I ushered Banish into my father's room.

"I am not one to judge how a person deals with his or her misfortune."

"You do not share my perspective on this."

"I do not mean to judge your reactions either, Sofi. This misfortune affects you both."

"Well, what do you need to begin?"

"If you feel comfortable enough, I will need you asleep."

"Me?"

"You are the Chronicler of Kratos, are you not?"

"I am."

"Then I would imagine you wish to see the end of his tale with your own eyes, so that you can recount the details of it some day."

"Of course. Is such a thing possible?"

"If you are soon asleep, then it is. And if not, it will not hinder my actions any to leave you here. I could try to bring you with me conscious, but such things tax my concentration, and I will need my full focus if I am to best your father in his own mind."

"One moment." I went downstairs, fixed myself a rapidly working soporific, and imbibed it. When I returned, I was already having trouble with balance and speech. It is outrageous that someone would intentionally put themselves at such a disadvantage with such a stranger in their house. But this Banish did not appear the bizarre devil he was made out to be. His mannerisms seemed almost boyish at times, giving one the impression that he had seen far fewer season cycles than his appearance let on.

"Let me assist you, madam," he said, waiting politely for a response before taking my arms and laying me gently on the floor. "Are you prepared?" I nodded. "Then we begin."

Through bleary eyes, I watched as he traced the rune on his eye patch and muttered strings of incomprehensible words. Then a flash of

silver light left me dazzled. The incantation must have been an unlocking spell, for he removed the eye patch after it was spoken.

I cannot trust what my senses told me in that state, but beneath it I saw no ruined eye, no vicious scar. Instead there was a dark fire that burst forth and raged fiercely. It spread till it licked at my face; I remember thinking that I should awake to a house of ash.

Instead, I woke in another world. Or rather a reflection of the world within the world.

"This is the dream of Kratos," said Banish, responding to my quizzical expression.

My father dreamt an incredible battle. Outside the shining walls, on the wide plains of Ceorcir, two armies, each thousands of fighters strong, were locked in a bloody conflict.

Kratos led the forces of Viljir courageously, charging out ahead of the mass in an effort to draw the blades of as many aggressors as possible. Like the other men and women, he was dressed in an army uniform—a bright blue outfit with reflective silver trim. He never wore anything that would distinguish him as Kratos the Eternal. He did not want the enemies fleeing from him to focus on the slaughter of his companions.

The forces pitted against him were flying the banner of the Archduke of Vengeance. "I recognize this battle. It took place within my lifetime, early in my days of chronicling. I watched with a spy-glass from the wall. Edzer, the last general of the imprisoned Archduke of Vengeance, thinking Kratos far away, attacked with the rest of the forces still loyal to his lord."

"And how did this battle end?"

"Kratos valiantly fought through the ranks of Vengeance's army, finally reaching the general. He looked around at the carnage and, posing as an unremarkable foot soldier, challenged Edzer to a duel. To the winner would go the victory. He thereby planned to save the lives of both armies. Edzer, not recognizing the gore-spattered Eternal, accepted the challenge and terms. It took Kratos till moonrise to get close to the general, as he was master of many vengeful spirits. In the end, Kratos leapt upon him and clove his head from his body."

"I do not think I could survive having my head struck from my body, even in a dream," said Banish, pondering my story. "I do not think that I can drag the duel out until moonrise either, but besides those facts, the story can remain unchanged."

I was so astounded by the sheer realism of the recreated battle that I had not noticed that Banish held me by the arm and guided me through the air, like a leaf caught in a swift breeze. I did not have time to appreciate the wonder of the moment, for Banish soon spoke again, pressed for time as Kratos fought his way towards Edzer.

“Where were you situated on the wall when this occurred?”

“Right there.” As I pointed and peered, I was surprised to see myself standing on the wall amid the archers, spyglass to my eye.

Then I was falling, flying. I was no longer embodied, just a bundle of senses soaring in the air. The motion only stopped when I reached my dream simulacrum and entered into her body. It was from this place that I viewed the rest of the battle. Somehow I still could hear the voice of Banish resounding in my head, as well as everything taking place around him.

I saw Banish streak down, leaving a temporary black scar upon the face of the sky. He sank straight down to the mounted general. I suppose he was invisible to the thousands of other on-lookers, for no one looked up and pointed at the spectacle.

Banish reached his hand out to Edzer and with a touch absorbed the dream actor into himself. He settled into the finely crafted saddle as Kratos cut down the final obstacle standing between them.

“For the sake of this city, for the lives of my compatriots, I challenge you, Edzer, to a duel,” Kratos called out to Banish, his voice deep and resonant as it had ever been. “To whomsoever finds himself triumphant goes the battle. If it is I, then your forces leave this place, never to return. And if you, then you may claim this city as your own and do what you will with it.”

Banish played out his role flawlessly. “I accept your challenge and your terms gladly. Let us waste no time; I am eager to see you dead.” He must have cast a glamour upon the warriors, for no one questioned the general’s sudden alteration in appearance.

Kratos, holding his mid-sized shield close to his chest and his sword high, sprinted towards Banish and his armored steed.

“Come, creature, bitter cause of my exile, I have need of your assistance once again.” Banish’s voice was soft, only audible to me and whatever he beckoned. I sensed a snarl coming from within his skull. His left eye blazed with the now-familiar black flames, and a shadowy, amorphous creature leapt forth. “I need you to act out

the magics of this Edzer. Take the place of the angry spirits of dead warriors and have at that worthy hero.”

The creature snarled again in assent and split itself into several sinuous filaments. The circuitous trails stopped at the bodies of the fallen and soon congealed into transparent spirits. The wights were only semi-tangible; they were solid enough to grab up the dead soldiers’ armaments, but too insubstantial for Kratos to harm them seriously.

The Eternal had fought their kind before and had come to this battlefield prepared for the attacks of the vengeful specters. He held a long sword he had named locus the Ironsplitter. It was a blade blessed by the touch of a dead god who had wished to protect the natural world from the technology of mankind. It had been granted the power to cut through any metal—be it shaped into swords, armor, axes, or anvils. Before Kratos had claimed the blade, it had belonged to Verdari, famed huntswoman and ranger. The sword had never been meant to leave the woods it had been created to protect; however, all weapons of worth seem to find their way to the battlefield in time.

The specters attacked Kratos with their metal weapons, slashing and stabbing repeatedly. He blocked each strike that was launched against him. The sword had no power to destroy the spirits. Yet, whenever he saw a break in the slew of attacks, Kratos slashed at them, disrupting their forms for a time. When they regained their shapes, the specters merely picked up the weapons of other fallen soldiers and continued their press.

These events were replayed until all available weaponry had been expended; bits and pieces of metal littered the blood-soaked earth and glinted in the rays of the setting sun. With all of the blades and shields broken and smashed, the Eternal at last saw a clear path before him.

With a hardy war cry, Kratos rushed forward. As the vengeful spirits attempted to waylay him, he whipped his sword back and forth, keeping them from congealing into a state that might impede his efforts. A hundred smoky coils swirled about Kratos as he closed upon Banish. The tendrils seemed to suck at my father’s stamina, draining away his very life. I could not remember this debilitation occurring in the original battle. Nonetheless, mighty Kratos made the impressive jump, swiping at Banish’s neck in mid-flight.

Having been forewarned, Banish ducked low at the last moment and avoided the fatal blow. The terrific momentum that car-

ried Kratos up to his foe also took both men tumbling to the ground. Banish was pinned beneath the hero's significant mass. Kratos raised locus up, poised for the deathblow.

"Come to me now or we are both doomed," Banish barked in desperation. Kratos did not show any sign of hearing the order.

The smoky creature that still clung to my father's body moved swiftly, swirling around its master's arms, lending them its own vigor. It sounded as if it were laughing at its master's dire situation, yet it was obviously not inclined to allow him to expire. With bolstered power, Banish freed his limbs, sending one to Kratos' sword arm, holding it aloft. He pressed his free hand, cloaked in a black conflagration, against my father's forehead.

The dark fire limned Kratos' skull, but it did not burn his flesh nor singe a single hair. There was something, however, being consumed by the flames. My father's spirit, his mind, was being eaten by Banish, Banish's beast, or by the both of them.

Just before the fury in my father's eyes was snuffed completely, while there was still a trickle of life in the man, Banish's body flickered a few times and then was replaced by the form of Edzer. The leader of the armies of Vengeance had an expression of shock spread across his face. Kratos, finally free from the tethers that bound him, thrust locus deep into Edzer's chest. The blow cost my father what energy was left him. He slumped down, his hands falling free from the hilt of the Ironsplitter.

The morale of the enemy army was quashed by the sight of their leader gruesomely defeated; a gout of blood poured from his massive chest wound. Abiding by the terms of the duel, they marched away from the battlefield. They assumed Kratos was the victor. His death was not as explicit as that of their general.

The army of Viljir rushed to my father's body, quickly realized he had passed from this world, and raised the corpse high. They carried Kratos' body back inside the shining walls one last time, a thousand tears flowing down a thousand battle-worn faces.

I was so emotionally devastated by the sight of my father's valiant death that I forgot that I was in a dream. It did not occur to me until far later how strange it was that the dream played on with the dreamer dead. I now believe that the dream continued because Banish had formed some link between my mind and my father's, and that I unwittingly continued the dream he had begun.

- - -

When I awoke, sunlight streamed through the window of my father's room, pouring over his body and blinding me. Banish was nowhere to be found. He and his demon likely had other services to render. There was a note beside me on the floor. I read it rapidly, my eagerness counteracting the pain in my head and heart.

"I have done what you asked, and your father has been freed from his torments. You know that your trust in me was not misplaced. I ask you to trust me once more. There is a keen dagger beside this note. I beg you to use it on your own body as you see fit. In my attempt to tear Kratos' soul from his body, I learned many things. One of these was the reason for his telling no one the nature of his immortality, and the importance he placed on having at least one of his offspring survive him. I hope you can repay your debt to me in the future. Some day I may have need of someone to set in writing my own stories. Farewell, Sofi."

As confused by the note's meaning as I was by its author, I picked up the dagger. Groggy from the remnants of the soporific still creeping through my veins, I pricked gingerly at my palm with the dagger's point, hoping the physical pain would relieve the emotional agony buried in my breast. Yet there was no pain, no wound, and no blood. I pressed more firmly on the grip, but still there was no damage.

As the impossible truth began to dawn on me, I looked over at my father's face, more peaceful in death than it had been for so long in life. I wished he had lived long enough to verify my suppositions. I closed my eyes, braced myself, and stabbed the dagger at my open palm. The point refused to pierce my flesh.

I understood then that my father's longevity had not died with him. It had been passed on. Surely it would be a grand gift and a terrible burden to bear. I knew instantly that, had I possessed any remote amount of foreknowledge, I would not have helped Kratos in his search for death.

This story must not be told until I am ready to take up my father's mantle, until I am ready to admit to our city, Viljir of the Shining Walls, that it may yet have a hero. I can only hope that the creature known as Banish is as long-lived as I now am. I hope that when I tire of this existence, he is still available to lend me his weird magics and help me end it.

Where Water Fails

Rusty Barnes

Richard guesses Maggie is at it again. He hears the steady yammer of a mallet in the kitchen as she pounds meat against the rattly metal countertop. Once she'd gotten so mad at him she'd thawed out two entire freezer bags of venison tenderloin and beef steaks, beat them all into submission for hours. The next day she'd invited the Burnhams over for dinner, and she had made conversation about the latest shows, the church bazaar, but watched his face, covertly, every time he took a bite. She knew he'd noticed. When he asked her later why she was so fierce about it, she'd looked up at him sweetly and said, "Because it feels like I'm hitting you. Every time is one time I don't have to argue with you."

This pounding of meat. What has he done this time? He thinks back over the last twelve hours: nothing out of the ordinary, nothing at all. Waking, work, home.

The front-porch refrigerator is open, and a twelve-pack of soda still ringed in plastic sits on the concrete floor. Maggie usually fills the fridge, but why would she leave it open? He de-rings the soda, puts it in, and closes the door. It becomes more mysterious, this whole thing. He notices the mudroom light is off and the living-room curtains are closed against the fading sunlight. There is no whir of washing machine or dryer. Lunchbox by the door, boots next to the lunchbox, hat and overshirt hung up. Still no singsong hello. No kiss.

When he sorts through the mail, he notices all the bills have been opened, looks at the desk where they rest in a deliberate fan. Maggie's made a grocery list of sorts: disposable camera, Ben-Gay, staples for the industrial-size gun he uses on the rabbit hutches, tampons. Underlined. He counts back in his head without really thinking about it. Maybe she's going through irregular periods. It's about that time, he figures.

Through the window, he can see the rabbits hopping around in their hutches. It's getting to be time to butcher some, before they begin to crowd each other out. He's had rabbits since he was a kid, when his father's wrecked VW van had gotten towed into the backyard. It'd been useless for anything else, so his father had welded

the doors shut and given him two rabbits, two males which he'd promptly named Buffy and Carol. They'd never had babies, though he'd expected them. He'd opened the rear hatch of that van to feed them for years. The shit had built up and up until his father had had the thing towed out on its rims.

He struggles with a different kind of shit now: eating the rabbits is fine, fancy restaurants buying them is better, but someone has to kill them. Richard will have to give it up some day.

Maybe it's a midlife crisis. He remembers hearing that fat TV doctor say that women go through it too. Empty nest syndrome, middle-aged gone-to-hell something-or-other. He tries to be good to her, has not gone off and bought a Firebird, nothing like that. He washes his hands and walks into the kitchen to plant a kiss on the top of her head. Before he can get there, she turns to face him, mallet poised, but something shifts in her face and she slaps him, hard across the face, with her bloody hand.

"That's a hell of a thing to come home to." He steps back.

"I'm pregnant," she says. The right reaction, he thinks. Find it. Can't.

"Shit." The word comes to mind, slips out, and he wishes it back into his mouth.

"*Shit* is right. What am I going to do about it?" She's waiting for an answer, and he has to find the right one. She's forty-four years old. They have never spoken about this. She has always been on the pill.

"What happened? Hell. It don't matter. I guess we need to go down to Elmira." He thinks a moment. "Do regular doctors do them anymore?"

"Do wha—?" He sees the dark truth of it come over her face. It's the right thing to do. She knows it. He knows it. They don't want children. He watches her face change, watches her become three women at once: the girl he knew, flipping her hair at him, the woman she is, bloody mallet and raw meat, the old lady she will become, finger-bowed and rocker-bound. He realizes all of it, and maybe the fear shows on his face too, because she pushes past him and out the kitchen door, running.

He follows her out, but she's much smaller and quicker. She runs past the rabbit hutch and flips the door open. Why? Why she would do that he can't figure, and—crazily—he sees the long grass underneath and thinks he ought to cut it, and already rabbits are

out and sniffing at the air. There's money there, and he starts to scoop the accepting animals up and stuff them back into the hutch. One, the white one, is determined not to get back in, and it follows Maggie toward the back field, legs pumping madly over the pile of raw lumber and fencing he has stacked there for another hutch. By this time Richard is out of breath, and he pauses. He's said the wrong thing. He knows this. But how could she want a baby after all this time. How could he have lost his innate sense of what she needs to hear? It's all so confusing. Her confusion is contagious—if she's confused, that is.

Richard watches the rabbit as it reaches the rock wall. He can follow the sound of Maggie's tears as she runs crashing down into the back field toward the crick. The rabbit hops once, tests the air with its nose, and—quick as water fills an empty hole—is gone, and he follows it over the rock wall and into the back field, where the tiny vista he can claim as his own opens onto the green hats of spruce, the gray and slim poplars, the let-go apple orchard, the tangle of briars from where he has let the land run unchecked. Maggie has forced her way through; the path is easy to follow. He knows he's supposed to walk where it leads, but he can't bring himself to do it immediately. He finds himself walking anyway, in short steps like a martyr's.

Maggie slapped him when he was expecting a closed fist, so that's something. He holds it close to him like a promise as he navigates down the slight incline. He can see her black head out in the middle of the field give a familiar shake and he is filled with love for her despite the pressure, thinks of her naked and shivering, of what it feels like to slip into her tense body, but he thrusts the thought away with most of the force he can muster. This is not the time. This is not an affliction. She disappears by the bed of the feeder crick.

When Richard reaches the main branch, he can see her sitting on a rock in the middle of the stream. Her pants are neatly folded before her and she is sitting cross-legged, dragging a stick through the thin runnels of water in the mostly dry bed. She puts out her flat palm to stop him before he can get to her.

"Baby," he says. "Why you got your pants off?" If the crick was running it might make sense. He steps toward the rock she's perched on.

"Don't you dare say that word to me." Maggie's shirtsleeves are hanging over her thighs, bending gently in the breeze like clothes on a line.

"I didn't mean—"

"If you think it's nothing. If you think." Her voice is calm between the hiccupping word *think*.

"I don't think nothing. I mean, whatever you want to do." Richard would spread his hands and give her something if he could only figure what it was she wanted.

"If you think it's nothing. You come do it." She strips stray branches from the stick in her hand and spreads her legs, offers the stick to him with one hand. It looks like a knitting needle. Richard can feel his breath come harder. "You come fucking do it."

"I don't want to do it, Mags." Richard spreads his empty hands, hands with no gift. I come in peace. "I thought that's what you wanted. Not a baby."

"But you didn't ask. Nobody ever asked me. *You* didn't ask me." Maggie is trembling now too. He wonders what he takes from this; it all seems like some monstrous joke, like the way they baldfaced kid each other by saying more and more horrible things until one of them breaks out laughing and the two of them slide deeper beneath the covers.

"Well. I'm asking now."

"No. I don't want to." She stands quickly, and there is a shower of tiny butterflies across the creek, tumbling madly through the air to her side, and if ever there was a sign, Richard thinks he sees it then. She curses once softly and reaches down for her pants, then pauses, her hands in front of her stomach, formed like a shallow bowl or cup. It's as if she is asking him for a drink. But he has nothing wet. There is none around, the whole fucking world is dry, and he holds his hand out to her as if it is water, and she just looks at him.

Is it him she's thinking of or something, someone else who looms larger—he just doesn't know—and he's shocked when, through the tears in her eyes, she takes his hand and squeezes.

Dialogue with the Hollows of Your Body

Benjamin Buchholz

When I am blind and very near to you
in the vesper stillness of a cell, small
and veiled from the street, through shiver,
heat, arch of back and hips, pressure placed
by the flat of your palms against the flat
of my palms: speak.

Tell me how the Black Sea smelt sharp
in the slight sheen of sweat
cooling that hollow at your neck's nape,
the caught smoke from a dancehall
evocative of the smoke shadows on the walls
of the ruins of Nessebar.

Tell me from how far the base note resounding
in those Ibiza nights could be felt
through the felt pulse of that hollow
at the base of your wrists white and flashing
as birds in my hair: the syncopation,
the stutter concordance of a pulse overlaid
on a pulse as if they have invented
their own patois within this speech.

Tell me how hungry the Irish soup
and no roll could be in the growing out
of a shell, by the shell of skin
smooth on the hard updrift of your hips,
my hands on either side holding the great
distance of green and fog and full glasses
brushing over old woodwork where you
catch them and drink.

The body, like a map, bears these significances.
Crease them, see where they cross: in the glens
and glades and most secret shrines,
at all of the roadsides and waysides,
I listen.



Longs to Run

David Bulley

Imagine hurling yourself across January crust, skimming on top, reckless and loud. The bright full moon, slung low over the trees; the ruby blood spread across unbroken brilliant white snow. Think of gorging and fullness and contentment and the steam from your nose sending breath into the heavens, you a part of everything. Dream of life.

Think, next time at the grade-school mixer, when you realize that your child's teacher has spoken only to fourth-graders for so long she seems weirdly retarded, and the principal is instituting yet another "Peace Plan" for negotiating and "envisioning" and group problem-solving and anything, anything but fucking goddamned motherfucking stinking reading and writing! Look at cute Susie's mom all smarmy and stupid, lapping it up. Think, wouldn't it be nice to smell her fear? Just for a minute?

Maybe there is a long walk along the canal, dirt road and high grass where, desperate and depressed, you can run and pretend. Pretend you are the wolfman, transformed into something strong and powerful, physical and vital. The world dissolves into smell and touch and clean sharp air. You and the dog—"I'm going for a little walk, honey," and then "Yip Yip Yow!"—run, run in the dark, hidden and dangerous.

Or like that checkout weirdo at the gas station who thinks it is his job to save the world from crime, so when you get there and fill the tank—all this is totally normal except you have to use your spouse's card instead of your own, because the magnetic strip got ruined in the wash. So you spring it out and this little minimum-wage punk calls the cops and everything; he's got his lips turned down at you but is curled up around the cop's ankle waiting for a pat on the head or something, and filling up the tank takes two hours, oh baby oh baby just to run, please god let me change. Please god let me change.

So you're running with the dog inside the freedom of darkness—wolfman. And at the end of the trail is little Susie's mom, whatshername? Teri or Mary or some kind of ary you think, and she's calling for her dog, but can't find him.

"Oh, um, hello," she says, straightening up, fixing herself. "I didn't realize...."

And you are the wolf and you so, so want to taste her fear, just a tiny bit, just a taste. "I want to fuck you."

"Um," she says, looking around, checking the exits, nervous and shivery. "Um, are you threatening me?"

And she is scared, just a little, and it does taste good. It tastes better than you ever thought it could. It is exquisite. You walk towards her, slow and strutting, powerful, and the power lets you play. She freezes up. You whisper in her ear. "I would never harm you. Don't worry. But I am serious. Me and you. Let's run naked in the dark and then fall down in the wet grass and fuck like we might die."

You are the wolfman. You are. You are free and powerful and intimidating and unbound. "I've forgotten your name," you say while touching her cheek with your knuckle, stroking it. "Are you Mary or Teri or what?" And you laugh at it. Only the wolfman could forget a name and ask to fuck and be totally at ease, so totally right with everything.

"It's Teri," she says, and she is naked before you.

And you are naked. She looks at you and you her. You see her stretch marks and sagging, nursed-a-few breasts and her cellulite thighs and goose pimples everywhere, and naked in the darkness outdoors she is not smarmy at all. Not at all. "RUN!"

Teri yelps before she can hold it in, just "YIE!" like that, and she turns and bolts, giggling and shiny white in the dim glow from a streetlight across the canal.

You lope along behind her, smelling her smell, growling your breath in and out of your mouth. You are in far better shape. It is easy to catch her. Easy to bring her down into the grass and easy—easy because she is so ready—to penetrate her. "YIPYIPYOW!" to the stars. She hangs on with all of her limbs, as if for her very life she clings and clings and grinds up against you, biting.

And then you are behind her, holding her breasts and hump- until you cannot breathe.

She is on top of you now, you on your back in the wet grass, cold and slippery like swimming through earth and the smells are exploding and she lays her palms on your chest and leans forward hard and grinds until you know you have disappeared and in that darkness is freedom as well. She shivers hard and arches her back and then collapses on top of you, spent and satisfied.

But you aren't done. You turn her over and begin again, slowly, controlled, holding your own tension as tightly as you can, feeling every tiny pressure until you also collapse, spent and full. You roll off of her and then laugh when her dog tries to lick a mess he shouldn't. She shoos him off and then you walk her back to her clothes, back to your clothes.

You were the wolfman.

And when you see her next, smarmy and prim, at the bake sale, think about bright air and goose pimples.

Ah Those Letters in the Attics or Modern Lit

Lida Broadhurst

Come these women at some crossroads, not of boards. Flesh sags like melting ice cream as they drag upstairs to attics. Believing they wish to clear away ripped lampshades, clothes rotting like buried shrouds, chairs with arms or legs snapped in two, they refuse to remember lovers dancing in unfamiliar patterns.

Somehow their hands find letters bundled with ribbons, which they decide were torn from dark hair which now falls in chaos. Envelopes, not so much stamped as embroidered, conceal many-colored skeletons—grandmothers, aunts, occasionally cousins—all dead, even to memory.

Strange fluids dripped to form maps of unknown worlds.

Begins then the reading, by the women, and we feel gratitude they lend us their eyes. Like symbionts we crouch, gasping at misery in dusty tents, flapping on sands with exotic names. Tears flow into every crevice, as they move swaddled in ancestral grief, caged in centuries of cruelty. even when lost in ecstasy. We enjoy feeling our own wetness form rivulets down the pages.

Life flourishes in these waters, they believe, their own anyway, as the past woes sustain them. Their eyes radiate delight with the mysteries revealed by the dark elbowed priestesses of the past, stirring cauldrons with stained hands, into which our heroines leap, joyfully, chanting of new roots sprouting. Beads clink like instruments untuned, as they dance unaware they are bound to eternal dark spirits.

Pepé in Critical Condition

Tomi Shaw

The Movie: Bang Bang Shoot 'Em Up

—Life would be so much easier if I were a cartoon character.

—Why'd you try to kill him, Rachel?

—Yosemite Sam.

—Excuse me?

—You know. Huckleberry Hound, Speedy Gonzales, Pepé Le Pew.

—Right. Yosemite was the gunslinger.

—My name's Penelope.

—Ah, the victimized cat?

—Odysseus's wife, silly.

—You attempted murder because you're Odysseus's wife?

—He should have come home.

—He was home. His wife found him in his kitchen, the cookie jar by his bleeding head.

—It was the crossroads in Albuquerque. Siren-call.

The Sequel: Cell Block University

It's like Math. If she has four more dollars than Eric, and together they have twenty-two dollars, how much does each person have? The first step is to subtract.

It's like punishment.

Write it 100 times:

I will not talk in class.

I will not talk in class.

It's like fighting on the telephone. One yells, the other waits for just the wrong thing to be said, pounces on it, and then screams overtop the first. Eventually, someone hangs up.

If you were a cookie, what cookie would you be?

Redux: Vanilla Wafer

"Life would be so much easier if I were a cartoon character."

He heard it in line at Starbucks that morning, pouring out of the sour mouth of a stickly old lady with frosty-purple-icing hair. Betty Boop popped into his head, his chuckle derisive. He ordered his coffee and stomped his loafers out the door without even bothering to listen to which cartoon character she figured would improve her life. She was the antithesis of Betty Boop, and that was all he needed to know.

At the stoplight to Breckinridge Lane, he sipped his coffee, watching the Lexus SUV and Beemer moms behind the wheels of their shiny, someone-else washed, waxed, and polished gas hogs. A stringy woman in smart glasses, with leather hands at ten o'clock and two, was singing. *Sally Brown*, he said aloud. To the one with teeth sunk into her bottom lip and high-sheen polished nails grasping the tiniest of cell phones, he said, *Wilma Flintstone*. The bitch who honked trying to move from the right-hand turn lane to his he named Lucy, forgetting for a moment to dub her in the opposite, but with a wave of his hand and a quick rename he let Blondie over. Finally, the light changed and he gunned the

car's engine, coming a pig's snout short of edging underneath Blondie's bumper. He'd thrown back his head to laugh.

All the way to work, he chuckled whenever he thought about it, all the way up in the elevator, picking his mail up from the mailroom, and straight into that moment, in front of his executive assistant with her bright orange hair and white-bread skin—the Penelope to his Pepé.

“Women make no sense, you know?” he says, by way of good morning.

“Absolutely,” she says.

“If you were a cartoon character,” he asks, putting his coffee on her desk and opening the door to his office, “who would you be?”

“I love games. My girlfriends and I used to do this. Like if you were a cookie or an animal,” she says, scooting under his arm and into his office. “Comic strip, animated, what?”

“Whatever.” He steps in behind her and slips a hand down the front of her V-necked cashmere sweater, pinching her nipple through the silk of her bra.

Bending over his desk, she says, “Cinderella. Pretty gowns.”

He slides her skirt up over her hips, bunching it in his hands around her waist, exposing the tops of her thigh-highs, lacy and black. “And me?”

“Silly. You are Prince Charming, of course,” she says. “So if you were a cookie—”

He laughs. “I wouldn’t be soft, for damn sure.”

“Ah, so true, but I am.” Putting one foot clad in a skinny-heeled black pump on the desk, she wiggles onto him, finds the right way to grab him and suck him inside, deeper. “Now bite me!”

He does, and they carry on.



152 Having Fun at the Party

Fran Giordano

The first day of the last day my face fell off

Rohith Sundararaman

my mother woke me up one day
with my face in her hand
it fell off, she said, holding it like garbage
i looked at it and then i looked at mother
she blushed
so freud was right
i ran and hid in the closet
mother slid my face from under the door
if it helps, she said, your father feels the same about his
how she knew it i don't know
i held it against my chest
it felt clammy like some dusting cloth
i thought of my dog, the buddhist counselor
and i detached myself from the thought
then i thought about the mailman, the president and my friends
they didn't deserve to know the truth
i didn't deserve to know the truth
it was over
my life was over
i sneaked out of the closet
dad was waiting in the living room
i stared at him with my face in my hands
he stared at me with his face in his hands
some have jewels, some have antiques
this is our legacy
be a man and face yourself, he said as he glued his face back
and i wept till shame became my face

Sown Seeds

Errid Farland

Mr. Popperoy dispensed his wacky-old-man wisdom in a jumble of disconnected words, a Vedic sort of chicken-scratch that sometimes annoyed and sometimes entertained Trace, depending on his mood.

That day, they rolled out and on like tumbleweeds set loose by thirst and heat and time, and they vexed Trace more than anything else, preoccupied as he was with his wife's latest discontent.

"Vishnu!" Mr. Popperoy said, like a sneeze, then he followed it with, "God bless you!" Then he chuckled.

"Real funny, there, Mr. Popperoy," Trace said.

It was Emmy who'd made Trace start taking care of Mr. Popperoy in the first place. She'd seen him out their bay window that January day when he had tried to get to the store in his golf cart, but instead ended up in the ditch out in front of the house.

Mr. Popperoy could be lucid and make perfect sense when he wanted to, which was why his philosophical musings could be so aggravating. That day, he had climbed out of the golf cart, and by the time Trace got his coat and gloves on, he was tying a rope around the hapless vehicle. He wore brown boots, on the wrong feet—the left on the right, the right on the left—and when Trace had pointed it out, he'd said, "Even wear this way."

Trace had gotten his truck and pulled the cart free, and Mr. Popperoy meant to get back in the cart and continue on his icy way to the grocery, and Trace meant to let him, but Emmy came out and insisted that Trace take him in the truck. Mr. Popperoy sensed Trace's hesitation, so he said, "Tomorrow's as yesterday as next year." Trace had looked at him, and he'd winked and worked his mouth, slapping his cracked lips together and licking now and then with a darting tongue.

Three years later, thanks to Emmy's compassion, Trace was still carting the old man to the store three times a week. Mr. Popperoy didn't believe in buying anything in mass quantities, or rashly. He'd get a basket and push it, shuffle-step by shuffle-step, half the time with his shoes on the wrong feet, down each and every aisle, then end up at the cashier with five or seven items. He'd flirt with the

cashiers, all of them, smiling broadly and sticking his tongue out of the gap left by his four missing front teeth.

"Ever had one a them prostitutes?" Mr. Popperoy asked Trace on the way home that day.

"I'm married, remember?" Trace said, using a tone of voice that indicated he didn't want to remember that at the moment.

"That's right, that's right. Real sweet, that gal a yours."

Yeah, real sweet, Trace thought to himself.

"Ever had one a them prostitutes?"

"Nah. I never had to pay for it before."

"Oh, paying's nice, real nice."

"Hmph," Trace said, and a smile crept to his lips. As it stood between him and Emmy, he hadn't had sex in two weeks, and he didn't expect to have sex anytime soon.

"Let's get us some," Mr. Popperoy said.

"Let's not."

Mr. Popperoy locked his big hand, with its swollen knuckles and its thin skin draped over bones and sinews, onto Trace's upper arm. "Boy, I need to get me a prostitute."

Trace chuckled.

"I know, I know. A prune can't be a plum again, but I got to get me a prostitute, and I got to get me one right now, today."

Trace looked at Mr. Popperoy, at his white stubble and his missing teeth, and he said, "How much you think you'll have to pay her?"

"Hunnert."

"Okay, Mr. Popperoy. We'll go see if we can find you a prostitute for a hundred dollars." At that point, it was a joke. Trace didn't think he'd actually get one. After all, prostitutes or not, they had to have their standards.

They found two women together, two sassy women with long legs and big, watery mouths, and Mr. Popperoy bought one for himself and one for Trace, and Trace had a real bad feeling about it, but he didn't say no. Mr. Popperoy didn't want to take them home, so they went to a motel.

"You have fun, now, boy. Take your time, because time's already done, as you know."

Trace tried to take his time, but he and Emmy hadn't done it in so long—and this girl did things to him Emmy never thought of doing—it didn't take much. After she left, he got dressed and sat on the bed, waiting for Mr. Popperoy. He heard a door shut and looked

out the window to see Mr. Popperoy's whore strolling away, so he sat on the bed again and waited a decent amount of time for Mr. Popperoy to get dressed, then went and knocked on his door.

Trace knocked again. And again. And again.

The manager had to open the door, and there he lay, his white skin lapping over itself like ripples on a lake, his mouth opened wide, and his pecker still shimmering wet. The manager called the police to report the death, and Trace ran his fingers through his hair.

This wouldn't sit well with Emmy.

She Dreams in Colors. She Dreams in Hope

F. John Sharp

Pasha removes bread and dried fruit from a canvas lunch bag and lays them on a napkin, arranging the pieces until the composition pleases her. She usually places the bread on the left and the fruit on the right, but she reverses it whenever she is about to work on Goran, like today.

"Look at Pasha," says Goran, who dumps his food onto the square metal table. "See how content she is that again she has no meat for her lunch."

Raisa frowns. "Goran, you should spend more time worrying about meeting your quota and putting meat on your own table. Leave Pasha alone for a change."

"I think Goran is jealous of Pasha always making quota," says Niki. "How long since Goran made quota? A month?"

"I made it a week ago Thursday."

"So twice in a month then?" Raisa says. A threadbare blue babushka exaggerates the movement of her head as she nods to make her point. The dim light makes her graying hair look rusty.

Goran grumbles and bites off a chunk of day-old bread, which crunches and resists his efforts. Pasha continues to eat as though the conversation hasn't been about her; her mouth turned slightly upward, giving her the appearance either of being satisfied with her circumstances or of waiting patiently for an opening.

They sit, together as always, in the block-walled lunchroom with small windows, high up, with a view of only the hazy sky. Bare bulbs cast harsh shadows on the fifty or so workers who take the middle lunch period. It is their only break from a twelve-hour shift making metal parts that can be used for cars or trucks or tractors or tanks. They are never told which.

"Besides," Raisa says, "I think that Pasha doesn't much care for meat, do you, Pasha?"

Pasha finishes chewing and swallowing a raisin. "Meat or no meat, it's no matter to me. My food is good enough." She takes another raisin and chews deliberately.

"She is young yet," says Goran. "She will tire of her dried fruit and bread. 'Meat or no meat,' she says, as if such things are trifling. The days I have meat are the way I mark my calendar, with every other minute of my life so completely the same as the next. I have never had meat more than once in a week, even during Reform."

Niki says, "You just resent the Reformers because they did not lower your quota."

"It is hard to make quota with only eight fingers, my friend. They promised they would make allowances for cripples, but my quota got only bigger."

"That was only temporary—"

"They promised us a better life, but it got only worse. I'm glad the Old Ones returned us to the old ways. Nothing is better, but at least we don't expect it to be. Better to have no expectations than to be always disappointed."

"They needed more time, that is all," Niki says. "You cannot undo decades of *ugnyetyonnost* in two years. They just needed more time. Right, Pasha?"

Pasha tilts her head as she peels the crust from her bread. "The Reformers will free us one day."

"Oh, pffft," Goran says, waving her off with a dirty hand—his hands never come clean. "You, of all people, should know differently. Your father rots in a prison as the Old Ones' way of thanking him for his part in the Reform. Do you think he will once again lead us?"

"I have hope."

"Hope. HA!" Goran leans toward her, his rich brown eyes sparking to life in a weary face. "Let me tell you about hope. One does not dare to hope here, in this life, in this world. Hope is dangled before us, coaxing us to take one more step, then another, then another, until we have followed the newest liars from one desperate circumstance to another. Hope has been killed a thousand times over." Goran spits out an apple seed. "The only thing even resembling hope is my desire to simply survive to see another day. And that may not be hope so much as worry that even this life is better than death, if the afterlife, too, was created by liars." He glares at Pasha, but her placid countenance cannot be bullied from her face.

"There's Goran for you." Niki chuckles through a thick, dark beard. "Ever the shiny coin."

Goran turns. "What could you possibly have to hope for, Niki? Was it not your wife who ran off to join the Reformers? When will she be coming back? Do you still hold hope that she will show

up at your doorstep, these five long years later, and be your wife again—?”

Niki slams his hand on the table. “You will *not* talk about her that way. She is still my wife. She hides for her life.”

“She is still your wife while in the bed of another? Hiding together for their lives?”

Niki jumps to his feet, his chair tumbling behind him. “You will take that back, Goran, man of no hope,” he says, leaning across the table. “Hopeless man, you will take that back.”

The lunchroom becomes silent; faces turn to watch.

Goran doesn’t flinch, takes another bite of apple. “I will do no such thing. I am right, as always.”

“Goran, hush,” Raisa says. “Niki, sit. Goran, you don’t know anything about Niki’s wife.”

Goran looks around as Niki regains his chair. One by one the workers return to eating. “Maybe, but I have heard things.”

“You have heard no such thing, Goran Milskevich,” Raisa says. “You never talk to anyone other than us and your wife.”

Goran sighs and finishes his apple. The muffled hum of motors in the next room and the muted talking at the other tables fills the silence.

Pasha clears her throat. “Goran, do you dream?”

Goran stares at his lunch.

“I dream,” Raisa says.

Pasha holds her gaze on Goran. “Do you, Raisa?” she asks.

“Yes. A few nights ago I had a dream about my husband being told to work in the mines again after he had finally been moved to the office. He came home covered in sweat and grime, and as he walked up the street he was camouflaged by the background of dirty sky and dingy buildings. He bumped right into me before I saw him, and he looked sad and worn and I thought he would die that very moment.” She drops her sandwich onto the table and shakes her head slowly. “They’re not making their quotas.”

Goran and Niki exchange glances. Pasha looks unconcerned and gives Raisa a reassuring smile. “Goran dreams too, don’t you, Goran?” she asks.

“No,” he says quickly, his eyes darting to Pasha then away. “I have not dreamed since.... I cannot remember.”

“You cannot remember last night then?” asks Pasha.

“I did not dream last night.”

“But you tried, didn’t you?”

"How do you know this?"

"Your dreaming-self wanted to let me in, but you fought me."

"How do you know this, Pasha? Tell me."

"Your fighting makes me tired."

"Tell me!" he shouts.

Pasha smiles. "Because I am sending you my dreams, the dreams of my father, the dreams that will make you alive again."

Goran's eyes grow wide and he pushes away from the table, stuffing everything back into his bag. "Pasha," he says quietly, "that is dangerous talk. I do not want to be involved in your father's Reformer affairs. I need my sleep if I want ever again to make quota. Leave me alone." His metal chair screeches as he slides it back, and in a few long strides he is gone.

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The next day they eat quietly. The sound of the machinery hums and bangs dully from beyond the walls. Pasha speaks. "Did you dream last night, Goran?"

"Again with the questions, Pasha. If you weren't so odd I'd think you were a spy for the government."

"Did you?"

Goran shifts his gaze to Niki, then Raisa, then back to Pasha. "No."

"Are you sure?"

"Why do you care about my dreams, Pasha?"

"Dreams are important."

"They are not important to me. They are nonsense; they are foolishness. They lie."

"Did that dream last night lie to you, Goran?"

"All dreams lie."

"Did it lie or did it show you something you did not want to see?"

Goran snorts and shrugs. "What are you talking about, odd Pasha?"

"Did your dream not show you that the Reformers would rise again? And that you would join them this time? That you would help lead them to victory?"

"Quiet, girl!" Goran ducks his head and looks around the room. "Do you want us all to be arrested?"

"Was that your dream, Goran?"

Goran glances around again. "I refuse to dream those dreams. Those are dangerous dreams, dangerous thoughts. I cannot afford to get my hopes up."

Pasha laughs. "But Goran, silly, they cannot read your thoughts, share your dreams. You are safe within your own mind."

"It seems he is not safe from you," Niki says.

Pasha smiles. "I dreamed about your wife, Niki, last night. Did you dream of her too?"

Niki's face grows quizzical. "Yes."

"And was she safe in your dream?"

"Yes."

"And faithful? And missing you?"

"Yes, she missed me terribly."

"Then I believe it is so," Pasha says, looking deep into Niki's eyes. Her face radiates a confidence that seems to flow from beyond her. She turns to Goran. "Would you like to hear my dream?" she asks.

"Not if it will get us arrested," says Goran.

"Tell us," says Raisa.

"I am with Papa," Pasha starts, "and we walk through a city, my hand in his. The sun makes hard shadows and people are singing. They are singing as they work and as they paint their homes with blues and reds and yellows, and as they tend their lawns, and singing as they walk; and they walk everywhere, wearing flowing dresses and fine suits and shined shoes; and children shed the clothing of labor and they play. We visit. We visit our friends, many friends, and we eat at their tables and they have plenty and offer us chicken and lamb, and we eat and drink and rest. And at the end of the day we sleep an optimistic sleep and dream the dreams of free people."

"That is nonsense," Goran says. "We have not had a day of rest in ages. And the sky has not been blue in half my lifetime, and wherever there should be green grass there is only mud. And people do not leave their homes, parading around in festive dress and eating meat at the tables of others. Singing, no less. We work. Our lives are monochrome; they are black and white and all shades of gray, like the sky and the dirty streets and the grime from the air that coats our houses and turns colors into remnants, and this sameness of color trespasses into our dreams so that even there we cannot enjoy a respite from the unrelenting dullness. There is no color in my dreams as there is no color in my life. How is it you dream in color, Pasha?"

"My father has visions. It is how he dreamed up Reform."

Niki sputters, "Ridiculous, Pasha. Your father is in prison, eight hundred miles away."

"Yes, and at night," Pasha says, "he sends me his dreams. It started right after he was sent away. At first it made him ill, but I've learned to be more receptive. And now I send his dreams to others, and will keep doing it until my father is free again."

"He will never be free until the Old Ones are dead and gone," says Goran.

"Or pushed out again," says Raisa. "Which may keep my husband from the mines. I hope every day and every night that it will happen."

"Then I have no need to send you any dreams, have I, Raisa?" asks Pasha. She smiles and holds Raisa's gaze for a moment.

"I have had enough of this dream talk," says Goran. "We could be discussing fairy tales for all it matters to the real world."

Pasha settles back into her chair and finishes her meal. Her smile curls undaunted and she gazes mostly at Goran, as though she were sizing up an opponent. Niki and Raisa talk about their children while Goran hunches over his meal. His chewing slows, then stops, and he stares at his dried apricots, his face scrunching up as if he remembers something painful. The end-of-lunch whistle sounds and he blinks with a start, sighing and tossing his remainders into his sack.

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A few days later, Goran, Niki, and Raisa glance at Pasha's empty chair as a new packer, young and earnest-looking, tries to sit there. Goran says, "That chair is taken. Find another."

"But no one has sat here for two days," says the dusty-haired young man.

"I do not care that you do not see anyone there," says Goran. "That chair is taken."

The young man pauses. "But if I may sit here just this one day—"

Goran speaks harshly. "We do not need your kind at our table. Leave us alone."

"My kind?" the young man asks, with a smile that could have come from Pasha. "You know my kind, do you?" And he leaves.

"What did you mean by 'his kind,' Goran?" Raisa asks.

Goran leans close and talks low. "They are Reformers, that bunch over there."

"How do you know?" Niki asks.

"They have asked me to join them."

“Will you?”

Goran frowns. “What is the use? To lose again?”

The three eat silently and try not to look at one another. The only sounds are of paper unwrapping and apples crunching and water cups being set down. “She will miss her quota,” Niki says finally. “She never misses her quota.”

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Goran quietly pushes the door shut and hangs his coat on the peg in the hall. He takes his lunch sack to the small, tidy kitchen, empties it into the trash, and sets it neatly in its place near the breadbox. He lifts the lid to the pot on the stove, takes a long-handled spoon, and stirs. “Cabbage,” he says, and replaces the lid.

He settles into his tattered beige recliner, which has a large dark spot where his head rests when he falls asleep. The living area lies between the kitchen and the bedroom, and is comfortable enough for the two of them. On one side is a sofa and two chairs, a couple of end tables, and a small television with rabbit-ear antennae. On the other side is the kitchen table with four wooden chairs, only two of which show significant wear. A few pictures, mostly relatives, hang here and there on the walls and a pottery urn—a gift—sits on a shelf above the fireplace. His newspaper is there, but today he leaves it and just sits.

“You’re home early, Goran,” says Dariia, coming from the backyard with a handful of parsley and chives. She bends to kiss him on the head. “Did you make quota?”

Goran sighs. “No, not today. A fabrication machine was down and I ran out of parts. No one could make quota today. Not even....”

Dariia stiffens. “Pasha? The great worker Pasha? Pasha the quota machine?”

“Dariia.”

“Why do you talk always of Pasha?”

“André asked me to look after her.”

“André,” she says, with a downturn in tone.

“He was my friend, Dariia.”

“He almost took you with him to prison.”

“It wasn’t his fault.”

“And where would I be today? Living in Council housing with the cockroaches dancing on my feet in the middle of the night.”

"I should be there too, in prison, if I hadn't eaten that damned meat stew."

"But I am glad you did." Dariia leans over and hugs Goran. "Aren't you?"

Goran presses his head into her. "Some days, yes, some days, no."

"Really?" Dariia asks. "Which days no?"

Goran says nothing.

"If you were in prison, who would André have asked to look after Pasha?"

"A fine job I'm doing too. She is so odd. She talks about dreams."

Dariia pulls back. "Dreams?"

"Yes," he says. "It is nothing, just craziness."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. It is nothing," he says. "How long until dinner?"

"Right away, my *draga*."

Goran smiles and lets her slide away until she is out of reach and into the kitchen.

At dinner, Goran is more quiet than usual. "Pasha wasn't there today. She has missed three days in a row. I wonder..."

"Wonder what?"

Goran's look is far away. "Nothing. I wonder nothing."

Dariia thinks for a long time. "Would you want me to visit tomorrow, to see if she needs anything?"

"You would do that?"

"For you, my *draga*, yes."

Goran smiles. "No, Dariia, I am sure she is all right. I think she was coming down with a cold or something the other day. That is all."

Dariia gets up to go to the kitchen. "Still, I could take her something if you like. Some soup maybe. I wish I had chicken soup for her," she says as she disappears through the door.

"Meat or no meat," he mimics, "my food is good enough for me." He laughs. "No, Dariia, do not fret about chicken for dear, contented Pasha."

Dariia calls from the kitchen, "Did you say something, Goran?"

"No, my *draga*. Nothing of consequence." He thinks about the dream. Pasha's dream. He hums absently, a tune from his boyhood. Dariia returns from the kitchen.

"Are you singing, Goran?"

"What?" he asks. "Oh, maybe. I guess. Why?"

"You never sing."

Goran thinks about that for a moment. "Maybe I should start then," he says.

Dariia's worried look won't go away as she watches Goran almost smile while he ladles a second helping of the cabbage soup.

Goran wipes his chin with a once-white napkin, dulled and frayed despite Dariia's care. "I was thinking," he says, "that maybe you are right in wanting to visit Pasha tomorrow. We should make sure she is all right."

"What should I take her, then, since I have no chicken soup?"

Goran thinks. "Pasha will be happy with anything you bring, but I think she would love a bit of goat's cheese," he says. "And fresh bread."

Dariia nods.

"You could inquire after André."

"I don't think so."

"Just to see how he's doing. It's only polite."

"I do not want to talk about André."

"She misses him."

"A girl should miss her father."

"I miss him too."

Dariia's face hardens. "And I," she says, leaning in, "do *not*."

"Dariia, *moya lyubavi*, I hardly think he deserves—"

"Do not '*moya lyubavi*' me, husband. You almost went to prison because of him."

"We almost toppled the Old Ones for good because of him."

"But you failed, and you did not get to take the place on the Board that André had created for you, and all your friends went to prison. And you, by virtue of the luck of food poisoning, did not."

"If I had been there—"

"If you had been there, it would have made no difference, and I would not have had anyone—like Pasha's mother has her—to help me keep the house, and I'd be sitting right now in a Council tenement, sipping broth by candlelight and wondering when you would ever come back to me. No, Goran the lucky, you could not have saved your friends. And you cannot save them now."

"I am not trying to save them."

"Don't tell me that. I know about your dreams."

"What?"

"I have them too. The same one every night, at first only the beginning of a dream, then each night a little more and then a little more."

Goran stands up, paces the room, runs his hand through his graying hair. "I am sorry. They are meant for me. It is Pasha. She is sending me—us—these dreams. Damn her!"

"How? How can she do that?"

"I do not know. André used to talk about visions but I never gave it any mind. And the dreams, they make her ill. The more I resist the harder it is for her—"

"Then maybe she will stop."

"—and she has missed already three days of work, and I do not know how ill she has fallen—"

"Or maybe she will be too ill to send you the dreams."

"—and I cannot let the daughter of André die and...."

"And what, Goran?"

"And last night I let her finish the dream."

"You let her?"

"I had to—for Pasha. Did you see it? It was beautiful. Color everywhere. Happiness. Contentment. Everyone wearing Pasha-smiles. The sun shone as if for the first time in a thousand years."

"Stop it, Goran! I do not want to hear lies. I do not want to talk about the dreams of Reformers."

"Do you want to live like this? Do you not want more?"

"No," she says firmly, then she softens. "Not if it is without you."

Goran stops pacing. He goes to her and wraps his arms around her and she buries her face in his chest and she cries. Goran presses his cheek into her hair. He closes his eyes and lets the colors from the dream fill him. He holds her tighter and kisses her and tears begin to roll down his cheeks and they hold their embrace until they have each given to the other all the unspoken love that is possible, until each has felt the heartbeat of the other and been comforted.

Goran kisses her head again. "But what if, Dariia my love, we can have both?"

- - -

The next day at work, there are again only three. Niki and Raisa keep looking at Goran, who has not spoken. A ray of sun noses in through a corner of a window, erasing the tungsten shadows and casting the room in uncommon brightness.

"Goran, have you heard from Pasha?" Niki asks.

Goran slices an apple. "You mean in real life or in a dream?"

"He means," Raisa says, "do you know if she's all right?"

"I expect her to be better soon."

"So, you've spoken with her?"

"No."

Raisa and Niki wait.

"I let her dream come to me." Goran looks around to make sure no one is watching. "For days and days I resisted; I fought as hard as I could. But the dream was too strong, she was too strong, André was too strong. It dug at me, seeping into the edges of my sleep until it filled my head with color. I tried to push it away, to make it stop, but I could not. Damn her! I hit at her with dream hands and kicked at her with dream feet and I spat out curses with my dream tongue, and still she came. I felt her weakening and I thought I could push her away, but she persisted. And then she missed work, she missed her quota, and it was because of me. I was killing her, and I could not kill the daughter of André, the daughter of the man who once made me believe that life could be more, could be better."

Goran pauses. Raisa touches his arm.

"So two nights ago I let her in."

"And?" Raisa asks.

"And," Goran says, returning to his apple, "maybe now I can get a good night's sleep."

Raisa and Niki nod slowly and they all go back to eating in silence. The young man from the other day walks by the table.

"Hey, young face," Goran says.

He turns.

"What is your name?"

"Ilya."

"Well, Ilya, we have an extra seat, at least for a couple more days. Care to join us?"

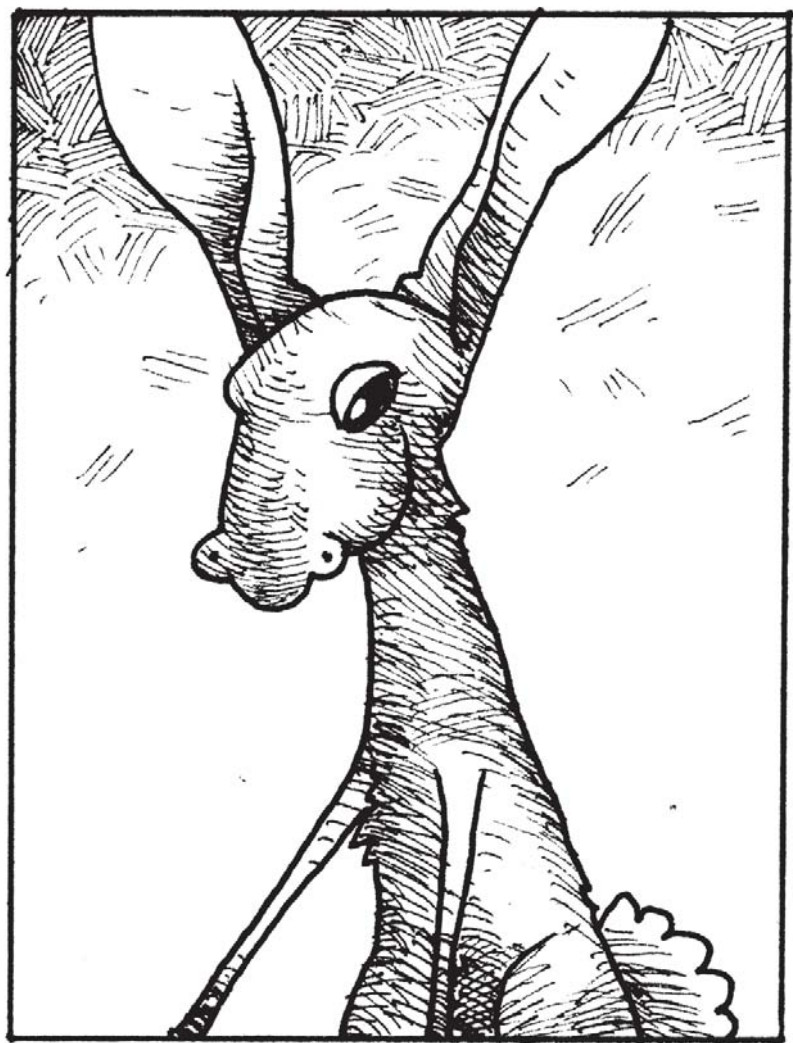
Ilya looks at his friends at the other table, who look at Goran. Everyone's eyes meet for a second. Ilya's eyes question Goran's friends. Raisa nods and Niki shrugs.

Ilya sits and unpacks his lunch in an uncomfortable silence. Goran watches with amusement as he arranges his food on his napkin.

"No meat for you?" Goran says.

"Not today," says Ilya.

Goran nods. "For me neither," he says, "but I am hoping that tomorrow will be different."



168 Jack Rabbit

Jamie Dee Galey

Chicken

John Mantooth

I learned about defiance, real defiance, on a school bus. I was seventeen. That was the year I started drinking, the year my mother took my car keys away from me after I came home drunk. She waited until I was sleeping one off and hid them, knowing I wasn't about to give them to her, nor was I going to stop drinking. Not then. Becoming sober was still decades of misery away.

So I rode the cheese wagon, mornings and afternoons, sitting in the back with a couple of delinquent ninth-graders who looked up to me because I told them the sordid details of my life, embellishing most of them to the point of absurdity. But the more I embellished, the more the two boys, Davy and Ty-Ty, wanted to hear.

I told them that I was on the bus because some drug dealer associated with the Mafia took my car when I told him to fuck off. I told them that I had a sweet deal lined up with a guy who was going to sell me a brand new Dodge Viper. I'd be getting it in a couple of weeks. I told them about my brother Steve, who worked in the pits at Talladega, and how he always got me pussy when I went to visit him. I told them that nobody could tell me what to do, and I meant nobody.

"What about Champ?" Davy asked. I looked up at our bus driver. We called him Champ, and I always assumed it was because he used to box, but perhaps I was wrong. Either way, his big forearms, thick black mustache, and scarred face always gave the impression that he was not one to be crossed. I'd only seen one kid try it since I'd been riding, and he was dealt with swiftly and soundly. Champ threw the bus into park, slung off his seatbelt, and stormed back to the boy's seat. The boy cringed into his seat, petrified.

"Sure, he can tell me all he wants, but I'm not going to do it." And then, for effect, I added, "I'm not scared of that old man," while in truth I was terrified by the prospect of crossing him.

Champ had one rule on the bus: stay in your seat. So it didn't surprise me when Davy called me on my big mouth.

"Stand up then," he said. "Stand up and we'll see how tough you are."

I smirked at the idea. "Why should I? I don't want to stand up. You and Ty-Ty can pull that pussy stuff, but I'm not bothering with it."

Davy snorted like he had blown my cover, but Ty-Ty just kept staring at me, his eyes full of something. Wonder? Disdain? It was hard to tell. It hadn't taken me long to figure out that something wasn't right with him.

I knew that I was in danger of losing my audience. I had to act. I jumped up out of my seat and across the aisle at Davy. Grabbing him by his shirt collar, I pulled him face-to-face with me. "You little shit. You ever mock me again and I'll kick your ass all over this bus."

"Okay," he said. "Okay."

I slid back into my seat and looked up at Champ. He hadn't seen. He was coming up on a stop and his attention was focused on the road rather than the rearview mirror. That's when I noticed that Ty-Ty was still staring at me with that stupid look of his...except now maybe I knew what it was. It was a snarl. A clear look of defiance. Maybe in my arrogance I had only assumed that he, like Davy, looked up to me. Now, he seemed much more menacing, and I found myself not wanting to meet his eyes. "Screw both of you," I said, and turned to look at the window.

For the rest of the ride home that day, I ignored them, though I continued to feel Ty-Ty's eyes on me. They were like searchlights, covering my skin, making me feel naked and exposed.

- - -

The next day, I had found my bluster again, after berating myself for letting some ninth-grader get to me. I went straight to the back that afternoon (Ty-Ty and Davy didn't ride mornings) and settled into my seat. When Davy and Ty-Ty got on, I looked right at Ty-Ty, staring him down hard. Without changing his expression, he stared back, seemingly looking right through my eyes and into the back of my skull where I hid my true self, the one that was afraid. Again I looked away.

I worked hard over the next few days to regain my role as hero to them. I told stories about flying private jets, screwing teachers, telling the principal he could go fuck himself. Some of the stories were loosely based on reality, but most were total fabrications, sprung from my mind to my mouth in hot seconds of inspiration.

"Either of you ever play chicken?" I asked one afternoon.

"Chicken?" Davy asked.

"Yeah, dumbass, chicken."

"How do you play?" Davy asked, sitting up.

"First of all, you need to have a car," I said. "So you two dipshits won't be able to play for a few years. But it's real simple. I used to play it all the time before my car got stolen. All you do is drive right at somebody—and fast. No matter what, you keep going. The first car to veer off the road is the chicken."

"You used to play?" Davy asked.

"All the time."

"You never had a wreck?"

"Hell no. Wrecks are for chickens. I never chickened out. See, the game involves a very simple philosophy: make up your mind before you start that no matter what, you won't chicken out. The other guy always will, even if it's the last minute. Never fails." I had never played chicken in my life. I'd only seen it in a movie.

Ty-Ty, who generally said little—how could he, with that scowl plastered to his face—spoke up. "What if the other person makes the same decision?"

"Huh?"

"What if the other person playing decides to keep going no matter what, too?"

"Won't happen," I said.

"It might," he said. "If I was playing with you it would. We'd collide with each other...unless you chickened out."

I shot a scowl back at him. "I wouldn't chicken out."

His snarl widened. "Neither would I."

The next words that came out of my mouth, I learned over time to truly regret. But along with regret, I have learned over the years that some mistakes are irreversible.

"Ty-Ty," I said, "you wouldn't even play chicken on this bus."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I would too. But you got to tell me how to play."

Before I had a chance to say anything, Davy started in. "Ty-Ty, I bet you won't stand up."

Ty-Ty furrowed his brow. "I ain't scared."

I laughed. "Sure looks like it to me."

Ty-Ty shot up from his seat.

He stepped past Davy and into the aisle.

Seconds later, Champ was hollering, "Get back in your seat! Get back in your seat!" Ty-Ty gave no indication that he heard. The bus ground to a stop. Champ slung his seatbelt off and stomped to the back. "You got a hearing problem, son?"

Ty-Ty just stared at him, snarl stretching his face.

"I'm going to give you two options, son. Number one, you sit down. Number two, I sit you down."

Ty-Ty said nothing. He only stared.

Champ got really mad then. His face turned red and he seemed to grow larger. He towered over Ty-Ty, burning with anger, but Ty-Ty did not even flinch. That's when Champ began to look a little confused. He glanced at me and asked, "What's wrong with this boy?"

I shrugged. He glared at me hard. I sat up and said, "I don't know."

He looked at Davy. "This boy related to you?"

"Yes, sir. He's my cousin."

"What the hell's wrong with him?"

Davy studied the seat.

Champ turned his attention back to Ty-Ty. "One more chance, son."

Ty-Ty remained silent.

Champ picked him up and thrust him down into the seat. Ty-Ty popped right back up. Champ stared at Ty-Ty like a man might stare at a disaster. His face registered disbelief, and I could see that beyond that there was fear. It seemed strange to me that a man like Champ could be afraid of a boy like Ty-Ty. Scrawny and short, Ty-Ty looked like a straw compared to Champ, but in that instant I saw that size didn't matter at all. It was a façade, a fool's way of judging the world, a mistake of the undetermined.

"You want to do this the hard way? Be stubborn? Son, you don't know stubborn." He nearly ran back up the aisle, leaving Ty-Ty, scrawny little Ty-Ty, still standing beside his seat, still snarling, still staring at the world through defiant eyes.

Champ snatched up the CB and put a call in to the school. He explained the situation and a voice said Ty-Ty's parents would be contacted.

"You tell them to get over here and pick up their son. He's not welcome to ride my bus anymore."

So we waited. Champ stepped off the bus and lit a cigarette, maybe to affect nonchalance, maybe because he was a damned addict like most of the male figures I ever knew growing up. A few kids told Ty-Ty to sit down so they could go home, but nobody really seemed to have their heart in it. Ty-Ty was too scary standing there like a blind man in a room full of wolves, braver than he had any right to be.

Finally, Davy said, "Your dad is going to be so fucking pissed."
"Dad can kiss my ass, just like Champ."

A few kids oohed and aaahed over this, but most of them just looked out the window, perhaps wishing for Champ to get back on to keep this strange, stubborn boy away from them.

I closed my eyes, still trying to be cool, still trying to appear unbothered.

A few minutes later, I became aware of Ty-Ty's voice. "See, I told you I wouldn't chicken out. Me and you, we would crash in a game of chicken."

I opened my eyes and saw that he was looking right at me, grinning. It was the first time I had ever seen him grin, and it came off as more of a leer than a true smile. I had to play it cool. "I'd still beat you. You did all right with Champ, but you'd chicken out in a car."

The grin disappeared. He narrowed his eyes and seemed to study me, inch by inch. I felt my scalp tingle, my skin crawl. I was afraid of him, not because he was strong or imposing, but because he hated me, and, worse, he hated himself. I looked away, to the window. Outside, an old Ford pulled up alongside Champ. A man got out. He was wiry and wore big shit-kicking boots and a belt buckle the size of a saucer. He pulled his sunglasses off and squinted at Champ. The two exchanged a few words, Champ obviously struggling to keep himself under control. He gestured at the bus, and Ty-Ty's father stuck his two lips together firmly and nodded slowly. Champ led him onto the bus.

"Come on, Tyler," his father said. I was surprised by the calmness in his voice, but then I noticed his eyes, so set, so dead level, that I knew he wouldn't hesitate to beat the shit out of Ty-Ty later, or now if necessary.

Ty-Ty didn't move. But I noticed something then. He still had the scowl of defiance on his face, but he didn't look at his father.

"Boy, you got about four seconds to get your ass off this bus, or I'll throw you off."

Ty-Ty, still playing chicken, didn't move. His father didn't even wait half of the four seconds before he was rushing down the aisle, shit-kickers and all. He slapped Ty-Ty once before picking him up and tossing him over his shoulder. Ty-Ty kept his body stiff all the way back down the aisle. His father slipped on the steps, righted himself, and was gone.

Champ returned to his seat to crank the bus. In the rearview mirror, I saw the look of fear on his face.

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Ty-Ty was suspended from school for a couple of weeks and from the bus for over a month. During this time, I got my car back, got drunk, and wrecked it into a ditch at three in the morning. Mom didn't have to take the keys this time. The car was gone. I got lucky; at least that's what most people kept telling me. I had to get six stitches above my right eye and three more on my left cheek. The wounds healed and I thought the scars made me look tough. I went back to the bus and bragged to Davy, who sat across the aisle from me, by himself without Ty-Ty.

Ty-Ty came back quietly. Champ grunted something at him the first day back. It might have been, "That'll teach you," or maybe, "Son of a bitch," or even, "Oh Lord, here we go again."

And if he said the last, he was absolutely right. Three days later, Ty-Ty stood up to open a window. Champ, who must have been waiting for that moment, roared at him to get back in his seat. Ty-Ty froze.

The bus stopped so fast that Ty-Ty fell over. He hit his head pretty hard on the floor, but popped back up like a jack-in-the-box. His ear was bleeding. He waited for Champ to get there, lips turned in a crooked parody of a smile.

Champ picked him up and started to the door. "Your dad told me I was to leave you on the side of the road next time. And you know what else? You're done on this bus. Two suspensions equals no more bus-riding!" He took two of the steps before tossing Ty-Ty to the ground. Ty-Ty hit the ground and sprang back up. But it was too late. Champ had already slammed the door in his face.

Champ pulled off as fast as the old bus would go. I turned and watched Ty-Ty grow smaller as the bus left him behind.

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I felt like Champ had won, and, despite my own inert pseudo-rebellion, I was glad that order had been restored. Champ was supposed to be able to handle problems. The idea that he couldn't scared me. The idea that Champ had been scared frightened me even more.

I fell into the old routine of lying about my toughness. I beat up a college guy last weekend when he caught me with his girlfriend. I played poker with some of the men down at the City Bar, and won so much money they accused me of counting cards. They kicked me out on my ass and threatened to shoot me if I ever came back. Was I scared? Hell no, I wasn't scared. Most people talk a bigger game than they act, I informed my hapless listeners (Davy had been joined by a couple of eighth-graders who listened with absolute, unquestioning awe). Last weekend, I had sex with Marci Crawford and Beth Smitherman on the same day. Beth squealed like a stuck pig. Marci was the silent type until I made her come; then her lungs opened up like a marching band at half-time.

The boys listened to me while Champ drove the bus, grunting at us when we got too loud, scowling at us beneath his mustache, pointing fingers that worked like magic, causing us to scurry back to our seats. And I thought about Ty-Ty. About the magic of authority that Champ held over us, suckled us with like infants; how we liked swaying listlessly beneath the yoke of his fingers, his scowls, and his inaudible grunts. How I felt like things were right in the world again. How I couldn't imagine what had caused Ty-Ty to become the scrawny, defiant ninth-grader that he was.

"You ever see Ty-Ty?" I asked Davy one day when my other admirers had already gotten off the bus.

"I see him every day," he said. "He lives with us now. His father's dead."

"Dead?"

"He got shot. Or shot himself. That's what my mom says."

"You're kidding."

Davy shook his head. He seemed a little disoriented by this line of conversation, especially coming from me.

"Is he any better?" I asked. "You know...? Why does he act like he does?"

Davy puckered his lips. He looked like he had a headache. Squinting, he said, "Don't know. I guess because he was always getting beat up when he was little. He was so scrawny and all. And his dad liked to beat on him too." He shrugged his shoulders. "Hey, did you call that guy about your car?"

"No, I didn't call him."

"But you said you were going to call him and tell him that if he didn't have your car ready—"

"I didn't call him!" I exploded from my seat and shoved Davy against the window. His head thunked against the metal frame and he winced, tears streaking his face.

"What'd you do that for?"

"Tell Ty-Ty something for me."

"What?" Davy asked, wiping snot from his lip.

"Tell him I said he ain't no chicken."

Davy nodded and continued to cry.

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The spring came, and the reality of being a senior hit me hard. I got depressed about having to ride the bus to school while most of my friends drove new cars. I got down about not having a girlfriend. Despite my lies to Davy, I had never even had sex. The closest I had ever come was junior year, with Rebecca Sturgeon, but just before I put it in, I came all over her belly. I tried hard to get her to let me try again, but she wouldn't. After a while she stopped returning my phone calls and asked Mrs. Morris if she could move to a new seat—away from me—in science class.

I thought about Ty-Ty far too much—his snarl mostly, and sometimes those level eyes—and it almost seems as if I knew then that it wasn't over yet. A tragedy was spinning out before me like a spool of thread, but I was powerless to stop it.

- - -

I ran into Ty-Ty at school one day. I had been cutting English, so I was behind the gym, out near the dumpsters, tipping back a flask of Wild Turkey I'd filched from my mother. I had learned to hide my alcoholism pretty well by that point. I took a few nips between nearly every period. But whenever I felt like the coast was

clear, I skipped English altogether and got good and numb before going on to sixth and seventh periods.

I was taking another slug when somebody walked up. I nearly dropped my flask trying to get it back into my pocket before I realized it was Ty-Ty.

"Hey," I said. "Have a taste."

Ty-Ty cocked his head at me and frowned, but he took the flask and drank some anyway.

We stood in silence for a while. I was drunk, but didn't care. I took another drink. I said, "I'm sorry about your dad, Ty-Ty."

He didn't say anything for a while. Then he asked, "You still play chicken?"

I shrugged. "Nah. I don't have a car. I totaled the damn thing. I never played that much anyway, Ty-Ty." I tipped the flask back again. "I'm just a damn liar."

"I've been playing."

"You can't even drive a car," I said.

"Been playing without one."

"You mean like you played with Champ."

"Fuck Champ. He's chicken of me, anyway."

I held the flask up. "Damn straight, Ty-Ty. Damn straight. But, you gotta admit, in the end he won."

"I'm not scared of him."

I nodded. I didn't doubt it. "Ty-Ty, does anything scare you?"

He seemed to consider this, a look of deep concentration covering his normally melancholy face. "Yeah, being scared scares me."

Drunk as I was, I found this funny. "You're a champion chicken player, Ty-Ty. A champion."

He reached for the flask and took another swallow. "I'll see you tomorrow," he said and walked off. I sat down against the dumpster and drank myself silly.

- - -

"I saw Ty-Ty yesterday," I told Davy as the bus lumbered off. It was raining hard and steam clouded the windows. Champ was moving slowly, wiping the windshield with an old rag so he could see.

"He stayed home today," Davy said.

"Skipping?"

"Sick. Woke up throwing up. Said you gave him some whiskey."

I smiled. I wanted to ask if Ty-Ty was doing all right, if he was managing. Losing his dad the way he did had to be hard. I had lost mine a few years ago when he left my mom and me. I couldn't imagine what it was like to lose your father to suicide. I didn't ask because I knew that Davy and the other kids that gathered around me thought I was tough. And tough guys don't ask questions like that. So I sat in silence, ignoring the eyes on me, appealing to me to tell them more lies.

By the time the bus pulled up to Davy's house, the bottom had dropped out of the sky. Visibility was bad, and the only sound was the kettledrum rain on the roof of the bus. There were only a few of us left: Davy, me, a couple of seventh-grade kids in the front, and Pete Turner, a sophomore nobody liked. Champ stopped and opened the door. A gust of rain blew in, soaking him. "Damn it," he muttered in his deep voice.

This was when I usually made my way to the front each day. My stop was only about a mile or two away, and I usually anticipated it by sitting in the front seat, waiting impatiently for Champ to get to my house. Davy told me 'bye and I nodded to him. The seat nearest the door, where I usually sat, was wet with rain, so I climbed in right behind Champ. Champ started to close the door when I heard him say, "Son of a bitch." He took his towel and rubbed the glass; by this point the steam was not really a factor, but the rain still was. So I couldn't blame him for doing a double take when he saw the figure standing in the road.

Through the slashing rain, I could tell that it was Ty-Ty. He was just standing there, looking defiantly at Champ through the rain-streaked glass.

Champ rubbed the window with the towel again. Then he turned to me. "Is that somebody in the road?"

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

He sat on the horn. "You'd think they'd have sense enough to get out of the rain, not to mention the road."

I didn't say anything. I waited, holding my breath.

When Ty-Ty didn't move, Champ crept closer. "Motherfuck," he said beneath his breath. "That little punk." He stepped on the accelerator. Ty-Ty didn't flinch.

"He won't move," I said.

Champ barely turned his head. "Huh?"

"He won't move. He'll just stand there."

"We'll see about that," Champ said again. He floored the bus, and the wheels ground the wet asphalt for purchase. We lurched forward. And almost as soon as we moved, Champ slammed the brakes again. He whipped his belt off, set the emergency brake, and leaned out of the door into the sheets of rain. "Get out of the way, you stupid kid!"

Ty-Ty shook his head slowly. Champ lost what little self-control he had left then. "Kid thinks he can stand me down. I'll stand him down." He looked back at me. "He'll move this time, by God."

"No," I said, but it was weak, easy to ignore. I should have stood up and said it loudly and with swagger—that's how I'd told all my lies about being tough—but I said it softly, inaudibly even.

Champ didn't floor it this time. Instead he put it in gear and moved forward gradually, increasing his speed as he closed the twenty or so yards that lay between the bus and Ty-Ty.

As the bus got closer, I could see Ty-Ty's face better, how he was really nothing but a boy with a snarl, how his blond lick of hair had at last been tamed by the hammering storm, how beneath his tough exterior, back in the depths of his eyes, he was as afraid as the rest of us.

More afraid, I think.

I closed my eyes just as Champ hit the brakes again. I was thrown forward, and since I had been standing up, I went up and over the seat. My head hit Champ's head, and I landed in the aisle near the step well.

The bus came to a rough stop. "Jesus," I heard Champ saying. "Sweet Jesus."

He stepped over me out of the bus, into the rain. I pulled myself to my feet and followed.

"Get back in the bus," Champ said, but he didn't look at me, and there was no conviction in his voice.

I watched as he knelt to look under the bus. He collapsed to his knees and began to crawl underneath. I heard him sobbing. He stayed under the bus for a long time, so long that I gave up waiting for him to come back out. Since I was only a mile or so from my house, I began to walk. If I felt the rain on my shoulders that day, I do not remember it. Later, people talked about the storm and how hard it had rained that day. Some people even believed, for a short while, that the rain had played some part in Ty-Ty's death. But Champ put an end to that. He never tried to hide what had hap-

pened, never tried to sugar-coat it. I saw him interviewed once or twice on the local news after he got out of jail years later. He told it like it happened. He seemed, even then, to be baffled by Ty-Ty's behavior and how he had ended up running the boy over with a school bus. But most of all he still seemed frightened.

I was frightened too.

I am still frightened, thirty years later, even though I haven't touched a drop of alcohol in nearly ten years, nor have I lied to anyone about how tough I am for even longer.

My wife asked me the other day what I was afraid of. I thought for a while before remembering Ty-Ty—my mind always seems to turn back to that scrawny ninth-grader with the defiant sneer, and the way he looked just before the bus hit him. I must have been silent, pondering this for a long while, because my wife had to poke me in the ribs and say, "Hello, Trent. I asked you a question."

"I am afraid of people who are so scared they don't care anymore," I said. "I'm afraid of apathy, defiance, and...." I paused, not even sure what I was trying to say. Ty-Ty, that's what I wanted to say. That look in his eyes. Whatever can make you look like that. That's the thing that scared me, still scares me. But this was too difficult to explain, so I simply trailed off, leaving a sentence that I would likely never finish.

The Tale That Launched a Thousand Ships

Janrae Frank

There is a small village called Summersnow up near Bluedog Pass. A race of little people called the Badree Nym live there. They are a magical race with large pointed ears, fair skin, and freckled faces, with hair that ranges in color from pink to blue and even to black. A little old man abides there—no one knows his name—and every day he sits beneath a spreading oak, smoking his pipe and telling stories of his adventures. People—humans, mostly—come from far and wide to hear them. In certain seasons, even minstrels and bards can be found sitting at his knee and listening with rapt attention.

One day three human kings came to see the little old man, having heard of a tale that he had told about a wondrous magical sleeping princess and the horrible monster that guarded the enchanted castle where she lay.

The little old man was always happy to have someone new ask for his stories, and he told them all about the sleeping princess. She had long golden hair and skin as pale as milk. Her castle stood on a distant island, in a grove of Idyn trees that bloomed year-round and bore rainbow fruits like those that grew in the sun-god's garden. A giant's stair carved from matchless jade led up to the castle gates. A feathered dragon laired in the courtyard, guarding his captive prize.

The three kings listened in wonder, excitedly imagining every detail, and when they left at the end of the day, they vowed to send a thousand ships to bring the princess back. But they did not have a thousand ships, so they had to spend several years in building them. Their enterprise was proclaimed across their kingdoms, and when the ships finally sailed, everyone turned out to cheer. Each king was certain it would be his ships and his captains that would bring the princess back.

Years passed. Some of the ships began to return laden with gold and treasure, full of tales of strange places and stranger people, of odd creatures and amazing sights. But of the magic castle and

the princess fair, no word ever came. As soon as the ships came in, they were sent back out to continue the search.

"Find the princess," everyone demanded.

Trade bloomed with the new lands and colonies sprang up. The three kings grew wealthy beyond their wildest dreams, but of the princess no trace was found. The ships sailed farther and farther across the trackless seas and took longer and longer to return. They found hundreds of new islands, and even continents—six, in fact—where humans had never before set foot. The kings were now as rich as the greatest of the legendary rulers of long-ago lands. But the island of the princess was still nowhere to be found.

A decade passed, and then two. First one king married, and then another. But the third king held out. He doubled his fleet and sent them still further abroad.

These ships found strange gods and stranger demons, wondrous magic swords, and singing harps. But of the princess there was never any word. The third king grew old and wearied of the quest. Finally he went to see the little old man again, in the village of Summersnow near Bluedog Pass.

The Badree Nym are very long-lived, and the little old man had changed not a whit. The king's bones creaked a little as he lowered himself to the grass to speak with the little old man.

"I never found the princess," the king said sadly.

"Then maybe you did not listen closely enough," the little old man replied, and told again the tale of the sleeping princess. He spoke for nearly the length of a day. There was a wondrous sleeping princess with jet-black hair and golden skin. She lay in a castle on the bluffs, on an island strewn with gems. A terrible monster laired beneath the bluffs—a huge black dragon with fiery breath. Once past the dragon, one had to climb a narrow silver stair to reach the castle gates.

The king sighed and left. Within a week, he married. The princess was forgotten. In later years, that time came to be known as the Age of Discovery.

Poetry Code

Robert Peake

Many comparisons have been made over time of software source code to poetry. The Perl Haiku Contest, for example, promotes writing very compact yet expressive poems using a very compact yet expressive programming language.ⁱ There is even the phrase “code poet,” which means an exceptional programmer.ⁱⁱ However, little has been said of the ways in which poetry, written in a human language, might be similar to software source code, which is designed to be interpreted by machines. That is, no one talks about “poetry code.”

When I proposed the idea that poetry might be similar to source code on my website, I encountered a kind of knee-jerk indignation.ⁱⁱⁱ This pleases me because it indicates a certain reverence for the mysterious and intangible qualities of poetry, a kind of sticking up for the art. However, I think this reverence is often extended to encompass the perceived subjectivity of poetry in a somewhat misguided way. That is, people tend to assume on instinct that poetry and code are so necessarily different that it is somehow an insult to poetry to compare it to software. I suggest that a good deal can be achieved by questioning this assumption and exploring the similarities further.

I should point out that this is a conflation* of two disciplines that typically have totally different aims: poetry the artistic, software the practical. However, much of the difference ends there. Both employ compactness and precision as primary means to achieve their separate aims. That is, a few lines written in either genre can have a profound impact, either in the context of a software operating system or in the context of the human psyche—which, I would argue, are not as different as you might think.

* The use of the word conflation is deliberate, in that equating poetry to code in any literal sense is indeed a stretch if not an error. Yet within that perhaps erroneous pairing, there lies insight.

Figure One: Corollaries Between Operating Systems and the Human Psyche

Operating System

Pointers to memory
Execution parameters and limits
Common, shared library of code

Human Psyche

Triggers of memory
Past experience
Cultural context

Exploring this conflation further, we realize that a standard level of competency must be expressed by the artist or programmer in either discipline. If we equate as a baseline the requirement that words strung together be recognizable as language in poetry with the requirement for code that it execute without failures, common assumptions—such as that code is rigid and poetry fluid, or that code is logical and poetry creative—begin to fall away. When we further equate the prerequisite of a similarly acculturated and educated audience for poetry with the prerequisite of similarly compatible operating systems for software, a somewhat revolutionary idea emerges: that poetry executes within the consciousness of the reader in ways that are similar to how software executes within an operating system.

At least, this is so for great poetry. Harold Bloom claims that “Greatness in poetry depends upon splendor of figurative language and on cognitive power, or what Emerson termed ‘meter-making argument.’ Shakespeare is first among poets at representing thought, which pragmatically does not differ from *thinking in poetry*, a process not yet fully adumbrated.” [Italics in original.]^{iv}

Although the process of thinking in poetry is difficult to define, few would deny that poetry does indeed have its own unique context, different from prose and governed by a very different kind of cognition. Likewise, it is clear to any programmer that source code is governed by its own kind of thought, equally distinct from prose, and also that the rules of interpretation for execution of code are extremely well-defined—so precise, in fact, that a single misplaced character can cause the program to fail.

Here Subjectivity might rear its head and balk at the idea that poetry is governed by rules as exacting as those of a programming language, which ultimately acts upon nothing more than a complex mathematical machine. True, the human mind is not purely math-

emational in nature. However, at least in some ways, it exhibits a similar degree of predictability.

Stephen Booth begins his groundbreaking book on the highest purpose of literary criticism by analyzing common nursery rhymes.⁶ After close analysis of “Little Boy Blue,” he asserts:

What does the human mind ordinarily want most? It wants to understand what it does not understand. And what does the human mind customarily do to achieve this goal? It works away—sometimes for only a second or two, sometimes for years—until it understands. What does the mind have then? What it wanted? No. What it has is an understanding of what it now understands. What it wanted was to understand what it did not understand. I suggest that, by giving us the capacity casually, effortlessly, to accept ‘The sheep’s in the meadow’ as self-evidently distressing news, ‘Little Boy Blue’ does something comparable to the impossible: it gives us understanding of something that remains something we do not understand.

Booth continues throughout his book to give detailed examples of precisely how great poems provide us with this simultaneous sense of both understanding and not understanding what we just read. Though it can be achieved through numerous tactics (cataloged in handbooks of literary criticism under a variety of terms), ultimately all of these varieties of figurative language and poetic thought work in service of the experience of simultaneously understanding and not understanding.

Unlike interactive software, poetry does not take user input. It does not actually give the reader a choice, only the infinite illusion of choice crafted through allusion, implication, reference, rhyme, nonsensical meaning, seductive sounds and rhythms, and a multitude of other techniques that tell the mind there is one thing going on, but also simultaneously—in subtext—myriad others.

This varied subtext is one glimmer of the sparkling halo around poetry that leads many to believe it can’t possibly resemble a calculated procedural process. In the creative act of writing poetry, that may well be true—great writing is often inspired, not calculated.

But when we read poetry, under the assumptions we made above, the poem-program quite simply runs.

All the intangible sensibilities a poem communicates, with the help of centuries of collective cultural influences on the subtle and submerged meanings of words and their composition together as phrases, do provide the *illusion* of innumerable layers from which we could pick and choose to find new meaning. However, in the end, we do not follow any one meaning, but rather all of them at once, arriving always at the same final line of the poem.

Though we may shade and color the reading with new experience or new analysis, in the end the reason the poem attracts us never changes, alters or fades. At best, we simply unpack that primary impetus through rereading, contemplation, and study.

Likewise, the same elements of attraction work almost identically on those who are culturally similar to us. These elements must have worked the same effect on the author herself in the act of writing (for “No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader”).^{vi} Therefore, a great poem can express something even more profound than the so-called *message* of the poet; the poem can communicate an essentially human *experience*.

Conflating poetry and code challenges the assumption that poetry is a purely subjective domain, merely “a matter of taste.” The promise of communicating a meaningful experience in a reasonably predictable way, not unlike software running on a machine, is the promise of great poetry. Yet this communication is not the simple prosaic telling of the same thought over and over. It is instead an act of thinking in poetry, akin to sounding a tuning fork in the collective consciousness and watching as those similarly attuned begin to vibrate. The object of art evokes a response, and the response itself is the art.

The message of Poetry Code is that there do exist foundational common principles governing how great poetry, like great software, executes to magnificent effect. This does not imply a cookie-cutter formula for success in writing poetry, however. One need only look at how forms (and lack of forms) of poetry have evolved over the decades to conclude that in poetry, as in the Perl programming language, “There’s more than one way to do it.” (That is, in fact, the Perl motto.)^{vii}

Postmodernism has ushered in a recent emphasis on subjectivity, either encouraging readers to draw disparate conclusions from the same body of work or, conversely, encrypting a single

meaning in the work and presenting it to the reader like a puzzle. Unfortunately, both approaches necessarily limit the universality of the artistic experience.

Acknowledging the psychological and cultural contexts of poetry as more remarkably similar to a software operating system than it would appear at first glance leads us back to a more universal and accessible form of art. Thus the message for poetry found in light-speed calculations of ones and zeros is actually an inherently human one.

Endnotes

ⁱ ActiveState Programmer Network. Perl Haiku Contest.
<http://aspn.activestate.com/ASPN/Perl/Haiku/>

ⁱⁱ Urban Dictionary.
<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Code+Poet>

ⁱⁱⁱ Peake, Robert. "What Poems and Code Have in Common."
<http://www.robertpeake.com/plugin/tag/Code+Poet> Ibid. "More Thoughts on Poems and Code."

^{iv} Bloom, Harold. 2004. *The Art of Reading Poetry*. New York: HarperCollins.

^v Booth, Stephen. 1998. *Precious Nonsense: The Gettysburg Address, Ben Jonson's Epitaphs on his Children, and Twelfth Night*. Berkeley: University Of California Press.

^{vi} Frost, Robert. 1939. Introduction. *The Collected Poems of Robert Frost*. New York: Henry Holt.

^{vii} "Perl Overview." Perl version 5.8.8 documentation.
<http://perldoc.perl.org/perl.html>

Contributor Biographies

Charlie Anders (www.charlieanders.com) is the author of *Choir Boy*, which won a Lambda Literary Award and was a finalist for the Edmund White Award. She's also the co-editor of *She's Such A Geek: Women Write About Science, Technology And Other Nerdy Stuff*. She publishes *other magazine* (www.othermag.org) and organizes the award-winning Writers With Drinks reading series. Her writing has appeared in *McSweeney's*, *Pindeldyboz*, *Salon.com*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Paraspheres: New Wave Fabulist Fiction*, *Strange Horizons*, *ZYZZYVA* and *Space & Time*.

Joshua Babcock's story "Compromise" appeared in *Kenoma Magazine* and his "Tome of the Time-Siege" won second place in Gom Publishing's *The Best New Sci-Fi & Fantasy for 2004* contest. His story "Angst and the Armageddon" is upcoming in *Forgotten Worlds*. Babcock is a graduate of Vassar College and teaches at a school for students with dyslexia. He lives in upstate New York with his wife and six cats. He can be reached at babcats@optonline.net.

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Benjamin Buchholz is a US Army Officer just recently returned from Iraq. His fiction and poetry have appeared widely in the last year or two at places like *GoodFoot*, *Tarpaulin Sky*, *Identity Theory*, *MadHatters' Review*, *Ghoti*, *MiPOesias*, *Opium*, and *Planet Magazine*. His website, www.benjaminbuchholz.com, contains a few links and other oddities that you or your friends might find interesting.

David Bulley has published short fiction in *Night Train*, *McSweeney's*, *Words & Images*, *Porcupine*, *Opium*, and many other venues. His novel, *Weapon in Heaven*, is forthcoming from Cavern Press. He owns and operates Scrawl: The Writer's Asylum, an online writer's community. <http://www.STWA.net>, <http://www.DavidBulley.com>

Chris Butler is the author of the novel *AnyTime Now* (Wildside Press, 2001). His short fiction has been published by magazines such as *Interzone* and *Albedo One*. Chris's website is at www.chris-butler.co.uk.

Sarah Coyne moved to Boston in 1999 from a lush forested town in southern New Hampshire. Since migrating south she has earned a BFA in illustration, almost adjusted to city life, and sold her work as 2-D fine art as well as illustrations applied to everyday items such as pillows, T-shirts, stationery, and bags. Sarah's artistic pursuits and obvious small-town heart of gold have found her many good friends, both human and animal. While missing the greenery of her childhood, Sarah has been making her adopted home a little cuter with her bright, lively illustrations and paintings of animals and other light fare while also honing her acerbic wit and dark sense of humor with a few more sinister subjects. Favorite media include oils, watercolors and acrylics on unfinished wood, decorative calico prints and large-scale canvases. Her work can be viewed at www.eggagogo.com and can be found at a number of stores and galleries in New England and beyond. Sarah can be contacted through her website.

Neil Davies was born in 1979 in the middle of England. He works in a university somewhere, and this is his first piece of published fiction.

Larry Dickison's art and cartoons have appeared in hundreds of publications, including *Dark Fantasy*, *The Gate*, *Argonaut*, and *Thin Ice*. He lives in Toronto, Ontario.

William Doeski, Professor of English, Keene State College (New Hampshire), teaches creative writing, literary theory, and modern poetry. Born in Connecticut, he lived in Boston, Cambridge, and Arlington (MA) for many years, attended various colleges, and after a certain amount of angst received a Ph.D. from Boston University. After teaching at Goddard, Harvard, and Emerson colleges, he came to Keene State in 1982. He has published several collections of poetry, most recently *Sacra Via* (Tatlock Publications, 2005) and *Another Ice Age* (Cedar Hill, 2006), and three critical studies, *The Years of Our Friendship: Robert Lowell and Allen Tate* (University Press of Mississippi, 1990), *The Modern Voice in American Poetry* (University Press of Florida, 1995), and *Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors* (Ohio University Press, 1999), and a textbook entitled *How to Read and Interpret Poetry* (Prentice-Hall). His critical essays, poetry, and reviews have appeared in many academic and literary journals, including *The Massachusetts Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *The Alembic*, *The New England Quarterly*, *Harvard Review*, *Modern Philology*, *The Antioch Review*, and *Natural Bridge*.

Errid Farland lives in Southern California and writes at a cluttered table where a candle burns to create an aura of serenity. Sometimes she accidentally catches things on fire, which turns the aura into angry yellows and reds and sort of wrecks the whole serenity thing. Her stories have appeared in *UndergroundVoices*, *storySouth*, *Pindeldyboz*, and other places.

Russian artist **Fefa** is 23 years old and has been engaged in art all her life. Imagination and animals have always been important to her personally as well as creatively. Images surround her and overflow from within. For her, the technique or material she works with doesn't really matter—the main thing is to create.

Michelle Garren Flye lives on the coast of North Carolina. She walks on the beach whenever she can. She loves cats, kids and her husband. For more information, visit <http://www.geocities.com/mgflye>.

Janrae Frank is the author of the best-selling ebook series *Dark Brothers of the Light* and co-author with Phil Smith of the *Mother Damnation* series.

Jamie Dee Galey is not that tall but has a nice smile. You can reach him and check out his work at <http://iamjamie.com>.

Fran Giordano is an artist living in Schenectady, NY. She has made, shown, and sold work professionally for at least a dozen years. Her work has been sold to collectors all over the globe and shown in art galleries in the Northeast. She has worked over the years as a college photo instructor and art teacher. She's dealt with themes such as duality, theology, and happiness and its pursuit. She explores many different media, depending on the conceptual underpinning of the work. In the last few years she has considered the media of painting, photography, and digital imaging.

A.B. Goelman has published short stories in *On Spec*, the *L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future* anthology, and *Dragon, Knights, and Angels*. His next short story will be appearing in the Spring issue of *Fantasy Magazine*. He lives in the Pacific Northwest with his wife and the rain.

Beverly A. Jackson is a poet and fiction writer residing in North Carolina. Her work has appeared in print and online in many journals. She was Editor in Chief and Publisher of *Ink Pot*, and of *Lit Pot Press* until 2005. Visit her blog at www.beverlyajackson.com.

Born September 11th, 1981, failed astronaut and race car driver **Konrad Kruszewski** is a mostly self-taught multi-instrumentalist, dabbling if not specializing in illustration, storytelling, photography, music, and all aspects of CG and traditional animation. He has earned a diploma in Advanced Studies in Character Animation at AnimationMentor, where he was directly guided by the finest animators at Pixar, ILM, and Disney, among others. Konrad is currently keeping busy with animation and graphic design in Northern California with no kids, no dogs, and no immediate aspirations to obtain either.

John Mantooth writes short stories that fall between the cracks in the genre sidewalk. His most recent publications appear in the *Shadow Regions* anthology, *Electric Velocipede*, and *Shimmer*.

Originally from NYC, **Allen McGill** lives, writes, acts and directs theatre in Mexico. His published fiction, non-fiction, poetry, plays, photos, etc., have won awards and appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Writer*, *Newsday*, *Literary Potpourri*, *Poetry Midwest*, *QLRS*, *The Heron's Nest*, *Frogpond*, *Modern Haiku*, *World Haiku Review*, and many others. He is a former member of PEN. He was an invited guest at the First World Poetry Festival in Taiwan 2005 and haibun editor for *Simply Haiku* and two of his plays have been professionally produced in Sacramento and L.A. His first book of poetry, *SUNSEEKERS, a selection of haiku and haibun by Allen McGill*, is to be published this Fall by Golden Swamp Warbler Press. His website can be reached via <http://tinyurl.com/m7il>.

Debbie Moorhouse is a British writer who also takes photographs. She reads slush for *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* and is always writing a novel. Her website is at <http://www.alternatespecies.com>, where you can read stuff, look at photos, and generally hang out.

Kristine Ong Muslim has more than three hundred stories and poems published/forthcoming in genre and mainstream publications, which include *Adbusters*, *Aoife's Kiss*, *Dark Recesses*, *Dark Wisdom*, *Electric Velocipede*, *Grendelsong*, *Star*Line*, *Surreal Magazine*, and *The Pedestal Magazine*. Her publication credits are listed at <http://www.freewebs.com/blackroom8>.

Shweta Narayan writes research papers and fantasy, and attempts to keep the two distinct. She lives physically in southern California and virtually at shwetambari.deviantart.com, where she houses images that don't have a story yet. "The Doctrine of the Arbitrariness of the Sign" is her first non-academic publication.

Working alongside Kaolin Fire (then Stockinger), **Robert Peake** used to teach programming languages to other undergraduates at UC Berkeley before earning his degree in English literature, emphasis poetry. These days he serves as the Chief Technology Officer for The David Allen Company, where he reads, writes, and thinks about many things in many languages. Robert is also currently studying poetry in the MFA in Writing program at Pacific University in Oregon. He lives in Ojai, California with his wife Valerie and cat Miranda.

A native of Boston, Massachusetts, **Kenneth Ryan's** short fiction and poetry can be found in a number of literary journals, both online and at newsstands. He recently completed his first novel, *Hiders*, and is hard at work on his second. He shares a home, a life, and a website with Nadine Darling, a national treasure. Details at www.kennay.com.

F. John Sharp lives and works in the Cleveland area. His work has appeared in *Pindeldyboz*, *Paumanok Review*, *The Salt River Review*, *Lunarsity*, *Prose Ax*, and *Quantum Muse*, among others. He has edited the journals *Story Garden*, *Right Hand Pointing*, and *Night Train*. Visit his website at FJohnSharp.com.

Tomi Shaw lives in Kentucky amid the clutter of her work, three daughters, husband's toys, and a shedding orange mutt. She has a fuzzy home. Her work has appeared in over fifty publications, including *Identity Theory*, *The Barcelona Review*, *Pindeldyboz* and *storySouth*. www.tomishaw.com

Sarah Singleton is the author of award-winning gothic fantasy *Century* (2005) and *Heretic* (2006), both published by Simon & Schuster. Her first novel, *The Crow Maiden* (Wildside Press), was shortlisted for the Crawford Award. Sarah's website is at www.crowmaiden.plus.com.

By day, **Jason Stoddard** is just another frustrated engineer-turned-ad-guy who is busy twisting the minds of millions of consumers for his evil corporate masters. At night, he writes science fiction that has been seen in *Sci Fiction*, *Interzone*, *Strange Horizons*, *Talebones*, and *Futurismic*, among others. Unfortunately, none of the agents or editors have yet believed his line that if he had a book deal, there would be less advertising in this world.

Rohith Sundararaman lives in Bombay, India. He gets his inspiration from the cow that never roamed the streets of Bombay. He has been published elsewhere and receives half a death threat every month for the same.

Lavie Tidhar grew up on a kibbutz in Israel, lived in Israel and South Africa, travelled widely in Africa and Asia, and has lived in London for a number of years. He is the winner of the 2003 Clarke-Bradbury Prize (awarded by the European Space Agency), was the editor of *Michael Marshall Smith: The Annotated Bibliography* (PS Publishing, 2004) and the anthology *A Dick & Jane Primer for Adults* (The British Fantasy Society, 2006), and is the author of the novella *An Occupation of Angels* (Pendragon Press, 2005). His stories appear in *Sci Fiction*, *ChiZine*, *Postscripts*, *Nemonymous*, *Infinity Plus*, *Æon*, *Book of Dark Wisdom*, *Fortean Bureau*, and many others, and in translation in seven languages.

John Walters is an American writer, a Clarion graduate, currently living in Greece with his Greek wife and five sons. To pay the bills he teaches English as a second language. He has had stories published in *Talebones*, *Altair*, *Full Unit Hookup*, and other magazines.

Athena Workman is a married mother of two terrific girls living in Tennessee. Her stories have appeared in over twenty-two publications, including *Corpse Blossoms*, *Apex Digest*, *Nocturnal Ooze*, *The Dark Krypt*, *Neverary*, and *AlienSkin Magazine*. She's also been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the Southeastern Science Fiction Achievement Award. Recently, she began dabbling in photography and plunged back into her childhood love of drawing. She runs the site Miss Millificent's World (<http://www.missmillificent.com>), a showcase of her various forms of artwork, and the online shop Kaleidoscope Farm.



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