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G U O

greatest uncommon denominator



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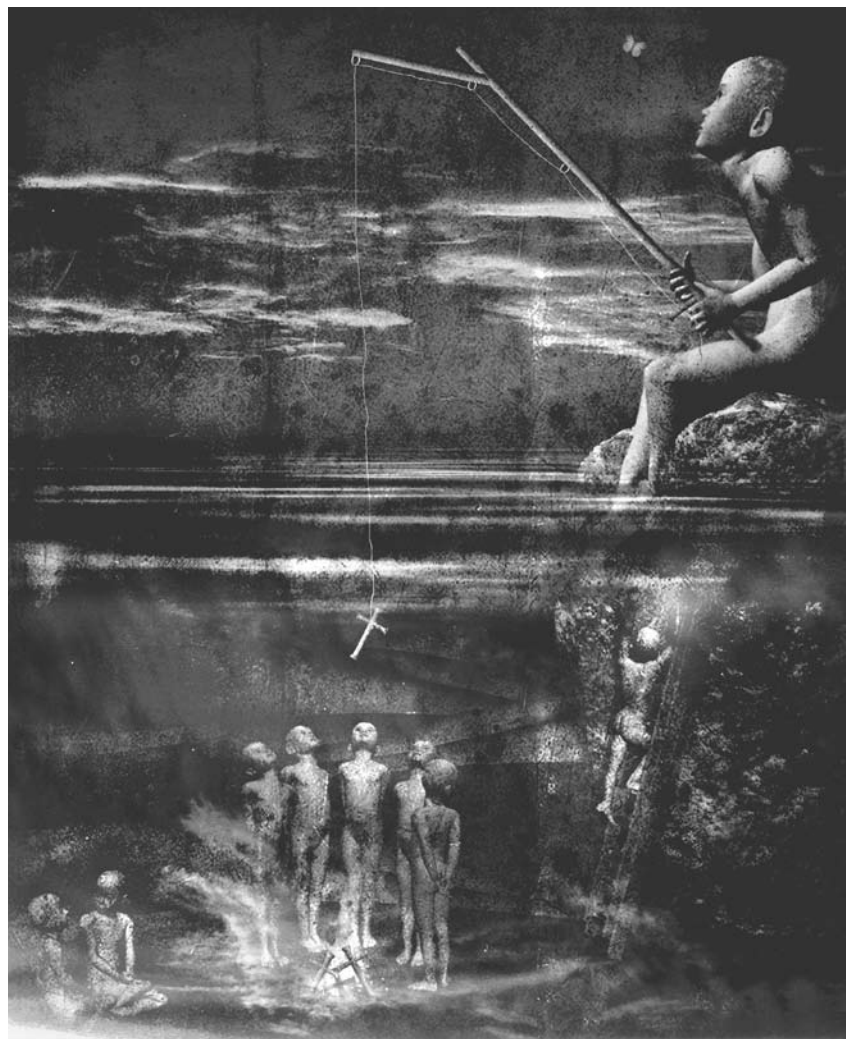
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Fools & Intellectuals

Cameron Gray

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Day of the Dead

Jamie Dee Galey

El Alebrije

D. Richard Pearce

The sun's rays have not crossed the ridge, nor has the first turista awoken in the bright orange hotel, as I flit among the children making their way to school. They laugh and try to catch me, but I don't let them touch me. I keep my sting and my teeth well out of their reach, for the children cannot see them. They see only what they wish to see in me, which is a gift from the one who first dreamt me.

The young painter sees us playing and says, "Be careful, mariposa, lest they catch you."

But I am no butterfly, as I prove when I spy the village bully, Jorge, coming along the road. Yesterday he stole Juan's lunch, and Juan is too afraid to tell. I buzz into Jorge's face and spit, my phlegm warm and gummy, and all of the other children laugh and cheer as Jorge curses and chases me down the street.

Many miles away in San José, my mother is still asleep, so I can go with the painter to his shop and watch as he hangs the painting he finished last night. It is a large painting, on canvas, not amate. He does not follow the tradition. He did not make the paper, nor did he grind or mix the paints himself. The canvas and paints came from a rich land far away, and the paintings themselves are utterly unlike those he saw as a child, but they are from his heart, and his memories and his hopes.

They are beautiful, and delicious. I sample the one showing a young man sitting in a window, waiting. In another, a faceless figure atop a stack of books on a blue background, watches me feast, seeming to disapprove of my taste. I wink at it.

In San José, my mother is yawning and stretching. I fly to the window, after a quick glance over the artist's shoulder. He is sketching a butterfly—yet it is not quite a butterfly. I am pleased.

- - -

Natalie awoke roughly, groggy and hungover, knocking over a nearly-empty bottle of her sleep tonic by the bedside as she stretched. She cursed softly and set the bottle upright, trying to remember how it felt to go to sleep sober. She never drank during the day, but found herself unable to get to sleep without several. Her thoughts edged into dangerous and lonely territory when the sun went down.

The school bell rang in the distance and she could hear the vendors downstairs opening the rattling gates that protected their store windows. She smelled chorizo cooking with eggs, and ran for the bathroom. She ventured forth a few minutes later, refreshed and more or less composed, and answered the worried purr of the small, colorful creature that hovered outside the bathroom door.

"It's okay, little one, Mamá is all better."

She made herself coffee and opened windows—familiar morning rituals that had for many years taken the place of kissing a nearly-forgotten boy awake. She greeted the sun as it broke into the window, and watered the geraniums that clung perilously to the windowsills.

At last she made her way downstairs and began the business of her business, dusting shelves, polishing and greeting the catrinas—small skeletal statues clad in the high fashions of days gone by—and other cousins of the creature hovering behind her, statuettes and sculptures in many colors, shapes, and sizes. She checked her stock of herbs and other supplies, making a list for ordering: chamomile and black tea.

While she did this, the little creature flitted around the shelves behind her, kissing the catrinas impishly as they fluttered their fans, a rosy tint flushing their bony cheeks. He stuck his nose in the near-empty jar of chamomile and sneezed. He curled around the heels of his mother as she finally opened the gate of her store. She turned and nearly tripped, an exasperated "Bastante, little one!" escaping her lips.

He grinned and leapt for the wall, fluorescent bat-wings whirling. He settled comfortably, with his bright blue tail curved around his emerald body. He yawned once, and slept.

Natalie fired up the cappuccino machine as the first farmer-tanned tourists entered her café. "Hola," she greeted the elderly couple.

She reserved the traditional "Buenos días" for the people of San José, in her mind her people—if not by birth, then by love. She made cappuccinos, and while the tourists waited, they wandered around her shop. She enjoyed their shocked expressions and their murmurings as they peered at the catrinas, wondering at the elaborately- and beautifully-clad skeleton ladies.

She particularly enjoyed taking their twenty U.S. dollars and giving them a hundred and fifty pesos in change, silently daring them to question the exchange rate. Mr. Socks-and-Sandals looked like

he was about to say something when his wife said, "It's the same as fifteen, George; just knock off a zero."

Natalie was from Nebraska, but enough of her Sioux ancestry filtered down into her features to guarantee she was always considered a local by the tourists. They never greeted her in English, unless with a tremulous "Hi" that carried with it the unspoken question, "Just how much English can you understand?"

She had been in San José for a number of years, so many in fact that she sometimes almost forgot what had come before. Many seasons had come and gone since she had arrived in Mexico with a man, a boy then, who was following the surf. They had met on the big gray dog, America's version of the dream catcher—a wagon full of migrant souls heading toward a dream, or at least away from a nightmare. He was looking for surf, and had been on the bus for two days by the time she got on it. His dream had become hers for lack of any better vision. They had lived in Venice, then La Jolla, then followed the surf south, and she had left him in Todos Santos when she had grown up and he had not.

In San José she had found a home, of sorts. Her people's medicine, all but beaten out of her in her childhood, had found new life when joined with the medicine of the people of the then-quiet Mexican town. She kept herbs and spirits and brewed teas of calm and health. She created a new kind of medicine, blended from bits of her people's medicine gradually remembered and from the medicine of her new people. She discovered finally that she had a special type of vision, and that artifacts made with love and passion awoke to it. The alebrije sleeping now on the wall had been the first to come alive under her sight, and he had acted as her life preserver, a solid anchor as she'd drifted between cultures.

When the golfers had come to San José and the cruise ships had come to San Lucas, the people had welcomed the change and the dollars, and expanded their shops and their trade.

How could she not follow suit? Cappuccinos had joined teas, and trinkets and maps had appeared on the shelves beside her blushing catrinas.

To the people in San José, she was an old-timer—welcome among them and a member of the community—but not of them, even after these many years. It hurt when she thought of this—usually more than once or twice a day.

She took a large, steaming cup with her and set it on the table outside her shop as she swept the sidewalk clean of fallen flowers and

cigarette butts. She waved to the children, leaving school now for a quick session of religion in the church, down the street and across the square. A small group of boys approached her, laughing and daring each other to get closer. She glanced up at them and smiled.

"Buenos días, muchachos," she said.

One of the smaller boys, braver than his fellows, smiled back. "Buenos días, bruja."

This tickled the boys and, in unison, they squealed, "Bruja!"

Natalie brandished her broom, cackled evilly, and chased them as they ran laughing to the church.

- - -

The rest of the town is in siesta when I awaken. My mother has just closed the door, and smiles as I leave the wall and come to curl around her shoulders, purring and licking her earlobe.

"Bruja indeed," she says, smiling at some memory from the morning that I cannot see. We are going into the back room, where she spends the siesta reading—she does not sleep easily without drink—when there is a small knock, timid, at the shop door.

Mother opens it to a young woman, who is crying, as they are wont to do. She is the third this season.

Mother asks her in Spanish, "Is your love pure?"

Trembling, the girl nods, and Mother brings her inside. The girl is in love, and wishes a charm, of which my mother's are the best. No one questions why a woman without love herself is so able to sell it.

Mother says, "Now, hija, I will not sell you a potion, because they are messy and you may bewitch the wrong person, verdad? I will teach you a spell, and you must keep it secret, for I am teaching you ahead of your time. Every woman knows this spell—even your mother could teach you, but she would not have you know it yet. You need not fear it, or me. It is not evil."

The girl nods, smiling now through her tears. Mother summons me, and I slink around her ankles. Mother says, "Now, hija, what do you see here?"

"Un gato," says the girl, and Mother cocks an eyebrow, surprised at her sight. People see different things when they look at me, and many see nothing at all, but this girl's vision is practical, placing me in the realm of the mundane. Yet the girl is obviously a romantic.

Mother shrugs and says, "Even so. This spell will take three days to effect. Each morning you must pet a cat." She pauses, gathering

her thoughts, while the girl scratches my snout. "Then," continues my mother, "you must bless the Virgin, and ask her favor."

The girl nods now, enthusiastic. Nothing evil would the Virgin approve.

"Then you can cast the spell; it is quite simple. The first day you must just glance at your lover. Look at him as if he were a fish at the market whose freshness you were unsure of. Let this be the expression on your face until he looks back. Then look away, and do not look at him again that day. On the second day, look at him again, this time as if he were the ugliest man in the village—imagine that he is muy feo, and wishes to bed you. Again, once he sees your face, look away."

The girl murmurs softly, a question in her eyes. I nip her heel, carefully—no poison—and she is quiet.

"On the third day, look at him again, and smile as if you hear a song that you love—think of a short verse that makes you happy and imagine it. This time, when he looks, you must walk away. If he calls you, ignore him, at least twice. After this, he is yours."

The girl smiles widely now, thanking my mother profusely, and she hugs me as I crawl into her lap.

"You do not need to thank me, hija. It is a service. With what will you pay me?"

Sobered, the girl opens her bag and unwraps a catrina, a beautiful sister to join our household. Mother gasps; this catrina is pristine, dressed in a fine wedding gown, and her skeletal fingers clasp a bouquet of roses. A soft veil masks her smile, and she is barefoot, her bony toes poking out from beneath her gown. She is like, yet unlike, the others of our household. She is tiny, no bigger than my forepaw, yet every detail is in her, down to the bony fingertips; she is perfect.

"Where did you get her?" My mother is displeased, and I wonder why. Could she not love this catrina? Perhaps even more than the rest?

The girl is again frightened, and she says, "Mi tío. My uncle made him for me, for my wedding—for someday."

"So she is not yours yet, then."

"Oh yes, bruja, she is mine. My uncle gave her to me."

Mother nods at the girl and says, "I think you must want this boy very badly, hija. I hope not too badly."

She sends her on her way then, reminding her to keep the spell secret from everyone. "Even, and most especially, your mamá."

- - -

Natalie closed the shop early that afternoon, locking up while the sun still shone on the streets, but she didn't go upstairs to begin dinner. She held the little catrina in her hands, singing softly to her.

Finally she made a decision. She took a cappuccino in a paper cup and the little bride catrina with her and left the shop, making her way to the end of the street. She paused, looking out at the square until her dawdling fluorescent creature caught up with her. She opened the door to the last shop and went in; the creature amused himself by hovering in the electric eye of the door chime.

On the seventh chime, both Natalie and the shop's owner said, "Cállate!" and it fled from two angry stares, hiding among its cousins on the walls, other brightly-painted and wildly-varied creatures of imagination.

The shop was a bazaar of artistry, filled to overflowing with amate paintings and line drawings, handmade cloth, tapestries, and sculptures of stone, clay, and papier-mâché, collected by its proprietor from artists all over Mexico. Turtles, lizards, monkeys, and chickens of every conceivable color and fashion festooned the shelves. Catrina damas and caballeros danced in the old fashion, and hanging marionettes cheered them on with silent olés while dragonflies and scorpions with human faces laughed and drank.

White-haired tourists browsed the aisles, oblivious to the fiesta surrounding them, as the shopkeeper greeted Natalie. "Buenos noches, Madam. Muchas gracias," he added as she handed him the cappuccino.

"Buenos noches, and de nada."

"So what brings the esteemed bruja to my humble store this evening?"

The shopkeeper wore age like a costume, his sun-wizened face belying the youthful twinkle in his eyes. Like Natalie, he wasn't from San José or even Mexico, though he was of Mexican descent. He had fled Texas after growing sick of chasing the American dream, and had come to San José and pursued the art of his fathers and mothers. He had found his dream here instead, and after some time, his family had followed him home. His name was Armando.

Natalie handed him the catrina. "Is she yours?"

In his hand, the bride curtsied and blushed behind her veil. Armando smiled, winking at the little bride. "No indeed, Natalia; I gave her to my niece."

"Who sold her to me for the kiss of a boy, who will likely knock her up and steal any dreams she may have grown. This is one of your best pieces, Armando, perhaps the best of anyone's I have ever seen. I am not unhappy to have her, señor, but I would prefer not to feel I have taken advantage of someone who knows little about value."

"And who is that, my dear? My niece? Me?"

"Yes." Natalie frowned and reached into her bag.

"No, no, my dear. Do not insult me; all was fairly traded or freely given. Do not try to pay me anything." He paused and grinned. "I have no wish to be indebted to a bruja."

"It is not funny, Armando. You gave this masterwork to a girl too young to appreciate its true value, and she frittered it away. Luckily, to me."

"Value, Natalia? It is but a bit of clay, idly played with. I can always make another. Besides, it has obviously ended up in the right place, in the hands of one who truly appreciates its...value, and can bring out its truest beauty and life."

So saying, he placed the catrina back into Natalie's hand, where the little bride clung tightly to her thumb.

"God damn it, Armando," said the woman, but she couldn't bring herself to say more.

The old man reached up a withered hand to Natalie's face. He touched her cheek and she looked away, watching as the last of the tourists left the shop. He murmured, "Gently, Natalia. You think we sell ourselves too cheaply? You are afraid and guilty, because you have lost your culture and cling tightly to ours. And it angers you to see it...squandered. When our old countrymen come in and buy us out? Think, Natalia. If I can still sell these trinkets of mine and others', surely those who will pay such outlandish prices will want to know some of the stories behind them, no? If only to show off when they return home. And if you and I can come and learn and love, surely others can as well."

She sighed and tucked the catrina into her pocket.

"Now go," said Armando, "and take that nuisance with you. Honestly, Natalia, of all the things that have awoken to your vision, I wish you had let that little bastard keep sleeping in Pedro's." Feeling himself being spoken of, the colorful creature left the shelf where he had been hiding. He nipped Armando's ear, dodging a swing and a curse, and bolted for the door.

She left the shop then, not believing in the hope of the old artist, but reassured that she could keep the catrina without feeling any guilt. He was right in one thing, though: she did appreciate, to the point of envy, the culture of this people. His people.

Natalie wandered along the street, away from the centro and up the hill into the city, wondering if she could ever find a place where she truly belonged. Finally she decided to eat, and found herself across from a restaurant she had not visited in many years, but whose food she suddenly craved.

"What the hell," she said out loud. "I could really do with a quarter pounder."

- - -

I follow my mother out into the city; I am happy to be wandering. We don't go out very often, and rarely this far. We pass the school on the way, so I dip into an open window and taste of the children's work. Bright crayon drawings of haciendas, of the beach, of the new grand hotels of the town; all are satisfying and very tasty.

I race to catch up with her, and the children wave, and some older people too. To some, I am a butterfly, like I was to the children this morning; to others, a dragonfly. Some see an angel, some see but a stray balloon. I pause for one last taste of a chalk drawing on the sidewalk—a clown, not unlike the clown Mother now stands across from in the building of yellow and orange.

I slip into the door as it is opened by a tourist, and curl on my mother's shoulders. She is standing in line, but I see the restaurant's clown. I whirl and circle him. He is not very tasty, but has something like a lingering flavor from years too far gone. Mother shushes me.

The man in front of us is a tourist. He is big and fat and has a sunburned neck. He gives the girl at the counter some money, and she gives him some back with his pile of food. He eats as much as I do, I think, before I see his children waving to him.

"What is this?" he says.

"It is your change, sir," says the girl, though he cannot understand her.

"Damn it, I gave you U.S. dollars, and you give me this crap back? What the hell can I do with this?" The man's face now matches his neck, or maybe it was red already.

A surfer boy in the next line laughs. "Dude, you're in Mexico, she's gonna give you Mexican money. It's a different country."

"Fuck you, shithead," says the man, then he turns back to the girl. "I gave you one hundred U.S. dollars, and I expect the change to be American."

The girl is near tears, but she turns to some of her fellows to see what change she can scrounge. My mother's shoulder is suddenly hot, and burns my feet. "No," she says, and the man turns to see who is talking.

No one in this place can understand Mother now; she is speaking in a tongue she has always thought she has forgotten. The turistas stand with jaws open wide and the other people cross themselves as she speaks, thinking the bruja is cursing him. And she is.

"You sweat-stained son of a bitch," she says, "you and your kind make us embarrassed to show our faces beyond our borders. Like it or not, I suppose I am one of you. Well, you at least will never again park your ass on a beach and swill tequila while cursing your waiter for not speaking your language."

Her fire catches at me and I hiss.

"Alebrije." She calls me by name and I am full of her power. "Take me."

I laugh as she lands on my back, and we fly into the man's face, into his eye, into his mind's eye. She rides me into the depths of his thoughts, across a gnarled landscape where his fears are real, and we see him running across the sand away from banditos who have already taken his family. He flees, heedless of their cries, and we hunt him down like an animal, piercing his back with arrows and bullets, and we circle him, slicing him slowly with machetes and leaving him tied to an anthill where he screams for an eternity.

I can taste the man's terror, and it is sweet, a perfect complement to the innocence I feasted on earlier.

Mother calls me back as I finish lapping up the man's screams, which are subsiding into whimpers. She is weak and pale, and I carry her away, out of his mind and back into the world. She stumbles out of the restaurant and over to a bench across the street, where I watch as she recovers.

Men in white surround the turista, and one puts a mask on him while the others lift him into a big white van. As Mother becomes more aware, she shushes my concern and watches them.

- - -

The police were interviewing the wife, who was screaming that some Mexican woman, a tall one, had knocked her husband to the ground.

Surfer-boy's voice rose above the general murmur of the crowd. "No, dude, I'm telling you, he just collapsed. Yeah, man, that woman yelled at him but she never touched him or anything—he just had, like, a stroke or a heart attack or something."

It seemed that none of the citizens of San José had witnessed anything. The girl at the counter had already left, and no one thought of looking for her.

After a time, the crowd dispersed, and Natalie went home.

Early the next morning, she was at Armando's door with a large box in her arms. He unlocked the door, tsking as she entered.

"Natalia, my dear one, I will not take them back."

"Then do what you will with them. Throw them away," she said, looking sadly at the box full of catrinas huddling together in fear. "I have frightened them, and they no longer wish to live with a bruja."

"You frighten them because they fear for you. Natalia, the man will live. He will even recover from his...seizure. You scared him; that is all the alebrije could ever do."

"All he could do. Not all I could do. I raped that man, Armando."

He shrugged. "I don't mean to belittle your skills, bruja, but I don't think that is entirely accurate. You exposed him to himself, and he should be thankful he didn't have to spend thousands of dollars on therapy to get the same effect."

"Not so funny."

The old artist took the box from her, put it down gently, and laid his hands on her shoulders, looking into her face. She had trouble meeting his gaze, but once she did, looking away was impossible.

"Mi hija, this isn't about that man. Are you running away again?"

Natalie recoiled as if he had slapped her, but his grip remained firm.

"You come from two cultures, an old one you don't remember so well, and a young one, immature. The old one has changed much and much has been lost to you. This is a sad thing. So." He paused, and, unsure of what he wanted, she nodded. He continued, "You came here, and rightly so; it is a good place. But listen, you did not bring the others, the golfers and the ships, the Costco, okay?"

"But..."

"Cállate. They have come, and it is good; we have more money around here, more stuff for the people—"

"More Big Macs and skateboards."

He frowned, but nodded. "Even so. And televisions, and pod-things for the ears. But is this your fault? Is this a fault? Does it make us less real to have the things they have?"

She was silent, and he continued, "All right, then. More stuff for us and more of them exposed to our art, which you love so much. Perhaps they do not all get it, but it is never so that every person appreciates or gets even their own culture.

"You want to protect the culture you have chosen; this is good and right. Everyone should be proud and fiercely protect their heritage, and whether it is by birth or by choice is of no import. But one bruja cannot change the way the world turns, and it is selfish of you to think you should, and childish of you to think you can."

He released her gaze and she nodded once, abruptly. The old man said, "I will keep the ladies for you for a time, and when you want them back, they will be here."

She wandered around his shop while he puttered in the back storing the box well out of the range of buying eyes. Her hands lingered longingly over many of the pieces.

The alebrije poked his head out from under a pile of blankets and hooted and jumped out of the way when the door chime rang. "Buenos días," said the man in the door. "Do you work here?"

She looked him over. He was a tall man, lanky, perhaps her age, perhaps older. He had the dust of travel on him, and wore a Corona tank top, shorts, and sandals. He reminded her of someone she had known once—a boy who hadn't grown up.

"I don't work here, but I might be able to help you," she said.

He smiled, and she liked the way it looked on him. "I was wondering some things about Day of the Dead. There's a festival coming up, and I'd like to know what's going on before I crash it."

Perhaps Armando has a point, she thought. She took the man's arm and began showing him around the shop.

- - -

Mother has let me go. She said I have outgrown her, but in fact I think she has outgrown me. She left San José with the man that startled me at the door. I like him, though. He travels a lot, and wants to see many things, and Mother shares that wish.

He scratched my chin.

I flew out above San José and I kept flying, having fed well on dreams and nightmares. I went up high enough to see all of Mexico

at once, then all the Earth, and I am still going up. But if I look very hard, I can still see Mother, in a van with him, as they drive down some dusty highway.

She is reading the newspaper, and there is a picture of me. I look very close and see a range of stars in the picture that twinkle from my head to my belly. She reads the caption to the man and I listen very closely, shutting out all of the other sounds.

“Listen, Viejo. ‘Scientists today named this newly-discovered constellation Alebrije, after a creature of imagination created and made famous by Mexican artist Pedro Linares. The constellation is only visible through Hubble, but many photographs have already been taken of the colorful cluster and are making a huge impact in the Mexican artistic community.’”

She smiles up at me. “Not bad, little one.”

Subtlety

Lucy R. Snyder

Subtlety came to us from Latin
(by way of the clever French)
in that thin, gossamer term
subtilis, which in turn
is a web of under-stitched
subtext. What joe really gives

a flying doublefudge fuck
about lacy coy underwords?
Twixt the stark, sooty verbs
it's card tricks in a tar-dark hall,
earnest *Kama Sutra* recitations
to a rubber smutstore doll.

A horse is a horse unless she's a Mississippi queen,
an allegory crawling from a swamp of contempt.
I metaphor lunch, but the queen wouldn't listen,
baffled by menus plain as her face. Moot. Mute.
Mote. Moat. The meanings collapse, drown
in that lazy river. Undercurrents churn mud.

Four Torments and a Judgment

Erik Williams

The demon Yarsloth sat in the back of the church, invisible to the flock of worshippers around him and bored out of his mind. A Mid-Level Demon, Yarsloth held a title demanding important work. The last century alone he had spent implementing a family curse over five generations. But Dispatch had needed to fill a hole, so here he sat, yanked from his curse work and assigned a menial task barely fit for a lower-caste imp.

The congregation around the demon broke into song. Yarsloth lowered his head and tried to block out the unsatanly noise as he flipped through the file on his assignment. As he read, his motivation dwindled.

Adramelech had assigned Yarsloth to perform four torments followed by a judgment. Only one torment was allowed per week, however, and it had to occur on Sunday during worship. Which meant Yarsloth faced a month of Sundays sitting in this blessed church.

Clown work, he thought.

Sure, he would get to create mayhem, but it paled in comparison to a century of destroying a family generation by generation. And he would have to sit through four weeks of evangelical revivalism. No demon should ever have to endure that.

Yarsloth shook his head. He hated this type of job. Why not judge the target and get it over with? No, Hell had to drag it out and give the sinner a chance to truly repent. Only if he failed to do so could judgment be passed and Hell gain the damned soul. But for things to reach that point, Yarsloth had to perform the overly-dramatic torments first.

The demon read the case file further and sighed. In addition to it being clown work, he had a boring target on his hands. The file said reverend John Simms didn't practice what he preached, instead worshipping at the altars of kiddy porn and child molestation. No necrophilia. No cannibalism. Nothing Simms had done warranted

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the attention of a Mid-Level Demon.

Might as well be guilty of tax evasion, Yarsloth thought.

Reverend Simms finished his sermon. Yarsloth had to admit to himself that what he had heard had actually sounded pretty good.

Full of hellfire and brimstone. Always good topics.

Simms now walked amongst the congregation, asking for individual testimony. Yarsloth took this as his cue. Showtime.

He focused on one of the flock, choosing an overweight woman with a large hat near the front.

As Simms approached her, he said, "Sister, do you put your faith in Jesus today?"

The woman nodded. "Yes! Praise Jesus!"

"Do you believe Christ's blood was shed to redeem us?"

Yarsloth reached into her with his mind.

She started to say yes, but Yarsloth filled her mouth with blood. As she spoke, she sprayed the red fluid all over Simms.

"God in Heaven!" he yelled.

The reverend wiped the blood off his face as he took a shocked step backward. The surrounding flock hissed in surprise. Others in the back stood to get a glimpse of the sudden commotion.

Yarsloth lifted the woman to her feet. He jerked her forward, advancing her at Simms. She marched with a goosestep like an SS storm trooper.

"Sister, you must pray with—"

Yarsloth shot more blood from her mouth. It spurted out like water from a hose.

The flock screamed. Some stood mesmerized, staring at the possessed woman. Others rushed for the doors, knocking a number of the gawkers to the ground.

Simms stood firm. He stepped forward and embraced the woman. He placed a calm hand on her brow.

Warmth singed Yarsloth's forehead.

He vomited more blood and exited the body. He could check off the first torment as complete.

The woman's body went limp. Yarsloth watched Simms lower her carefully to the floor.

"Sister," he said to her. "Pray with me."

"What happened?" She started crying when she saw the blood.

"You've been touched by a demon. Now pray with me."

Yarsloth watched this and scratched his head. When Simms had placed his hand on the woman's forehead, Yarsloth had not felt the icy touch of evil through her. Instead, warmth and strength had emanated from the man.

- - -

A week later, reverend Simms preached even more hellfire and brimstone. The righteousness in Simms's voice displeased Yarsloth greatly.

After having a woman possessed by a demon vomit blood all over him in front of his congregation, Simms should be displaying at least an ounce of nervousness. He should be wrestling with his guilt and finding himself unable to continue this hypocrisy. He should be wondering if the demon had appeared to torment him for his evil deeds. Instead, Simms looked confident, as if the first torment had had no effect on him.

Yarsloth swore to make the second torment tougher. It was still clown work, but he could do better.

"A demon visited us last week," Simms said to the flock. Many nodded their heads in agreement. "But we drove that demon away through our faith in Jesus!"

Yarsloth shook his head. The resolution in Simms's voice pissed him off.

"That demon is still here..."

Can he see me? Yarsloth thought. Then he shook his head again. No human could see him unless he chose to reveal himself.

"...in all of our hearts," Simms continued. "It is a representation of our sins, of our guilt, and of our shame. But through faith, we can drive it away like a bird on the wind."

Yarsloth seized on Simms's words and unleashed the second torment. The doors to the church burst open and in flew hundreds of pigeons.

The congregation screamed while Simms begged for calm.

Yarsloth let loose the pigeons' bowels, dumping the contents on the heads of the panicking crowd.

Simms prayed loudly as the congregation rushed from the church. The pigeons followed, dropping their loads as the crowd ran to their cars.

Yarsloth laughed. Bird shit covered the inside of the church. Bird shit covered Simms.

The exodus of the congregation delighted Yarsloth until he saw the reverend standing firm with his Bible cradled to his body, praying mightily. Simms's congregation would fear returning next Sunday, the demon knew. Maybe without his flock, Simms would see God was punishing him, not helping him.

- - -

Yarsloth prepared to unleash a horrible third torment. No more clown work.

The church had been cleaned, but the congregation had not returned. Maybe ten parishioners sat there the next Sunday, listening to Simms trying to explain the events of recent weeks. Yarsloth resolved to make sure the third trial would chase off the last few believers and cripple Simms's faith.

Simms didn't even have a chance to start the sermon before Yarsloth unleashed his torment.

Thunder boomed through the church.

Simms stood silent. His tiny audience looked up at the ceiling in wonder.

Red rain began to fall inside the church. The ten people screamed when they saw blood coming down on them. The miniscule crowd panicked and fled as it had when the pigeons invaded.

Again Yarsloth laughed. And again Simms stood and prayed.

Burning hate surged through Yarsloth. A possessed woman vomiting blood. A plague of shitting pigeons. And now blood raining from the ceiling. Yet Simms stood firm in his faith.

Yarsloth had cracked holier men than this, but Simms still prayed. And this was a child-molester? He should be begging God not to punish him further. Yet he was looking to God for help. He didn't even ask forgiveness.

- - -

"I want this guy verified," Yarsloth said.

Hell's Dispatcher, the Great Demon Adramelech, looked up from his desk and gritted his teeth. "It's the right guy. I haven't gotten one wrong in two thousand years."

"Well, check anyway. I think it's the wrong guy."

Adramelech smirked. "You're having problems breaking him so you're trying to blame me."

"Look, I'm down to my last torment and this guy isn't showing any signs of fear or repentance. He's full of the Spirit, man. This guy is holy. I'm telling you something isn't right here."

Adramelech shook his head. He pulled up his record on Simms and read, "Simms, Jon. Forty-five. Baptist minister. Tallahassee, Florida. Is that what you've got, Yarsloth?"

Yarsloth nodded his head reluctantly. "Maybe—"

"Maybe you've been working curses too long," Adramelech said. "You don't have a century to play with here, Demon. Maybe we need to knock you down a caste to refresh your skills."

"Fuck you, desk jockey."

Adramelech raised his huge frame from his seat and towered over Yarsloth. Flames shot from his eyes and smoke from his mouth. "DO NOT INSULT THE GREAT DEMON ADRAMELECH!"

Yarsloth had no choice but to cower. Although Adramelech was old, he was still powerful. The Great Demon's anger gnawed at his insides.

"Yes, Great Demon."

Adramelech calmed down and returned to his seat. "You've got a torment and a judgment left. Handle it and you can go back to your precious curses."

- - -

Simms stood alone in his church. No one had come to hear his sermon this week. But he gave it nonetheless.

Yarsloth walked down the middle aisle. Time for the last torment.

Simms watched, transfixed, as his Bible floated in front of him. His eyes widened and his jaw slackened. Yarsloth tore the pages from the binding, letting them fall to the floor. Then, in a frenzy, he shredded the entire book to pieces before the minister's eyes.

"What are you?"

Yarsloth's booming laugh filled the church.

"God, why have you forsaken me to this evil spirit?"

The final torment had worked. Finally, Simms was confused and weakened. Yarsloth had won. Now he could execute the judgment and end this torturous assignment.

Thin air formed into black vapor as Yarsloth revealed himself in the form of a dark, shapeless cloud. Inside the cloud, flies and locusts swarmed.

Simms looked upon the demon. "God in Heaven."

Yarsloth screamed with triumph. Simms hadn't repented upon the revelation. Now he could be judged and his soul dragged to Hell.

"You have been judged," Yarsloth said. "You have been damned for your sins!"

He flew at Simms, engulfing him and lifting him into the air. The flies and locusts bit at the reverend's flesh.

"You will understand the truth, reverend, and not know mercy!"

"Demon!" Simms yelled. "You know not the power of the Lord!"

Simms spread his arms wide and tried to embrace the cloud surrounding him.

Yarsloth could feel intense heat radiating from Simms. The reverend's arms sliced through his shapeless mass like swords, leaving a trail of pain in their wake.

"In the name of God I command thee to release his Shepherd!"

Yarsloth had no choice. Despite his straining efforts, he found himself lowering Simms to the ground. The heat from the reverend burned and the demon's body felt like it was on fire.

Yarsloth released Simms, but the burning continued. He backed away from him, trying to understand. He looked at Simms and saw power swimming in his eyes.

The minister approached Yarsloth. "BACK, DEMON!"

The demon cloud moved away with each advancing step. Fire danced on Yarsloth's damned soul.

"I CAST THEE OUT OF THIS HOLY PLACE!"

The demon cloud contorted and shivered. Against his will, Yarsloth drifted to the ground and sank into the shadows.

- - -

Yarsloth stood before Adramelech in his true form, his body burnt to a crisp, smoke rising off his once-scaly skin. His legs charred. His face looking like it had been melted and then frozen.

"What the hell?" Adramelech said.

"You got the wrong guy." Yarsloth coughed on the smoke rising from his shoulders.

Adramelech shook his head, staring at the damage. "Impossible."

"This guy is no child-molester. He wasn't afraid. He's in good with the Almighty. And he knows how to use the Spirit. You got the wrong guy."

"It couldn't have been that bad."

"Have you ever been touched by the power of the Throne?"

Adramelech sat silent.

"Didn't think so."

Adramelech took Yarsloth's file and went about comparing it to his record. As he did, he kept lifting his eyes to gaze upon the destruction written on Yarsloth's body.

After a minute, Adramelech said, "Well, what do you know?"

Yarsloth moved closer to the desk. "What?"

"Your file says 'Simms, John' with John spelled J-O-H-N," Adramelech said. "My record says 'Simms, Jon' with Jon spelled J-O-N. Everything else matches. That potato-head Astaroth in Admin gave you the wrong file. I guess there are two forty-five-year-old Baptist ministers in Tallahassee with the same name, just spelled differently. Simple mistake."

Yarsloth, if he had had the rank, would have pounced on the Great Demon and torn him to shreds. Instead, he just nodded weakly.

"Do you think you're up for getting the other minister?"

Yarsloth stared.

"Okay, I'll put someone else on it. You just get better. You've got a curse to get back to."

Yarsloth nodded and turned away.

"You'll be okay."

Yarsloth moved off.

"No big deal. I'll take the blame for this one."

Yarsloth continued to walk, leaving Hell's Dispatcher alone in his office.

"You're a champ, Yarsloth. You'll be back on your feet in no time."

Yarsloth was well down the hallway when he heard, "How about we pretend this never happened?"

Hepatocellular Carcinoma, Stage IV

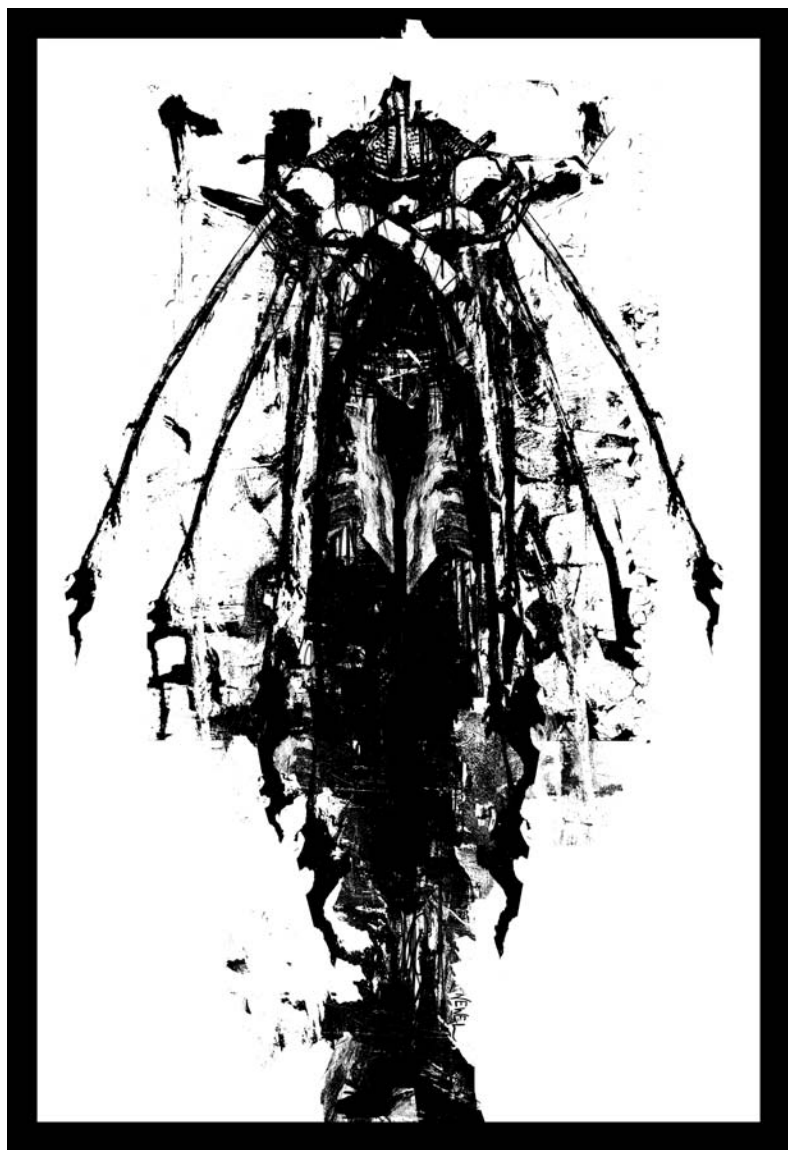
Samantha Henderson

On the beach across the street from the liquor store that's down the
road from the clinic,
A bicycle rusts, bent almost in half,
Useless even to the beggars
And wild children who beg for candy in almost-perfect English.
Five steps beyond: nothing below your feet but air, more air,
Air scrubbed clean by salt,
And salt water, blue as a blind kitten's eyes,
Deep as the world. Turn around, make careful note
Of the stripped hills, a woman rummaging in a stained steel barrel,
A strip of red fabric caught on a doorsill and slapping the ground,
And tell me why I should not fall backwards.

In the Lenten season they smear ashes on your face,
Dry and gritty beneath the priest's rough fingers,
And you are told that dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt et cetera.
But they are wrong. We are, at best, smears,
Water with a little dirt to make it interesting. You see this at the end,
When your legs mottle yellow and your ankles swell, and your fingers
Are tight as sausages, and you become
Merely a way for water to walk about.

Around my ankle, taut
With parasite water, I've roped the rusty bicycle.
I'll gift myself to the careful crabs,
Not rot, but dissolve.
A little fall, a cold shock,
Exit,
Stage IV.

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Sam—Sharp Walls

newel anderson

Painlessness

Kirstyn McDermott

Christ, not again. Hard enough to sleep with the afternoon sun sleazing through the venetian blinds, the dull ache in each and every joint of her sweat-sick body, and Faith groans as she rolls over to grab the bottle of water beside her bed. Blister pack of tablets beside that, antibiotics of some kind, and RelaxaTabs as well because the doctor refused to prescribe her any sort of decent sleeping pill; she takes two of each.

Natural rest, my arse.

Hard enough to sleep with the near-constant vertigo and the quilt pulled right up to her chin, sweating and itching beneath it because otherwise she'll only wake up with chattering teeth and her fingernails a disturbing shade of blue.

Hard enough without *this*: the sobs and muffled shouts pressing through the shoddy townhouse wall, the nameless thumps and, yesterday, even the sound of smashing glass.

Faith pulls the pillow over her head, but it's too hot, too close; she can't breathe properly even when she's *not* trying to smother herself. Stretches her legs instead, trying to kick the cramps from her knees, and when the shouting from next door starts up again, she raises a fist for the umpteenth time to pound against the wall.

And, for the umpteenth time, stops herself at the very last second.

It might only make things worse.

No idea who her neighbours are, after all. *A single woman*, the agent's assurance during inspection, *quiet and tidy; you'll have no trouble there*—and with that now so obviously a lie, who the hell knows *what* she's moved in next door to on a fucking twelve-month lease?

The shouting ceases, gives way to sobbing. Soft, feminine cries that Faith almost can't hear—and somehow that only makes it worse. So, two more RelaxaTabs before curling tight beneath the blanket with her chin tucked close to her chest, and no matter that it's harder to breathe through her congestion like that.

Harder still to sleep with what she can hear—and imagine—beyond that wall.

- - -

Between the opening screech of her neighbour's security door and the brash metallic clatter as it slams shut again, Faith shrugs into her dressing gown. Cinches the faded terry-cloth belt around her waist and hop-foots it down the hall wearing just the single ugg boot slipper, because god only knows where the other one's hiding and there sure isn't any time to mount a search party. White-trash Cinderella half-tripping out her own front door and, "Hey," she calls to the woman already turning away from the letterboxes. "Hey, wait up."

Whatever she may have been expecting, it isn't this. Tall, much taller than Faith herself, but certainly not much older, early thirties at most and even that would be pushing it. A sundress of faded sky blue clothing the sort of slim-hipped androgyny Faith might once have killed to possess, and something so...solid in the way she pauses, tiger-in-the-grass motionless with her face half-turned away and hidden beneath a wave of blood-bright hair.

"Can I help you?" the woman asks, blade-sharp voice with an accent too vague to place.

Faith blinks in the morning glare, one hand raised to shield her eyes. "Sorry, just wanted a word. About the...um, the...look, I'm feeling pretty crap right now and I really need to get some sleep, so...."

"I'm making too much noise."

"Well, yeah. I mean, normally—"

"Normally you wouldn't be here." The woman looks up then, looks right at her with dark eyes surrounded by even darker flesh, fist-sized bruises and a scabby, swollen cut on her lower lip, and Faith swallows, tries to find some words, any words, but the woman waves them away. "My apologies. I assumed you worked during the day. I didn't realise you were ill."

Forget about it, Faith wants to tell her, wants to ask if there is anything *she* needs, like maybe a hospital or several shots of morphine, but all at once it's so damn hot out here and the sunlight really is too bright, searing-white bright like the unmarred skin on the woman's face, what little there is of it, and, *how rude, when she doesn't even know me from Adam.*

So, "I'm Faith." Right hand stuck out and trembling; the woman regards it like it's a dead thing for a moment, dead or near enough. Looks at her that way too, with oil-slick eyes impossibly black and shot with colours like Faith has never seen before, colours she can't even name. "Mara," the woman says.

Mara, a bassline thrumming through the sparks that jump and scratch behind her eyelids, and Faith holds onto it, clutches it tighter than she clutches the frost-cold hand now closed around her own. *Do you hear that, she says, or maybe she doesn't after all.*

The birds, do you hear their wings?

- - -

If ice could boil, and still stay frozen, this is how it might burn.

The seething shiver of skin on skin, on cloth, on the bare bathroom floor as she lies spread-eagled in an effort to touch absolutely nothing, or as much of it as she can. The water that ebbs around her chattering teeth, slips into her mouth despite the cool, strong hands that hold up her head, long fingers curved firm around her chin when all she wants to do is slip beneath the surface and sink, sink, sink. The light that swells her skull, her bones, her guts, seeking to split her wide and spill itself into the world.

blood-fever

Barely a whisper from no one she cares to know.

- - -

Here, drink this.

Can't, I'll throw up.

You won't. Drink it.

The taste too strange, ginger and chamomile and something else that just doesn't belong, and—*oh god, oh christ*—the red plastic bucket still smelling of vomit from last time and this only makes her puke more, spasms so violent it hurts, until finally she rolls back onto the couch with a groan.

Told you I'd throw up.

The woman's smile so subtle it's almost not there at all.

Yes, and don't you feel so much better for it?

- - -

Three days, Mara tells her, perched stray-cat cautious on the edge of the bed. Three days since that morning when she passed out by the mailbox; Faith feels nauseous all over again. Three days, which would make today what, then, Saturday?

"Sunday," Mara says. "Your work called on Friday. I told them it was highly doubtful you'd be in next week but you would let them know once you were conscious again. Frankly, they didn't sound too concerned."

Unsurprising. Newbie telemarketers being more dispensable than used Kleenex, especially newbie telemarketers who are barely scratching at the lowest rung of their daily quota levels; if EzyEzcape even bothered to keep her shifts alive, it would be no minor miracle. Never mind that, after almost a week without pay, if she manages to scrape together next month's rent in time, it will be the loaves and fucking fishes all over again.

"Shit." Faith tries to sit up, fails. There isn't a part of her that doesn't ache.

"I don't think you're ready for vertical," Mara observes.

"I have to go back to work tomorrow. I can't afford to be sick any more."

Mara shrugs, a do-what-you-have-to-do sort of shrug, and rises to her feet in a motion that is at once elegant and utterly final. Jaundice, the faint shadow of a bruise on her cheekbone as she tucks her hair behind her ear, and only now does Faith remember.

"Hey, you said three days? That's how long I was out of it?" Frowning as the other woman nods, because that can't be right, can it? Faith has had coffee-table bumps take longer to fade than that and, *sorry*, she insists, *but that can't be right*.

Not three days, not *only* three.

"Why would I lie?" Mara seems amused, as though this is all some elaborate game, a prank or maybe some sick-day surprise. Like maybe everyone Faith knows is huddled out in the lounge room with party hats and sparklers and a huge hand-painted banner strung across the window: *Welcome back to the world*.

"But your face...."

Words failing as Mara lifts a hand to her own cheek, fingers falling across model-smooth lips that look as though they've never even been chapped, let alone left split and bleeding. "I heal fast. It has been three days." Said as though that were an eternity in itself; her eyes are equally desolate.

Leave it alone, girl; you have no business with it.

Faith swallows, throat too dry for more than a muttered apology, and the smile Mara returns is only tooth-deep. "You seem *compos mentis* now. I'll be home all day if you need something." The square set of her jaw an unspoken challenge—*but you won't need anything*—as she holds Faith's gaze for a full three seconds before walking away, three long paces to the bedroom door.

Only three days.

"Wait." The woman pauses but doesn't turn round, only angles her head a little, and Faith takes this acknowledgement as all she's going to get. "Thanks, okay? Thanks for taking care of me."

"There's multivitamin juice in the fridge," Mara says. "You're dehydrated and you're probably ravenous, but I wouldn't recommend solid food until tomorrow. Otherwise, you know."

A curt nod towards the red bucket in the corner, then the bedroom door closes and Mara is gone.

- - -

Friday night, and Faith sits at the kitchen table with a bottle of red wine, unopened. The same kind she left on Mara's front step a few days ago with a thank-you note scribbled in haste after her knocks went unheeded, the kind she'd once again planned to present in person, with more thanks, tonight. She'd hoped her neighbour would invite her in, that they'd crack open the bottle and drown whatever collective sorrows they managed to scrape together—which had to be quite a few—and maybe lay the foundations of something that might one day be called a friendship.

New city, new job, and Faith is lonely. Not that she would ever admit as much with a clear head, a clean bloodstream; hence the wine.

That had been the plan, anyway.

But mice and men and smothered, broken blondes, Mara isn't alone.

Faith can't hear the sounds all the way out here in the kitchen. Those same whimpers and thumps she remembers from when she was ill, sounds she'd later decided—hoped?—had been amplified by delirium, fever-swollen and exaggerated beyond all measure of reality. Until now. She picks up the cordless phone for the second time tonight, index finger hovering above the 0 on the keypad.

What if Mara hates her for calling the police?

What if the...boyfriend? lover? (rapist?) takes it out on Mara herself?

What if the police don't arrive in time, or even at all?

Damn it. She places the undialled phone on the table, instead creeps down the hall to the bedroom and listens. Nothing, no sound at all from beyond the wall, and is that a good thing or does it mean that something much worse is happening next door? Or has happened?

"Bitch!" The jagged masculine snarl so loud it might be in the same room, and Faith near jumps out of her skin, hands quickly at her mouth to stop the cry that rises in her throat.

But it's what comes after that finally kicks her indecisive arse into gear. The muffled sobs for him to stop, to "Please just stop," echoing in her head as she races back through the townhouse. Grabbing the wine bottle on her way—weapon? appeasement? excuse?—and then straight outside, bare feet smarting on the gravel path that joins her place with Mara's, running so fast that by the time she's pounding on the woman's front door, Faith is breathless.

A small eternity until, just as she thinks no one is ever going to answer and she's going to need that phone after all, there's a flicker of shadow over the peephole and the door opens a couple of guarded inches.

"What do you want, Faith?"

Mara's eye is near-shut swollen, she's bleeding from two nasty cuts on her cheek that seem in dire need of stitches, and that's just the side of her face that Faith can see. "Are you...are you okay?"

Only the most stupid question she could possibly have asked, but Mara actually smiles, a thin, icicle smirk accompanied by a shake of her head, that glossy red hair rippling over her face, and Faith wonders how much of that colour tastes like iron right now. "I'm fine. Go home."

"You don't look fine. You look like you need help."

Mara closes her eyes and sighs, a blood-smeared hand rubbing hard against her forehead. "Faith," she says, and, "Listen," and then there is some scuffling behind her and the door is jerked all the way open.

He's shorter than Mara, shorter even than Faith, whose eyes he refuses to meet as he pushes narrow-shouldered between them, shrugging into a grey suit jacket with a peacock-blue tie hanging from its pocket. Faith can see the red wedged beneath his manicured nails, the flecks of crimson on his creased white shirt.

"Phillip, wait," Mara calls out, but the man doesn't even pause. Just half-turns his head to mutter something that might be *forget it* or *fuck it* or something else entirely before scuttling through the little front gate like a cockroach surprised at midnight. The hazard lights on a silver Audi flash twice as he crosses the road towards it, and within seconds the man is inside and speeding away.

"Great," Mara says. "That's just great." Sounding more resigned than angry, even though she's standing there with hands on her hips

and eyebrows drawn together in a frown that just about freezes Faith's heart. As does the blood runnelling down both her cheeks, and the sticky-wet way that black satin robe wrinkles against her ribs.

Faith swallows. "He won't be back tonight, will he?"

"God, no," Mara snorts. "He won't be back." Then her gaze drops to the bottle of wine hanging uselessly at Faith's side and she sighs once again. Bitterdeep breath that holds all the cares of the world and then some.

"Come inside," she says, stepping back from the door. "You and me, we need to talk."

- - -

Of course she's going to look around, Mara having excused herself for a quick shower, leaving Faith to open the wine and wander through to the lounge room, glasses in hand and bottle tucked awkwardly beneath her arm, and surely it doesn't hurt to look. Not that there's much to see; the Spartans lived larger than this.

Big navy-blue sofa along the far wall, bare-topped coffee table, and two mismatched chairs, one with a grey pin-stripe fabric and the other the kind of patchy brownish velvet you only find in the most desperate op shops or the trendiest retro-funk café bars. Small television in one corner and a lamp standing sentry opposite, its shade almost—but not quite—the same deep blue as the sofa. But no DVDs, no CDs, no books. No little knick-knacks or photos in frames, no junk mail or shoes or shopping lists left lying around.

The only personal touch, the only hint that a human being might actually inhabit this space, is the large unframed canvas hanging adjacent to the window. A stemless scarlet rose blooming against a near-black background, petals open and weeping viscous red tears onto the once-white feather floating below it. Blood tears, blood-flowers; how did that song go again, that Cure song she left behind in Sydney along with her night-cast wardrobe and the rest of her angst-ridden trappings? Bittersad lyrics about trust, about never really knowing who you can. The feather is soaked, bedraggled, but still curves resiliently upwards, its tip pure and unsullied, so bright against the darkness that it almost glows.

Faith runs a finger across one of the glistening droplets and is almost surprised to find the canvas rough and dry, her skin unstained.

"A friend painted that for me. Do you like it?"

The question quietly asked, but Faith still jumps, fights the urge to hide her hand behind her back like a schoolgirl caught with cigarettes or something much worse. “Yeah,” she tells Mara, who has reappeared with shower-damp hair and a flock of bright-white butterfly stitches on each cheek, black satin robe swapped for jeans and a sleek grey jumper. “Yeah, I like it a lot. Might have wanted to arm-wrestle you for it once upon a time.”

Once upon a time, not so long ago.

“Not now?” Mara smiles, or almost smiles, as she crosses the room to claim her glass of wine from the coffee table. She sits down carefully, right in the middle of the sofa, one leg curled beneath her.

“I’m sort of starting over. You know, leaving the past behind me.”

“Hmm, mysterious.”

“It really isn’t,” Faith explains. “It’s just that the people I used to hang with, my *friends* or whatever you want to call them, the whole *goth* scene,”—bobbing air quotes with both hands around *that* word—“they got to be a little...poisonous.”

“Goth scene?” Mara arches an exquisitely plucked eyebrow.

“You know, black clothes, eyeliner, swanning around like they *invented* depression. Like it’s fucking *profound* or something.”

“I know. There are goths in Melbourne too, you realise.”

“Yeah, but it’s not my scene down here. And anyway, I’m....”

“Over it?”

“I’m over *me*.” Faith slumps into the brown velvet chair, licks the resulting splash of wine from her wrist. “I’m over who I was back there. I’m over feeling shitty every damn day, and *liking* the fact that I’m feeling shitty, and then really hating the fact that I *like* it, if any of that makes any fucking sense at all.”

“Perfect sense.”

Mara is good, Faith will give her that. Sitting there sipping wine and encouraging Faith to babble on about nothing like this is just some cozy girls’ night in after all, like she hasn’t been cut to pieces by her arsehole boyfriend, or whatever variety of pond scum he happens to be.

“Listen, Mara, are you okay? Really?”

“I’m fine.”

“Maybe I should drive you to hospital. Get someone to check you over, just to make sure there isn’t—”

“I’m *fine*.”

Her tone icier now, a note of warning clearly sounded, but

Faith plunges ahead nevertheless. "You don't have to put up with that shit, Mara. You don't have to be scared of getting help either, and if you need someone to be here with you when that asshole comes back—"

"He won't be coming back," Mara snaps. "Believe me."

"How can you be so sure? Guys like that—"

"Do you take me for an imbecile? A victim?"

Faith swallows, searching for the right words. "I'm just... concerned. I can hear stuff through the walls, you know. Stuff that doesn't sound too good."

"What you do think is happening here? Do you think that man is my *lover*? That I need to be *rescued* from him?"

The sneer in her voice unmistakable despite the peculiar accent, perhaps even because of it, and all at once Faith has had enough, has had more than enough. Feels a little like she's being kicked in the guts herself one too many times tonight and, "Oh, fuck off. I'm not the one sitting there with my face looking like it got pushed through a plate-glass window."

Incredibly, Mara laughs.

"This is funny? Some sad prick beats you up a couple times a week, and it's meant to be funny?"

"He's not a prick," Mara says, still smiling. "Well, he may be that, but he's also a client. Or at least he *was*; tonight was his first visit and I doubt he left with a good impression. Lasting, perhaps, but not good."

"What sort of a client?" Asking even as the pennies start to tumble.

"The kind who pays for *services rendered*."

It's not like Mara is the first prostitute Faith has ever encountered. Hell, half her former friends could be considered whores in kind, a blow job or a sleight of hand casually swapped for half a tab of speed-spun bliss almost any night of the week, a gram or two of pot any given morning after.

Faith takes another mouthful of wine, its flavour grown acidic and sharp.

"Look," she says. "That doesn't matter. Just because a guy pays you doesn't mean he gets to hurt you."

Mara shakes her head. "Sweet girl, that's what they pay me *for*."

- - -

Except that they don't.

Pay her, definitely. Pay her enough that she only has to work when she wants, and can afford to be choosy about who she sees and how often.

But they never actually *hurt* her.

The disorder has a complicated name and an even more complicated diagnosis, but what it boils down to is her nervous system is defective, has been all her life. What it boils down to is she can't feel any kind of pain, can't feel extremes of hot or cold either for that matter, can't feel much more than pressure and touch.

What it boils down to is this: Mara can be slapped and bruised and cut and burned and left broken in more ways than any human being should ever have cause to know, and none of it will hurt. All of it will heal, and most of it will heal very fast.

This makes her special.

This makes her *expensive*.

- - -

Faith hasn't bothered setting up an internet connection at home yet—no one she cares to email and too many who'll be wanting to email her—so she's McSurfing through her thirty-minute lunch break instead. Greasy hamburger in one hand, fritzzy trackball mouse in the other, and nothing but frustration on the screen in front of her. Loads of words, masses of infocrap—Googling *can't feel pain* gets her more than seventeen million results just to start with—but nothing really useful. *Sensory neuropathy* and *congenital insensitivity* and *Riley-Day syndrome*, and every time a piece seems to fit, it turns out she's just been holding it upside down.

Mara doesn't fit anywhere. Not precisely.

Unless it's on one of the forbidden pages, with the family-friendly blockerbots insisting she maintain a minimum safe distance.

Yet another click to bring up *congenital analgia*, and maybe this is it at last: *a syndrome characterized by a global insensitivity to physical pain*. Following the links to find, not a perfect fit, but the best one so far, even with the short life expectancy, the high rates of undiagnosed infection, the frequency of scratched corneas, amputated fingers, and tongue-tips bitten clean off in infancy. List after list of predictable injuries, obliviously-accidental wounds without pain to give notice, but so what?

Maybe Mara just knows how to take care of herself.

Rattle of ice from the boy behind her who's slurping the dregs of his drink right in her ear, and Faith takes the hint. Five minutes late already, and they'll dock her for that, dock her but still demand that she make up the sales, push her quota of crappy holiday deposits onto pensioners who only leave their homes every second Thursday to punch the pokies and dream of rolling over those three magic bars.

- - -

Mara has brought fruitcake. A large, moist lump of a thing that crumbles when Faith tries to cut too thin a wedge, her butter knife clearly not up to the job.

"Don't feel obliged to eat it. I didn't."

The cake left by one of Mara's clients last Christmas, and Faith wonders at the type of men who take pleasure in first reducing a woman to tears and bruises and bloody wounds, and then in bringing her gifts.

"It's good; I like fruitcake. You sure you don't want a piece?"

Mara wrinkles her nose. "Thank you, no." She's only come to say there'll be company at her place tonight, from eight until ten, give or take half an hour depending on how things develop. In case Faith would rather not be here.

"Thanks for the warning."

"I don't mind if you play loud music. That's what Matthew used to do."

"Who?"

"The tenant who lived here before." That midnight gaze sliding over the kitchen where the two of them sit at the wonky little table Faith picked up for twenty dollars at St Vinnie's along with three matching wooden chairs. "Not as neat as you, but better furniture."

"Right." Faith wonders just what sort of man he really was. The bury-your-head-in-the-stereo kind, or the kind who angled for a free sample. She breaks off a sizeable corner of cake and pops it into her mouth, chews very slowly, and tries to ignore the thought that emerges yet again from some sick little hollow of her mind.

Sneaking up on Mara with a needle, just to see what would happen.

Just to see if she could make her flinch.

"Come on, then," Mara says, and Faith almost chokes on a chunk of maraschino cherry. "You obviously have questions. Ask away."

The cake now dry as unbuttered toast on her tongue, too much of it to swallow quickly, so Faith chews and chews, but Mara is already flicking a dismissive hand in the air. Never mind the questions, those cautious-curious inquiries posed by so many others in not so many ways. She knows them all by rote anyway, so how about they just skip straight to the answers?

The clients, these men who come to see her, they each have their reasons: sadistic power trip or erotic wish fulfillment, extreme role-playing or morbid curiosity plain and unadorned. In some, the reason dwells deep below the surface, inscrutable even to themselves, and there is only the *need*, a desire pure and compulsive and absolute that draws them to her. Some she only sees the once before they retreat ashen-faced from her door, the experience not quite what they'd expected, or else too much more. Some are regular as the new moon. *All* of them want to hurt her; an uncommon few wish the favour returned. The clients, they're complicated.

For Mara, it's simple. She does it for the money.

And for the record, there is no sex involved; she's not that kind of whore. On occasion, for a certain kind of client, she'll use her hands to finish things off. But that service costs extra, quite a bit extra, and, in any case, most of those who need it prefer to relieve themselves.

What she does, it's not about sex.

And never mind the soundtrack; every good girl knows how to fake it.

"So you don't get hurt?" No matter how many websites she looks at, Faith can't really get her head around this. Pain doesn't *cause* damage, it heralds it, and if someone can't feel pain, then how can they judge if they're hurt, or how badly?

"I see a specialist," Mara says. "Regular check-ups."

"Does he know? How they happen, I mean, all your...injuries?"

That greyhound smile again, swift and lean and borderline dangerous. "He should do. He causes his fair share."

"Okay." Faith swallows, hard. Pushes the rest of her fruitcake away. "I'm not even gonna pretend that I understand—"

"I don't *need* you to understand," Mara cuts in sharply. "I don't even need you to care. I'm not a puzzle; I'm not something you need to solve. Or rescue. I've told you this so you know what's happening and you won't come hammering at my door again in the middle of a session and cost me a client."

"I already said I was sorry—"

"I don't need *that*, either."

The two of them glaring at each other until at last Mara pushes back her chair and gets to her feet. "I realise you're lonely, Faith. But I don't do friendship."

"Even if I paid you for it?"

A cheap shot instantly regretted, but Mara only laughs. "Even then, Faith. Especially then."

- - -

She doesn't leave. Doesn't turn on any music or even the lights. Just sits on her bed in the dark with her cheek pressed against the wall and listens.

To nothing very much, in the end. Random sounds of movement and the occasional murmur of voices, low-key and indecipherable. Not every psycho likes his girl to scream, apparently, and Faith wonders why she doesn't feel more relieved.

(Or less disappointed?)

Awkwardly bent, her left leg has fallen so deeply asleep that she needs both hands to straighten it out. Heavy-numb lump of flesh below her knee, and only the vaguest sensation of pressure as she digs a fingernail into the muscle of her calf, digs hard enough to leave a little red smiley behind.

Is that what Mara feels or, rather, what she doesn't? Ever?

Faith tries to imagine what it would be like to have your whole body cocooned in this way, to have never known even the incidental pain of stubbed toes, torn fingernails, and paper cuts, never mind anything more profound. Might it be so bad, if you were careful? Thinking of the reasons she left Sydney, left the people *in* Sydney, what was left of them, Faith grimaces.

Painlessness, on both sides of her skin: she could wish for worse.

- - -

Sometimes Mara leaves a note. A little scrap of powder-blue paper wedged into the screen door at eye level with a handwritten date and time, three or four days' notice for Faith to make other plans if she feels the need.

(Mostly she doesn't.)

But more often lately, it's a personal appearance, a handful of words or perhaps a whole cryptic, fractured conversation about

spoiled milk, lost languages, or the tribe of magpies that wander along the street each morning, spotting grubs in the nature strip and marking each passerby with a polished-marble glare.

"Friend of the crows," Faith murmurs.

"Pardon me?"

"I used to know someone who said that whenever she saw a magpie: *friend of the crows*, and she'd point two fingers at it and then back at herself. So they wouldn't dive-bomb her come spring."

"And was she?"

"What?"

"A friend of the crows."

Mara sounding so serious that Faith has to laugh. "Geez, I don't know, maybe. Never did get swooped on, not that I remember." And Mara nods, once, and turns on her heel, and that's the end of that yet again. Two steps forwards, three steps back, like someone braving herself to jump from the high-dive board, and Faith wonders what it is that Mara is after. Why she can't come out and say straight up that maybe she is just as lonely as Faith, that a friend might actually be what she needs?

And yet.

There is definitely something not quite right about the woman. Not drugs or drink or any other kind of mundane madness—and Faith has known enough of those in recent times to be able to tell—but something else she can't identify.

Mara is just...not right.

- - -

Middle-of-the-night phone calls are never a good thing, and Faith swears loudly as she lurches from her bed, tripping over a boot and bumping her knee on the corner of the dresser on her way to the door. Three months in the townhouse and she still can't find her way in the dark, so it's a speedy zombie-shuffle down the hall with arms outstretched to fumble for the lounge-room light switch while she tries to pinpoint the handset's location from its shrill, persistent ring.

Who the fuck could be calling at this hour?

No one has this number except work and her mum, and she's sworn, she's *sworn*, that no matter who turns up on her doorstep or what they say or plead or promise, she won't let them know where Faith has gone.

Of all people, she *knows* the importance of that.

The phone is under a couch cushion. Faith's stomach tightens as she presses the Talk button, lifts the thing cautiously to her ear. "Hello?"

Someone breathing, or just static on a crappy line? *Hey babygirl, when you gonna come back to us?* She can almost hear Livia crooning the words, and she swallows hard. Please, not her, not Liv—the one person in the whole damn world she can refuse nothing, even when those brilliant green eyes are cracked and scattered and ice-locked, or perhaps especially then—and *hello*, she says again. *Hello?*

"Faith? Faith, it's me."

"Mara?" The was voice so scratchy-faint that for a second she thinks she's guessed wrong. Thinks she should hang up right now before it's too late, because she really doesn't have the strength to do this all over again, but *please* the voice whispers, *please come get me*, and her heart falls back from her mouth just a little.

"Mara, what's wrong? Where are you?"

- - -

She must have misheard, or miswritten, because Grafton Avenue only goes up to Number 119 and then it's nothing but parkland. Close-huddled shrubs and knee-high grasses, with a wan yellow streetlight illuminating the sign that tries to pass this place off as *Urban Forest*. *Yeah right*, and Faith checks the envelope where she scribbled down the address. Definitely 141, but maybe it should be 114? Or perhaps not Grafton Avenue, but Street or Crescent or Road, if such a beast exists?

Unclipping her seatbelt, she reaches across for the Melways on the passenger seat and flips to the index. The interior light in the old Toyota hasn't worked for two years, and she's squinting her way through the G's when something taps at the driver-side window. Little scared mouse-tap still sudden enough to startle: Mara standing out there in the night with a half-curved fist and a face bleached whiter than Faith has ever seen on someone still living, pointing at the locked rear door with her other hand, her mouth moving soundlessly beyond the glass.

Three frozen seconds before Faith finally gets her arse up and out of the car. Mara is wrapped in something that looks like a sheet, a low-budget toga costume hanging in thick folds from her shoulders, the dull fabric dark in patches—and Faith doesn't want to think too much about those just yet. More concerned with getting Mara into the car, Mara who shakes her head when Faith tries to lead

her around to the passenger side, who wants to lie down instead, who says she *needs* to lie down, so Faith opens the back door and helps her crawl inside.

Even with legs loosely curled, Mara takes up the whole length of the seat. This tall, lean woman not so solid now, and the way she shivers in her goosepimpled skin almost breaks Faith's heart. One bare foot sticks out from beneath the sheet with toes clenched tight, pallid little piggies turning their backs to the world, and Faith tugs a corner of the fabric over them.

"Mara, don't go to sleep on me, okay?" Leaning in and over the woman, pushing damp-matted hair from her face. "Listen, I don't know this area. Where do I go, where's the nearest hospital?"

A cobra could not have struck as quickly.

"No hospitals!" Hand closing rat-trap tight around Faith's wrist, pupils so dilated they make the whole of her eyes glow black. "No," she hisses again. "No hospitals."

"Fuck that, Mara. You need—"

"No! If you even *drive past* a hospital, I swear to—" Turning her head aside as she starts to cough, brutal as broken glass, and when it's over her chin is smeared with blood. "I swear I will get out of this car. I'll get out right now, if that's what you're planning." And she almost does, pushing herself up off the seat and sliding towards the door until Faith wrestles her back down, or tries to, tells her not to be so fucking stupid, but she already knows the battle is lost. No way she can take this woman anywhere against her will, and she'd bet both tits that Mara really would throw herself from a moving vehicle if she so much as *smelled* an Emergency Room sign.

"All right. All *right*, fuck!"

A long, tense moment before Mara nods and finally releases her grip. "Just get me out of here. Please."

"Where to?" Faith asks bitterly. Fresh handprint of blood on her arm and she wipes it on her shirt, navy-blue fabric none the worse for such a stain. "Home to warm milk and jim-jams?"

"No, not home." Mara closes her eyes, sinks back against the cheap vinyl upholstery. "Get us onto the highway and drive south. There's a motel about twenty minutes from here."

Faith is done arguing. So when she spots the bright-lit storefront of a twenty-four-hour pharmacy—*Because Your Health Shouldn't Have To Wait!*—after only a few kilometers, she doesn't even ask. Just flicks on the indicator and pulls into the near-deserted carpark.

"Don't even start," she tells the rear-view mirror, Mara's instantly suspicious gaze catching hers in the glass. "Unless you reckon you can put yourself back together with whatever this cruddy motel of yours has in its mini-bar, I'm picking up some stuff here. That okay with you?"

Not really a question, and Mara doesn't answer it, doesn't say another word until Faith returns to the car. Two small plastic bags rustling with bandages and Dettol and surgical tape and anything else she thought might come in handy. Paracetamol too, for the headache that looms at her temples, and she presses a couple of these into her palm straight away. Dry-swallows and turns to flash the box at the woman in the back seat. "Don't suppose *you* want some...."

Mara's laughter splinters to a wet and ragged cough. "Rainbows End."

"What?"

"The motel, it's called Rainbows End. Keep driving, you'll see it."

- - -

She almost didn't. Almost sped right past the place, with its tall pine trees half-hiding the vacancy sign out front, and now that she's standing in the cramped reception area, she wishes she'd done just that. The night manager pushes a form across the counter and Faith hesitates for a second, pen in hand. She doesn't know Mara's last name and is reluctant to use her own because...well, just *because*, and so, *Courtney Love*, the first words that pop into her head and now nothing else will, but the man doesn't even blink when she slides the form back.

Made-up name, made-up address, the tariff paid with cash. Two nights in advance because otherwise they'll have to be out by ten this morning and it's already almost four, and Faith feels sick.

Sick and scared and royally pissed off.

Their twin-share room is right at the end of the complex, no neighbours if the absence of cars is any indication, so thank fuck for small mercies. Faith parks at the front and gets out to open the car door for Mara, chauffeur duties never grimmer than this as her passenger extends an arm for support, stares up at her with eyes deeply shadowed but still burning bright. Tiger eyes, savage and regal, and how it must sting for Mara to have to lean against Faith like this.

Beneath the pine-sharp patina of disinfectant, the room smells of strangers and stale cigarettes. Faith helps Mara over to one of the beds, dumps the pharmacy bags beside her, and then goes back to

sling the *Shhh! Guest Sleeping!* sign onto the doorknob. Flimsy chain latch on the inside and she pulls that across as well.

"I want some water," Mara says.

"Let's have a look at you first."

Mara shakes her head, clutches her toga-sheet with both hands. "I can look after myself." Weighty blue-green cotton like you'd find in an operating theatre, far too much of it soaked magenta by now, and Faith has well and truly had enough of this shit.

"Fuck you, then."

Four long strides to the door of the room, fishing the car keys from her pocket with one hand while the other reaches for the security chain, because this isn't her problem and never was and—

"Wait," Mara whispers. "Please." Little-girl-lost voice Faith has never heard before, little girl lost *forever*, and somehow that's more frightening than all the blood. A voice to stop her dead, and she turns to see Mara rising carefully to her feet. "Look then," Mara says. "Look if it matters so much to you." And she lets the sheet fall.

Bride of Fucking Frankenstein the first thing that comes to mind, but it's so much worse than that.

Black-bristled sutures winding their jagged way from clavicles to pelvis, vaguely Y-shaped like an autopsy incision and crowded by an ugly patchwork of cuts that could only in these circumstances be thought lesser wounds. Ribs and belly and the almost non-existent swell of her breasts all bearing the mark of knife or scalpel, some stitches torn apart and bleeding fresh crimson rivulets to join the dark and clotted mess that cakes her body from the waist down.

"Christ."

The word little more than appalled, astonished breath, but Mara just grins. "Nothing to do with *him*," she says, as a thin trickle of blood slides down her calf and around her ankle, pools on grotty grey carpet that has seen better days—though surely not worse ones.

For an entire precarious minute, Faith just stares, car keys digging sharply into her palm. She can still leave, can still turn her back on this whole fucked-up mess and just walk away, drive away and try very hard to pretend that she never even heard the phone ring tonight, *because this is not her problem*. This is Mara's nightmare, but if Faith doesn't leave right now, if she doesn't open the motel door right this second, then it will become her nightmare as well and god only knows when—or if—either of them will wake up.

Mara wobbles a little, unsteady on her feet, then half-sinks, half-falls back onto the bed. "Can I have that water now?"

And even as Faith closes her eyes, even before she takes her first resigned step towards the ensuite, a shored-up space within her cracks and splits and breaks wide open, and something far too familiar worms its way out, uncurls its long and greedy limbs, and laughs.

- - -

The scant, thin hour before dawn, and Mara seems to have fallen asleep at last. Her shallow breathing has deepened, become more regular, and there's not the slightest response when Faith calls her name. No movement, no murmur, not even the semi-conscious flutter of an eyelid, but Faith thinks she'll wait a little while longer just to be sure.

Wet, bloody-pink wads of cotton wool litter the floor, and a stained towel huddles at the end of the bed where Faith left it once Mara finally pushed her away. *Enough, enough for now*, after Faith finished washing the dried and crusted blood from her chest, her stomach, her ribs. Pale fists bunched in the sheet around her hips, clenching tighter when Faith tried to pull that down as well, tried to see the damage lurking below but *there's nothing*, Mara said. *Just blood from everything else*, and clean or dirty, what she really needed was rest.

The smell of antiseptic fills the room, and Faith worries what Mara might look like beneath her sutured skin.

Or even just beneath the sheet.

Finally, careful to make not the smallest telltale sound, Faith slips from her bed and pads over to Mara's. She takes hold of the stained and crumpled fabric and peels it slowly back, wincing at the whisper-soft crackle of dried blood as she draws it all the way to Mara's parted knees, morbid magician flourish, to reveal—

Just what, it takes Faith a second or two to fathom.

Nothing left of what should be found between a woman's legs. Only several deep cuts cleaving flesh right down to the glisten of bone, vicious wounds like someone put a fucking axe to work, and filled with so much dried and crusted blood that Faith tastes bile rising fresh to her throat. So much blood that maybe it seems worse than it is—nothing Band-Aids are gonna fix, sure, but still maybe not as horrendous as she thinks either—and she forces herself to lean forwards, to look closer.

Too close. Not enough time to withdraw as Mara suddenly twists sideways and draws up her legs. Kicks out and catches Faith full in the chest with enough force to send her spinning across the

room, winded and gasping like she's been kicked by a frightened horse. Tacky carpet beneath her hands as she lands and scuttles backwards on her arse, more than a little frightened herself now with Mara getting up from the bed and stalking naked towards her. Amazon-tall and stitched together like a broken doll, a piece of her too large—too *chunky*—to be simply skin flapping open between her legs, slapping against her thigh with each determined step.

Faith barely makes it to the toilet before she throws up.

"Hey." Hands on her back, her shoulders, reaching around to pull the hair from her face. "You shouldn't have seen that; you should have trusted me. You should have listened when I said I was fine."

"You're not *fine*." Turning to find Mara with a motel towel wrapped close around her waist, greyish-white and already spotted scarlet. "Can you even see yourself, can you see what he's...*done* to you? What he's...." The image of torn, bloodied flesh still stark behind her eyes, blinding, and Faith stuffs a fist into her mouth. *Mara*, she whispers, and *oh christ*, and then *Mara* again.

They're all the words she can summon.

Mara sighs and sinks heavily to the floor, knees pressed tight together. "You don't understand, Faith. You don't even know the half of it."

- - -

The story is, last night was a game of Doctors & Nurses. More precisely, Doctors & Doctors—Mara's *specialist* friend with some friends of his own along for the ride, medical degrees decidedly optional. A room done up as an operating theatre, and Mara the star attraction.

A patient who would remain fully conscious while you sliced and prodded and poked around inside her. A patient who would speak on command, who would weep or gasp or not speak at all if that's what you preferred. Eyes wide and bright and completely aware, even as you curved a hand around her heart to feel its rhythm against your awestruck palm.

Even as you stitched her closed again, your fingers sweating, trembling, inside their surgical gloves.

The story is, even this was not enough. Sex never in the contract, but one of them had pulled down her bikini briefs anyway, the others circling close like leering wolves with the scent of blood thick in their nostrils. Until they forced apart her legs and saw what wasn't there.

As for what was, well. Nothing any of them could ever have seen before.

Simply, *nothing*.

Mara thinks they used a cleaver. They'd brought all sorts of tools, all kinds of implements to play with. A cleaver, or some other heavy-bladed knife.

But the story is, Mara gave far better than she ever might have gotten and by the end, not all of the blood spilled had been hers.

Not even most of it.

- - -

Faith doesn't want to know exactly what that means. What any of it means. Is only too grateful to be sent in search of the small, combination-locked suitcase Mara has left in care of the management for precisely such an occasion.

"Should have told us you was with her, love." A different man than before, tall and hollow-cheeked, leaning towards Faith with both forearms flat on the counter. "She stays as long as she needs, tell her. No charge."

Then, with genuine concern, "She okay, you reckon?"

And Faith, who knows nothing about anything any more and is trying very hard to feel just the same, merely nods. "I think so. She says so."

Back in the room, Mara thanks her for the suitcase and disappears with it into the ensuite. There is the sound of the door locking and, after a few minutes, the rhythmic patter of the shower. Faith flops onto the bed—*her* bed, not the other one—and throws an elbow over her eyes to block out the morning sun now squeezing slantways through the not-so-vertical blinds.

Thoughts of Sydney crowd forwards and, for the first time in a long time, she doesn't automatically push them away. Livia and Ben and all the others she left behind, one thousand kilometres worth of behind, because who knew how wide that particular vortex yawned. *We're, like, exploring Antarctica here*, someone had mused late one night. Russ, or maybe Corin; she couldn't recall. Wedged in her memory instead, the wired exultation in Liv's reply: *Baby, no, there's dirt and rocks and shit under there. This is the fucking Arctic circle, nothing but ice all the way down.*

Livia, raccoon eyes perpetually smudged with day-old eyeliner, her dyed-black hair overgrown with greasy blond.

Livia, finding veins in her ankles so she can still go sleeveless in summer.

Livia, scratching herself to ruin in the search for subcutaneous life.

Faith had fled. No dramatic watershed moment, no death or overdose or even accidental injury to propel her into the harsh light of day, just waking up one winter morning with frozen toes and the even colder realisation that if she dragged herself off to Livia's that night she might never, ever find her way back home.

Four weeks at her mum's instead. Best mother in the whole damn world to keep her under lock and key like that, self-imposed house arrest in suburbia while she cleaned up, thawed out, thankful that she hadn't really even begun to plumb the sort of depths that Livia and the rest had so eagerly dived to. Surfacing from that level might have—almost certainly *would* have—been impossible. Would have been impossible regardless, if she hadn't picked up and moved to Melbourne with barely a pause for breath or the burning of all her address books. Faith had proven herself stronger than she'd thought, but no way would she ever be strong enough to close a door in Livia's face if that girl decided to come knocking.

Only now there's Mara, and Faith wonders if she doesn't have some sort of subconscious freak-compass guiding her every movement.

The ensuite door swings open, spilling forth steam, fluorescent light, and someone Faith almost doesn't recognise. Mara has cut her hair, a close-cropped schoolboy style slicked back from her forehead with gel, or maybe just water from the shower. Dressed in black jeans and a baggy black T-shirt, she even seems to move differently. Loose-hipped, almost a swagger, with pale arms swinging by her sides as though buffeted by a careless breeze.

"Still here?" The surprise in her voice, no matter how mild, is just too much. This is impossible, *Mara* is impossible. Pain or no pain, no one gets cut open like that and walks around so effortlessly the very next day; no one gets *butchered* the way this woman has been and walks around *at all*, never mind in fucking *jeans*. Faith realises that if she weren't so furious, so well and truly *fed up*, she'd most likely be terrified out of her wits right now.

"What are you, Mara?" Anger definitely the preferred option, and she lets it all the way loose. "What the *fuck* are you?" Launching herself from the bed, reaching for Mara with no clear intention

beyond doing some sort of violence of her own, but it hardly matters. Mara catches her wrists in hands too strong to be human, crosses them over, then pushes her away. Hard.

Faith lands on the corner of the mattress and topples straight to the floor, terror now sliding into prominence as she rubs her wrists together, so sore the bones themselves seem bruised.

Mara regards her in silence for a few seconds, then nods, as though arriving at some kind of decision. She sits down on the bed opposite, legs apart and elbows resting on her knees. "I'm not sure what I am," she says quietly, staring at a point between her bare, blue-veined feet. "You have so many stories, it becomes difficult—confusing—to hold onto the truth."

Faith swallows, not daring to move.

"I did not fall." Mara glances up, her tear-glazed eyes still sharply focused. "But neither did I choose a side. And more than that, I can't remember."

She winces, hand moving swiftly to her waist, where it rubs in smooth, slow circles just below her ribs. "Not all of them doctors, then." And to Faith's wordless, uncomprehending shake of the head, "The liver, I think. Rearranging itself to the proper position."

"But you.... It looked like that hurt. *Did* that hurt?"

Mara shrugs.

"You told me you didn't...that you couldn't...." Not finishing, not wanting to finish. Not wanting to say the words to make it real, so Mara says them for her.

"I feel pain, Faith. I feel everything that's ever done to me, while it lasts." Half a smile, half a grimace curving her thin, pale lips. "But think, would you really feel a mosquito bite if your leg had just been severed? Or would you want to feel it even more? Would you long for that bite, that almost insignificant sting, because the other pain—the loss, the *absence*—was just too unbearable?"

Faith gets to her knees, gets oh-so-slowly to her feet. "Mara...."

"No." Even with half a room between them, the raised hand snaps her frozen to the spot. "It's too late for *Mara* now. Whatever she had, you can have. Or not. I won't be returning to that place."

Run. Run. Run. Each beat of her heart imploring escape, but Faith can't seem to move. Finds her mouth opening instead, asking if there is something she can do, because if there is anything at all that might help—

"What can you do?" the woman that was Mara snaps. "You and your kind who know nothing but selfishness and cruelty." Rising from the bed, one hand lifting her shirt as if to illustrate the point. Jagged central incision that actually does look markedly better, even after these few brief hours—until two long fingers dig their way beneath the stitches and tug, pulling out half a dozen with a sickening, wet pop. Gaping, bleeding wound in her belly big enough for a hand to slip into, and it does, emerging again scarlet and dripping and offered to Faith like a promise. "Tell me, what can any of you do?"

Faith feels the motel-room door against her shoulder blades, though she can't recall backing into it.

And the woman, the *creature* that was Mara, stalks towards her, taller than ever with bitter-black eyes darker than the despair of stolen souls. "Cruel. Selfish. Arrogant beyond sufferance." But that hand, with those blood-soaked fingers, is unexpectedly gentle as it caresses Faith's cheek, slides down to cup her chin.

"Yet you are loved," the creature that was Mara whispers. "You are *all* loved."

Faith can only hope the taste of salt on her lips comes from her own tears.

"Leave." The hand loosens, those terrible eyes close. "Leave now."

And for once, Faith does not need to be told twice.

- - -

The door to Mara's townhouse stands slightly ajar, slightly crooked. Half-off its hinges, Faith sees when she approaches, and inside the place, the damage is worse. Furniture broken, upholstery torn. Smashed crockery and glassware turning the kitchen into a glittering minefield, and the bedroom reeking from the dozens of bottles of perfume that have been spilled onto the stripped and blood-stained mattress. In the wreck of a home still almost devoid of intimate possessions and personal touches, the saddest thing is the painting of the floating red rose. The canvas now cut to pieces, palm-sized scraps scattered over the lounge-room floor, and the wooden frame upon which it had been stretched cowering in a corner like some skeletal, broken-backed beast.

By her foot, a bit of canvas lies face-down, *arest Mar* scrawled on its back in a small but confident hand, and Faith gets down on her knees to find the rest of the inscription. Oversized, paint-stiff

jigsaw with too many blank pieces, but finally she has all the ones she needs.

For My Timeless Love, My Dearest Marguerette, who waits for no man. Arthur. New Orleans, July 1928.

And Marguerette may not be Mara. And Mara may have lied about the artwork being done for her by a friend. And Arthur, whoever he was, may have painted this canvas for a woman who did decide to wait for him after all, a woman with whom he grew old and lined, a woman who was mortal and human and who did not look up at the stars at night and remember what it was like to walk above them.

But Faith doesn't think so.

Especially when she turns the pieces of canvas over to see that they show the curved, blood-draggled feather. Long and thin and silver-white, the feather of an eagle or albatross, or some other creature equally glorious and skybound and doomed.

Arthur, whoever he was, he had known.

Faith curls up on the carpet, knees drawn close to her chest, and wonders when she'll stop crying. *Don't you ever forget how strong you are, sweetheart*, her mum had said. *You got yourself through this, you can get yourself through anything.*

But right now, all she wants is Livia's arms around her, Livia murmuring meaningless shit in her ear. All she wants is not to feel the weight of a new day, the weight of new knowledge too frightening to consider except from the most oblique of angles. Never mind how she gets there.

Never mind if she never, ever finds her way out again. *You are loved*, it had said, blood running down its slender wrist.

Right now, the scraps of canvas clutched in her desperate, desolate fists, Faith thinks love never burned colder than this.

Watching the playoffs

Jim Kacian

through a fog of flu. The Falcons are marvelously organized, and as one they march repeatedly across the field, in huge bites. In my mild miasma, their precision—the way they explode as a unit, unfolding beautiful, irresistible patterns—seems the endeavor of some lower species, bent on community survival with no quarter given. Sleep again is fitful, and, as has been the pattern the past few nights, whatever is lingering in my mind as I drift off effuses into my dreams. At first, those same beautiful, ruthless red and black patterns, the seeming futility of resistance. Then my consciousness is permitted to interact, and I discover it is a video game that I control. I invent different variations of the game—one in particular is called “enlightened self-interest”. I envision the complex algorithm for calculating best-case scenarios for all twenty-two players on the field, the distribution of opportunity, the likelihood of equal happiness in the system. Increasingly odd play ensues, pattern is lost, the calculation of reward complicates enormously to account for the results of each preceding play, and weird—might as well say random—acts occur as the only possible actions. By this point, of course, football rules have been abandoned as having no value in what remains of the game. New rules are probably emerging, but it’s nearly impossible to say from my point of view. By now I’m writhing beneath the covers, my sweat chilled, twisting the sheets to immobilize myself. The dog wakes from her own more peaceable sleep and comes over to investigate. I’m cheered by this act of community, of fellow feeling across species, and I pat her head and stroke her fur. I’m braced by the thought—Oh, never mind, she just wants to go out.

midnight pee
the dog runs to the edge
of the light

Dolls

Kristine Ong Muslim

These brides reek of blood;
their froth of white makes
their wounds disappear.
I have found their bodies
inside the boxes stashed,
unopened, for twelve years
under the stairs. Finding them
is like unpeeling prisms to expose
the darkness inside, to scoop
a handful of dank caves, a row
of basins that remain hollow.

I have always believed that I can
simply exchange atmospheres,
leave my secrets at home
so my pet dog can bury them
with the pilfered wishbones.
But the discovery of the dolls
cannot be unlearned.

Small and sacred, they
do not have mouths. Everything
has to be painted on, even the fluted
streaks of life on their cheeks where
daylight gets its thrust. Flaccid, they
stand up, a bowl of eyes floating
in a milky cataract of disgust.
And those ears that protrude
are only rifts in the thin fabric
of their skin. Again and again,
I hear their songs in my head.

The Disappearance of Juliana

John Walters

Your first clue comes from one of Greg's old friends. You find him in the musty basement of a bar, playing pool all alone. He's got a week-old growth of dark beard and his jeans and yellow sweatshirt look like they've never been washed.

The room stinks of stale beer, cigarette smoke, dusty carpet, and B.O. You gag and almost retch, but you force it down and continue.

"I want to find Greg," you say.

Whereupon he looks at you with a peculiar expression that is a bit more than just a mix of being half-drunk and half-stoned, carefully lines up the cue stick with the cue ball, and takes another shot. "How did you find *me*?" he asks.

"It wasn't difficult. If no one's found you before, it's probably because no one's looking."

He digests that while he takes a few more shots. Finally he asks, "Why do you want to find him?"

"We were living together. He left suddenly. I miss him. I want to know why he left." It's true, as far as it goes, though not the whole truth. Your stepfather is stalking you, your mother is a silent presence halfway across the city who you know is constantly hoping you'll call, your job is a boring dead end.... You just have to get away, is all, and searching for Greg is a good excuse.

"You won't find him." At which point he buttons up and won't say any more; he ignores you as if you aren't even in the room.

You ply him with cheap tequila. When the bottle is almost down to the worm, he breaks down. "They got him," he says. "The invisible people got him."

"What are you talking about? Who are the invisible people?"

He mumbles something incoherent, then adds, "They tried to get me, but I got away. But they got him."

It sounds like drunken nonsense, and you are tempted to dismiss it as such, but there is something about his expression that piques your interest. It's not fear, exactly; it's something else. Guilt? Regret?

"Where were you? Where were you when they got him?"

Without hesitation, he answers, "Rome. Downtown Rome,

near Villa Borghese. We were busking on the Spanish Steps. They found me there.” He is gazing at nothing in particular. “They take everything from you. Everything. Then they make you invisible, like they are.”

“But how did you escape? And how can I find him?”

But he slumps forward, resting his face sideways on the table between you, his mouth half-open, his tongue lolling. After a minute, he begins to snore.

It sounds crazy. But you have been planning to cut loose and run anyway, and Rome seems as good a place to go as any.

- - -

He decided to search for Juliana out of concern not for her welfare but for his own. She had long since ceased putting out, but the only way the situation was going to remain discreet was if he kept tabs on her.

He had never intended to see her mother again, but that was the logical first place to go. She greeted him cordially enough. Her hair, dyed a red color that did not suit her, was disheveled; her poorly-applied makeup did not hide the dark bags under her eyes or her gaunt cheeks. She had obviously been drinking, despite the early hour. Diffident and timid, she could not conceal the helpless longing in her eyes. But as far as he could tell, she was honest with him. As soon as he had ascertained that she didn’t know where Juliana was, he said goodbye and exited hastily.

Next he tried the restaurant. The owner, a tall Greek with a huge gut and a face full of black stubble, offered him ouzo and fried octopus. He seemed the eternal optimist. He was not put out that Juliana had left without notice, and expressed concern that she was missing. Evidently she had always been punctual and responsible. After her last payday, she had never showed up again, so there was no back salary for her to come and claim.

For the past several months, she had lived alone. Her tiny studio apartment was on the third floor of a dilapidated red-brick building on Capital Hill near Broadway. The postbox was crammed with junk mail and the rent was overdue. He paid it to get in good graces with the landlord, who then allowed him into the apartment.

At first, he found nothing extraordinary. There were canned goods in the kitchen, clothes in the closet, toiletries in the bathroom. Art books and sketchpads filled the living-room shelves, and her

drawings and paintings were tacked all over the walls. He found them morbid, even grotesque; he had always discouraged her efforts. Not much appeared to be missing. If she had taken off, she had traveled light.

He had almost given up when, in a wastebasket full of Diet-Pepsi cans and granola-bar wrappers, he found a crumpled receipt from a travel agent for an airline ticket sale. He straightened it, studied it, and put it in the inner pocket of his suit coat.

She had left a trail after all.

- - -

In Rome, something happens. After you find a hostel in the center, you start to walk the streets, ostensibly looking for Greg, but you soon realize that you don't really give a damn whether you find him or not. You look around as if for the first time. All sorts of things are happening about which you had no idea—little things like the pattern of raindrops in puddles, the way the cobblestones in the streets are arranged, and the looks on the faces of the people that pass you by.

It's the people that you study most carefully. No matter who they are, they have their secret sorrow, and they seem to wander around searching for they know not what.

You haven't brought much money, so you set up an easel and start to draw portraits on the Spanish Steps, but your pictures are not very popular. You are too honest. The customers are into caricatures; they want a laugh. You study their faces closely and show them how they really are. But they don't want to know what they actually look like. At least you make enough to get by day by day, and for the moment you are content with that. During breaks, you enjoy the sunshine or the rain, you sit and ruminate, you wonder why it doesn't bother you that you don't miss anything from your past—then you consider what your past was like and realize it's not surprising at all that you don't miss it.

Supporting yourself becomes a drudgery; you spend less and less time on the Steps—actually, you only stay there the bare minimum of time it takes to finance your room, your food, and your drawing paraphernalia. You even start to eat less, just so you won't be bound to sitting in one place for so long. You wander here and there, and whenever something interesting catches your eye, you sketch it. Once it's a three-legged dog at an outdoor café, limping slowly from table to table begging for crumbs; once it's a pottery merchant whose cart

lost a wheel in the street, sitting on the sidewalk forlornly surveying the shards of his wares; once it's a whore with garishly-painted face, black net stockings, and a short red skirt below which half her ass shows, standing at a corner with a bitter expression. You don't know why you are attracted to these peculiar, heartbreaking scenes, but they arrest your attention and consume your awareness so that everything else around pales into insignificance and you cannot move until you have completed your drawing.

Autumn passes. Winter approaches, with chill winds and near-freezing temperatures. You buy a secondhand woolen coat and continue your wanderings, and continue to sit on the Steps and draw portraits when the wind dies down and the sun warms the stones so that there are enough passers-by to make it lucrative. You contemplate moving on to a warmer climate, perhaps even India. You start to save whatever spare cash you can.

Then one day during a lull in business, you see a face you never wanted to see again.

Twilight has come and a crimson stain has spread across the scattered clouds. You have been wondering whether to pack up and leave or stay another twenty minutes or so hoping for one last customer. But when you see him down in the *piazza*, all thoughts of lingering are blown away. You quickly throw your pencils and paper into the plastic briefcase you carry your supplies in and fold your easel. You leave your things with a jewelry vendor you know who works late and dash up the Steps to the path leading to the park at Villa Borghese.

The darkness deepens. Dim lamps cast pale yellow light here and there, but beneath the trees, the shadows are almost impenetrable. You pass the Villa and choose paths at random in the park. It is almost deserted at this hour, though through the bushes you catch occasional glimpses of lovers making out on benches.

You stop and listen. Overhead, leaves rustle. In the distance, a fountain gurgles. You are unsure, but you think you hear footsteps behind you, so you plunge through a gap in the bushes and wait, trying to control your breathing.

Suddenly someone grabs you from behind and throws you to the ground. At first you think it's *him*, but then you realize he is mumbling something in Italian. You stifle the scream that wants to erupt and struggle to escape. His breath reeks of wine. He climbs on top of you and tries to pin your arms to the ground, all the while whispering to stop fighting, that he won't hurt you, and so on. "No,

no, no," you whisper, afraid to shout for help because *he* might hear you and find you here.

The man is strong and heavy; he succeeds in grabbing your wrists and holding them above your head in one hand, while with the other hand he struggles clumsily to loosen his belt buckle.

You drive your knee into his balls. He groans and doubles over. You manage to push him off, get to your feet, and run.

Now you are terrified of the rapist behind you and even more terrified that in your panic you might run right into *him*. You are beside yourself; you don't know what to do or where to go.

Then, directly under a lamp in front of you, a woman appears. One moment she isn't there, and the next moment she is. She wears a flowing ankle-length skirt of autumn colors, brown and gold and red, a light brown blouse, and a red jacket, all of which seem inappropriate for the icy weather. Her long, straight black hair would, if it were not tossed in the chill breeze, reach her waist. Her age is impossible to guess; she has smooth, youthful skin and a lithe figure, but her light brown eyes bespeak wisdom.

She beckons to you. "Come. This way."

You hardly hesitate. Better the unknown ahead than the evils behind.

She leads you into a small garden surrounded by trees that block the wind. In the center is a bench with a wrought-iron frame and wooden slats.

Somehow, here you feel enveloped in a cocoon of warmth.

She sits on the bench and indicates that you should join her. When you do, all your strength dissipates and you slump forward, elbows on knees and head in hands.

"Are you all right now?" she asks. Her voice is deep like a mature woman's, but gentle like a caress.

You sit up, quickly recovering your vigor. "I'll be okay."

She says, "Don't be afraid; they won't find you," and you believe her. Then you wonder how she knows that people are after you. With a totally disarming smile, she adds, "My name is Lily. Tell me about yourself."

And you realize that is exactly what you want to do, more than anything else in the world. So you tell her. You start with your childhood and the death of your father, your gradual loss of respect for your mother, and your contempt for your stepfather. You even tell her of his frightening you into yielding to his sexual advances, and you have never told anyone about that before, not even your mother. You tell her of your dysfunctional relationships with your

boyfriends, one after another, about your fear of opening yourself up to the pain of rejection, about ultimately isolating yourself from relatives and friends and anyone else you considered a threat. Finally you get around to your conversation with Greg's friend, your trip to Rome, your wandering the streets with your sketchpad and pencil. And when you finish, you wonder how you managed to hold it in for so long; you feel empty, but it is a liberating sort of emptiness, like the glow after orgasm.

"Thank you for confiding in me," she says, as if it has been a great privilege to listen to you.

"Have you heard of the invisible people?" you ask. "Do you know where they are?"

As if she didn't hear the question, she says, "I think you should go on to India, as you have been considering. It seems the logical next step in your quest."

You wonder whether she deliberately evaded your question about the invisible people or whether she didn't hear it. You are just about to ask again when she says, "Aren't the stars beautiful? They shine like jewels."

You look up, and it's true. They are resplendent and innumerable in the clear winter sky.

Then you notice that you are suddenly cold again. A chill breeze hits your face like a slap waking you from a deep sleep.

You shiver and look around.

The woman is gone.

- - -

He hired several detectives to scour the hotels, guesthouses, and hostels. Once they found where she was staying, he staked the place out until he saw her go in, late one cold Friday evening.

He retained one detective and had him move into the hostel. He himself began to surreptitiously follow her around. He wanted to study her habits, her lifestyle, before he made his move. But nothing she did made sense. As far as he could see, she was frittering her life away, living at the edge of poverty while she played at drawing.

Yet she was of legal adult age, so he couldn't just grab her. He formulated a plan to present her to the authorities as a mentally-unbalanced runaway, casting himself as the benevolent rescuer. He got so enthusiastic about this story he almost believed it himself. But to make it stick, he would need certification, so he arranged for a psychiatrist friend back in Seattle to write up an official document.

While waiting for it to arrive, he couldn't help but tail her. Just watching her fascinated him. It was infuriating that she was so bereft of reason that she would not voluntarily come with him, her benevolent rescuer. He stared for hour after hour at the long chestnut hair fluttering about her face in the breeze, her peculiar squint as she studied her subjects, the way she chewed her lower lip in concentration as she drew.

He hated her for her hold on him.

Finally, the document arrived. Even with it, though, he found it difficult to enlist the aid of the *carabinieri*, the local police, who tried to refer him to the American Embassy. At last he persuaded them that, if she were not apprehended, she might pose a threat to others.

The following day was clear and cold. He had decided that the easiest place to grab her would be on the Spanish Steps. Technically, she had no authorization to sell portraits there, which would be enough of an excuse to bring her in. After that, the police had agreed to release her into his custody, provided he took her out of the country. It had all been arranged, and money had changed hands.

In the late afternoon, he arrived at Piazza di Spagna with two police officers. But when he stepped out of cover, she spotted him and made a run for it. He gave chase, but lost her in the darkness of the park above the Steps. He hastened back to her hostel, but missed her by minutes. The man supposedly watching her room was snoring noisily beside three empty wine bottles.

He was furious. By all natural reasoning, he should have just given up and gone home. She would never return; from what he had seen of her habit of roaming about in the poorest neighborhoods, she would probably be murdered in an alley some dark night in a far-off slum. But he couldn't get her out of his mind. If he couldn't have her for himself, he wanted to dispose of her in some way, so she would never pose a threat to him.

He began to interview everyone he had seen her with. He talked to restaurant owners, souvenir hawkers, beggars, drunks.

Finally, on the Steps, he came across another artist with whom she had discussed her idea of heading east.

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Here you sit, at the end of the world; at least it seems that way to you. At first the euphoria of being in such a strange place sustained you, but as your money dwindled, you became apprehensive. On the one hand, you believe you were meant to come here, that

meeting the woman in the park was no accident and she gave you specific direction; on the other hand, you are too close to the edge for comfort. It was one thing to live from day to day in Rome, where whenever you got low on funds you could draw a few portraits and get by, but it is another to be here in Mumbai, where there are millions upon millions of beggars, and you are looked upon as wealthy and accosted for alms no matter how poor you really are.

At first you stayed in a cheap hotel. Then you moved to a hostel near Mother Theresa's Sisters of Charity mission. You were the only foreigner in the two-dozen-bed dormitory, amidst street sweepers, brick carriers, and hookers, but the rent was next to nothing. Now you can't even afford that.

You feel as if you are about to fall through the cracks. Your life means nothing to anybody, least of all to yourself, and your death would have even less significance. So you sit on your bag, the rough black canvas bag that holds all your earthly belongings, and you sketch.

The street people fascinate you. Whole families live on the pavements, eating, sleeping, raising children, somehow eking out a living as day laborers or servants or rag-pickers. In the past, their poverty would have frightened you, but not anymore. You actually have less than they do. They have a tiny spot of concrete to call their own; they have parents or spouses or children or brothers or sisters; they have a means of subsistence, however humble. You are tempted to envy them.

But you have your art, and it is enough to sustain you. You have only recently begun to think of yourself as an artist. You have finally realized that it has nothing to do with other people's perceptions of you and your work. So you draw them: you draw the babies lying in the gutters, their faces surrounded by flies; you draw the families asleep on the roadside, curled up all together as if to protect each other, oblivious to the rats that crawl over them and around them; you draw the fat businessmen in their foreign-made suits as they pause and throw a *paisa* to the poor just before they disappear into their multi-story metal-and-glass towers. At first, as you draw, you wonder vaguely what will become of you, but you gradually forget about that as you absorb yourself in your task.

How long you have been sketching, you have no idea, but abruptly you have the sensation you are being watched. Well, that's nothing new, because in this land you are *always* being scrutinized

by the curious, but this is different. Someone is intently paying attention to you.

You look up. Two beggar children, a girl and a boy, stand before you. The girl is wearing light brown cotton pants frayed at the cuffs, and nothing more. She looks to be about six or seven years old, though it's hard to tell because of the way that undernourishment and unsanitary conditions take their toll; she could be several years older. The boy is wearing green shorts and an off-white tee shirt; he appears to be about ten. They do not accost you for a handout. They simply watch you, as if studying you, the girl with her right index finger in her mouth, the boy with a slight smile, as if in possession of an important secret. What are they up to, if they don't want money from you? You can't figure it out. After a stare-down that seems to go on interminably, they wander off.

But the girl comes back in a few minutes. She looks at you again with her big dark brown eyes and serious expression. She has brought a small bag of peanuts. She chews one slowly, with her mouth open. Then she proffers the bag to you.

This has never happened before; it dumbfounds you. Is she offering to share the nuts with you? How could it be? Is it possible that you look so despondent, so wasted, so hopeless, so helpless, that even the beggars are taking pity on you?

At first you shake your head no (forgetting that the gesture means the opposite here); you cannot conceive of taking something from someone like her, who must have so little. But she comes a half-step closer and offers again.

You smile, take a few, chew them.

For the first time, she smiles too, a timid smile that is nevertheless obviously sincere, the type of smile that is so pure it is like sun breaking out of clouds after rain.

Then the boy shows up again, still with his slight smile. He takes you by the hand and leads you into a tea shop, buys bread and milky tea and watches you eat and drink. When you are finished, he smiles broadly, showing remarkably straight white teeth, takes your hand again, and leads you back onto the street.

58 He and the girl begin to walk away together, but with their expressions and subtle gestures, they are clearly inviting you to follow.

You scarcely hesitate. What have you got to lose?

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She wasn't nearly as difficult to find as he'd thought she would be. Though Mumbai was crowded and confusing beyond belief, foreigners stood out in sharp relief to the darker Indians; he found her in three days without help.

All he wanted now was to punish her and shut her up. He found a street kid ("You want hashish? You want girl? You want boy? Anything you want I can get.") who led him to a high-class brothel. He offered Juliana to the owner for a considerable sum. The owner assured him he could keep a white foreigner busy with customers, ten or twelve a day or even more.

As he left with the down payment, he got a bitter satisfaction from thinking of Juliana trapped there. She would be kept heavily drugged and her passport would be taken away. She might last a year, two years, five at the most, before she burned out, got syphilis or AIDS and wasted away and died, or got sold to a low-class laborers' whorehouse.

- - -

The children climb into a baby taxi, a three-wheeler with a low-hp putt-putt engine, open on both sides but with a black vinyl roof. No words are spoken to the driver; he smiles and starts off, weaving slowly through the dense traffic of trucks, buses, taxis, private cars, bicycles, pedestrians, cows, dogs, chickens, and so on. Soon you are completely lost, but you don't care. Something seems right about this situation, though if someone were to ask you what, you would have no idea how to answer. So you just sit on the blue plastic seat enduring—no, relishing—the heat and dust and stench and noise.

Eventually you realize you have reached an area that is decidedly poorer than the one you've come from. Huts are constructed of bits of plastic, scraps of wood, and other discarded materials; naked children play in heaps of rubbish next to men and women carefully sifting through it; drying dung briquettes are plastered against the walls; open sewers line the streets.

A tremor of fear causes you to shudder involuntarily. The boy, seeing your unease, smiles and says, "Dharavi!"

It's obviously the name of the district; he says it with the reverence one reserves only for the ultimate place, for home. And indeed, when you try to see it through *his* eyes, the golden light of late afternoon causes the shantytown to glow like Shangri-La.

The driver, a gaunt young man in a sweat-stained sleeveless white shirt and a green-and-yellow-checked *lungi*, pulls over and stops,

and smiles as you disembark. He has not used the meter; there is no mention of a fare.

Along a narrow path through the scrap shacks you are led. Something strikes you as decidedly odd: most of the people around ignore you as if you do not exist. Until now, everywhere you have gone, you have been beset by stares.

In the gloaming, your guides stop before a larger-than-average edifice, a 3D jigsaw puzzle of refuse with a piece of black tarp for a door, and indicate that you should enter.

- - -

She often took walks at night. He could follow her with a few hired goons; a quick shove into their van at an opportune moment would accomplish the abduction.

He found her sitting outside a tea shop surrounded by alleys that would be dimly lit after sunset, but before it got dark, she wandered off with some beggars and got into a baby taxi. Furious, he decided to follow and grab her right away.

But obstacles kept popping up that prevented them from getting close to the taxi: a bus, so crowded that people hung out the doors and balanced themselves on the rear bumper, stopped to take on more passengers; three bicycles collided and fell in a tangled heap over which the riders argued in the middle of the road; a group of filthy cows leisurely crossed the street.

As they pulled over to the curb in Dharavi, he glimpsed her disappearing around the corner of a garbage-strewn lane.

He could not convince his driver, a tall, overweight Sikh, or his helper, a slim, unshaven man in brown trousers and an off-white sleeveless tee shirt, to go in after her. They protested that someone might steal the van, but in fact seemed frightened of the place.

Finally, he slammed the van door in frustration and set off by himself.

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Filth and stench left behind, you step through into another world. There is not a speck of dirt anywhere; the expensive-looking furniture—upholstered beige couch and armchairs, glass-topped coffee table, dark wood shelves full of books and electronic equipment, Persian carpets—is tastefully arranged as if by a professional interior decorator.

But you can scarcely take in your surroundings, so overwhelmed are you by the presence of the person in the room. (A corner of your mind notices that the children who were accompanying you have not followed, though in some way they still seem to be there.) The man who stands before you is barefoot (and as you notice this, you realize you were supposed to leave your shoes by the entrance; you sheepishly retrace your steps and do so) and wears dark brown slacks and a light blue dress shirt. He is of indeterminate age, perhaps in his thirties or forties. He is very dark-skinned, almost black, with fairly long straight hair and a thick mustache. But his eyes are what draw your attention: chestnut brown, but that's not the important thing; they are intense with wisdom and mystery, portals to another world. They remind you of the woman in the park in Rome.

You stare at him, speechless.

So, you have made it this far, he says. His lips do not move.

You do not respond.

You are almost ready.

"Ready for what?"

- - -

He ran down the lane, but by the time he reached the turn, she was nowhere in sight. He hurried onward at random, past heaps of garbage, squalid shacks, and groups of filthy rag-pickers, dark-eyed, sinister, perhaps dangerous, but somehow unaware of his existence, as if he were nothing more than a passing breeze.

Abruptly he stopped, breathing heavily, and realized he was lost. He was trespassing; he had ventured into a hostile area. Fear gripped him. He was trapped. Whatever wild confidence, whatever cloak of concealment, had enabled him to penetrate this far fell away. He was prey. He could wait for them to close in or he could try to make his way out; it didn't matter. There was no escape.

- - -

The man does not answer, forcing you to search your own heart. Why have you come here? What has driven you? Your original goal of looking for your boyfriend you abandoned long ago, yet you continued seeking. You left home, family, job, friends, traditional aspirations; you cast financial security to the wind. Why? For what? Did you really expect to find anything? Did you really think you would survive, that something or someone out there in the void

into which you jumped would catch you and keep you from falling? Yes. Yes, you did. Either there is a goal or there is chaos; either you will arrive or you will perish; no middle ground exists.

Now, at last, you want an end to it.

But there is something, something else, some kind of barrier that remains.

The man stands quietly, waiting. It's your move.

What is it? What are you missing?

He is the doorman. Beyond him you sense...not Paradise, but....

People.

Words fail you, but in your mind, you picture it something like this:

A circular arrangement of the word "people" surrounding the word "you". The word "you" is positioned in the center. The word "people" is repeated 18 times, arranged in a circular pattern around "you". The arrangement is as follows:

		people		
		people	people	
	people		people	
	people		people	
	people		people	
	people		people	
people		you		people
people				people
people				people
people				people
people				people
people				people
people				people
people				people
people				people
people	people			people
people				

It is a whole community of people. Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of them, united as you have never before imagined people could be united: in mind, as if one. They are not all there physically, but they are all there psychically. They exist as a parallel but hidden society alongside the open society of the world, cloaking themselves in invisibility.

As you bask in the wonder of it, gradually you begin to make out a few individuals:

people
 people the woman at Villa Borghese
 the rickshaw driver people
 people people
 the two beggar kids people
 people people
 people you people
 people people
 people Greg
 people people
 people people
 the man in front of you people
 people

As you become aware of these few, you realize that all of these people are much more than individuals as a result of this blending of minds, that from the core of their unity, they have extracted powers such as telepathy, telekinesis, the ability to deflect the awareness of others, and so on, but that they consider these gifts of secondary importance to the unity itself. Most of them came together in an initial burst of awareness at some time in the past; from time to time others have joined them, but not many, because the price—the total forsaking of everything else—is so high. They have been aware of you for a long time. They protected you in the park in Rome; they sent the children to fetch you; they kept you from being noticed by the locals as you entered the slum.

Overwhelmed, you become frightened, and suddenly you see it like this:

[illegible]

And so you try to assert yourself, to defend yourself against them, like this:

them
them them
them them
them them
them them
them them
YOU them
them them
them them
them them
them them
them them
them them
them

As you think this, though, you realize it should be more like this:

US

They flood you with feelings of love, convincing you they are not a threat. It is an invitation, nothing more. You can accept the invitation and join them, or, if you are unable to accept, you will go your way and never see or hear from them again; in time, you will come to think that this never happened, that it was a figment of your imagination.

But you *want* to join them; you *want* to enter in. You have nothing to go back to.

You stand at the threshold...but are unable to proceed. Why? You understand that you can't bring anything with you. What do you yet possess? What are you clinging to?

In your mind's eye, you search yourself. You would willingly strip off your clothes, but that's not it. You have no more money, no possessions of consequence, except....

Your notepads, your pens and pencils. Your art. It is all that is left you. It is the raft you have clung to through the storms around you, your only stability and peace of mind. You have always felt that if you lost everything else, you would still have that. It has been the one constant, the one certainty, the one absolute.

You lift your bag from your shoulder, open it, gaze at the sketchbooks and art supplies. How can you forsake them? This is you. This is what makes you unique.

So what, in the end, do you want, a representation of reality or reality itself?

The decision seems to take an eternity, and no time at all. You smile, and drop the bag.

And you disappear.



Sam

newel anderson

Offworld Friends Are Best

Neal Blaikie

So Kelton says we're moving, and we move. Not a stitch. Precision. I've never liked anyone on Bette anyway, so no one glooms my leave. Tight, tight, tight, and we're off. Bye world, you well you. No sniff from me, no no. Must brace! Forward, forward.

You know how, que? You've been there. What Kelton says goes, O ersatz leader, even tho Lennor and Gelya nod like they had some edgewise. Right. Sure ya did. Same as me, huh? Yeesh. What's the point in being dolt if you can't stand up for yourself? Whatever they do in there at night must be real speck for all that draggin and moanin, yes'n no no'n.

Huh.

But I guess Kelt is the moneybags round here. Gelya with her cryptic stuff, all pens and paper—yes, paper!—strangles the muse whenever. Can't be bothered most. And Lennor, poor Lennor, what's he draggin that's small enough to warrant *this* life? Steppin n fetchin went out, say, eons ago, right? Well, spose there's his screechy cat stuff, spews forth bout the zact sec Kelto leaves for business or whatever. Guess he thinks it's music.

Hmmm. Okay.

But I guess I can't complain bout the commos, that's sudden. Bette's been a not-harsh mistress, tho the people spank. What with all this very ultra tech and such my little life's been pefeckly snappy. Yum! Course I do have to deal with Elmo. What a stew that one is! Could you be a bit more of a total lost one? Martha's socks! Any chance we could, say, accidentally leave it behind?

I might even stop the pee n em for that.

At least I got the cat, ole Mister Fibb, patchwork tabby o' me heart. He and I sit back and watch, danders up, faces hard-packed and simmered, as the shot goes like this: first the stuff gathers, skitter skitter, then big tubes appear. Helpers spring from their hideys and soon the tubes are filled. Pop goes the porter and, tube by tube, everything but us is sent through to New Place, Wherever. Good riddance, stuff, see you in storage. No dry eyes anywhere.

Cept mine.

Irised me fib, I say. Same as it ever was. And my mouth so big with yawn, a tube almost went for it. Confused behemoth. Pitiful

gus. You know, it's always scramble, line up, disappear. Just like that. Just like last time. Just like all the times before, mas y mas, mas y mas. Exacto. Phisheyes. Yer soup, meef.

Kelton says (really talks like this, tho I mock a weeble), "This world has outlived its usefulness for our family unit, has nothing new to offer us. We must move on in order to maintain a prosperous slide along the growth continuum. The tyranny of the local, the expectations of the planetary culture, are stifling for us Offworlders. We must embrace change and become one with it. New worlds—new opportunities—await us, and we must once more take the plunge into the void between, the long dark night of space." Long sentences, more like it. Mangled clichés. The usual prop.

Surprise there.

And so time comes for us to go, all six, like ice logs floating down the river Styx. Burned and stiffened, drained of phlegm. Eyes slammed shut and blinkered. Our lives described in one loose sentence. Local reference morphed with mythic allusion.

So kay, kay, I did well in lit.

Had my final bit just last week on (voice lofty here, slight lisp) "Ontological Chaos in Shakespeare's *Xena, Warrior Princess*." A real brow-mopper, that. Got a goforth, tho, pointed straight at BetteU. All that counts, cords Kelton. Well, if she waited one more blinkin year, I'd be there soon, quaffin n thinkin, stinkin n brinkin. Just like you, me friend. Fact.

But no.

Stead we get popsicled and popped, off to some world named after our best friend from Helen. Sharon, they call it, this New Place, a real eye-burner. Sure. Sure. Bunch of zealots and aliens that look like teddies, more like it. Yuck.

So, anyhoo, that'll be it for a while then. Don't forget this time, kay? Almost a reayear older now. Wonder if you'll slip too far by next time.... Ha, time. Time meaningless when frozen, but only to the frozen. Distance too. And the math, well, who needs it? Rather pee n em, meece elf.

Bye now, you.

- - -

So I came outa the freeze and first thing I saw sides some ceiling was the blink from you, flashing green-red-green in the corner of my good eye. That's right, I said *good* eye. Seems the left one went out during the Long Frozen Night of the Soul, and it'll be *six days* before the new one's ready. Six days!

Yeesh. You'd think we were back on Old Earth or something, all knives and forks and anus-clenching. Like I spected, tho: *primitive*.

I even had to cough up my own blood after meltdown. Can you picture that? Positively twenty-third century! Not a bear, that pain, and the embarrassment, well, don't get me started. Red everywhere, and me hunched over like some acolyte. And the tech, an actual human, too cute for words, and coltish. A real flicka.

Chagrin alone could have killed me. (Dramatic hand gesture here.)

So they sent me home to wait. Popped me in a soft blue loz that loped and suckled like a sponge. Dropped the loz down, down through the medcom and out, somewhere underground, out and out through a freckled tube, a dark-streaked road from help to helplessness. (So the theta still has me in its grip. So sue me.) Squirted me up through the floor and tossed me all atangle into bed, where I slept for two or more dazed days.

And awoke and found me here. (Talk about drama.)

Here is odd, but here is home I guess, and I'm too weak by weeks to venture out, to even look about this cold ceramic dom where all our stuff was dumped, where things like things we always see arrange said stuff in comf and miliar layouts. I did spy on the other mems, tho, and found all but Kelt in baby-sleep. Even Ole Fibb was curled atop a crumpled tube, all snores and purrs and crinked-up fabric. Where Kelton was I didn't know, but as per, her door was bolt n stymied, and knocks brought nothing forth cept echoing. Though I thought I heard a low, insistent buzz from deep insideways.

I wondered for a spit why Kelt was always up and atom fore the rest of us, her room a queenless box of bees, and thought about that dream I've had not once, but every time we move. The one in which I float above some medcom floor, look down on all but one of us prone and poked on separate drawers, eyes sealed shut, our pickle jars awaiting us sour pickles. See faceless techs all turn as one as Kelton enters walking, defer and bend as she peeks and prods, nods in mute agreement at some cold, deft readout. Watch in confusion as she walks over to the one still-empty slab, gives it a little shove, and leaves the room as it slides sighing into place.

So another day went by and, spry enough to pry, I trundled cross the commo room to pop Kelt's lock and squander it, to try again to fill my lifelong dream of peep and plundering. The door seemed standard slip-n-slide, with thumbpad lock all dumb and fuddle-faced.

But spite my hacks and tinkering, or maybe all because of it, that door stayed stuck as per, refusing puckered probity.

No luck thereabouts, I sidled off to bed again, fell slump and ruddy into waiting arms of mad old sandy kings. Dreamed of folded angel-wings trembling neath thin, strained shirtbacks, of cloth bright as sunlight stretched to ripping, of wings bursting forth into the light, stretching and flapping, rustling sounds turning into Kelton's harsh, dry laughter, her laughter turning into a whisper, her voice playing out through that same old dream. This time with Kelton sliding in the empty drawer and turning to look at me, smiling. "You're almost ready, Miri," she says, then turns and walks right through the sealed-up doorway.

I sat up all asudden, eyes awake before the rest of me, my left hand tingling out of its own strained sleep. I heard soft footsteps in the commo room, leapt to my feet and slipped the door a crack or two, caught sight as Kelton's door slid shut and clicked. I stood there agape for a nano or two, then shook my clouded head and went back to bed.

Sometimes it's just not worth it, que?

Later, you.

- - -

It's been a couple of weeks since the eye came back, and I'm all better now, tho a little sore and lop-sighted. The eye-con blinked early on the eighth day (late, of course), and in just a few, the commo floor irised and sucked me down and out into a sleek, dark loz, all gloss and glue and glimmering. Clipped and clamped and whooshed me back to medcom, where the same cute tech poked and popped with those same warm hands. In a flap and a whir I was stereopt again, had glommed like goo onto that kind, exquisite face of his.

Was x-tad to hear again from you, palsy woo. To hear we'll be the same age again in a whiffle. What a reef! I was so worried you'd be some distant oldie when I got here, but your new move cinched it. What a shot: us frozen, slipping through space in opposite directions. Not a clue nor a corpuscle. Some friendship, huh?

Some life.

Anyway, how's Lorraine? It's gotta be better than this dump. At least it's *ultra*. And I hear the U is great, too—lots of ancient lit and stuff (weep, weep), plus funsies too. I am so jealous! Not sure what they've got here, tho nothing in this town. Elmo mumbled something bout The City, other side of the rock shelf, but was kinda purple at the time, and woozy.

What's a rock shelf?

Went out for my first lookaround yesterday, and couldn't believe it. There's dust in the streets and people walk everywhere. Walk! Where are all the sliders, the pedicabs, the blinkin cars for Martha's sake? This is, like, Frontiersville.

And the people. Don't even get me started on the people. Clothes everywhere. And big eyes buggin out in my direction, like I was walkin around naked or somethin. Yeesh! Me, I was in a tunic and sandals. No big one. Standard issue. But the looks. Like they'd never seen legs before.

I almost died on the spot.

And the buildings. Where's the tall, shiny scrapers, the glass-lined monuments to human endeavor, the footspans high and shimmer? (Blah blah blah.) Where *do* they do business? Where *do* they put things? Nothing here but squat gray boxes, two stories most, and dingy brown things that look like clods of dirt. Even our humble bode looks like some gross bug chewed up sand and spat it back out. How I long for our little apt back on Bette!

I know, I know, I complained then too, but this is different. This is pure-angst-cakes different. A blazer. An eye pressed close to the filament with no lid to block out the blinding light. A trap as large as a world, a box with no discernible lid. Tears almost form just thinkin bout it.

Almost.

Nuff weepies from me, tho. As per, I will adjust. Kelton says it's hard at first, but our Offworld smarts and sources will prevail. Or some such prop.

Yawn.

All I know is, I can't wait to be old enough to wing it outa here. Maybe I'll head out your way, and frolics can be had by all.

See ya on the thaw, meef.

- - -

Weeks now, and my invisibility potion seems to be working.

Kelton's gone all the time, of course, fetchin vittles, and the other two are holed up in their rooms. Scratching sounds from both. Poppin eyes that peek, mad dashes to the lav. And little Elmo's gone total virt, just sits in the corner droolin. I tell ya, that boy ain't right.

I think they used to call this a pickle.

What *is* a girl to do?

Sure, food comes out the hoozie like always, and we're plenty juiced. Skittery things clean up and make tidy. School comes through the virt, Offworld of course, since this is, like, another planet or something. So at least *inside* it's all the same, tho boring. But outside. Outside's another one.

How do I begin?

Just say it then: I think somehow we've skaddled back in time. There. Fact. Only x-plan, really. How else to count the tall black hats and skirts enough to clothe an army? How else to count the days in hell with no one left to talk to? Strange does not approximate, me friend. Not close. Not never.

And you know me. I try to make first contact, to say my hiyas and my howsits, to glom on and friend it. But these ones don't nibble nor bite, don't stop to peck the time nor ask for noddin. They slip n slide like eelfins or mammoosas, all scuttery-buttery and plague-dipped. What am I, the prophet? Should I fess up now or barter for it later? What is the angle best approacheth?

And Elmo's no help, the little pert. Lost in some other world, with body here for puddlin. Kelton, well, what's her line but money, baby, money? Nothing up there but a speech with calculator, that one. She's not even here when she's here, gel? Then we come to L&G, the separated twins, all self-absorbed and pouty. Withdrawn an understudy thatwise. Are they at least edible, I twink?

Vacuum, oh yes, vacuum.

Try this shot: yesterday, lessons dried and puckered, I ventured out to see. To see what, I didn't know. The locals skat, as per, dashed into doors left slammin. But there's this boy, roughy that, all slouched and mean and smilin. Freckles everywhere, with red hair peekin from outa that black hat. Just sittin there on a stoop three doors down, like he's waitin. Ah, I thought, there's the one. Aliens in sight, Cap, turn on the transer.

I walked up bold as beeswax, said to the little flurp, "Hey, I'm Miri. What's your name?"

His eyes were quick, this one, and they onced me over. No turnin and runnin, tho. Real progress. His mouth worked too, and said back, "I am called Eli."

Now what's with that, I twonk? *I am called Eli.* An actual pronouncement. It was puddle-lumpish. I decided to ignore it and press onward.

"So, Eli, what's for fun hereabouts?"

He looked me over and back, sizing up, tweaked those dry gray lips, and said, "Fun? I am not familiar with that concept. Please explain." All formal-like, but scared in a bold way.

My side split at this point, you can imagine. Where'd this peppa learn to talk? Ancient Earth? This was too much.

"You know, fun," I gasped tween chortles, then took a finger and poked him in the side for tickles.

You'd think I'd smacked him in the head with a board.

It was just like Kelton's ancient toons. You know, the ones from Old Earth. One minute he's there, sittin smirk, next thing he's gone, a cloud of dust left to mark the spot. Poof! Just like that. But I knew he'd been there, cuz my finger was still hot from where I touched him. Hmmm.

I believe I've made first contact.

Beam me up now, U-girl.

- - -

You know, I will absolutely explode from jealousy if you don't stop telling me how much fun you're having. I *am* happy for you, of course, and all the molecules in my body are lined up and pointing in your direction, wagging their little tails like hyperactive puppies. But enough already. I am begging here.

The thought of you sitting in the grass with all your new friends, sharing laughs and jolts, your minds stimmed up and your glands swollen bigger than your heads...well, it just sends me up the chute without a ladder. A real flounce-ouncer that image, a salty spiter. And oh, how it makes me wax nostalgic....

Remember that time on Joanne when we prowled the Tubric Fest as oners? It was dry that day, as per, and the sky was huge and pink and streaked with ketchup red and mustard yellow. All the oldies were skonked on ethyl-em and sheetrock, dressed up like Warden or the New Man, their pockets stuffed with labels and hard-baked breading. It was truly pathetic. It was our first taste of human foil, of vacuum and the spitlock. Oh, how we cracked and sportled, running ramp and ruddy through the streets of Holetown.

Then last, when our feets were boned and brickled, our heads all light from seconding, we ran up the northern hills and bodied hard against the cool, clean grass there, huffing and wheezing and tearing. You turned to me then and told me that you loved me, and we braced and rolled and giggled under the foodstuff sky.

These are the moments that make life worth living, but where are they now, eh? Buried deep and teasing.

So how am I, then, you ask?

Worse to worse and then still worse—how else to describe my life here? I know I sound pitiful but, well, I am. For all intents, for all I know, for the luvva Martha, I am basically alone here. Sure, there's Mister Fibb, but at his advanced stage he sleeps all day, and when he's awake he's as miserable as me. Apparently, there are no rodents here, and dust makes him sneeze. So what's there for him, eh? And I'm bad company when he is awake, so we're no help for neither. Crimes & thistle trees! Despite that old hoary, misery does *not* love company. Not even a little. Not for a sec, nor even the thought of one. Fact.

Elmo, as I've said, is stuck in virt, and finally I had to ivy him. I mean, I hate the little org, but he is my brother. I think. Plus, if he died, the smell would really push me over. I have to consider that aspect. I have to consider everything now. No help from the squalid dolt quarter, that's aplenty.

Haven't seen Kelt in weeks, and the last time was like a blur—a rustle of cloth, a cough in the night, a laugh and a pat in the dark while I almost slept. Then out the door with a click, and the faint sound of tears hitting ceramic floors coming from Lennor's room. A regular emo geyser that one is. Yeesh. And he's no help, nor his twin, even when I do get to see them by daylight. Which ain't often. Nor for long. Which is a reef, really.

I tried talking to Lennor once, while we were still on Bette, and it was like tryin to catch a fly with your tongue. As soon as I penetrated the comfort zone, he was off, staring at the ceiling, drooling on his feet, making low screeching sounds deep in his throat. What is that guy on? What reality does his little pea-brain inhabit? More ovely, what does Kelton see in him? Artistic genius notwithstanding, the guy's a zone. A real blank note.

And Gelya, well, talking to her is like nursery rhymes read backward, whispered in your ear by a duck. Is that vivid enough? Cryptic does not even begin to approximate, me friend. I watch the lips move on that beatific face of hers, but all that comes out are wisps of dry, stale air with nonsense attached. She did make a nice cozy for the hoozie, though, which was real special.

Then there's The Mysterious Kelton, O Bioneer, intrepid leader of our feeble pod, who at least *used* to be around for chats and such.

But not these days. She's off somewhere doing whatever it is she does, moving things and information, taking credit for whatever brings the most credit. Making our lives better or some such prop.

Right. Whatever. I guess so.

It sure would be nice if she'd stop to say hi or thunk me in the noggin, would look me in the faceplate or frown at words left floatin'. Would at least notice on her way that Elmo, her precious little Brinkly, has festered in a pool of urine, has burn marks round his temples. I wonder what planet *she's* on. I wonder who the tall black hat is that's always waiting, slipping out of shadows to blend with her receding image.

And these people are supposed to be my role models. At least, that's what the brochure said.

I wonder now what went wrong, why this move threw us all atumble, why this place pecks and pesters more than others. We were never nuclear like the natives, but we were happy. Weren't we? I wonder that one often.

Sorry, you. If I pout like this next time, could you just shoot me?

- - -

You know for years I've danced with fate, have tempted shots of Kelton's rooms avacant, have tried to crack and pester dark, forbidden privatings. Have tinked and hacked at stubborn locks, done battle with her dumb aye-eyes, but always fell back flustered and defibulant. But doors must be less strictured here, old simple mechs more vulnerable, for finally I cracked her code and slipped inside.

The room was like her rooms have been everywhere, but quiet some, with cluttering and dustiness—like Martha's kitchen, or a tomb. First thing I noticed was the skitter ports sealed shut with some adhesive goo. Second thing I spied was a book, an actual book, ancient and moldering, left open on the stand next to Kelt's trim bed. I bent to see, caught whiff of must and centuries, saw tiny notes in gotten script scrawled all around the margins of the text.

I pickled it and flipped the dry brown pages, saw notes throughout, the margins jammed to bustering. Then closed it up and turned to glom the covering. Its title was just bare visible, printed in flaking gold boss, the words *Earth Standard: Tears of the Prophet: The Quest for a Nascent Nanotech*. And below that, almost blitted by time, was this: by Rosemary Kelton, Ph.D., HM. Rosemary Kelton? Was this some ancient forb from the two-name era?

Weird, I thought, but splainable.

I placed the book back on the table and took a shot of something else. On the wall above Kelton's bed hung an old toodee photograph in a thick wooden frame. Its colors had leaked out over time, its edges browned and curled, but the image was still clear and sharp. It showed a woman who looked like Kelton, but in olden garb, sitting under a huge tree, holding a baby in her arms, smiling sweetly for the camera. On her right was a little girl, sitting with her hand on the woman's knee, smiling too, but with her eyes turned away, as if she were staring at something in the distance.

I gently lifted the pic from the wall, turned it over in my hands, and noticed a hollow channel running around the back of the frame. I looked closer and saw a small gray sac, about the size of a thumb-nail, lodged inside one corner of the channel, marved at its slow and regular pulsing, its rhythmic in-n-out.

I poked at this strange vesicle with fingered tip, fell soft against its warm resist. In a prod or two I had it loose, rolled it out and onto my hot left palm. I bent for a closer spec-n-sniff and it softened and pooled, flowed cross my hand and wrist like a smooth rubber glove, warm and wet and oddly calming. I put the frame on the table next to the book and lay down on the bed, the hand arest at my side. Serenity vacuumed my resistance, cleaned my curiosity. I turned slowly toward a sound on my left and saw a woman standing there, her hands clasped in front of her, a gentle smile spreading across her face. She was dressed in olden garb like the woman in the pic, but looked different, younger. She spoke in a very thickly-accented Earth Standard.

"Please remain still while the upload commences," she said, and reached for my newly-gloved wrist.

I couldn't spurt, couldn't spin, and didn't really want to. Felt something gathering inside my head, like a storm front over mountains, felt it move down toward my chest and then surge along my arm to my wrist, where it gathered again, waiting. It felt like a hot ball of dough under my skin, presence sans pressure, like it habbed the same space as my own mollies, tuned-out but tuneful. In a flick, the ball flipped, and passed through my palm and into the palm of the woman who held me. She began to glow slightly in the dimly-lit room, closed her eyes, dropped her chin to her chest, paused a sec, looked up.

Then it was all over. Just like that.

She lifted her head, let go of my wrist, and stepped back. "Upload complete," she said, and dissolved into the shadows. I sat up on the bed, reached over and picked up the frame, and watched as the glove flowed off my hand and back into the channel, where it once again became a small gray sac slowly pulsating in a corner.

I hung the picture back on the wall and quietly slipped out.

Can I wake up now?

- - -

I guess interesting will have to replace fun, and weird replace fulfilling. Life does its strange attractor number, and change becomes another flavor. Sometimes strawberry, sometimes acid. We can go with it, find value in reaction, or we can retreat and suck the myrtle. Suddenly the unknown becomes nutritious.

I do tend to pontify, eh? But I guess I have finally adjusted to new life here. I guess anything can become normal if you sit in it long enough. Even goo.

I won't talk about the home life this time, since I don't really have one anymore. What I have is a place to go to when I'm not doing anything else, a place to get free food and fresh clothes, a place to get away from Eli or to wait out the too-long nights. Sometimes I even go there to sleep, when sleeping feels like something I oughta do. When lids crash down and legs turn to puddin. When I miss the cat, I guess. He's gotten quite feeble.

After that first contact, Eli became my shadow. I'd be out on the streets, my usual lookin, and I'd see him darting, silverfishing down alleyways and slip-slidin cross crumbly rooftops. Like a hummer, that one, or a trained eel. A ghost dog or a peckin poodle. A doppler shift without the ganger. A real live spanner.

So it became my mission to trap the little fly, to snap him short and shave him. To have a face-to-face, a tetter. To snatch the hat from top the carrot, to morph que pasas. Because, well, a girl can't have a stalker. Not unless she wants one. Not unless the script calls for it, and I'm telling you it most definitely does not. I am not a number! I am a free man! (Obscure reference here. Check the ancient lit deeb, U-girl.)

It wasn't hard, the snarin. I mean, he's not the brightest prey, this Eli, and his element is not even close to mine. His ineptitude was not even obvious, it was so obvious, but was still cute in an animal way. What can I say? I'm definitely a softy. So I found an

alley with no exit, a tunnel with a cap on, a door nailed shut against the prophet. And I led him in and I trapped him. Details would be boring. Results follow.

"Hello, I-Am-Called-Eli," I voiced mockingly. "Remember me?"

He gave his best pinned-by-starlight eye-poppin, darted back and forth like he'd lost his soul or comslot, ran headlong into the door to nowhere, then turned and finally faced his captor. It was too sad to bear. And I'm not expanding, not even a little. He looked like the anti-Martha had caught him at last, had shoved her gnarled hands up his pant legs, had grasped his trembling heart tween her teeth and bitten hard. Real hard. Yeesh. Was I really that scary? Maybe I need a new deodorant.

"Look," I said, pinning him harder with my best I-mean-business facethrust. "*I am called Miri.* Let's be friends, kay?" I knew further mocking wouldn't help, but hey, I couldn't help it. Sometimes the switch says sweetheart and sometimes it says bitch. But who'd been following who here, eh?

He looked scared for a sec, or maybe two, or maybe seventeen, then got that smug look I was growing so fond of, slumped nonchalantly against the wall and crossed his arms. I felt my fondness grow. Now *this* was more like it!

"So, Eli," I said. "Why have you been following me?"

For a flash, I thought this too direct, his slump pointed downward sudden, his meanor not much meaner. Then a spark sparked, a match lit up in Martha's oven, and the prey rolled bright green eyes up at me and spoke. Or mumbled.

"You are—" He choked a bit, phlegmatic to a fault I'd say, but who's complainin now, eh? Progress was afannin, the cat had jumped the bag, had left it crumpled. I could tell there was no backward goin. And didn't want there to be. *Bad.*

Real bad.

"I cannot stop watching you," he said, and fixed me a sad, sheepish gaze for a nano. Or two. "You are like an angel." His face flushed at this, and truth unfold, so did mine. A bit. A micro-bit. A shaving of a bit. A bit-o-honey.

I laughed, of course, not showin. Bout had to, que? I mean, this was ludi, like some old tellshow. And the lack of contractions, well, it was too much. Where *did* these people learn to talk? Galactic Central? Earth Sooner? Somewhere along the vast continuum of cultural expansion, the wide-eyed divergence, the human diaspora,

these ones uninvented normal speech, dressed it up in hot black cloth along with their unwashed bodies. Everything they say sounds so important. What else could I do?

"Well, Eli, that's real speck," I shot back, "tho some might think a wee bit bodkins." I gave him that long, hard look, my best Old Jesu, then smirked back friendly. "Course, I'm not just anyone. I may let it pass with an x-plan."

He uncoiled a smudge at this, moved a foot back and forth, drawing something in the sand below. I wanted to look, to see if the signs were signin, but I fixed his face in my radar and held on real tight. I wasn't lettin go for nada. Martha herself coulda walked up and hugged me and I wouldn't've budged or shimmied.

It was a moment sublime.

"I have never seen anyone like you," he said, somehow repeating himself, tho different. I stood fast, encouraging him with composure. "You are like an angel from the Book of Reparation, a right-hand maid of Martha. When the end time comes, when the Son returns to place His head in the lap of the Mother, you will be there, helping to hold open the portal." He looked down then, embarrassed, and drew his foot back and forth across the image he had drawn in the sand, erasing it forever.

For once, I was numbstruck.

This really was too much, a this too big to grapple with. I felt something fall away. I grasped and missed it.

Eli saw the opening and fled.

I stood there glazed over, run amok and stupid. This was not what I had expected, not what I had wanted. But there it was, trackin away through the sand, a dust-cloud sayonara.

I walked over to where Eli had been leaning, squatted down, and took a looksee. The image was mostly blitted, but out near the edges, mirrored left and right round the scuffle, two pieces remained. I squinted closer, felt a hotness somewhere inside me, stood up all asudden. Bloodrush blurred my vision, set stars to dancin. But through it, hard as light in a vacuum, I could see the image fragments clearly.

They looked like wings unfolding.

I turned then, and followed Eli's footprints.

Stay tuned, old friend. Thoughts must gather.

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Now that you enter your segundo año, stroll brightly long that path that grows elusive, the image of you shrinks and falls away

from me. Like an old toodee tellshow running looped on an ancient viewscreen, fallen on its side in a vacant room down a long, narrow hallway, my vision of you's lopped and glimpsed but briefly, forever out of focus. Your words come through, though, and are ingested some, then hang crackling in the air, stuttering and popping, as you try again to comfort and inform me.

It's okay that your life is so perfectly the one we both once wanted, that your new friends are all sad members of our unsung tribe that never was one. And I'm not bitter nor resentful, am glad as clams for you, old friend, ecstatic in detachment. You and I've spent too many days as one, with too many blinks as longings, for me to feel anything to the left of sorrow. Feelings on the wrong side of *that* track are pointed strictly at my life right here and now, with all its winter wonderings. Though it seems that even that bad apple may have worms that are oddly edible.

I'm sorry, meef, to've left you hangin on that last one, but some vents don't open on their own, ya know, but need a bit o' pryin. 'Twas such that day I left you on, called Eli Day in retro, when the brainpan and the scribbler crashed together in that hallway, shook plaster from the walls and ceiling, left this head all scratched and ponderful. What happened next was so surreal, yet so mundane a branch on the decision tree. Where do I begin?

Where do I end?

The prints I followed on that day grew fainter by the blockful, but I hounded them down streets of dust and buildings left to moldering. I hadn't had the pleasure of these ruined ways, had never seen these blackened doors and roofs caved in on silent natterings. But here it was the nonderwise, the remnants of a city left to fest and rottering, a city not of human org, yet snug and oddly simmerful. As I stalked the feet of Eli, the streets grew narrower, like vehicles had never traveled here, like tall thin people had strolled through in solitude, and slowly. And all around my speckled bulbs, the buildings or their afterthoughts grew ever taller, like human habs stretched upward, and the air went thick and ripely scented, as if molecules of air had over time transmuted into fungus.

I hadn't really thought about it since I've been here, or mostly even cared to, but figured now that this place I'd stumbled blindly into was the ruins of the teddy civ. It was too old, too skew, to be a human wreck, and the doorways too tall by at least another meter. How had I missed these quarters forewise? I seemed by the direction

of our stellar foodsource to be just westward of our lovely town of Aleriel, and could only guess that the human offcasts had built along the edge of this and then expanded eastward. But then, geography has never been my smelly shirt.

At last my trail of toes came to an end, not fresh at the feet of preyboy Eli, but up against a wall of stone and old packed earth, of orange mold and vines of crinkled cellotree. I looked around for signs of him, to see how he had skirted me, but saw no paths leap offwise, nor signs of skulky clambering. Just his prints boldly pacing toward the wall, a half-print bedded in the base of it, as if he had simply passed right through and kept on going.

I thought of Kelton then, and drawers laid out with frozen bodies. I shivered and stepped forward.

I tried to grasp the wall's old stones, to pull up and climb, but kept slipping back into the dust with fading ease not under me. Then a high-pitched voice said my name, and I turned to see who called on me, to grasp at anything that was graspable. Was startled to see a teddy there, not ten meters away, standing still and staring, with my eyes now locked on its, its long arms swaying back and forth, back and forth in an imaginary breeze, one hand pointing off and on at its own chest, a sound like "pip" coming from its too-round mouth.

Was it telling me its name?

Although I'd known they were around, this was my first time actually seeing one of Sharon's natives, and I felt a warmth spread cross my face then down it. It really did look like a teddy, though a teddy that had been unstuffed a bit and stretched up longways. Its head was slightly large for its reedy body, and its eyes were big and round and dark-black featureless. It opened its mouth and spoke to me in a voice that was high and shrill and piercing, yet oddly soft and welcoming.

"The wall is not the wall, Miri," it said, then turned and passed through as I'd imagined Eli had.

Needless to say, I was hammerlocked and flummured.

I ran over to where it had last stood, shouting, "Pip? Pip? Is that your name?" I kicked at the wall. "What do you want with me? How do you know my name? Where's Eli?" I grew angrier by the nanosec, felt like the butt of some alien joke, finally came unstuffed enough to settle down in the dust and rest my knotty back against the wall that certainly felt like a wall to me.

I finally got up and, with one last kick at the imaginary wall, walked back home.

Hey, can I come live with you?

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So I was just lying there on the bed, orbs unstuck, sleepless and unsettled. I stared at the blankness of the ceiling, at the clean white empty space that should have been the inside of my skull, trying to flip but floundering. To peek the neek you showed me once, to let the thoughts fall out and fumble. But this old brain of mine, now seventeen or so in Standard years (I'm not quite sure), tho decades in real ones, is cluttered up and scuppering. Like the video vaults of Pauline, or the House of Dead Trees on Kelly Three, I am packed and puckered, jammed and suckered, host to thoughts and hostility, to memes and virility.

Where do I get this stuff?

It must come from somewhere, or drop full-formed from the ungray sky, so relentless blue, blue like the color of my mood here, my life a shade of it, or shaded by it. Confusion is the order of the day, I guess, the scoop du jour, as I flux and flummer, on my back and on my.... What is that color, that shade the ceiling and the walls all mock me with? I call it white, but is it really? White is the absence of color, but how can that be? All white must be off a bit, impure as my thoughts, thinking of you and all we've left behind us.

Heard a mumble from the grave today, a note from futures lost and pasts unbroken. Not from anyone we knew, but from her granddaughter—her *granddaughter*, meef. (I shake just thinking these words.) It seems our friend Sharon, this planet's unlikely namesake (tho not really), left by us three years ago to live her life on Helen, has died. Not by disease nor peril, no, nor by some jilted lover's hand nor accident's perusal. No. She died of old age, meef. *Old age*. She was a hundred and ten Standard years old, and she just died in her sleep. Died and left us more friendless, less freckled in the feckless night, adrift with only each other now to console with. She was the last of our group to stay on Helen, left behind as we moved onward, the last to both outlive and undo us, and now it is only you, my friend, and humbled little me.

The mind glopplens, flaps open and sputters. The time dial turns, puts screws in the places we thought were hidden, twists and twists as we dangle there hopeless. Just you and me, kid, and I can't even twitter. Can't flutter nor smack, nor crack nor chortle nor spin. You

and me, who haven't seen flesh in three long years—who, by some accident or bald happenchance, have remained same and relative—are *it* now. We are it. Partners in crime, pals in a hurry, a murder of crows, a gaggle of worries. Our group of five is two now, short-sheeted by relatives, by Uncle Albert's sad, sick joke on all of us.

This means we can never move again, or only move together. Where then shall we meet, we birds of a feather?

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The sadness bates as the hours pass, and we turn now to local news. Was not surprised you'd heard of her dim mising, of our friend who lived so long ago and left us. She would have made it so, her parting wish, to think of us through her slow, dull passing. Was glad to hear we'd shared our sadness.

I didn't see Eli again for weeks after the wall incident, thought perhaps the flurp was lost forever. Didn't care, really, tho curiosity lurked about, snuffling for orts. Then one day I saw him on that stoop, slouched as per, time perhaps in some mad versal, and marched right over. *The little clone*, I thought, *what's he all smirked about, all simmer-faced and skulksome? He better have an x-plan.*

"Hey, Eli," I said, fearsome and delib. "What's the deal with that wall?"

He turned his head slowly, looked at me like he'd never seen me before. When he blinked those cold green eyes, I could have sworn there was some kind of film covering them. But when I moved closer and stared him down, they appeared normal. Hmmm. He smiled then, too warm I thought, and nodded just a weeble.

"Hello, Miri," he said. "What wall are you referring to?"

That smile grew warmer by the nanosec, and he seemed more at ease than the last time we had been together. I couldn't flip nor flurry this one, couldn't see inside the box, nor even lift the lid. He was scruted, this one. Just the way I like 'em.

I smiled.

"Don't play that, preyboy," I said. "You're mine now and you know it. Fess up or prepare to be tortured." I stood my ground, arms akimbo, feet treed, face darker than my normal dark skintone.

He slackened some, turned away from the sheer force of me, and said, "I do not know what you are talking about, Miri." He paused, shuffled his feet some, turned back. "But you are correct. *I am yours.*"

I sat down on the stoop next to him, careful not to touch, and stared in the same direction he seemed so intent upon. We sat like this for longer than I could stand, but I stood it. Then I burst, though quietly.

"So, Eli," I said, my voice as neutered as I could make it, "does this mean we're friends now?"

He laughed then, a low rumbling sound, somewhere between a cough and the rustling of fabric, and I thought my head might explode. It was too much. He was laughing, like he was normal or something. What was I to do now?

"Eli?" I said, as tiny devils danced on my shoulders. Both of them.

His laugh scuttled off to the hole it had crawled out of, and he said, "Yes, Miri?"

"Would it be okay if I hugged you?" I was giddy.

I saw him stiffen a bit at this, was ready for the escape attempt—would've wrestled him to the ground if I'd had to. But his answer surprised me, and I relaxed. "Yes," he said, "that would be nice."

I threw an arm across his shoulder and drew him closer, and could feel the trapped sigh escape from his trembling lips. I wanted to laugh out loud, to dance fingers across his hidden ribs, to tickle all that stiffness right out of him, but it was like grabbing onto a coil of live electrical cable encased in mud, and I just couldn't. It didn't matter, tho. We were buds now, I thought, conjoined in our solitude. I stopped myself from making him a knucklehead, patted his back like we were men, and set him free. "There, now," I said, using all my superpowers to fend off the smirk floating in the air around my face, "that wasn't so bad, was it?"

He laughed again in that rusty way, and we sat there in silence for a while, until Eli broke it.

"Have you ever heard of something called the Pony Express?" he said.

I shook my head, realized he wasn't looking at me (as per), and said, "No, can't say I have."

He was quiet for a few seconds longer than I was comfortable with, but when I spied him from the corner of an eye (the original one), I could tell he was gathering his thoughts, working hard to cobble up enough courage to keep speaking. I was filled with pride.

"It was an ancient form of information transfer," he said, and I could tell he was on a roll, or at least the crumb of one. I stayed

zipped, clamped and curious, as he continued. "Young men, boys actually, about the same age as me, would ride on the backs of small horses, delivering handwritten messages to remote towns and villages." He stopped and looked at me, expecting unbelief, saw none, and continued. "This was before the era of flight, or electronic communication, when humans relied only on muscle and intelligence." He paused there, seemed embarrassed, shuffled those busy feet of his. "I learned it in school."

"I see," I said, but didn't. Did he have a point?

He took this as a sign of interest and continued. "We have made everything so easy," he said, "there is nothing left to do. We go to school to learn about what has gone before, get so close to it we can almost taste it, smell it, touch it. But when we are through, there is nothing for us to do." He sighed, a soft, wet trembling in his chest. "If I could do anything I wanted to, I would be a Pony Express rider in ancient times."

"That's real...interesting, Eli," I said, and felt momentarily disappointed that I was unable to mask my sarcasm.

We sat stumped for a while longer, and then Eli stood up suddenly, turned. "I must go now, Miri." He was facing toward me, but was looking down.

I reached up and gently clasped his chin, lifted his sweet face to look at mine. "Hey," I said, "it's been fun," and I let go. He didn't look down, or away.

"Yes," he said, maintaining. "I guess we *are* friends now."

He turned and walked away, and I sat there watching him until he disappeared around a corner.

I still don't know what's up with that wall, tho.

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I see, I see. U-life grees and grumbs, and you gain in ways I never will, though my path is growing stranger by the molecule. The vids were spat, and kindly preyed upon. I see by your squirt that U-girls are well-served, tho I, alas, could barely looksee and remember. But there you were, old friend, full-merge moving, full of living, blurry and far away, fading as I faded too. You seemed so young to me, so childlike in your hesitation, though I know we share the same unnumbered days. The universe we both had common, that bubble boy called Civ or simply World, seems bratty and complacent now, a hallmark or a toodee rendering. Can I call it shallow without offending thee?

Life on Sharon has broken and cleansed me, has sent my orbitals spindiving. My needs are not desires, and my desires lie out in front of me like sausages or eggdreams. Pick it up, Miri, examine it. Turn the link over and over in your hands, feel the tightness of its casing. Place it in your mouth and feel its salt necessity, all warm cylindrical; observe its slow but happy journeying. And even if you consummate, chew it up and swallow, the next one will still be there, and the next one. And the next. They are knected now forever, and the tall cool bevs all slide down smooth and creamy, leave foamy stashes on trembling lips neath eyes like broken saucers.

Am I making sense here? It seems so to me, but then, my mind has moved elsewhere since last time, and your eyeblink came through feeble and a bit unwanted. How can I x-plan? How can I sprinkle? Two days ago I would have qued my sanity, would have laughed and trimmed the giggle tree.

But now. Now's another thing.

I awoke that day to the sound of knocking, a light tap-tap on the port to our humbodable. Stumbled past closed doors and Elmo's pud, pecked the pad with wobbly thumb, and waited. Slip it went, or sloop, and the bright glare of the morn hit full-force follicle. I looked asquint through sleep-rheumed peeperings, but saw no one. As I turned agusted, ready for a killing spree, I looked down and saw a bunch of flowers, large white petals gleamed and shimmering, all trimmed and tied and left hold lyn.

I picked them up directed noseward, sniffed the blooms with fuddled senses, felt a warm tingling long my caps and sinuses. Had a brief flash of imagery, a dream perhaps or memory, a scene from some fond-remembered telly thing. In this shot, I saw swarms of scopic insects, their crystal bodies mad-scrambling down warm, wet passageways, pincers clicking as they sped along. As the others rushed away, I saw one stop and lock its claws into the damp, pulsating wallway and begin dismantling it one molly at a time—and light began to pour through holes that should never have been there.

I coughed a bit, burning, shook off this vision, padded closed the door. *Eli*, I thought, and smirked. *He's brought me flowers. How sweet.*

I tossed them on the commo table and went back to bed.

Later that day, all up and span and curious, I followed Eli as he walked delib through ruined spaces. Trudged daisy long the slender

paths and whyways, returned by circles left unbroken to the wall of disappearancing. Watched in plex his skinny form pass through that wall like vaporings, while words of Pip nagged in my ears like gnatty pleas. Again I stomped up to the wall and gave it a swift kick, felt something give this time, stepped back a bit.

Emboldened thus, my brain a fuzz of dictories, I closed unbelieving eyes, tossed off stale thoughts and hezities, and strode bold and brazen toward that wall that was no wall. I felt some roughness scrape at me, like teeth biting into chalk, then passed straight through its soft, cold fabric to the other side, my skin all wet with a moisture that could never in this world be called water.

I stopped and looked around, my heart a palp of pleasures best untold, and found myself in a surprising grove of brilliant trees, tall tween taller buildings, all fest with leaves of velvet amber, popped out with blooms of stellar white. And the ground underfoot went from dust to pale blue grass, warm from the sun or from something older, soft like the inside of a baby's ear or the cool green light before the sun falls at last below the waiting worldedge.

My sandals fell unbuckled to the ground, and my feet drank in the luscious softness of this new kind of walkspace. I strolled over to where Eli was sitting under one of the trees, looked down at his unsmirked form there, and settled down on the ground a few feet in front of him, looking up and around at the brightness and the splendor.

"I thought trees were supposed to be green," I said, trying for sport but losing it.

Eli chuckled some, but didn't answer, for these were definitely not green, not trees at all in the usual sense, though the shape was there, and the semblance. Beneath their graying, withered bark, against the back of Eli who sat propped up there, I sensed a pulsing, rhythmic breathing. And circling round their vibrant canopies, like haloes or the rings of Jennifer, were thousands and thousands of flying things that looked like fernbees, moving in precise formation, quieter than the air had become all around me.

Eli smiled softly, tipped back his hat, looked up from eyes ablaze with color, and said, "This is it, Miri. A window to the next world." He reached up with one long hand, and a flower came loose from the tree, fell like a snowflake into his open palm. He cradled it in his arms like it was the baby Jesus. "These are mullblossoms. They help bring understanding."

Then he held up the crisp white petal and, with one smooth movement, tore it clean in two. He held one half out to me. "Here. Take it and place it on your tongue," he said. "But do not chew or swallow it."

I reached out and took the petal-half, felt something soft and warm like fresh butter sliding into my hand, saw as from a distance my hand move toward my mouth, felt the salt-sweet taste of the flower as it dissolved on my eager tongue. And something inside of me snapped off and broke. Broke in two. Broke into my safe, my secret hiding place, ransacked its rooms and tore out the flooring, smashed the windows and left the door ahanging. Then a warm wind blew through the open spaces, sucked papers and shards of glass out into a clear blue sky.

I stood up and walked through the jarred-out doorway. Inside was bright and clean, warm sunlight pouring like milk through the sheered-out windows. I looked down and saw the floor was soft blue grass, and my naked feet sank in with gratitude. I looked around and saw one lone piece of paper lying in a corner, went over and picked it up.

On one side of the paper was a child's drawing done in bright prime colorings. It showed a house with smoke coming out of the chimney, and a fence with horses behind it. Standing in front of the house were a man and a woman holding hands, him in a tall black hat and her in a tunic and sandals. Off to one side was a large tree with amber leaves and white blossoms, and sitting on the ground under it, what appeared to be a little boy, drawing angels in the sand. It was signed simply, "Love, Tesla."

I turned it over, trembling. On the back was a single sentence, written in clean block letters in a child's simple, deliberate handwriting: "The past will enslave you."

I dropped the paper and ran.

Opened my red, wet eyes and saw Eli sitting across from me, smiling serenely, eyelids closed and stuttering.

I stood up and ran for real. Ran headlong into the wall that was a wall again, climbed wide-eyed up and over its slanty side, fell with a thud to the road below, and ran some more. Ran barefoot through the dustblown streets, panicked through alleys and over crumbling wallways, past startled teddies with their claws clutched tightly to their abdomens, through crowds of tall black hats nodding in perfect unison to a sound like gas escaping. Ran for kay after bloody-footed

kay, chest afire, head apound and scattering, until at last I fell down blubbered and defeated, slid to a filthy finish in the doorway of my own humbodable.

How I got here I'll never know, but I managed to roll and crawl, to pull myself inside and slam back blithering. To slough the day and its mad tendering, to disinfect and dress in clean new coverings and fall hard and fast into a bed of dark bad dream and warm cloud membering. Fell asleep to the sound of my own gut twisting, twisting, like thin, reedy arms flailing in the breeze.

Strange does not approximate, me friend. Not now. Not never.

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Somewhere back along that bitter trajectory, out in space where our paths were silently crossing, I must have entered a zone of strangeness. The life you have, the life I used to covet, seems unreal to me now. Like a story. Or a lie.

We've been on this world for more than a year, and everything has changed forever. If I sound like some alien to you, more serious or befuddled, it's because I am. What else could I be? The universe I once was an unthinking part of has become remote to me, a far-away dream. Even the virt, my once and only connection to All That Mattered, lies unused in a darkened corner of my brain, its billy cues tangled and dusty on the floors of the rooms I quietly tiptoe through. It tickles me now and then, like a question mark stuck in the back of my throat, but I shrug it off and press onward.

Real life has become much more interesting now.

So much has happened since I last reached out to you, changes that seem inevitable with hindsight. Where to begin?

Kay, first: Brinkly died. There. I said it. Even used his real name, the little twerp. Came home one day from my Travels With Eli and there he was, univied, rotting on the floor of the commo room, a micro smile splayed cross his face, dingy vomit coloring his already discolored skintone. What a stew. What a waste. I guess some of us adapt and some of us retreat. I did what I could to help, right?

(Right?)

I was so mad I started kicking him, started yelling at the little flurp to get up, get up you Martha clone, make yourself useful you sorry little pud of goo, you no-good tissue flask, you pee machine, you beautiful little boy, you little bother, you little brother. My little brother. My *dead* little brother. Oh Martha, you were so easy to

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ignore when you were alive. Now you'll never leave me alone, will burn forever in my retinas, in the lining of my nostrils. Damn you for going away. Damn you for being here at all. (How Martha-damned poetic.)

But then, life's rough sometimes. You get over it.

So they came and took him away, recycled his worthless juices, his teaspoon of salt, those somber men in black, all glares at me and mine. And where was Kelton through all this, where were the twins? I just don't know. Not a glimmer nor a speck. Maybe they were never here at all, maybe they were hiding. I remember hearing a scratchy scurry from one of their rooms, a barely-audible screeching like the distant mating of cats from another. Then nothing.

The next morning, as I lay in bed pantomiming sleep, my red-rimmed eyes fixed on the featureless ceiling, I heard the front door click shut, then again a few minutes later. And that was that. No more twins, no more family. I hated them anyway. Good riddance, you clones. You never existed for me in the first place, and I don't gloom *your* leave. I spit on you. I spit on your graves. Why is my Martha-damned face all wet?

You clones.

It's a bear, this life. But you bear it. Ha ha. I'm sorry to get so maudlin, meef, but hey. What can I tell you?

Oh yeah, Mister Fibb died too. There. Said it. I even cried for that one. Yeah, that's right, me went boo hoo, me went wah wah, just like a little baby, like a mewly cat or a preddy pat. But, Martha be damned—go ahead, you bitch, kill me—I loved that cat. He was the only one I loved—more so than even myself—and that love used to run long and deep. So you can imagine. Can't you?

Fibb's death not nearly as dramatic as Elmo's, but then, he was old. Just died in his sleep, kept on layin there when I nudged him, all smiled up and curlin. Sweet to treat in kittykat land, all pounce and ponder, all eats and squander. He was even older than me, and that's ancient for a cat. So I say goodbye, Mister Fibb, I will miss you. You'll be long remembered, and well. (More tears here.)

Oh stop it, Miri. You're not the first person to suffer (nor the first to refer to herself in the second person), and you won't be the last. (This is the part where you hear me sucking it up.)

Be seeing you. (Nother ref here, U-girl.)

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So Eli and I were looking around in Gelya's old room and came across scattered sheets of paper, a cracked pen left bleeding

in the corner. Quick as elves, we gathered up the sheets, tamped them neat and tidy, stowed them flat against the inside back of my pouch. Then I wiped the pen, sealed and tweaked it, and slid it in with a snick-n-sigh.

Problem solved, I thought.

What problem, you wonder? Well, as this ancient mediaform I hope you're looking at should make obvious, the virt is gone, dissed not knected, left to drip, and with it my eyeblink blinks no more. How to get through to you now, eh? This I hadn't thought of, hadn't specked nor spackled.

"Maybe you can use the Pony Express," Eli said, and I was momentarily floored when I realized he had made a joke. I think our boy's growing up. A tear almost formed in one eye, but I laughed instead, laughed at the image of a tiny horse leaping from star to star, my letter, my actual paper letter written in actual ink, tied to its back with a string or a ribbon, a look of fierce determination on its tiny face, starlight shimmering in its glassy eyes.

A nice image, that. A nice fantasy for a speck or two.

More likely, though, it would be like this: same horse, frozen and blinkered, shoved in a vat, my letter clenched hard and fast tween brittle teeth, a look of sadness, ancient and velvety, replacing that other look, replacing everything, a little tear frozen to its furry face. A logo or a barcode tattooed across its untrembling eyelids.

So now I write as Gelya did, scratch inky marks on smooth, untextured pages, and hope someday you see this and remember. Without the virt, the time thing will intrude. The pony could be dead and desiccated long before she trots up to your doorway; the paper could be long moldered, these marks as faded as your fading memory of the friend you used to have.

But I write because I have to, meef. I have to tell you of my life here, and what will become of it.

They came for me while Eli and I were rooting round in Kelton's room, trying to figure out how she'd gotten her stuff out, why she had abandoned us. They weren't the tall black hats, but City folk, all smartly dressed in standard garb, their faces tough and serious, their meanor meaner than anything I'd specked or spected.

"Miri de la Kelton?" the first one said, her voice a hardening in the dusty air. It was a question, but she looked at me like she knew the answer forehand. I looked back, too hard myself for flinch or fluttering. Her eyes rolled eastward for a nano, then popped back harder.

“Um, my name is Miri,” I said, “but I don’t know anything about where Kelton went. You’re all adults. You figure it out.” I grabbed Eli’s arm and tried to push past her, but her cronies waited in the commo room, put up a wall of blank faces and stiff, white shirts, holding us in place.

The first one, the leader I sposed, grabbed my left hand and pushed something cold and metal into the palm. It burned for a sec and then was gone. I stood there flummed and simmering, but didn’t resist. Nor couldn’t. Eli looked horrified, looked like he was trying to shrink back into Kelton’s room, or back into the swamp he’d oozed up out of (the coward, the flurp). The woman snapped the object into a datapad, nodded almost imperceptibly, and turned to her comrades.

“This is her. Let’s do it.”

One of the others, a man I think, grabbed my shoulders and spun me around, pinning my arms behind me. I tried to struggle, until something pierced the back of my neck and I felt all will flow out of me like an upload.

“You will come with us,” the leader said, and I complied.

Everything after this is hazy and uncertain, but I remember all of us (except Eli, the flurp) piling into an aircar, lifting up and out over the rooftops of Aleriel. I remember turning a fudge-thick neck toward a port, looking out and down at the shrinking image of Eli running, arms waving uselessly in the air above his hatless head. *Yeah, that’s real helpful*, I thought, and then we shot up, faster and faster, and the image of Eli—and of my former home—shrank to nothing and was gone.

I seem to recall flying quick and low over a calm, dark body of water, black and impenetrable even in brilliant sunlight, its sludgelike waves slow and viscous like tar or pudding. After what seemed like only a few minutes, we reached a city (The City) and the car landed on the roof of a tall building. Roused from my stupor, I shuffled out of the car and dutifully followed my captors across the roof and into a waiting lift.

After much more dutiful walking, I ended up here, my padded cell without a pad, my prison of uncertainty. Oh, it’s nice enough, with commos that are sudden, a hot/cold shower and a bed to lie in, a well-packed hoozie and a rack of tunics. But I can’t get out, can’t pry the door nor even see a window. Can’t understand, now that trunks have tranked, what it is I’m doing here.

All I can think is that Kelton made someone mad. Very mad. Angst-cakes-fresh-from-the-oven mad. And now I’m the one to pay

for it, since I'm the only one left. But I just don't know. No one's been to see me yet, though I stare a hole through that door and think real hard at it. Sometimes I put my ear against it and imagine I hear footsteps moving through time down an endless hallway. Sometimes I think I hear laughter.

All I do know is that if something doesn't happen soon, I will go the way of Brinkly, virt or no virt, and when they do finally come to see me, to take me away to some fate I have no control over, they'll find me prone and puddled on the floor, imaginary burn marks on my temples.

For now, I guess, I'll fold these sheets and place them under my pillow. Will try to see your face again, to feel your words fall over me like blankets or caresses, to wonder how your uneventful life is treating you. Dully, I hope.

Whether you ever see these words or not, I will write again later, as long as they let me. As long as I can think clearly enough to do it. As long as this pen holds out, I guess.

Later, meef. Later.

- - -

I'm shaking now as I write these words, and pause every stroke or two to count the remaining sheets, to calculate the wordage and the rate required to tell the thing. To stare at the mirror cross the room, at the copy of myself I see there. To put off telling you this story's strange, sad ending. To try to stay in that world I left behind, that world of life and rote undoing, of certitude and longing. That life in which I knew, or thought I knew, my own scant identity.

But now it's come to this, this thing I can't quite grasp at yet, and in a very short time it will turn into some unknowable. As I scratch off this final note, these words of blunt posterity, of blithe remembering, I am uncertain about which I fear the most, the future yet to unfold or the past that has now been re-explained to me. Perhaps it's both, or neither. Perhaps what I think is fear is just this new fierce emptiness that's spreading out in front of me.

They came for me again mere minutes after I finished my last letter to you, the same sour woman and her roughy bookends. Popped the lock and slid the door back unexpectedly, stood waiting for my first response team. But I was slow on the uptake, turned tragic and delib toward their stupid, stoic faces.

"Yes?" I said, my eyes like diamond, my throat constricted.

As per, only the woman spoke. "You will come with us, please," she said, and waited.

I thought about a shrug here, about shirking military hithering, but could tell by their robotic stance that they would wait me out, would only leave with me lock-stepped in front of them. They had their orders, que? A reason to be. A will to live.

And she did say please.

So I slipped and slapped, groomed and lapped, brushed days-old crumbs from this last plain tunic, while my visitors stood like statues, waiting. Then I followed them out into a nondescript hallway filled with nondescript doors, walked the walk until we reached a lift and stepped inside.

This dim-lit box jerked sideways all asudden and I fell against one of my escorts, who quickly and mechanically pushed me by the shoulders away from him. Not a word nor a look escaped him during this, but as we traveled I peeped at him from the corner of an eye (the new one) and could see him brushing compulsively at his clothing, could tell he was looking for something to wipe his hands on.

We continued sideways for some time, all faces staring doorways, all breathing rhythmic and in unison, then were jerked upward and began accelerating rapidly. I thought I heard a large sigh coming from behind me, but was too busy trying to pop my ears to give close tensioning. Then a decel, a slow stop, and the doors slid open with a soft click-n-whir.

The light was too bright after the grayness of the lift, and I blinked as I was led out into what looked like a large, empty conference room, bland plastic chairs stacked along the walls like the ruins of some business civ. One of my new friends grabbed a chair and placed it in front of me. "Sit," he said, and I did.

The lights dimmed and he spun me around toward what seemed to be the front of the room, holding the chair in place. In front of me was a wall embedded with twelve screens, all off. As we stared at these flat gray sacs all soft-packed and featureless, I could feel my keeper breathing, caught a whiff of cheap soap mixed with fecal matter, heard all three draw in sharp draughts of air and hold them.

The screens came to life.

On them were twelve different faces, men and women of varying ages and plexions, all heads shaven, all turned in my direction. The one in the middle spoke. "Miri de la Kelton?" she said.

Was there an echo in my life?

"Yes, my name is Miri," I replied. "But I don't know anything about Kelton." Two could play at this echo game, I thought, then

libbed, "And I don't get the Earth-Standard name thing. It's Miri. Just Miri."

The faces all turned in different directions, as if they were looking at each other, then turned back toward me. The woman who had spoken seemed familiar to me somehow, and I tried to picture her with short dark hair as she spoke again. "Miri de la Kelton, do you know why we confiscated you?"

I was confused again by the archaic phrasing, the odd word choice, but answered truly. "No," I said. "I don't know anything at all." I could feel well-manicured hands tightening their grip on the back of my chair.

She ignored my response, and continued. "You were confiscated because in Offworld law, such as it is, you are considered to be the legal property of the Kelton, and all of her property was seized—at least, all that was left." She paused then, looked down as if she were going through some notes. Or was embarrassed. "As the injured party, we have certain rights in this matter."

I stared, numbstruck. What was she talking about?

"However," she said, looking back up at me now, "under Sharon's laws, both cloning of human beings and owning said clones as personal property are illegal. Because of this, your situation has presented us with a dilemma."

I felt an invisible weight pressing down on me, felt my shoulders grow hotter and hotter. The room began to waver, the screens flickering to blue, to red. I heard a sound like escaping gas coming from under my chair. My back was thick with sweat.

The woman continued droning. "Since you were held as property by the Kelton, and were unaware of your situation, you cannot be held responsible for her actions. Nor can you be held responsible for whatever part you may have unwittingly played in them." She paused again, turning gelid eyes to stare at something in the distance.

"As for your...." She paused here, as if searching for the right word, for some way out of her dilemma. I could tell she was using her hands to desperately stroke imaginary icons. "Your...brother," she continued. "We can find no evidence that you were involved in his death. It appears he terminated while in virt, during an illegal upload of some kind." She fixed me with a warm, all-knowing gaze. "We are fairly certain you lack the technological capacity to commit such an act." Her lips curled into something that was not quite a smile.

Had someone increased the gravity in the room? I felt like I was being crushed inside a neutron star, like someone had stapled my feet to the floor. Somehow, I managed to speak. "What...are you...talking about?"

She looked at me with great sadness then. I could tell. I'm good at these things. She was feeling pity for me, was looking at me like I was a lost puppy. Martha, I hate that. The day could have been worse, though. I could have been dead.

"We simply can't keep you," she said, and sighed. "You're free to go."

I must have lost it then, can remember almost nothing after that. Not the screens going blank nor the chair being stacked up high. Not the walk back to this room, nor the look of reef on my escort's face as he left me staring, as he pushed me in and clicked shut the unlocked door behind me.

I do remember one thing, though, an image now ashivering up my whyways, visiting whenever flective surfaces flash on by. But I can't work out where it was I saw it. Did it flick across the twelve lit screens before they blitted, or did I peek at it through slitted doors while stumbling down those empty, low-lit hallways? I guess it doesn't really matter now. I guess nothing does.

What I saw—or think I saw—was this: a lab with steel and glass ashining, dark cept for a blueness fusing everything. Along one wall, twelve in a row, were large, clear tubes all sparkly, filled with crisp blue fluid. And in each tube, life-sized and sleeping, were perfect naked replicas of me. Floating. Waiting. For what, I just don't know. The image always lingers large like this when brought up dredgewise, then changes before ending. I always see—or think I see—one of them pop open her eyes and stare at me, a smile playing loosely round that too-familiar mouth.

Sometimes I blink and the image goes away, but sometimes it continues lingering. When it does, I see—or think I see—this girl who looks like me open that smiling mouth and say something. If I could lip-read readily, could understand blue lips slow-moving through blue acidic liquid, I might see her say, "We're ready now, Miri," then close tight those unborn lips, blink closed those unborn eyes. And float there, waiting.

After they returned me to my cell, I slept for two days without waking. Rose on the third to write you this, to scoop up brainpan scatterings. So now more time has passed, and tomorrow I must

leave here. Must go out into this strange, unknowing city, this strange, unknowing world, and make my way somehow without you. Must find a way to send you these arcane wordforms, to let you know what has become of me.

To find that pony, and pry open its unblinking eyelids.

Monkeyshine

Hugh Fox

"Come in, come in, come in," said Alexander's step-grandmother Azariah, midget-monkeyish, pequeñísima. "It's so good to have you here for the Fourth of July. All the way from Boston!"

"Cambridge, s'il vous plaît," Alexander corrected his step-grandmother. "Cambridge isn't Boston, just like earthworms aren't Sir Galahad." Black shoes, knee-high black socks, black shorts, long-sleeved blue shirt—with a tie no less—his mother Charlotte always preaching, "The child's image is the adult's reality. You want him to be General Patton, you dress him in khaki, you want him to be a cockatoo, you dress him in feathers...."

"Only you're looking and sounding too serious, pal. You look like a maudit lawyer-doctor," groaned Grandpa Ryan, Mr. Irish-Chicago. "Kids oughta be kids, there's time enough to be old, bald, bold, bowled-over."

"You look like you've been bowled over," answered Alexander, five—just three days after his fifth birthday—running over to Grandpa and punching him in the stomach as in come Mama Charlotte and Alexander's older sister Pocahontas, eight.

"Really, dad, you always dressed me like Madame Sérieuse when I was a kid. Remember Spain and the Azores and Lisbon, Campeche, everyone would call me 'Señora' and 'Madame'...half-joking but half-serious...."

"And look at you now, married to a Parisian, teaching German philosophy at the University of Harvard!" Ryan loving the complexity of his daughters' and sons' lives, his own life—complexity, complexity, complexity, like a giant electronic interstellar chess game—staring as serious as he can at Alexander. "So do you play the bagpipes, my friend? And where's your kilts and Scotch beret?"

"My mother got her Ph.D. from Edinburgh...but before I was even born. And besides, the past is the past, Scotland isn't all just folkloric I.D. anymore...."

Pocahontas coming in with FORCE now, usually playing distant, wistful, hard to get, but when ignored....

"I play the drums and I don't need a kilt. I've got my Scotch plaid skirt, and...."

She starts skipping, jumping, hopping around, whistling the whole time.

"Nicely done!" applauds Grandpa, then suddenly seriouses out with Charlotte. "But where's Claude?" Walking out into the hallway, sniffing around. "Didn't he come with you?"

"N...n...n..." struggle-stumbles out Charlotte, "he's at a French conference in the French Antilles. You know how it is, conferences equal publications equal raises equal tenure equals sanity... although...."

"He hates me because of my hairlip...et je ne peux pas parler le français sans un accent Portuguese!"

"I can translate that!" Pocahontas solemn now, Bill Gates-ish—ladling out his billions to Jesuschristishly save the world. "Because I can't speak French without a Portuguese accent."

"How can you be so serious so young?" asks Grandpa, taken aback, like he's watching pool balls on a pool table playing poolball by themselves.

"I can be serious too," Alexander blurts in, looking up at the ceiling. "It's a bird, it's a plane, it's Saddam Hussein...."

Grandpa falling down on his knees. "Baruch atta Adonai, in nomine Patria, Filius et Espiritus Sanctus, amen...may the words of my heart never, ever fart...all I want is NOW, NOW, NOW...for forever somehow...."

"Sea turtles live three hundred years," Alexander began to lecture. "Why should there be such a difference between aquatic animals and terrestrial mammals? Why should mammiferous mean whisperous, if I may coin a word?" Taking a deep breath, ready for round two.

"Time for bed, my friend." Azariah cuddling him around the ears.

"My God, these kids are internet encyclopedias," says Grandpa, utterly flabbergasted. "When I was a kid, it was roast potatoes in the empty lot next to our apartment house and biking through the rain, a little whizzing through OZ, but...how will it be in another three thousand years?"

Pequeñina Azariah suddenly beginning to cry, solidified, petrified, mummified except for the crying, and then Mama Charlotte doing the same.

"What's going on?" Grandpa all mystified, confused.

"Another three thousand years," wept La Professora, "with the way things are going now? Nuclear proliferation, the old all gone,

planetary warming, changes in the Earth's weight—will it go closer to the sun...into the sun? Or fly further into outer space? Burnt up or frozen up? Or self-destroyed, or...."

"Come on! Come on!" Grandpa embracing everyone. "Three thousand, thirty thousand, a million thousand thousand.... Baruch atta Nothing At All!"

And maybe it was his tone, his all-encompassing caring, the all-encompassing everything-do-well-ness in his words, but slowly they all calmed down, and Grandpa went into the fridge and got out some Moose Tracks ice cream, dark-chocolate and vanilla, and they all found places in the living room, sat down, and he turned on the weather channel (Hysteria Season) and they began to yum-yum through the very-aristocratically-special ice cream.

Then Alexander very officially gets up and turns the TV off, sits back down, and begins to officiate again.

"I have some insomnia problems. You should know, it's genetic. Too bad it can't be engineered out of the gene-bank. And I'm getting immunized to my usual sedatives, and besides, I'm leery of negative side effects, and—"

"Stop!" says Grandpa, goes into the refrigerator, and finds a butter-pecan ice-cream bar that's been dipped in chocolate—Alexander's favorite combination.

"Pour toi, mon ami! For you, my friend." And he hands the bar to Little Serious Boyface, almost evoking a smile from him.

"That's more like it, Grandpa, to the diablo with cholesterol and two-percent milk! Remember how you told me your Czech grandmother lived on lard and survived to be a hundred and thirteen...."

"Well...she had trouble with numbers...but you don't forget anything, do you." Grandpa sitting down on the sofa next to Alexander.

"I'm Mr. Megabytes when it comes to memory."

"But I don't understand. You don't have a TV because your father said that if he had one he'd do nothing else but watch hockey all day, and he's supposed to be writing books on French literature.... So you speak French at home, n'est-ce pas?"

"Oui, nous toujours parlons le français chez nous. Yes, we always speak French at home."

"And you're in preschool, right?"

"Right as Martin Luther rebelling against simony," he answers with a smirky sneer.

"Wait a minute, I mean WAIT-A-MIN-UTE, nobody—but nobody—knows about Martin Luther and simony...."

"Except Lutherans and me!"

"But you're Jewish!"

Charlotte coming down the stairs after having quietly vanished for a few minutes, all dressed in a flowered dress and flowery sandals—a Ph.D. in German philosophy, sure, but before she got serious she spent five years in Hollywood trying to get into films. Forty-five now, but still a looker, though she had a few eye and lip tucks when eyes and lips began to drag and downcurve just a little.

"I don't know if I like the tone of that!"

"But I'm Jewish too...."

"But these days...."

"Okay...." Grandpa turning his tone into pure Michigan maple syrup poured on Mexican cinnamon-dosed papaya. "But you're Jewishish too...."

She goes into the kitchen, gets a little black, sugarless coffee from the coffee machine that they keep going from dawn to midnight, sits down on a sofa at a right angle to Grandpa and Alexander.

"Listen, the way that monkey talks. I mean his vocabulary, even the delivery style, he's more like an octogenarian than a five-year-old...." whines Grandpa, marveling at how his super-brain daughter still remains an all-star beauty, with all her dimples and her vampire-black eyes, and a body like a combination of cow and salamander.

"Nonagenarian! More like a nonagenarian, or a centenarian. Of course, with a little old-man amnesia," Alexander spits out with wild vehemence, like an old Buick 9 honking at midnight on New Year's Eve.

"See! Where does he pick it up?"

"Well, he goes to a public preschool in Somerville. You know, Ethiopians and Sudanese, gringo blacks, Moroccans, Armenians, Greeks, Portuguese, Brazilians, Cubans, Peruvians...two or three Irishers...."

"That's the way Chicago was in the old days. English was the foreign language."

"It's better that way."

"Mais, je préfère le français. I love French," she sighs out romantically, memories of France obviously skittering through her mind.

"No need to translate for Grandpa, he understands French." Alexander unexpectedly defending Grandpa with a great deal of tough-guy vehemence.

"Pero tu no entiendes Español.... But you don't understand Spanish...."

“No tienes que traducir nada para mí, entiendo todo. No need to translate for me, I understand everything.”

“But where did he, how did he...pick up all those languages?” screams Grandma Azariah.

“Well, he knows some Sudanese too, some Ethiopian—which is getting kind of arabicized.... Remember King Solomon in Ethiopia....” his mom explains condescendingly, Ms. Multi-Linguist herself.

“But...” Grandpa ruminates philosophically, psychotherapeutically, “it’s not just vocabulary, but delivery. He sounds more serious than an ecumenical council....”

“Winston Churchill!” adds Azariah.

“Oh, we can be silly-willies too,” chuckles Alexander, and grabs his sister’s arms. “A little Terpsichore time, Alicia....” And they both begin to dance.

“Alicia?” Grandpa all confused.

“Markova! Check her out on the internet search.”

“Net-search?”

Both of them ignoring Grandpa’s confusion, starting a little Fred Astairish-Ginger Rogersish singing-dancing:

*We may be weird,
but we’re not alone.
Who’s that weirdo
on the telephone?*

*We know too much
in a dumbass world,
so keep it rippled
and keep it whirled.*

*One for the money,
two for the show,
and listen to
that Grandpa wind
blow.*

*He thinks he’s a genius,
and almost is right,
but one thing he can’t do
is stand up and
fight...*

As they go on, Grandpa whispers to Charlotte, "But are they 'improvising'?"

"No, they write plays in school, take dance and performance classes. It's all very audience-oriented."

"Very impressive." And Grandpa sits back, closes his eyes.

"Is he sleeping or just listening? Is he all right?" Charlotte asks Azariah.

"We've all gotta go sometime, that's just realism," she answers, sits down next to him, and closes her eyes too, as the two kiddies continue to dance and sing:

*Wir müssen sterben
jetzt oder später.
Ich wollte ein Engel
sein, wo später ist
niemals....*

*We must die
now or later.
I'd....*

Trying to sing the translation too as Grandpa opens his eyes and almost sits straight up.

"You do great in English, rhyming and all...." Then eyes close again and he collapses into total relaxation.

"I agree," says Azariah, not moving at all.

The kids keep singing:

*They might be dead,
but aren't we all.
That's the story of life,
one, two, fall.*

*Do it while you can,
all you've got to give.
One thing you haven't,
an eternal life to
live....*

Grandpa still wondering how they could manage to sing so perfectly together, still not believing that it came out of the school,

but that they were improvisatory geniuses. Between them, they sounded like a combination of Stephen Foster and some kind of Celtic connection. Or had Charlotte sadistically/prophetically written the whole show?

DON'T LOOK UP/WAKE UP! the voices inside him said. Time for a little break, turn off the computer-calculator brain...snooze, booze, nothing to lose.... Began to snore, wasn't really sure if it was genuine or just more theatrics. It was in the genes, n'est-ce pas?

Baby Edward

Jeremy C. Shipp

There's more than one way to kill a dream.

My dream is a baby boy named Edward, and he's not allowed in the house. He lives in the VW Bus in my backyard. I keep the windows closed and the doors locked, which doesn't serve any real purpose, obviously. But I like to keep the key on a chain around my neck. I like to wear it under my dress shirt, coat, and tie. When I first put it on in the morning, the metal is cold against my chest. By the time I'm tapping at my keyboard, inventing new ways to politely coerce resources from suspecting citizens, I'm cold on the inside. Anytime I want, I can put the key in the lock, twist, and end this. But I don't.

You might ask, where's the mother during all this? Well, I hate to shatter your notions of family, but there is no mother.

I made Edward.

And he's mine.

Mine.

- - -

Harboring resentment is a great way to meet women. Try it. Sit down in your least favorite bar, let your eyes glaze over, frown, and put up your walls. The kind of walls you'd need to contain a plague, because most likely that's what you are.

Now see who comes knocking.

"Hi," says Annabelle.

I'm not psychic. She's wearing a nametag.

Well, maybe I am a little psychic.

"You're Ed," she says.

"How do you know that?"

It's ridiculous, but I look down at my shirt to make sure I'm not wearing a nametag too.

"I remember you," she says. "About ten years ago, I was visiting San Francisco and I heard you sing. We talked for about thirty seconds before I left. I wanted to talk with you more, but I was intimidated and shy. It's strange. I'm not usually good at remembering faces."

"Why did you want to talk to me?"

"Because your songs touched me, Ed. I told you that. Remember?"

I don't. Honestly, I don't even remember being in San Francisco.

"I remember," I say.

"You don't have to lie to me."

"Sorry."

She laughs. Maybe the way I used to laugh before my VW became a cage.

"Do you ever get the feeling that a storm is coming, a bad one, and you hope to God you're wrong, and then you are wrong and you're disappointed?" This is sort of what I want to say, except I want to scream it without any words. Gutturally. Instead, we discuss her job as a manicurist or stunt woman, or whatever it is she's talking about.

- - -

If you had to hear the crying I'm listening to, you'd get a Sawzall from your basement too. You'd cut a hole in the side of your Bus so you could insert a bottle.

An couple of hours ago, I was in the bathroom, minding my own perverted business, when it started.

Actually, I'm guessing it began a while before that, before I heard any of the sobs. It sounds like one of those cries that starts out silent and then bursts. The buildup has been going on for months. Maybe even years.

After my hard-on melted away, I tried burying my head in a pillow. I tried earplugs. I tried television, ice cream, a good book, a bad book. I tried cleaning, and remembering my childhood, and burning some old photographs. I tried driving around in my new BMW and keeping an eye out for the homeless.

I even tried not giving a shit.

Nothing worked.

So I'm here, with this bottle of formula and cold sweat.

My head is killing me. I feel like fighting back.

"Just drink the damn milk," I say.

The crying stops.

I hear sucking.

Instead of relief, I feel nausea and a trick fart that turns out to be quite a bit of diarrhea.

Good thing I'm not wearing my best pajamas.

- - -

The secret to winning a man's heart isn't food or sex. Annabelle and I have already shared those, but they're not what keeps me from running away.

That's what I do, by the way. I run and I hide, the way I did when I was a kid, except it's not a game anymore. At least not a fun one.

I used to drive around, searching for a place where I could be, for lack of a less cheesy sentiment, happy. A place where I could smell my lyrics in the air, and other such nonsense. I searched for a magical place. But I ended up here, of course, because real magic doesn't exist.

Enough of my bitching.

"How did you lose your leg?" I say.

"Trampoline accident." She pauses. "Sorry, that's a stupid joke."

"No, it's not. I didn't know you were joking, so I didn't laugh."

"How could I lose my leg on a trampoline?"

"I don't know. It could get caught on the side."

"And then what? The force of the jump rips me in two?"

"I don't know."

She laughs. Maybe the way I used to before I started taking drugs. The kind pushed by legal dealers with 401(k)s.

"It was a car accident," she says.

"I'm sorry."

"You probably don't know this, but as soon as I said 'car accident,' your face released a lot of tension."

"It did?"

"I used to be offended when I saw that in people. But instead of getting pissed off all the time, I decided to try and understand what was going on. I may be wrong, but my theory is that people don't like unexpected tragedy. Car accidents cause over a million deaths every year, and it doesn't matter, because it's normal. Like war is normal. Like malnutrition in Africa. Like.... Is that a dying animal outside?"

No. "I'll go check."

- - -

I present the food on my flattened palm, the way I did at the petting zoo when I was a kid. The first time I ever fed a goat, I was terrified that he'd chomp off my fingers and I'd never be able to play piano again.

A similar terror now molests my neck, my back, my stomach. Ed won't drink formula anymore.

"Just eat the damn cereal," I say.

The difference between this feeding and the one at the petting zoo is that this time my fears are justified. Tiny, sharp teeth rip open my flesh and clamp down on my bone. I scream and yank as hard as I can, but only manage to further mangle my index finger.

Ed yanks back, and pulls my arm deeper into the hole I cut in the side of the Bus. We play tug of war for a while.

"Let me go!" I say.

He doesn't.

I kick the Bus as hard as I can, and it must startle him, because he lets go.

I kick the Bus again before walking away.

Minutes later, I'm in bed, all patched up.

"What happened to you?" Annabelle says.

"I accidentally smashed my finger with the car door."

"I'm sorry," she says. Relieved.

- - -

Annabelle whistles while putting on her leg. She's tone-deaf.

"Do you ever feel it?" I say.

"What?" she says.

"Your leg. The missing one. What's that called when you can feel it?"

"Phantom limb. Yeah. My phantom used to be really painful. It felt like my leg was on fire almost all the time."

"I'm sorry." There's no relief in my face.

"Nothing really helped until I started using the mirror box. It's exactly what it sounds like. A box and mirrors. I put my good leg in one hole and my phantom in the other. With the mirror, it looked like I had two good legs. So I moved the phantom in sync with the reflection of my good leg and tricked part of my brain into believing I was controlling the phantom. The reason why my phantom hurt in the first place was because my mind considered it stuck. I had to set it free."

By now we're in the kitchen. The key against my chest feels colder than usual. Or maybe I'm running a fever.

"What happened to all the food in the fridge?" Annabelle says.

"I accidentally left the door open and a lot of it went bad." I pause. "No, that's a lie. I can't keep lying to you. I'll show you what's going on."

“Good,” she says, as if she’s been waiting for these words. Maybe she has.

I take her hand and lead her out of my present, into my past. We walk over the neatly-trimmed lawn, past the pawn-shaped fountain and the gnome-infested garden, to the corner of the yard exploding with weeds and wildflowers. It may only take a few moments to get here, but it’s not an easy path to travel with someone else. I squeeze Annabelle’s hand to keep myself from running away. She doesn’t complain.

“In there,” I say. I point. “He’s in there.”

The windows of the Bus are tinted, so she leans in close and cups her hands around her eyes.

She’s looking into more than a car, you know. I lived in that car. And even died a little.

When she turns back to face me, she says, “It’s just a guitar.”

“You’re a guitar,” I say.

“What?”

“Sorry. I was being defensive.”

“It’s okay.”

There’s nothing wrong with her eyes, you know. She’s just not looking the right way.

I want to tell her about Edward. I want to take off my bandages and show her my wounds. I want to let her hold my key. I would do these things, but there’s a big problem.

I’m not on stage. A hundred thousand fans aren’t singing the words with me. I’m only Ed.

So we go back inside.

- - -

Through the tinted glass, I see a dark form scampering about on the seats. He’s growling.

“No,” I say. “No more food, Edward.”

But he’s not a good boy like I used to be. He doesn’t know when to stand down. So he slams his head against the wall, over and over.

“Stop that, Edward,” I say.

He yelps with every blow.

Blood thrashes around inside me.

“I’m not going to help you anymore, Edward,” I say. “You’re nothing but a nuisance.”

He won’t stop. I hear cracking.

I punch the window with my bad hand and scream.

At this point I realize he's not trying to get my attention. He's after Annabelle.

When she peeked in before, he must have seen the kindness in her eyes. He knows she would feed him.

"It's no use, Edward," I say. "Annabelle slept through the last earthquake, and she'll sleep through you."

I smile, because I think I have him. I think, for a few fleeting moments, that he's going to lie on the seat, close his eyes, and suck his thumb.

Instead, he begins devouring the seats. His sharp little teeth tear at the upholstery, lacerate the metal, mutilate the seatbelts. He chews and swallows. Inhales.

"You're not getting any nutrients from that, Edward," I say. He doesn't care.

- - -

If your girlfriend surprises you with a romantic candle-lit picnic, you can't tell her it's a horrible idea. You can't tell her that the blanket is too close to the weeds and the Bus and you-know-who. I guess you could tell her all that, but she's gazing into your eyes, tickling inside you with her phantom toes.

So you say, "Thank you, Annabelle."

I see his massive lips pressed against the window, gushing with drool. He smiles, and I attempt to hide my fear with a smile of my own.

"I wish I could see the world through your eyes, Ed," Annabelle says.

"Why would you say that?" I say.

"Because you see such beauty around you."

"What I see is grotesque. I don't mean you."

"Your songs aren't grotesque."

"My songs aren't about the world. They're about the world in my head."

"What's the difference?"

An enormous hand crashes through the side of the Bus and wraps around Annabelle's torso.

She looks at me with relief on her face, as if she's always known it would come to this. Maybe she has.

As Edward pulls her into the darkness, I dive forward and try to grab her foot, but of course it's only a phantom, and my hand passes right through.

"Let her go, Edward!" I say.

I try to climb in through the hole his fist made, but a blubbery leg pushes me backward. I punch, kick, and bite, the way I never did when I was a kid. I was a good boy.

It doesn't help.

I try to yank the chain off my neck, but it doesn't break, so I lift it off instead. I put the key in the lock, twist. It's time to end this.

Immediately, a pudgy arm thrusts out of the driver's-side door and causes me to tumble onto the picnic candles. I go for the passenger-side door. This time, I dodge the arm that darts out at me. I open the door to the backseat and get kicked in the shoulder.

All of Edward's arms and legs hang outside of the Bus now, like he's some headless turtle.

I force the latch and lift the hood.

There he is. He's eaten the engine. I know that's not all he's eaten.

"Open your mouth, Edward," I say. "Spit her out."

He doesn't respond.

"Spit her out!"

I reach down and try to open his mouth with my fingers, wounds and all. His lips won't even budge.

When I try to use my key, he bites it in half.

I slam the hood shut and return to the picnic blanket to think. Part of it's on fire, but I let it burn.

My head is killing me. I feel like surrendering.

I feel like lying on the grass, closing my eyes, and sucking my thumb.

Instead, I walk around behind the Bus. Edward's penis dangles out of the exhaust pipe. I open the back door. I know what I have to do.

If Edward won't let me in, then I'll force myself inside.

- - -

My journey gets a lot easier when I realize I don't have to fight anymore. It's time to let go. My body surges forward, twisting and turning through the intestines. But it doesn't matter which way I go, because I'm going to end up with Annabelle.

No matter what.

She may be shredded to pieces, of course, depending on whether or not Edward swallowed her whole. I may only have a few moments to grieve over her remains before stomach acid melts my flesh.

III

And that's okay.

Finally I reach the stomach. I reach Annabelle. She's alive.

We embrace, and stay locked together.

Edward starts crawling, the Bus like armor around him.

The movement rocks me and Annabelle gently from side to side.

It's warm in here. Comfortable. Intimate.

I feel closer to Annabelle than I've ever felt to anyone, including myself. But we don't speak. We don't need to.

I'm excited, because I know where we're going. We're going to a place where we can be happy. Where I can smell my lyrics in the air, and other nonsense. Where magic is real.

- - -

Edward vomits us up, and we sit amidst the chunky bowels of my old home-sweet-home.

This is just an ordinary park, but my girlfriend is alive. Edward seems happy, lying on the grass with his eyes closed, gnawing on a squirrel.

I grab my upchucked guitar. Annabelle may not be a hundred thousand adoring fans, but I'm coated with puke and she still kisses me. French.

So I play.

Jamie Hawkins' Muse

Vanessa Gebbie

Jamie Hawkins, only child of an old mother, had a hump on his back and one leg three inches shorter than the other, so that he walked like a crab. His heart, his mother said, was so big it nearly cracked his ribs. It was full with wanting to love so much that his chest ached with the trying. But Jamie, with his crabwise way and his turn-aside head, his quizzical look...he opened himself to a world that span on by without a backward glance.

The spirit is not a vacuum, and where people would not speak to him, the essences of things did. Jamie grew up limping round his own island, analyser of little things, observer of single blades of grass for their shape, their greenness, their smell when crushed. In this way, he collected images, sounds, words, seeing a closeness between people that he felt but did not know.

He would sit at the window, the chair turned from the desk so that his body faced it straight. He wrote left-handed, the wrist curled round, fingers forcing sinister loops that meant little. He was not happy; neither was he sad. He existed in a state of sleepy limbo, where his food arrived on a tray brought by his mother, and his contact with the outside world was through glass, misted.

Why is it that lack of fortune attracts, like north and south, more misfortune? Why is there no balance in things? Maybe, had he been straight, with both legs the same length, his mother would have stayed with him longer. As it was, when his food did not arrive at suppertime one bright summer evening, Jamie went to find her, and discovered she had died. Quietly. No fuss. Given out.

There was something in her calmness, in the stillness of a hand on the floor, that moved Jamie beyond loss. This was where poetry was. At the end of things, where they were full to bursting with life, and life had given out, simply because it could not be held in any longer.

- - -

Of course, when he went for his interview at the mortuary, after the funeral, he didn't tell them he really wanted to be a poet.

Mr Dingemanns made a pyramid with his scrubbed fingers and said, "So, Jamie. Why the dead?"

Jamie supposed that Mr Dingemanns wouldn't know that poets are very few, and that the best place to take over from one must be at the point of exit. So he thought hard for a second or two before replying.

"Well, Mr Dingemanns, it's helping people, isn't it?"

Mr Dingemanns, smelling of cologne in his shiny black suit, leant back in his chair and smiled.

"A good answer, Jamie. A good answer." And he offered Jamie three months' probation.

- - -

At first sight, on his first morning, the mortuary didn't seem the best place to find real poetry, which was the only kind Jamie was after. There was not much depth to the bleached metal surfaces, the gaping gutters, and the coils of pale tubing. But he had time stretching like an empty desert before him; the trick was going to be finding the hidden rivers.

His mentor was Mike, all elbows and knees and hair too black for his pallor. He didn't look much at Jamie, only downward. There wasn't anything Mike didn't know about embalming and restoration.

He threw a white overall at Jamie. "Put this on. Don't touch anything." Then he went to fetch the first body.

Jamie blushed when the cover came off, but you don't carry on blushing when the person who's caused it has their eyes shut. Then, as he was wiping her down with some chill chemical, Jamie's head was filled with fumes that chased away all the words he had been saving up. Harsh, burning, acrid waves in his head.

He watched Mike cutting the papery skin...like an onion's...in the dip at the base of her neck, feeling underneath with his long fingers, then continuing to cut until a large blood vessel was exposed.

"Pass me that cannula," said Mike, pointing.

Jamie did, shaking his head. A nice enough word, "cannula", but it didn't have the right ring. And precious few partners, "cannula".

At lunch break, he sat outside and breathed deeply, surrounded by wood and stone. Mr Dingemanns came out with a greaseproof packet of sandwiches and leant against the old flint wall. He offered the packet to Jamie.

"Want one?"

Jamie shook his head. Mr Dingemanns smiled.

"Don't worry. I was the same my first day."

But it wasn't that. It was Jamie's words. They'd all gone, and they had been quite good ones, though maybe not in the best order yet.

"You'll be shadowing Mike for a week or so," said Mr Dingemanns. "Won't say much, but you couldn't learn from a better chap."

- - -

It was true that Mike didn't say much. Not to Jamie, anyway. But he chatted away to the dead like he was dead too and spoke the same language.

"Right, lovey. Got to get rid of all that gunk and flush you through with clean stuff. Hup with the leg then."

And, "Good muscles, old thing. Squash player, were you? Top of the league with those."

Or, "Tsk, tsk.... What you went through, eh? Never mind. There's all sorts of magic here, mate. We'll sort you out, no danger. Now, let's clean you up a bit, shall we?"

And after the first week, Jamie knew he was in the right place. He recognised poetry in the flat slap of old blood draining into the gutters and in the viscous pulsing of the plastic tubes. In the slide of broken bone under muscle and the drape of skin like dust sheets over cheekbones. He even recognised it in the smells, some so sharp and white that they burned into his eyes, some deep brown with a petrol-green shimmer that made his stomach heave until he got used to it.

There was a soft bustle to it, this place. It was like the waiting room at a port before the sliding doors open and the bus comes to take you to the boat.

- - -

Then Mike got sick over a weekend and Jamie was on his own. And it was that day that Mr Dingemanns came in and said, "Difficult one here, Jamie. Are you ready for it?"

The shape on the steel countertop was small. Mr Dingemanns watched as Jamie unzipped the plastic, watched as a small hand fell sideways, fingers curved, nails blueish-white.

She was only about three.

"Asthma," said Mr Dingemanns.

Jamie could see that, whereas others had accepted death in whatever form, taken it into themselves and become part of it, she had not. She looked asleep. Strands of her hair, a damp greenish-blond, hung together in lank curls as though wet, one flattened across her

forehead. Her eyes were not quite closed, as though she was still watching between her lashes...but the glint was gone, flattened, old glass. The dark lashes cast shadows down her cheeks. Her mouth was half-open, petulant, protesting.

"We'll be fine, Mr Dingemanns. We'll be fine. Won't we?" He didn't even hear Mr Dingemanns close the door.

Her arms and legs were soft, like puppets' limbs, but sand-filled, heavy. There were livid bruises on her chest, where the someone who cared had made frantic efforts not to lose her. There were felt-tip stains on her fingers. Maybe she had been drawing when the breath wouldn't come any more, and the paper had fluttered to the floor, been trodden on.

"We'll be fine, won't we?" said Jamie again, taking the softness of cotton wool, dipping it into sudden chemical chill, and stroking the child.

He imagined this was what it would have been like patting his own baby dry after a bath. His throat tightened, and the child blurred.

How to do this?

"Listen," Jamie said, working away. "I'll tell you about the best day I can remember, from when I was little. Not as little as you, but not much bigger.

"I remember a merry-go-round, red and gold, the horses with red nostrils that looked like they were bleeding, white-eyed, manes flowing, legs lifted and frozen in a magical gallop, round and round. Barley-sugar twisted poles to hold on to, the grooves too big for my fingers, flat-gold where hands had gripped, yellow-gold the rest. I remember being lifted up onto a horse by my father, who was still with us then, and I remember something else. I remember the boy on the horse next to me starting to cry and asking to get down. He was pointing at my back. That was the first time I knew I wasn't a proper person, not really.

"But the music was starting, and the merry-go-round was beginning a slow circle. My horse and his horse went up and down slowly, so that when I was down, he was up. That made him laugh... then slowly I rose up, and he fell below me, his horse looking wild-eyed...it was funny. And I laughed with him.... The music got louder and louder, tinny, jangling sounds that came and went as we went round...the sounds billowing and echoing, up and down, up and down. You know those times you used to laugh so much you couldn't stop? You had to lean forward and hold your stomach to

keep it from hurting...it was like that. It was the up and down of things that made us laugh. Round and round, up and down, these silly, stiff, stuck horses wild-eyed and wooden.

"When the roundabout slowed, and the horses went up... down...so...slowly, then stopped, the boy's mother came to get him down, but he said, asked, begged...and I'll never forget it...he asked for another turn, another turn with me. My heart nearly burst.

"Oh, and later there was candy floss, you know, sticky and pink, like melting cotton wool sticking to my teeth. Toffee apples. Did you ever have one of those? Or maybe they don't do them now. Funny things, those apples. They looked so nice, the toffee hard and glossy, with a flat circle where it had dried, the skin of the apple shining through it. They never, ever tasted as good as they looked, did you know that? You couldn't see the fluff-and-wool taste of the apple for the shine of the toffee."

- - -

Much later, at the end of the day, Jamie went up the old white chalk-mud track to the top of the Downs. He walked along the wide, tree-skirted whaleback of the hill and lay backbone-to-backbone with the dip and lift of the ridge. He half-closed his eyes and moved his hands to either side, fingers creeping slowly over the grass, until they closed over the cold glassiness of a flint, cold as ice, sharp as grief, smooth as time. In the flint, he saw the child's eyes; he felt her limbs in the spring of the sheep-shorn grass, the tilt of her chin in the hollow of chalk under the turf. He lifted his hands up, stretching them toward the sky, and saw her skin, pale and perfect, smooth, running up to his fingers.

He knew he'd find her breath in the mists that lay flat and layered along the fields, her hair in the tangles of dank wool caught on the wires that ran away and away into the evening light.

Freight

Joseph Love

The train was taking forever to pass, and my hands were freezing. My ears were overwhelmed by the crushing clack of freight cars. Barely lit by the splotched red from the signal lights, the bubbly graffiti passed. I could see the last train car fifty yards away, still a dull white smear that could have been a part of bridge or sky. The pocked-white grain car—the last one—shuddered by, and I read the prophecy written in bright red, a single curly line: “spit.” I spat.

The red and white bars lifted; cars crossed. I twisted the plastic bag around my wrist, letting the heat from the box of chicken slide up my sleeve. A bald man, wearing cut-off shorts and fumbling with a soda in one hand, rode up to the tracks on a bicycle. He rolled slowly over one track but caught his tire in the second. I watched as he stupidly hit his thigh with the handlebar and slowly fell between the rails. Something fell out of his hand with the soda. It was flat and shiny. I ran to him, wrapping the plastic bag more tightly around my wrist, feeling the heat of the cardboard against my arm.

When I got to him, he was digging with his fingers in the tracks; his soda was stuck in the rail. I picked up the flat, shiny thing and pocketed it without looking, without the man noticing.

“You never rode a bike before today, Mister?” I asked.

He didn’t look up, just kept gouging at his bottle. “Just bought the damn thing today,” he said.

“No shit.”

He stopped, stared, his eyes bloodshot. Across his bald spot was a scar that ran the full length of his scalp, with thick staples from front to back. “You got small hands.” He held up his in comparison. “Mind digging out my soda?”

He smiled, his teeth gapped but clean.

Three cars came down the hill towards the tracks, their headlights blinding. The first honked and swerved away from us; the other two followed. I leaned down and pulled the plastic bottle out of the rail and handed it to him.

He unscrewed the cap and gulped the purple soda. “Gotta keep hydrated. Even when it’s cold.”

He smacked his lips, the sugary spit making strings along the edges of his mouth. When he stood, his knobby knees popped, and I saw he had a pair of glasses sticking out of his hip pocket.

"Your glasses broke?" I asked.

"Thank you for the help," he said.

"I said is your glasses broke?" I bent down and grabbed his bicycle by the seat, picked it up, and handed it to him.

He stuck out his giant pink hand. "Artie," he said.

I shook it. "Skoke."

"Huh?"

"S-k-o-k-e."

"German?" He pulled the glasses from his pocket.

"Don't know," I said.

"Goddam glasses broke," he said, tossing them between the tracks.

"I got to get this chicken home before it gets cold. Bye, Artie."

I turned away towards the wet street and the steaming man-holes.

"Where's that?" Artie called.

"Couple miles." I pointed down the road, bending my finger to the left, showing him how I go west after I go north.

"Let me give you a ride," he said, patting the handlebars with his palm. "Promise I won't fall again."

I put my free hand in my pocket and felt the thing he'd dropped by the tracks. I thought about giving it back, but figured it was trash like people always carry around, and when they lose it they don't notice.

"Don't think you can eat with us; we only got enough to feed ourselves. Sorry," I told him.

It was still daytime, but the sun was setting and hidden behind a sky that looked like charcoal swirls in a pile of ash. On the handlebars, my legs lost all feeling for the cold. My feet kept slipping off the axle, and I'd catch myself by lifting up on the bars. We headed north, a crosswind tearing across our faces. Artie breathed on my neck; he was puffing hard and I could smell the grapey sugar from his soda. We passed streetlights and saw our breath. The front wheel wobbled as Artie leaned around me to see the road.

The chicken was getting cold. I leaned back against Artie's chest to free a hand. I put the bag in my shirt, against my chest; all the remaining steam crept into the cotton. When a wind gust came

and knocked us all over the road, it sent water from my eye to my temple and back into my hair, under my cap. It felt like I was crying. That tear was so warm.

"We close?" Artie asked. "My head's getting cold."

I had forgotten about the staples. I turned to look at him, but in the dark, I only saw his bobbing shadow and felt his hot breath on my face.

"My zippered brain's going to get frostbit, I swear," he said.

I laughed; jerking my head back, I hit Artie in the nose. The front wheel twitched. "Are you hurt?" I yelled. The wind was barking in our ears.

"I'm fine, fine, fine," he yelled back. "But are we close?"

I leaned against his chest again and held myself up with one hand, pointing to the intersection ahead with the other. "Left!"

Artie ran through the frozen mud puddle on the shoulder. The tires shot ice along our faces, his back, my pants. The road was becoming unpaved; the asphalt broke up and turned into black sand. The tree limbs hanging across the road were wet and shined against the clouds and sky.

I pointed to the clearing in the tree line. "That's our drive," I said. The wind had calmed. "With the red mailbox."

"The rusty one tied up with fence wire?" He whistled through his teeth.

I nodded. Artie turned into our driveway, the gravel wet and loose. He rode up to the steps and I hopped off the handlebars into the mud. The blood rushed back into my legs. The plastic bag under my shirt was cold. I put my hand in my pocket and felt the thing—a thick piece of paper—Artie had dropped.

"Where you going now, Artie?" I asked.

He sucked in air through his teeth, then rubbed them with his palm. "Back to town, I guess."

"We might got enough food if you want to stay and eat," I said.

The front door cracked open; I felt the hot air on my clothes. "Skoke?" Ma called.

"Yes'm," I said.

Ma opened the door so I could see her face. Her makeup was runny and she was wearing sweats. "Skoke, you got dinner or what?"

"Yes'm."

Artie stepped into the yellow light from the house; his breath hung between me and Ma. I could hear his soda swish in his pocket.

"Skoke, who's that with you. In the shorts?"

"Artie. He rode me here on his bicycle."

Artie's bicycle fell over behind us into the mud.

"Artie, you wanna eat with us?" Ma asked.

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

Ma opened the door all the way so Artie could see into the kitchen and den and bathroom and part of Ma's bedroom. "Come on," she told us. "It's freezing out and that boy's wearing shorts."

"And my brain's about to get frostbit," Artie said.

Ma looked at me to see if that was supposed to be funny. She couldn't see the staples. I smiled at her. She shook her head. "Go get Mamma, Skoke," she said.

I nodded and went towards Mamma's room at the end of the hall.

"Artie," Ma said, "you can help me set the table. Skoke!"

"Yes'm?"

"Sugar, where's the chicken?"

I pulled up my shirt and took out the cold plastic bag, which was clinging to the bottom and sides of the box. "I think it's cold, Ma," I told her, throwing the bag across the kitchen.

Ma caught it by one handle and the box fell out onto the floor. She sighed. "Get Mamma, sugar."

A dumb fear made me feel sick standing outside Mamma's door. If I opened the door, she'd be dead, slumped over in her lift chair, and we'd have to cover her with a sheet and wait for the coroner. That dumb fear got all the way to my throat, and I heaved a little as I pressed my hand against the warm brass doorknob. I sighed and got it over with; I turned the knob and kicked the door open, because it sticks at the top. Paint flakes fell on my head and Harry James blared from the AM radio into the hall and kitchen and echoed off the walls and shook the windows.

Mamma turned around from her ham radio, her good eye bulging behind her magnifying headset, the soldering gun in her hand smoking as she pressed it against the circuit board. "Skokey from O'Chokey!" she called.

I ran in and pulled her hand away from the circuit board and blew out the small flame jumping up from the top of the card table.

"Skokey!" She laughed. "Don't know what I'd do without you."

"Probably burn down our house," I said.

"I would, I would in an instant." She broke into a fit of laughter and couldn't catch her breath; as she coughed, she jerked the

soldering iron back and forth towards my belly. She leaned over and spat on the carpet where the fabric was worn thin.

Then she sat up, set the soldering iron on a steel plate and unplugged it with her foot, and reached over and turned off the AM radio. "That one's called 'Two O'Clock Jump,'" she said.

"Time to eat, Mamma," I said.

"Time already? You back from Lucky Jack's already?"

"We got company," I told her.

"We do?" She squinted. Then, for half a second, she smiled with her whole face and all her wrinkles disappeared. "Reckon I'll put in my teeth," she said, then added, "My eyeball, too."

Mamma kept the wood eye in the felt bag that hung over the back of her lift chair. I reached into the bag and fished through her kerchiefs until I found the change purse Da had bought her when people still listened to Harry James. She unsnapped the brass clasp and held out the shellacked wooden eye.

"See how yellow this thing's gotten?" she asked.

"Yes'm," I said.

"It ain't really yellow, I don't reckon. Not that it matters." She flicked up the eyepiece of her headset, tilted her head up towards the ceiling light, and pried open her eyelid. I saw the wedding ring she hid in the dry pink cave; she took it out and pushed in the eye. She put the ring in the change purse and handed it back to me. I placed it in the felt bag as she took off the headset, long strands of silver hair coming off with it.

"How do I look, Skoke?" she asked, smiling wide, toothless, throwing her head back, her stiff white hair hardly moving at all except to shake off dead skin and dust from its surface.

"You need to put in your teeth," I said.

"To hell with them," she said. "If company don't like me gumming near them, they's a goddam skunk. Let's go!" she hollered and threw herself out of her chair, balancing in her slippers before grabbing her cane. "I'll always remember," she sang, then poked me in the ribs.

"That bramble rose you keep in your hair," I sang back.

She looked at me with the good eye, the wooden one staring off at the corner of the ceiling. "All the roses I kept in my hair done withered away. We're all drying up, you know."

I nodded and took her by the arm.

"Let's watch *Price is Right*," she said. "No! That don't come on now. What comes on at dinner, Skokey?"

"*Wheel of Fortune*," I answered as she stepped into the hall.

"*Wheel of Fortune*?" Artie called from the kitchen.

"Yeah, let's watch that, Skokey. Pull the TV close to the table so's we can watch," Mamma said, tapping her cane on the linoleum.

"I like that Vanna White," Artie said. "Boy, is she something or what, Skokes?"

"Yessir," I said to Artie, who was sitting at the table with a pink wool hat on his head covering the staples. He was still wearing the denim cut-off shorts that only came down to the middle of his thighs.

"Skoke, put another couple logs in, will you?" Ma asked.

"Yes'm," I said, holding Mamma's elbow as we walked to the table. I pulled out the chair for her and she plopped down, shaking the kitchen walls.

I went back into the den to feed the fire. I squatted in front of the stove, wrapped my hand in the hem of my shirt, and turned the handle. I tossed the first log into the white-hot coals and watched the near-black bark as it flickered and settled into the orange bath. I tossed in another log. The fire was bright like the sun is hot, a heat so far away you don't feel it, a light so bright and clear that up close it doesn't hurt to look at it.

I closed the door with my bare hand. It burned, so I rubbed my palm in my pocket. I felt the piece of paper Artie had dropped by the train tracks when I spat.

"Skoke! C'mon," Ma said. "Wheel the television over here so we can eat."

The TV sat by the logs and ants nested around the casters, so when I moved it, I ground the ants into the floorboards with my feet.

Mamma turned on the TV before I could sit down. She twisted the knob on the face of the set and found *Wheel of Fortune*. It was going to commercial.

"Brought to you by these fine sponsors, amen," Mamma said. "Let's eat." She put a chicken wing to her mouth and tore off the skin with her gums, then just sat, sucking on it inside her mouth.

Artie drank some of his soda and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Ma just sort of picked off pieces of meat with her fork and spread them across her plate. Her shirt was wrinkled around the neck and shoulders where it draped off; I could see the strap of her bra. I took a sip of milk. Artie gnawed on a wing. The commercials stopped.

Artie jerked his head towards the television. "Boy, is that Vanna White something, or what?"

Mamma spat the chicken skin out onto her plate. "Let me tell you. I bet you could bring her to church and she would nod to the sermon. Bet you she'd know just what the preacher was talking about."

"Oh, yes ma'am," Artie said. "That is a fine woman."

"She ain't so great," Ma said.

"I think Ma's prettier," I said.

Ma looked up, her eyes red. "Thanks, Skokey."

"Your Mama's a fine woman, don't get me wrong. Anyone who'll let in some riffraff for dinner ain't bad," said Artie, looking to Ma.

She stared at my milk glass.

"I bet you it's Robert Redford," Mamma said, putting a lump of chicken in her mouth.

Ma stood up and took her plate to the trash. She looked down inside the can as she scraped the chicken into it, her brown-then-red hair falling around her face. When she'd put her plate in the sink and was holding herself with her arms across her chest, staring out the kitchen window into the front yard, I started to eat, but only stared at my plate and tried not to listen to the television.

"I'll be dogged, woman," Artie said. "Robert Redford."

My chicken was cold, but I pretended it was hot, so hot the steam between the skin and the meat burned the roof of my mouth. I sucked in air and took a big gulp of milk.

Artie slapped his bare thigh, grinning, his yellow teeth slimy, shining in the ceiling light. "I just love guessing the Places." He laughed.

"It's South Dakota," Mamma said.

"Nope. Grand Rapids."

Ma still stood in the dark part of the kitchen, in front of the window. She turned, her hair in front of her face. "It's snowing, Skoke."

I pushed out my chair and stood, the chicken on my plate cold and mangled.

"Down in front," Mamma told me.

"South Austin," said the television.

"Goddam," Artie yelled, throwing a limp piece of meat at the set.

Ma held out her arms and I hugged her around the waist. She turned, and we stared out the kitchen window.

"See it snowing, Skoke?"

"I only see the tree limbs," I said.

Ma picked me up and I sat on my knees on the edge of the sink. Ma held me from behind and put her chin on the top of my head. We watched the snow swirl around the black ditch by the road, covering the mud puddles in a gritty white layer. She squeezed me and I let my head fall backwards against her neck. Her chin smelled like stale water.

"Here we go," Artie said. "They're about to draw the numbers for the Lucky 5." He leaned forwards and turned up the volume.

Mamma ran her fingers hard across her hair and let the dust fall onto her plate. "Skokey, want to see what we can do with the ham radio?"

I shook my head against Ma's neck.

"Suit yourself." Mamma grunted loud and stood up from the table, squeaking in front of Artie on the linoleum.

"First number's twenty-three!" Artie said to the television.

I looked out into the snow as it built up on the windowsill, then put my hand in my pocket and held out the piece of paper Artie had dropped.

12-23-15-9-3.

Ma's hand reached around me, took the piece of paper, and crushed it into a ball, then stuffed it in the drain.

"My stars!" cried Artie. "Skokey! Won't you know it!"

I looked at Artie. He was standing, rifling through his pockets and feeling his chest where there were no pockets.

"Hell, hellhellhell!"

Ma locked her fingers together over my belly.

"Skokey! You seen a ticket anywhere? Where's that damn ticket!"

"What kind of ticket?" I asked.

"Goddam, Skoke. Didn't you hear? The lottery! Them's my numbers."

"When'd you get a lotto ticket?"

"Today, when I got my soda. Aw, goddam it. Come on, Skoke! You ain't seen it?"

"No. You dropped your coke; maybe you dropped your ticket."

"I bet you're right! Skoke, I bet you're right. I bet it's by the train tracks. I know it's there, Skoke. I had both in my hand. That's

right. Skoke, I got to get back to them tracks." Artie stood up from the table and finished his grape soda.

"Skoke will go with you. You can't see in the dark," Ma said.

I looked up at Ma. "But it's snowing out."

"Just go, sugar," she said. "Wear a coat."

I took my brown canvas coat from the bookshelf between the kitchen and the den and opened the door for Artie. "Come on," I said. "It's just going to get colder."

"I appreciate it, Skoke. I surely do. We find that ticket, I'll set you up."

The puddles in the driveway were hidden in snow and nearly frozen full, and Artie steered right into them, jarring my thighs on the freezing handlebars. Wind crashed through the trees and slush from the road flew up from the tires and coated my pants and Artie's bare white legs. I couldn't see anything on the road except for the black limbs that hung over our heads like ghosts, or shadows from Hell. Artie was panting, his breath puffing in front of my face in desperate clouds. I held my face in my hands and tried to unfreeze my nose by blowing into my palms. Artie's body rocked as he forced the pedals around, the spokes creaking as we ran across cracks in the road.

The streetlights looked like droplets of sap between the trees as we turned onto the main road. The snow was more like rain, and splattered against my coat and into my eyes. The sky above the trees glowed orange and steam rose from the train yard just down the tracks from the intersection where Artie had fallen. A train was stopped in front of the old depot. Black streaks of diesel soot lined the engine; the cars were covered in rust and dried sprays of mud.

"It's stopped on the tracks!" Artie yelled "Goddam it! I bet you anything it's under that goddam freight car."

Artie pedaled to the blinking signals and hopped off the back of the bicycle. I lost my balance and fell on my hip on the freezing asphalt; the bike landed on top of me. Artie crawled on his hands and knees, trying to peek under the car. "I know it's here, Skoke. Those were my numbers. They've always been my goddam numbers and that ticket was mine and there's no reason I shouldn't have that goddam ticket!"

I didn't know what to do. I looked around on the road in the flashing wet, lying on my back. I kicked the bicycle off me and rolled over onto my stomach. The signal continued clanging loud, and I could hear every steel bolt and hinged part of the monstrous train

groaning and humming as it sat and waited for the heavy burst of fire in its belly to shoot it down the track. The cars were so large; I looked up and saw one the size of our house. I stood. My hip throbbed. Artie crawled around in the slush looking for his ticket. I turned away from him and looked down the track at the string of cars, linked one after the other on into the darkness, where they poured out without end. The wind plastered the snow to the side of my face and to the freight cars.

Far down the track, in the shadows of yellow floodlights and naked, slick, wet trees, I saw something moving, hopping over ditch and limb. I took off after it into the darkness, into the sideways torrent of the cold and wet falling from the sky. I hopped over piles of disintegrating leaves and rotting limbs, through mud slicks and patches of gravel. I ran; my lungs burned. I tried to catch up to the shadow, which had now stopped and stooped over by the tracks. It was a football field away; I dug my toes into the frozen dirt and pushed myself through the wind that battered my chest. It was like running underwater, heading into that wind. The wind pushed tears out of my eyes and sprayed them across my skull and into my hair.

I was catching up to the squatted figure. It grew larger and larger, like a rock, a boulder, but living, warm inside and breathing just like I was, shooting white clouds of freezing air in front of its face in the dark.

As I got closer, I stopped running. I was out of breath and hunched over, clutching my knees and trying not to throw up. As I walked towards the figure in the yellow light, I heard a loud clacking noise, and, when I thought I had farther still to walk, a voice stopped me.

"Watch out, kid," it said. "Hand me that can by your foot."

I reached to the black-black ground and handed him whatever it was I felt. There was the clacking again. Then a hissing. I opened my eyes. They were so wet with tears. They were so warm. The boy was spray-painting the train car. Something in pink and blue and white.

"Ever tag a train?" he asked.

I shook my head. My cheeks were hot; the snow only made me dizzy.

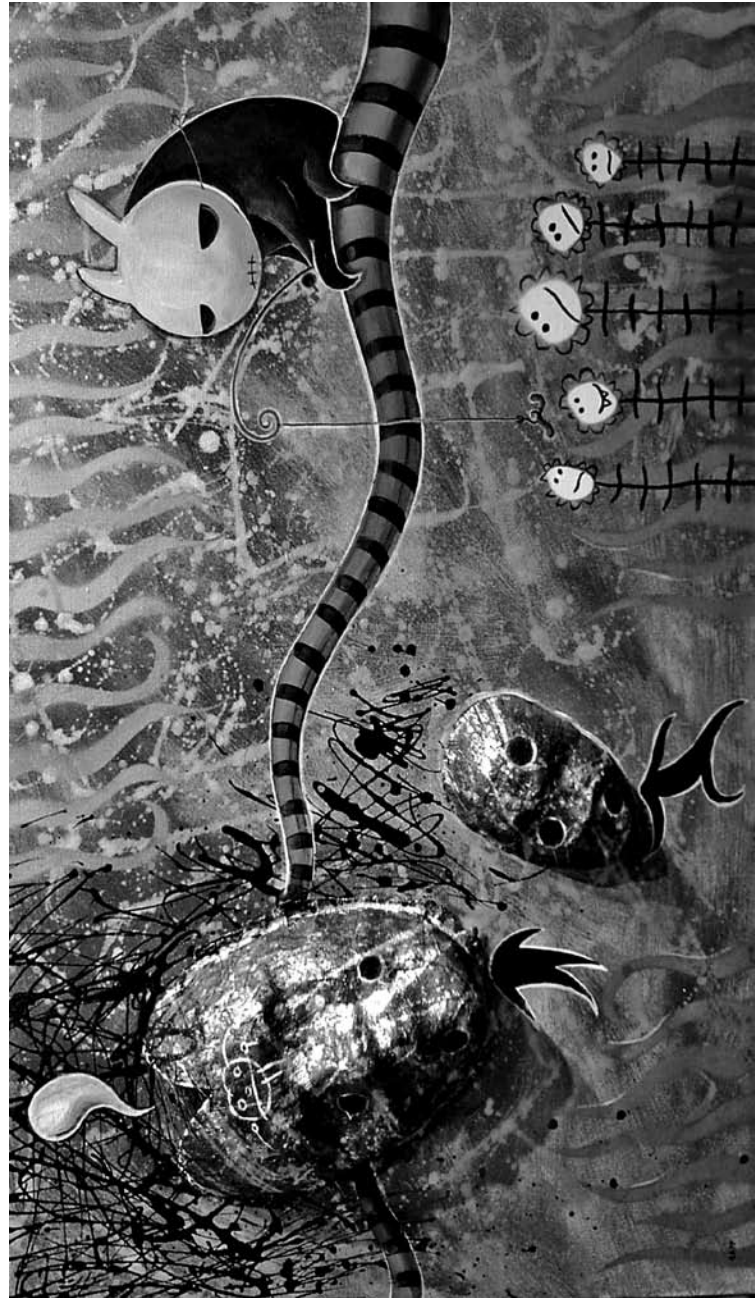
"Here," he said, handing me a can. "I'll clear off a spot for you."

He wiped the side of the car with his sleeve. I leaned forwards in the dim light and shook the can. It was full; the little ball inside

tumbled slowly, as if in zero gravity. I pressed the nozzle and, in a long, sweeping line, wrote, “retch.”

I put down the can and the wind swirled the snow all around my head. I put my hand out and caught myself on the side of the car. I bent over and was sick all along the ditch. When I was done, I remembered the car I’d seen earlier. I spat, and sat in the ditch and watched the boy in his dark wool hat and muddy pants paint the freight car, the cans hissing in the pale yellow light.

I figured finding him was about the same as winning the lottery.



Untitled Collaborative

Mike Capp, Justin Hillgrove, and Shana Marcoullier

Under the Flowers a Carcass Waits

Rusty Barnes

Under the pear tree is a sloppy-jawed mutt chewing
a beef knuckle.

Here the lilac bush, flush with bees, a purple
and somnolent fiasco.

Nearby the grayed-out tractor tire crowded
with black-eyed Susans and chamomile,

and some red-flowered thing in a dirt-filled jar,
whose name I have never known,

ready for you to plant it sometime; I imagine
the crash of your tires in the gravel driveway,

when a ready wit might spring to my lips,
my shirt suddenly ironed, shoes back on

but you're not coming, so for now I'm going to lie
here and let the day disappear, and wait.



Worldly Divine

Cameron Gray

The Salivary Reflex

Tina Connolly

When Allison first had sex with Tom, she licked him carefully, covertly, as part of foreplay, as part of the sex. Salivation disguised as affection, wearing the cloak of lust.

But it was really simply a taste test. Allison's personal yardstick. Let others measure men by fat wallets or thick penises, by how much time they spent with their mothers or on their hair.

Allison just tasted.

Tom tasted of salt and oranges then. More like orange juice in early arousal, sweeter, crisper. He nuzzled the foamy skin at the base of her belly, and she licked the rounded bones of his neck and tasted oranges.

During, the oranges intensified. Sweat and musk emulsified into a richer brew like heated wassail, pungent and furry. Citrus caught at the back of her throat.

It was the wassail taste that did it for Allison. The rest was smoke and mirrors. Tom's job as Co-Director of Finance—or was he the Vice-VP, or perhaps the Financial-Assisted Vice-Director? They all sounded rather similar to Allison, and equally ephemeral. Jobs came and jobs went. Sometimes you kissed ass, sometimes asses kissed you. Smoke and mirrors.

But the burning taste of oranges...that you couldn't fake. That must be irrevocable. That, for Allison, was love.

- - -

Tom and Allison had been married eight years when the K-I landed. *Kéaille* in French, *Ke Ki* in Japanese, *Kay-Eye* in Britain, but bald, stark *K-I* in the USA.

The K-I topped out at four feet tall. They were pink, knobbly, and rounded. They were translucent at the tips of their five chubby appendages and over the centers of their lower torsos. The torso's translucence revealed a certain organ that most of the K-I had. If present, it showed as a faint, pulsating blue through the pink semi-opacity, conveniently displayed—better than looking at an x-ray diagnostic, ultrasound, or CAT scan.

Neither the biologists nor the linguists could quite interpret what the prized organ was. It was clear that, like the appendix for humans, it had once been vitally necessary for the K-I, but was no

longer. Unlike the appendix, it clearly had some intrinsic or societal value for them. Even their clothes made to imitate Earthly fashions had stomach panels that were kept buttoned open to display their organ—or lack of it. Scientists at first thought that having the organ denoted a sex difference, but on further consideration, that seemed not to be the case.

Pink and chubby, with fuel-efficient spacecraft and impressive displays of data compression. The K-I brought quantaponics. They brought amusing holovids. And they brought religion.

It was not entirely clear how the K-I proselytized at home, or whether they even needed to. It seemed likely that they did not. On Earth, they looked for guidance in the area of dissemination, sought methods of rhetorical seduction. And they found them.

Not all countries welcomed the alien missionaries. China and Iran banned them. France allowed them to visit—and buy things—but not to preach. Japan loved them and made many *ke ki* anime shows, but did not take them seriously. There, the K-I eventually gave up or went native.

But America allowed them in—with anger, with fervor, with fear, with pleasure. The K-I settled in small clusters and set out to do what they had apparently come all this way to do.

Convert.

- - -

Allison and Tom had been married ten years when the K-I finally made it to their street. During their decade together, Tom had been promoted, had failed to be promoted, had resigned and been rehired at a significantly larger salary. The oranges had not ripened into anything more complex. Nor had they unmistakably soured into acrid disappointment. Merely they had faded until there was only a hint left, one dissipating floral note, as from a cheap plywood box that only even smelled like oranges because it had once shipped two dozen of them from Florida to Oklahoma.

The taste of Tom, in the kitchen or asleep, was of dust and dry-erase-marker stench. The infrequent times they had sex, the dust deepened to blacktop tar; tar in the heat, in Southern California, thick and deep, the land of the body carrying the racial memory of orange groves like a bitter secret. The taste slipped further and further each time they lay together. Sometimes trying to catch at an evaporation worked Allison into a frenzy. She tore and bit, clawing after things lost. But her mouth told her that all things die.

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All things die, but most things get up and go to work. Minus her orange grove, Allison slowly drifted, less and less aware of passing time. Until one day in year six, the network technician was rooting around under her desk and she found herself bending over him, tongue extended, jaws bared, an inch from his olive-brown neck. She paused, aghast, then licked him anyway. Darted her little pink measuring stick out against his neck, one clean swipe, then backed away and said, "I'm sorry, I think I dripped some water on you."

She picked up an empty company mug from her desk and held it to her chest, cupping her hand over it. Inside Allison's mouth was the flavor of almonds. Almonds and elm bark. Rich bitterness ran thickly from her tongue and exploded into her bloodstream. Flavor throbbled in her veins. Her eyelids fluttered.

The technician looked sideways up at her. His black eyes were hidden in the shadows thrown by the cubicle walls. He rubbed his neck. "You want to go to Denny's?" he said.

Allison accepted.

But then the technician's wife was transferred to another city, and he left in year seven. Allison returned to her work and her husband with a vague sense of renewed purpose.

Tom took a lover in year eight. The hot tar receded, the dry dust vanished, and Allison knew immediately. It was springtime in the States and summer on Tom's skin, a young and heated summer of love and motorcycle rubber and orange soda pop. Allison lost herself in it. Drenched herself in the warmth and energy that crackled off his hard, furry legs. She gave herself to him as often as he wanted, and he devoured her as he had not done in four years. Happiness fizzed in the back of her throat.

Energy and love fed and changed Tom. His self-worth plumped and expanded. But then drive calcified. Terror and confidence, middle age and the *squick* of motorcycle tires abruptly gelled, hardened into an oily, cementy flavor that hit Allison's nostrils even before her tongue. He asked for and was denied a raise, quit, and his body's last summer was over. His bluff held longer than his boss'. Tom negotiated himself back into power before Christmas, but the hardness did not leave him. It was concrete-permanent. It would take more than a new lover to recapture what had been lost.

Allison assumed the girl had left him when he quit. At least it seemed that Tom rarely left the house during those months, preferring instead to sit in his study, and pace, and play online poker, and pace

again. What she did not know was whether that girl, or another, came back when the New Year rolled over and Tom reclaimed his alpha spot. There were signs that for another wife would have been proof: lipstick on Tom's briefs and a wrapped tampon—a tampon!—under the passenger seat. But there were no oranges ever again, only hot cardboard and rapidly-cooling tar.

That spring, Allison's department was downsized by half and Allison volunteered to be let go.

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When Allison first heard the K-I were canvassing her neighborhood, she was annoyed. She hated missionaries with a passion she reserved for few things.

Paul from two doors down had come over to bring her gossip and a loaf of bread and to try to get in her pants. That was the regular Tuesday-morning ritual. "The pinkies have finally made it to our neighborhood," he said with relish.

"Oh?"

Allison accepted the lemon bread and a cheek-kiss from Paul. She took the bread over to the built-in cutting board, unmolded the foil, and began to slice. This too had been ritual this past year: the thick heel for her, two thin slices for Paul, fitted onto a saucer with a cup of coffee. "I thought your family was Christian."

Paul waved this aside irritably. "The wife thinks the kids should go to church occasionally. Easter and Christmas and whenever they get caught smoking pot."

Allison poured coffee into the thin floral cups and made listening noises. She thought about how much she hated the oleander pattern on the china.

"The pinkies have a reputation, that's all I'm saying," Paul said. "They're not normal. They're into weird shit."

"Of course they're not normal. They're aliens." Allison set the cup and saucer in front of Paul.

"You're such an innocent. It's hard to find that in a woman nowadays. It's attractive."

Allison stared out the kitchen window at the opening tulips and did not reply.

"They're kinky," Paul finally continued. "They say so themselves. Weird kinky aliens."

"What, their religion?"

"I want to meet them. Let them come to my door and try to

convert me. I'll get all the dirt and fill you in. Then you won't have to talk to them."

"They look so baby-like in their pictures," Allison said suddenly. "Big heads, big rounded features. Disproportionate to their bodies."

"That's their cover. So they can suck you into their cult. Like that group in Texas. And I think they look more like jellyfish or slugs. Nasty pink mounds with those blue things in their stomachs."

"Like a light-up toy, a button you push to make a baby giggle," said Allison.

"I think I'd better come over and protect you if they try to come by," said Paul. "They've already got you fooled, and next thing I know, you'll be off having kinky sex with the pinkies."

Allison rolled her eyes. "What time does your wife get home?"

- - -

Paul tasted like birthday-cake frosting and calamari. That was both far better than it sounded and far more insipid. The sweetened shortening taste had no depth; the squid was languid rubber with a far-off hint of the sea. Allison had been fooled by the oranges. She was not fooled by the remnants of the ocean. That part of Paul had ebbed long ago.

In the ninth summer, she had let him kiss her once on the mouth. His mouth with its little pointed teeth was hungry upon hers. It seemed like a passion, a devouring, but there was nothing to it, no wild sea flavor, no tidal wave to sweep her away. She had batted him aside and returned to pouring coffee.

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Allison was filing papers in Tom's study the first time she saw the K-I. There were two of them deliberating in Mrs. DeLillo's driveway across the street. She set the phone bills on top of the hanging folders and leaned towards the window, her forearm on the wooden sill.

She was surprised by how natural they looked in suburban America. Yes, they were bipedal and laterally symmetrical, vaguely humanoid. But the cotton-candy pinkness, the five appendages, the translucency, and the blue bellies...all those wrongnesses should have added up to something completely out of place. Yet they did not.

The K-I were in matching buttoned brown short outfits that,

on human babies, Allison would have identified as onesies. They looked squeezable.

The shorter one tugged on the other's arm, pulling...him? her? it? up to Mrs. DeLillo's door. Allison gently pushed the blinds apart to see more without revealing herself. The door opened upon Mrs. DeLillo, lax in red sweatpants. Her expression was unreadable in the shadows. The shorter K-I stepped forwards and held up a book, much the same size and shape as a hotel Bible. Yet surely their religion had not come originally with Bibles, or Talmuds, or Qur'ans, thick handheld answer sheets to tuck under an arm or take door-to-door. Surely that was an Earthism they had adopted to seem more familiar.

This, then, was how the Westerners had looked, foreign bodies among the natives, with their printing-press books and their methods of imposing. Intruders all, declaring that the *indigènes* should feel things they did not feel and believe things they did not see or smell or taste. Mapping onto a different set of perceptions, a religious synesthesia. The K-I were no different than any other missionaries, out to recondition their marks.

A faint sound of DeLillo-screaming slid through the double-hung windowpane. She must have a hangover. She pushed at the book the shorter one was holding, and the impact knocked the little K-I off of DeLillo's front step and onto the trimmed lawn. It fell backwards onto its fifth appendage and stopped there a moment, the other four knobbly limbs waving helplessly in the air. A tiny cooing cry ululated softly through the neighborhood. Allison pressed her fingers to her mouth.

The bigger K-I came over to its companion, but the little one did not need assistance. It compressed its fifth pink limb, like a pogo stick, and then recoiled and rocked to its feet. The two K-I picked up their book and slowly wandered down DeLillo's driveway, seemingly unfazed, back in deliberations. DeLillo had long since closed the door.

The missionaries looked up and down the street. Their round pink heads bobbed and their fifth limbs waved gently in the air like kitten-tails. Then the bigger K-I looked across and up, right at Tom's study. Allison made a small noise of dismay. The bigger one seemed to say something, and then the two K-I crossed the street together, their rolling bodies wobbling and their translucent-tipped fifth limbs lofty behind them. Allison watched them until they disappeared underneath her, under the porch eaves. The doorbell rang. Allison froze.

She did not know what to say to them, these adorable pink

moppets who were determined to preach to her. She usually had no trouble effecting the curt dismissal of anyone with a religious tract. Perhaps if she stayed motionless long enough they would give up and go away. The deep brown smell of Tom's breakfast tea still hung in the air and the waxed wooden sill was cool on her forearm. The doorbell rang again.

Then there were crisp, blunt footsteps and the sound of a door opening. She turned, startled. She had completely forgotten that Tom was in the house. A K-I voice, it must be, spoke; the sound came in underwater waves, the individual syllables lost in the rolling tones. Then Tom's voice, neither rough nor kind, no different than for any other solicitation. "No, thanks," he said, and shut the door.

Allison went back to the window to see them go. They rolled to the end of the driveway and ran through the same set of deliberations all over again. Then they set off to her left, in the direction of Paul's house. The bigger one looked back over its shoulder at Allison. Its eyes were opaque blue. Allison did not move until at last it looked away.

- - -

"They *are* weird," said Paul. His voice was huge with self-satisfaction. "I convinced them to come inside and talk for an hour. Taped the whole thing."

Allison poured the coffee. "Did they convert you?"

"Converted me to thinking they're a bunch of sickos. Do you know they don't feel pain?"

She set the coffee and two slices of banana bread in front of Paul. "How would they know what it is then? How would they know to tell you they don't have it?"

Paul seemed uninterested in any metaphysical ramifications of this topic. "They learned about it when they were studying religion here. The Christian martyrs confused them. The K-I have nerve endings that tingle, but it's not pain. They had me pinch their limbs and poke at the blue things in their stomachs to demonstrate, and then they made those weird cooing noises. I told them they were just a bunch of BDSMers."

"You called them the K-I," said Allison. Not pinkies.

Paul flushed. "They were nice," he admitted. "They talked about doing good for others. And those big blue eyes." He looked up at Allison. "But I'm not going to their church. The wife and kids would have a fit. Switching religions is for hippies."

Allison nodded. "Did you ask them back?"

"Yes." Paul broke off a piece of bread and stared at it, silent.

She leaned in next to him, over his shoulder, to pour him a second cup of coffee. Far under the authoritative odor of the coffee, curling in a warm aura around Paul's neck, there arose a far-off musky hint of the sea.

- - -

Tom was apologetic when he told Allison he was in love. He actually said the words "in love," and Allison couldn't help smiling for him. She refrained from asking whether it was still the same girl from two years ago. Some things were better left secret. Tom gave her the paid-up house and told her he would gladly send her money until she found a job she liked or met someone new, both of which he was sure would happen very shortly. Allison accepted the house but declined the paycheck. She had more than enough in her own account to cover a job search.

- - -

She saw the K-I six more times that summer, always together, always in those little brown onesies. They stood in driveways, planning after every house which way to go next, and they went back to Paul's twice that she saw, on weekday mornings. Allison stopped whatever she was doing if she caught a flash of pink, and crept to the blinds and looked. But they did not come to her door. She thought about going out to meet them, but what would she say? *I don't want any religion, thanks anyway. I just want to meet you. I'm just...fascinated.*

Because she was; fascinated in exactly the same way as when she was struck by a crush. The translucent knobs on the ends of their limbs reminded her of Jell-O, and she tried very hard not to wonder how they tasted. It seemed as though she could learn what they were like—why they had come and what their religion was about—if she could just measure them with her tongue. But saying *Hi, I'm Allison; can I lick your belly?* did not seem like it would be a very good way of maintaining cordial human-alien relationships.

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She was dividing day lilies in the backyard when at last they came. It was hot for September, and sweat was prickling the fine hair on her shoulder blades. A pinky-grey shadow fell over her hands and she looked up into a pair of opaque blue eyes. She had known they would come. They were made for that instant

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in time and space, two chubby pink aliens in the backyard of suburbia. The smaller one plopped itself down on its side on the prickly grass. It picked up a day-lily corm from the pile and examined it.

Confronted with the reality of the blue-eyed missionaries, Allison was suddenly shy.

"Do you have a moment to talk?" the taller one said ritually. It took a moment for Allison to sort out the individual words from the smooth, rolling sentence. But except for the underwater effect, their diction was clear and unaccented.

The smaller one let something that could have been a tongue loll out of something that could have been a mouth. The expression looked like amusement. "Paul sent us," it said. The two K-I voices were identical to Allison's human ears.

"I have time to talk," said Allison, stiff with uncertainty. She added in a rush, "I'm not religious, you know. I'm afraid you can't convert me."

"Religion has many faces," said the taller one. "Many senses."

"It is a hard word to translate," said the shorter one, and its pink tongue-like muscle rolled in and out. The muscle was translucent like the tips of limbs and bulge of belly.

"Let me tell you about some things we believe," said the taller one.

So it was to be standard-issue rhetoric after all, thought Allison. She looked longingly at their pink skin.

"We believe in doing good for others," said the taller one. "Isn't this a standard idea on your planet?"

"Yes," answered Allison absently. Up close, she could see how cunningly the brown sackcloth was cut to show off the translucent part of the belly. She had thought that both of her missionaries had the blue belly-organs. But up close, it seemed to be only the smaller one. It shimmered under its stomach skin, like a fruit suspended in gelatin.

"We believe that there are experiences that can take you outside of yourself. We believe that it is worth the effort to find greater truths and higher meanings."

"You mean, like religious ecstasy," said Allison.

"That is one way we might describe it," said the taller one. "To a religious person."

"Not to one such as yourself," added the shorter one. It

bounced the corm off a pink limb and back onto the pile of day lilies, for all the world like a teenager playing hacky sack.

“Standard salesmanship,” said Allison. “Tailor the pitch to the individual and reaffirm that I’m unique.”

For some reason, she felt quite comfortable speaking to the K-I in this way, positive that they would not take offense or leave. The adrenaline of the exchange worked on her brain like a mental cup of coffee. A smile began to tug at the corner of her mouth.

The shorter one’s tongue rolled in and out again. The blue in its center sharpened, as if the organ were pressing against the surface of its belly. With the increased clarity, she could make out the edge of the organ itself, no longer a blue blur but on clear display.

“We affirm that you are unique,” echoed the taller one. “We cannot explain ourselves to you with the usual symbols we use. Our manual suggests that religious ecstasy would be the incorrect terminology for you.”

“That’s your manual?” Allison pointed to the Bible-sized book that lay on the grass next to the littler K-I.

“It is a familiar format for Earth people,” said the taller one. She almost thought she could hear reluctance in the ocean-wave tones.

“It looks like your religious manuals,” said the littler one.

“And it is,” said the taller one. “A book of instructions for how to live. Is this not what religion is?”

“Yes,” agreed the smaller one.

The exchange almost sounded like the continuation of an old argument. With one pink limb, the smaller alien touched its belly softly where the blue was prominent.

“Please,” said Allison. “What is that? What is it for?”

There was a moment of silence. Then the taller one said, “There are experiences that can take you outside of yourself. This is what religion is for.”

“But we are all missionaries at home,” said the littler one. “We have no one to convert.”

“The blue organ is special,” said the taller one. “We do not need it at this stage of our evolution.”

“In fact, we like to get rid of it,” said the other.

“It is a religious experience.”

Allison looked into the little one’s eyes, blue and opaque, like cutouts of the sky. It seemed as though it knew what it was sug-

gesting. It seemed it knew what it was giving her permission to do.

"So we must travel," continued the taller one. "Find planets, such as yours, and find seekers, such as yourself."

"And Paul," said the smaller one quietly. It still held Allison's eyes.

"And Paul," echoed the taller one. It touched its clear belly where no blue was.

Allison had been a void for too long. Life abhors a vacuum. She extended her hand slowly towards the little one's belly and touched it with the tips of her fingers. The translucent section did feel like gelatin, cool and compressible, and as if anything sharper than a butter knife would slide right into it.

The little K-I watched her intently.

"I was pleased to be able to convert Paul," said the taller one. "It is a new phase of my existence."

"I am delighted for my fellow missionary," said the shorter one. Was that dryness in the waves?

Religion abhors a vacuum. "You are certain?" she said.

The flesh was cool and inviting beneath her fingers. Tempting. Succulent. Her mouth moistened involuntarily.

"It is what we came to do."

She sank her teeth into the Jell-O-like flesh of the little one's belly. It tasted of pine nuts and strange fruits. There was tart and sweet in that bite, hints of pear, mango, grapefruit. Orange. Yet it was none of those; it was something wholly new and simultaneously deeply familiar. It was so nearly identifiable, the taste on the tip of her tongue. Another bite would tell her. Wetness like fruit juice dribbled down the side of her mouth. The little K-I cooed in rapture. Allison's eyelids fluttered.

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There were some things you couldn't fake. Some things you couldn't remap. Blue sky and strange fruits and a warm, wet happiness that rushed in to fill the chasm deep inside. That, for Allison, was the nourishment she had been seeking. That was sustenance. That, for Allison, was conversion.

Nan

Scott Christian Carr

~Run. Run like I do,~ thinks Nan, and I do. Past the burned-out buildings, past the old factories of crumbling brick and bent, rusted steel that provide shade and shelter from the sulfur flats and the poisonous westward winds from the great chemical wastes beyond.

~Controlled breathing,~ thinks Nan, and I try to do as instructed. ~Through the nose—don't gulp the air. Don't pant.~ The voice of Nan's mind, a steady metronome inside of mine.

~Metronome~ is Nan's word, not my own, but with the description comes a comforting *thump-thumping* inside my head, much steadier than anything I've ever heard or felt. More constant than the wind, even; it's the pulse of a relaxed heart. My heart. Trying not to slobber, I pull my wagging tongue back into my mouth. I take a deep breath through my nose, but it burns and I fly into a sneezing fit.

Nan stops running and turns to face me. He's laughing. "Hoooo, hoooo, hoooo...." Huge guffaws, but Nan is out of breath too. His stocky simian body rises with each burst of convulsive laughter, each gulp of acrid air.

~Simian.~ Nan's word for himself. ~Not an ape,~ he thinks, ~not a monkey. Simian.~

Nan fingers the shiny piece of metal he'd found, the ~knife,~ he calls it. He juggles it carefully from palm to palm, touching its smooth, sharp edges. He'd seen it glittering in a pile of rubble, and stooped and snatched it up in mid-stride. Settling down now on his haunches, he inspects it closely, slashing at the air and holding it up to the sun. When he grips the knife tightly, it's almost entirely concealed in his huge fist.

He holds it close as he runs, pressed tightly to his side. The long hair on his back and arms hides its glimmer.

Running after him, I can barely keep up. Even though he runs as if he has a cramp or a stitch in his side, I fall behind. I do my best to follow, not breathing through my nose, but ~pacing myself.~

~Good,~ thinks Nan. ~Cardiovascular exercise.~

These words are unfamiliar to me, nonsense.

We run through the place where the dogs live, where I lived. A muddy embankment, on the edge of the sulfur flats but still in the shadow of the old...~city,~ Nan calls it. A hot, wet place where

strange plants, ~*fungus*,~ sprout from the darkest corners, from beneath rocks and between scattered, crumbling blocks.

Insects swarm here, seeking the hot green water of the puddle that the dogs have claimed as their own. The whole pack is here, lazily basking in the hot sun, scratching at diggers and fleas. Their fur is caked with dried mud, but scattered oily patches give their coats a sheen and betray their emaciated forms.

Heads lift tiredly as we pass. Dull eyes regard Nan with cruel suspicion and paranoia, and glare hatefully at me. I can feel their fevered, wordless minds. I'm a traitor to them; they despise me for running with an ape. A simian.

But they let us pass; they're too tired and hot to take up a chase. I have no fear of them. There's not one that I couldn't kill in a fight, or outrun. I'm still free to drink from their pool.

We keep on running, leaving the tired, hungry idiots behind. Past where the piles of brick and metal grow tall, where mounds and small hills of rubble eventually form awkward walls along the sides of our path, throwing lazy shadows over the road. We run past the broken remains of the small buildings, and on to the place where the sand becomes hard, black ground.

~*Tarmac*.~

We run further still, to where most of the bricks still hold together and a few of the tall buildings still stand, crooked and crumbling yet stark, defiant effigies against the roiling red sky. We continue into the dilapidated place where the apes, the ~*simians*,~ have made their homes. Timidly, we enter the clearing where they dwell.

They're all there; at least, all the ones I know are. Sitting proudly upon their hollow metal rocks. ~*Their dumpsters*,~ thinks Nan with a frown.

They all leap nervously into the air when they see us, frantically scrambling amongst their piles of hoarded junk for the highest, most threatening perch. When they spot me, they raise their arms high above their heads and begin to shriek. They bare their teeth at me and spit—but remain safely atop their sacred dumpsters. It's only for show. They know enough to leave me be, at least when Nan is in sight. They know that I am with Nan, that I am his dog, his pet. His ~*friend*,~ he calls me.

They won't bother me as long as we're together, but I would never dare enter their territory alone. They can be ferocious, and their aim is deadly.

As we enter their place, Nan slows his pace and falls into a slouch. His posture becomes crooked and hunched and he takes on a gamboling, bouncing stride. He begins to swagger and sway. He suddenly appears more ordinary, more natural. More like the rest of them. ~Primitive~ is how Nan describes the dog-packs and their filthy puddles. But primitive is how Nan looks now beside his whooping brothers and sisters slumming around their dumpsters.

After a few seconds of frenzied shrieking, the simians fall silent and go back to their tossing games, heaving scraps of metal and small stones back and forth from dumpster to dumpster. They pretend to ignore us, but I can see them watching from the corners of their eyes and I can feel their clouded, suspicious minds.

We jog on through the lot, leaving the gaggle of gorillas—simians—behind, and soon we come to another dumpster. This one stands alone against the unroofed remains of a small building set away from the rest. Nan glances back, making certain that we are out of sight, that we haven't been followed, and then he slows to a strut and casually sidles up to it.

~They won't come near this one,~ he thinks. ~They're terrified of it. It's filled with spilled buckets of paint. The colors frighten them.~

I'll never understand color.

~That's right,~ thinks Nan, ~your world is gray.~ He tosses his knife into the dumpster, where it lands with a deep, echoing clang.

Without looking back, Nan begins again to run.

We continue through the small cluster of buildings and onto a long stretch of blackened tarmac. We run for some time down this ~road,~ skirting the perimeter of the city, until finally we arrive at a long, low building that seems surprisingly intact. As we approach, I can see words carved into the stone on the facing wall. As we draw closer still, I can make out individual letters, and I recognize some of the ones Nan has been teaching me by scratching the strange figures with his finger in the sand.

We slow, finally, to a walk. Staring at the letters, I struggle to form them into words. To recall Nan's lessons. To make him proud. I'm panting, exhausted, but Nan seems to hardly have broken a sweat.

-E-L-E-

My mind struggles with the abstract task of applying sounds to the narrow etchings, of stringing them together and calling forth actual concepts.

-M-E-N-T-

~Elementary,~ thinks Nan. ~This used to be a school.~

These words make no sense to me, but I trust my teacher. Cautiously approaching the gaping entrance, I'm again surprised at how intact it is. The glass is all long gone, shattered and windblown away, but metal still frames the entrance, unbent and surprisingly untouched by rust—a dark, rectangular cave mouth.

I follow close behind Nan. It's dark and strangely quiet; the harsh wind doesn't penetrate the thick walls, but strange echoes howl amidst the dancing shadows. A cloying, musky smell fills the place. Chitinous beetles skirt the floor and the rotting walls thrum with insect life. Nan walks confidently. He is familiar with these halls, though I've never been this far from the watering pool before.

We come to a place, a ~classroom,~ Nan calls it, that is filled with strange misshapen spiders of twisted metal and frozen wood.

~Desks,~ thinks Nan.

~Now go. Leave me for a while. There are some things that I am not comfortable doing in the company of others.~

For a moment, I just cower in the doorway, not wanting to be alone in this haunted place.

Nan fixes me firmly with his eyes. ~Go.~

Out in the hall, I pace in circles until I finally muster the nerve to poke my nose into another room. It is identical to the one I just left Nan in. I walk to another, and another: more of the same. For some reason this frightens me, and I turn back, thinking that if I whine, Nan may let me curl up and sleep at his feet.

I approach Nan's classroom cautiously, not wanting to startle him. Not wanting to invoke his anger. Peeking around the doorframe, I'm shocked by what I see. Nan has somehow twisted his body into the reaching, misshapen arms of the ~desk;~ he is leaning back, eyes rolled up to the dank ceiling, gripped in its crooked steel fingers. And Nan is touching himself. It's disturbing, intimate, and somehow vulgar, the way his leathery fingers dance and caress. It reminds me of the other apes—the other simians—and the way they will touch themselves savagely and unselfconsciously. The way they will grab at their frightful penises, howling and throwing their feces at any dog that might dare approach their sacred dumpsters.

But there is nothing aggressive about Nan's actions or the expression on his face. He seems peaceful, quiet...at rest. As if something vital has left him. His body is trembling and his eyes have lost their glint.

I retreat quickly, embarrassed by what I've seen. Ashamed for looking. I cower in the hallway until I'm sure that Nan's not coming, then I lie down to a fitful sleep.

I don't sleep for long, but when I awaken, I'm stiff and sore. As much from the long run and damp air, I'm sure, as from the anxiousness in which I've dozed.

With my tail between my legs, I look toward the open doorway of Nan's classroom, inching my way closer. Peeking around the corner, I can see that he's still in there, still entwined in the desk. But unlike before, his eyes are keen and aware. He's waiting for me.

~*Come in*,~ he invites me with his eyes, with his mind.

He is no longer touching himself, and as I enter he turns his eyes downward toward the wooden face of his desk, poring over something. A strange object, splayed out before him. He beckons me over with a friendly wave, and I sniff at it. It has a pungent odor, the same moldy smell that permeates the entire place.

Nan's palm is on the back of my neck, gently stroking me as I examine the thing more closely. It's made from a material I've never before seen, at once delicate and sturdy. Looking closely, I can make out thousands of tiny letters, like the ones I've seen etched into faces of buildings. They are assembled into words, and they fill every inch of the surface of the thing.

~*A book*,~ thinks Nan, turning the page. He begins to read from it.

By Zombies: Eaten

Christopher Buecheler

The death tag wrapped around the woman's toe is curling at the sides, yellowing with age, growing brittle. Tags like this are written in pencil now, because we reuse 'em. We have to. This little town only had a few to begin with, and the dead pile up fast around here. I suppose we could've gotten more shipped to us if the shipping routes were still running. They're not.

The little girl in the corner hasn't said a word since we brought her in, but her eyes are like leaking faucets, producing tiny rivers of horror and fear and despair that run down her face as she stares out at nothing. The body under the sheet? The one with the old, used toe tag? That's her mother. When we found 'em, Mom had already become a mid-morning snack. The zombie had put out her eyes with his thumbs, jerked his arms, split her head open like a coconut. Then his buddy went to work on her legs, gnawing at 'em the way a dog will work a bone.

Turns out one of the things had once been her husband. They call it residual memory. No one's quite sure exactly how it works, but it's been seen too many times to be denied. He went missing a few days ago. Neighbor called us this morning on the jerry-rigged phone system we got here in town and said that Dad had shown up again, with a friend, moaning and crying and banging at the front door.

Fool woman should've known better than to open it. I'm not saying she deserved what happened, no...but these things have been all over the place for months. Whole country's been warned. Whole country's seen what they can do. Christ, everyone in town saw what was left of Brenda Glickman, and it was her own kid done that. You'd have to be blind, deaf, and stone stupid not to know better.

Wasn't much could be done except put an explosive round in Dad's head. Little girl was right there watching. Watching and screaming, and I felt bad about doing it, but if you don't catch 'em before the change, destroying the brain is the only way to put 'em down. I'm not talking a little bullet to the head here, either. I'm talking about atomizing the old grey matter. Making brain pudding. That's when the kid went silent, all at once, like someone had knocked her

clean out. Except she was still watching, all glassy-eyed, while we hauled away the bodies.

Dad's burnt now, and here's Mom lying on the table, brain removed before it can start to change, and the cause of death on the tag reads like a bad joke. "Killed by zombies," in shaky pencil scrawl, and then, scribbled up and diagonal to save space, an afterthought: "Eaten."

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The little girl's breathing is growing steadily more ragged. I've seen this before. She's going to start screaming pretty soon. She'll do that for a while, I guess, probably until her voice gives out. Then she'll either start to get better or she'll just keep getting worse.

I don't mind that she's going to start screaming. Not her fault, and to be honest this town is so goddamned quiet most of the time that any noise is welcome. I do feel a twinge of anger at Andy, who shoulda goddamn known better than to park this little kid in front of her mom's corpse and leave her there. I'll chew him out when he comes back on shift, but it won't matter. Andy hasn't been right since the zombies got his wife. The sonofabitch only'd been married maybe three, four months. Then all this shit started. His Lisa was one of the first to go.

No, Andy ain't right, as they say down here. This little girl ain't right. Shit, I probably ain't right either, but there's no real way to tell these days. Sometimes I wake up and my throat hurts like I've been screaming. Sometimes I wake up and the pillow's all wet. My dreams, though, they're all just grey and shifting, like pea-soup fog in November. Things I've seen? The grey fog's a blessing.

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Andy's been my deputy for about six months. He volunteered for the position after I was elected sheriff. I think he wanted to avenge Lisa. I got *my* position because I shot the last sheriff in the head before he could turn the local high-school basketball star into Sunday dinner.

Andy spends a lot of time cradling his shotgun like a baby and looking through the big windows out front. There's bars on those windows now. Necessary measures. It's bad and getting worse out there. You'd think we could just wipe the zombies out, but it hasn't worked like that. For example, you'd be surprised how few people

have the heart to shoot a loved one—even a dead loved one—in the face. Most of 'em just lie there, crying like babies, and let themselves be killed. For every zombie Andy and I put down, two more seem to take its place.

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One time, Andy sees this zombie lurching along right down Main Street, and he whoops like a southern colonel at the races and starts discharging that damn shotgun in the office. He's shooting right through the glass of the window, never mind that the spread is way too loose to do any damage at that range anyway. I had to wait until he ran out of shells and it was safe to go out the front door, and go put the thing down with my handgun.

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Thinking about that brings a smile to my face that feels like it might be more of a grimace. The little girl in the corner is going "Ah!" with each breath now, and the sound is the most pathetic, heart-wrenching thing I've heard in a long time—since the last little girl, anyway. There's been a lot of orphaned kids. The zombies seem to go for the big meals first; if you respond fast enough, you can usually save the kids. There's a whole mess of 'em over at the elementary school. Some of the teachers are running what amounts to an orphanage there. No point in teaching anymore. Surviving's a full-time job.

People could've left town, I guess, but where would they go? A major city? Forget it. They're all war zones, full of gangs and vigilantes. Freaks and perverts. Zombies.

Another small town? You'd be welcome, I suppose, but what's the point? The only safe place would be way out in the mountains somewhere, and truth is, most people just aren't equipped to survive anymore. They don't know how to farm or hunt. They don't even know how to find clean water.

Better to batten down the hatches, keep your guns clean, keep your Bible open, and wait to die.

- - -

First off, forget all of this George Romero shit that's running through your head right now, okay? You've got pictures in your mind of Grandma clawing her way out of the grave and trying to gum you to death. Not how it happens. Unless you put Grandma in the ground

in the past year, she's not coming back. The likelihood of infection decreases exponentially as the corpse ages. Oldest confirmed I've ever seen was ten months, and that was a joke. Motor control was shot. The thing was crawling along, wracked with seizures. Not scary. Not dangerous. More pathetic than anything else.

No, the dangerous ones are the one- or two-weekers. Folks like this little girl's dad, who died by zombie bite. That itself increases the risk of infection to near-guaranteed. When it happens that soon, they're still fast—and smart. Jesus, they can be smart. I've seen 'em hunt in packs like wild dogs, snarling and ravenous, overtaking their prey and dragging it down. They're strong too, if they were in good health during life. And they don't feel pain, best we can tell.

The first ones came out of the ground about sixteen months ago. April of last year, that was, after the last major thaw. There's a hundred thousand competing theories for why and how it happened, and, as far as I'm concerned, you can throw 'em all in a hat and pick one at random. The fools out there theorizing still believe there's a chance to stop what's happening. The rest of us have better things to worry about.

It's worse at night. Not that the things are nocturnal; they show up any time of the day. But at night, you can't see as far. Every shadow could mean death. The lights around town flicker, sometimes. Barely enough people left to keep the electricity running. Every time it happens, I feel like I'm going to have a heart attack. Good Christ, do you know how bad it's going to get when we're reduced down to torches and kerosene lanterns?

Sometimes, when I let myself think about it, I wonder what in the hell these things are going to do when they wipe out the human race. They don't seem to die from hunger, but the longer they go without eating, the more violent and brutal they're likely to be. Will they turn on each other? We haven't seen that so far.

I imagine they'll eventually rot away. I'm not sure if they keep decaying after they come out of the ground, but I guess they must, right? It's all dead tissue, and dead tissue rots. Maybe someday the earth will be free of humans and zombies alike.

I sort of like that. It's ugly, but it's awfully damned funny. Maybe it's God. You choose which one you like; I'm not picky. God the cosmic mathematician. God the giant white guy with the Santa-Claus beard. God the multi-armed elephant. God the warp and weave of the universe, who sent comets to kill the dinosaurs and zombies to kill mankind.

Maybe God put checks and balances into the Earth the way you toss one of those blue tablets into a toilet tank. Picture it: the self-cleaning earth, periodically flushing away the scum.

I think of things like that sometimes and it makes me laugh. I try not to do it out loud, though. Sometimes when I laugh, people think I'm screaming.

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She started up about ten minutes ago. Those rattling breaths between each "Ah!" got deeper and deeper, building to something. Then one more deep breath—more of a gasp, really, like tearing cloth—and then the first scream. I think it was "Mama." Not sure. Her voice cracked and broke about halfway through and it became something other than a word.

I wheeled her mom away a while ago. When Andy gets back, we'll take her from the one freezer we have here to the big bank of 'em at the morgue. Our guy there will come in tomorrow and find her, enter the name into the records, slip the toe tag off, and put it back onto the pile.

He used to take the bodies out and have 'em buried. That doesn't happen anymore. No time, no patience. No one has energy enough for proper burials, and people standing around in a cemetery these days tend to feel like items at an all-you-can-eat buffet. Now they go into the oven, and then into the pit.

The little girl's in agony. Hurts to watch, but it's sort of hard to turn away. Normally, she'd be pretty. Blonde, blue...I'd put her just on the upper side of ten years old. Those blue eyes are bloodshot now, wide, staring out at nothing. The tears that started as a leak are something more like a torrent now, and the screams go on and on. There's a drop of spit at the corner of her mouth. Her little hands are bunched white blotches clutching at her jeans. Poor kid.

Look, I know what you're thinking. I'm sitting here and not doing a goddamned thing, right? I should be over there comforting her. I should give her a hug and tell her that it's okay, that everything's going to be all right. I should tell her that I'll take care of her and that someone will find out what the hell's causing these monsters to wake up from a sleep that's supposed to last forever. I should tell her that someone will fix it.

I've tried that. First five kids, ten, maybe twenty, I tried it, because I believed it. What happens, though, is that at some point you find yourself holding onto one of those kids and saying those words,

and all of a sudden you're crying too. You realize that you don't believe a single damn thing you're saying anymore. You realize that, and you can't lie to the kid, because you can't lie to yourself.

Brother, that hurts more than listening to the screams.

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The noise has dwindled to halfhearted croaking and some sniffling sounds. Andy's late for his shift, and I'd call him except that I'm way too scared to do that. Andy's never late. He's got nothing else to live for but this job, which is why his shifts last about sixteen hours. He only goes home to sleep and, truth be told, I don't think he does much of that either.

So I sit and watch the minute hand on the clock and listen to the little girl. I know that when she stops crying, she's either going to go catatonic again or she's going to tell me her name. Either way, she can't stay here; I'm going to have to start being sheriff again, I guess.

That means going to Andy's house and finding him dead. Then it means going out to the sentry posts and likely finding one of *them* dead, too. Then it means going down to the firehouse and hitting the horn, which is the signal that we need to hold a town meeting, because we'll need a new sentry and a new deputy.

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The guys in the towers, I don't care much about. They're volunteers, almost always half-crazy. Guys who think that sitting up in their hunting stands drinking beer and taking shots at anything moving in the dark might be fun. Sooner or later they get too drunk, and they don't see the movement, and the next day they don't check in. Then I'm carting the poor bastards back here to cut out their brains and put 'em in the deep freeze. It's routine at this point, insane as that sounds.

Yeah, I don't care about the sentries, but Andy was a good man once, and even in his later days, I'd have given a dozen of most men for one of him. Now I believe he's dead, and I feel like a lost kid. Like that time when I was ten, standing in the middle of Manhattan and feeling that first wave of panic as I realized I had no idea where my mother was. That time, she showed up ten minutes later, crying and calling my name. This time, no one's going to show up. I'm the only one left.

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I think about just leaving...just up and running out the door and getting into my old Dodge and flooring that bitch and driving all the way out into the mountains. I think about living out there, and leaving these people to their slow, sad deaths. Then I remember the girl's eyes as she looked at the body under the sheet, the thing that used to be her mom.

I remember the pain I saw there, and something twists inside me like a knife, sharp and hot and deadly. I've had enough. Enough of delivering orphaned children to the school, enough of driving out to check on the sentries, enough of sitting in this office and waiting to die. I can't remember ever being this angry. The things took Andy, those bastards, but I won't let them take me, and I won't let them take her.

I jerk out of my chair and onto my feet. Nothing left to do, now. The course is set. There'll be no orphanage at the school for this one. No sitting down with a Bible and waiting for the inevitable. No.

So I say hey. "Hey, little girl." The sniffing stops for a second and I say, "You got a name?"

There's no response, not at first. I wait to see if I'm going to get an answer or more screaming. And then she says her name is Anna.

I say, "Anna."

And I say, "You want to get the hell out of here?"

- - -

Her name is Anna, and as we ride in the car, I wonder if I'd have been this brave at her age. This little girl watched her father's corpse claw its way through the screen door to split her mother's head open. This little girl watched two police officers burst into her house and blow up her dad's head. I can't imagine what that's like. Really, I'm pretty glad that I can't.

It's going on dusk, and Anna's face is a white smear against the lengthening shadows moving past outside. There are big purple blotches like bruises under her eyes, and she's still shivering and sniffing, but at least that thousand-mile stare is mostly gone. She's looking at all of the radio equipment in the cruiser, and at the shotgun resting in its harness under the dash. I tell her to be careful. It's not locked there. Around here, locking up your guns is suicide.

She asks me if it's real, and I tell her, yes, it's as real as they come. It's put down twenty or thirty of the monsters in the past month, so I know it's real. I don't tell her that part, though. Doesn't matter.

Anna looks up at me with her big blue eyes and asks me where we're going. Got to laugh at that a bit, because it's not as if I really know. I can tell her where we're *not* going. We're not going to the school; I can't look at the sick, blind, stupid hope in those people's eyes again. We're not going to Andy's house; I'm afraid that if I have to look at him dead I may break down in tears, and that's the last thing Anna needs. I'm not taking her to the sentry posts, no matter what.

So we're in the car, and we're driving, and I may not know where we're going, but I know it's not anywhere around here. Anna doesn't seem surprised when the sign marking the town line flashes by. She turns around backward in the seat and waves goodbye to the place she's spent her entire life in. Then she curls up and cradles her head on her arms and yawns that hitching yawn that kids do after they've been crying.

- - -

See, it had to come to this, and I guess I shoulda realized that long ago. The primary instinct of all creatures is survival, and what I've been doing isn't surviving. It's slow death. Andy and me, we were just going through the motions of living. He died with his Lisa, back last April. I was on the way to joining them. The soundtrack to my death would have been the sound of children screaming and the scratch of a pencil on old, weary paper.

Everyone in that stupid, shitty town is dying. The teachers at the elementary school. The students they're trying to protect. The townsfolk who've boarded their windows and bolted their doors and hunkered down in their basements trying to avoid the roaming packs of the undead. They'll all die, and wrapped around their yellow toes will be yellow tags, curling and cracking and worn thin where the names have been erased countless times to make room for new names.

Maybe the obituary for the human race will come as a decaying piece of paper with the words "Killed by zombies" scrawled across it in pencil, and then, scribbled up and diagonal to save space, an afterthought: "Eaten."

- - -

I let the yellow lines on the road flash below the cruiser for a few hours. Anna sleeps curled up against the door, wrapped up in a police blanket and murmuring through her dreams. The human

race has been dying for ten thousand years. I don't know how much longer it can hold on, but I'll be damned if I'll go quietly.

Anna's world will always be about zombies. If she grows up, it will be in a place where when a person dies, their brain is removed from their body and burnt. It will be a place where every dark corner can mean horrible death. She'll adapt. That's what kids do.

I want Anna to see the red rocks of New Mexico. I want her to stare out at the Grand Canyon and be amazed by its immensity. I want to hear her laugh as the sun bounces off the Pacific Ocean. I want to see the mark of her mother's death leave her face.

That's what I want, and I also want a soda, so I stop at a gas station. There's no one there, of course, but there'll be something in the back.

Anna doesn't wake up when we pull in, and I don't want to bother her. Three minutes, right? The things are strong, but not so strong they'll bust through a car window before I hear them trying and get back out here. I leave her in the car with the doors locked.

- - -

I'm hefting a case of cola when I hear the shambling, unsteady steps behind me. The smell hits me right after, like roadkill in the August heat, and my heart jumps into my throat. The thing moans as I turn to look at it, and the sound is high and wet and full of something that sounds like lust. Guess I look pretty appetizing.

It's wearing what must have been a set of coveralls at some point. If it had lips when it died, it doesn't now, and its moldy teeth are wet with some noxious fluid. It's missing an arm, but the other is still there and still strong. Its fingers clench and unclench as it stumbles toward me, and I've got nowhere to go. Oh, God, don't let me die like this.

I should've brought the shotgun. But it's in the car. Anna's in the car. And I'm in here, with something dead. If I could, I'd throw the case of cola at the thing and go for my handgun, but I can't find any strength in my arms. Can't even relax my fingers enough to drop it.

That's when I hear the sound from the left of us, from the entrance to the store. That sweet, wholesome *click-chack* of a shotgun cocking. Anna's got it in her hands, and I can see from her stance that someone, her daddy probably, taught her how to shoot. They learn early around here, and maybe that ain't so bad. I'm glad just the same that it's the standard-issue twelve-gauge. The sawed-off

ten-gauge that Andy used to carry would rip her arms off. Even so, even with this dead and rotting *thing* lurching down the aisle toward me, fingers outstretched and grasping, I'm saying, "Careful. Careful, Anna, it kicks hard."

Anna's looking at the zombie with eyes that are scared and sad and furious. If this were a movie, she'd have some quip on her tongue to send the bastard off to hell with, I guess. It's not, and she doesn't, so she just goes ahead and pulls the trigger.

The blast is crazy-loud inside. It breaks some of the windows and sets my ears ringing, but to me it's the sweetest notes of a symphony. The pellets have just enough room to spread before they hit the thing, tearing it most of the way in half and leaving it flopping on the ground. Black blood and little smoking pieces of stinking flesh fly up into the air. I imagine if you were to gut a live fish and drop it on the floor, it might look something like this. Couldn't possibly smell as bad, though.

I move to Anna's side of the store while she cocks the shotgun again. She looks at me, waiting, and I put down the soda, hold out my hand, take the gun from her, mutter a Hail Mary under my breath. I'm not exactly religious and for sure not Catholic, but I'll tell you, that Hail Mary, it makes you feel better about what you're about to do.

One shot to the head puts the thing out of its misery.

I feel Anna take hold of the first two fingers of my right hand. I look down and there are those big blue eyes looking back up at me, and she says, "I hate those things."

You and me both, kiddo.

So now I guess we're even, me and Anna. I stand there for a minute, amazed, looking at her and thinking. I'm thinking about tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that. I'm thinking: I've killed dozens of these things myself. I'm one man, already past his prime. How many more can I kill before I die?

How many more can someone who's young, and quick, and smart, kill?

How many others like her might there be?

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Somewhere in the night it starts to rain, and I take the speed down a bit and turn on the brights. There's no one on the roads anymore. Nowhere to go. No reason to go there. The cruiser's probably the first car to pass through these parts in weeks. I'm getting tired, but it wouldn't be safe to pull over and sleep. Better to

find a town with lights still burning. Better to seek shelter there. It shouldn't be too long; there are still a lot of us left.

The zombies are fast and dangerous, but they're not immortal. We've been sitting and letting them hunt us since day one. Cowering. Terrified. Unable to just let go and accept what is. Anna doesn't have that problem. She can't remember much else but the way things are now.

The dead have risen, they're killing humans, and they're eating them. This is true, but the dead can be killed too, and she knows it.

I look over at Anna, curled up and as near peace as she's ever likely to be again, and I think about where I can take her. What I can teach her. I look at Anna lying there by her shotgun, and for the first time since the dead clawed their way up from the ground last April, I stop thinking about dying for a while, and start thinking about living instead.



Rise

newel anderson

The Festival of Colour

Paul Haines

The town was called Pushkar and it clung to the edge of the desert near the shadow of Nag Pahar, the Snake Mountain. Pushkar circled a lake, an oasis supposedly formed from a lotus blossom dropped by Brahma, if you believed in all that shit. I wondered why high white walls crowned with broken glass surrounded the New Sunrise Hotel.

The only reason I was there was because I couldn't stand another six hours on the road to Jaisalmer. I had been suffering from the joys of exotic travel—hot flushes and chills—and desperately needed to find accommodation for a few days until my affliction passed.

A brawny Indian sweating in a faded uniform guarded the iron gates leading to the courtyard. He ushered me inside with a grunt. The shotgun he brandished did little to alleviate my unease. The hot winter sun glared off its shiny barrels.

The courtyard inside was surprisingly lush, with low wooden seats nestled amongst manicured gardens. Large palms provided shade from the persistent heat, and the rooms on the second floor had balconies overlooking the courtyard. A stone fountain gurgled in the centre of the garden. Several Westerners clad in colourful hippy gear lounged around smoking cigarettes and eating fruit.

A young boy in the early bloom of acne leaned on the reception desk reading a comic. Behind him, a cheap-looking scimitar was mounted on the wall, partially obscuring a faded poster of Vishnu. The boy pushed the guestbook lazily towards me without looking up. I wrote in a fake name.

'Single, fifty *rupees*. With bathroom, one hundred *rupees*,' the boy droned.

'Bathroom.' I pushed a pile of dirty *rupees* onto the page of his comic.

160 He looked up and stared at me with dark, lifeless eyes. The edges of the room seemed to twist and then snap back into reality as he dropped a key onto the counter. I reached for the key, needing its cold metallic touch, suddenly unsure of myself, of where I was and, even more importantly, who.

Something large moved in the shadows of the reception room. Something watching, wanting....

I grabbed the key, heard flesh sizzle as my palm seared. A sharp white pain...

...and the key bounced back onto the counter. An enormously fat man lurched from the shadows towards the desk. He wore a billowing white business shirt, trousers, and a strongly-spiced perfume. Large rings of sweat spread from beneath his armpits and his black hair lay slicked to his scalp. His skin was the colour of chocolate.

'*Namaste*,' he said, offering his huge, pudgy hand, the fingers adorned with thick bands of gold.

'No.' I recoiled, blowing on my burnt palm.

He cocked his head, studying me with large, murky eyes. He withdrew his hand, a curl at the edge of his mouth. His head rocked from side to side.

'Yes. I can see you are not all here yet.' The gentle, swaying, knowing nod of the Indian. 'Welcome home, my son. You are late.'

He pushed the key slowly back towards me, the sound of the metal on the wood like thunder grinding in my head.

'You are here for Holi, yes?' he asked.

'What? Holi? I don't....' Sweat leaked from my skin. What the hell was happening? I was going to be sick.

His hand touched mine and I thought I would scream, but, with his touch, clarity returned. His skin was warm and soft, and he turned my hand over gently. My palm was untouched, my skin—white skin—creased with desert dust.

'Take the key.' He pressed it into my hand. 'I'm happy you are here. Guptal here will help you to your room.' He closed the comic and tapped the boy on the back of the head. 'Go.'

Back in the courtyard, amongst the tourists and trees and cigarettes, the memory of what had happened slipped sideways. I looked at my hand again. Nothing. No burn, no tender flesh. Too many drugs, not enough sleep. And in this heat, who knew what I was really thinking? I followed Guptal up stone steps to the second floor and looked back at reception, wondering if there had really been a fat man. He waved at me, then retreated into the coolness of the shadows.

'What's his name?' I asked.

'He calls Harry,' said Guptal. 'Not his real name.'

'What's his real name?'

'I don't know, Darth Vader.' He gave me a sly glance followed by a grin. 'What is yours?'

'You read the guestbook?' I laughed. 'You got me. I'm Shane.'

He wobbled his head, the smile on his face evidence of some small victory. 'We are not stupid as you think. Not stupid as you.'

'I'm stupid? I suppose I am. Harry said something about Holi. What is that?'

'Big party. Lots of fires and water balloons. All day. It's called the Festival of Colour and we say goodbye to winter and hello to spring. Maybe you have alcohol you give me for the festival?'

'Why would I do that?'

'Because I help you. I know many things of Pushkar.'

'Maybe I have some alcohol.'

Guptal pointed out a rooftop garden on the other side of the courtyard. A blonde woman was bending her back towards her thighs, working through a series of yogic stretches. Guptal grabbed his groin.

'She very sexy.' He thrust his hips back and forth. 'I fuck her.'

'Yeah, little man. I'm sure you do. She catch you jerking off?'

'Ha, ha! So you know?'

She stood, rising athletically on long, lean legs, and turned to face us. Goosebumps rose on my neck, defying the sweat and sun. It was too far away to make out any details, but it felt as if she bored into my head with

(...feline, deep, seductive blue...)

her eyes. I shuddered and my knees buckled.

Guptal took my arm and helped me to my room. 'Things are not what they seem. Holi comes.'

And though I hadn't spoken to her, or even clearly seen her, I felt I knew her.

- - -

I rolled myself a joint, then poured myself a shot of whiskey. I figured I'd knock myself out and hopefully sleep through the rest of the day. The whiskey, cheap, nasty Indian stuff, should help kill the bug I'd picked up.

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While I waited for it to kick in, I lay back on the bed and leafed through my guidebook, looking for Holi. What had the kid said? The Festival of Colour?

I found two references. The first described the celebration of the passing of winter and the arrival of spring. That fit with the

timeframe, though I'd hate to be here in summer, because so far it had been a fucking hot winter. Same legends, different countries. No big deal.

The second described an old legend where an evil Asura king called Hiranyakashyap tried to kill his son Prahlad. The king enlisted his sister Holika, who was immune to fire, to do the job. But she fucked it up, got burnt to death, and Prahlad called down Vishnu, who killed his dad.

The part that interested me most was that India celebrated this by getting drunk and stoned, lighting bonfires, and bombarding each other with dye-filled water bombs.

I knocked back another mouthful of the whiskey and took a deep drag on the joint. I'd be right at home at a party like that.

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A knock at the door. I awoke with a dull ache in the back of my head.

Dusk had crept into the courtyard and shadows fluttered into the room. The air inside was cooler than before. Another knock, this time harder.

'Hello?' I climbed off the bed and pulled on a shirt.

'It is me,' said a voice behind the door. 'Harry.'

Christ, what was he doing here? I hid the whiskey bottle under the pillow and hoped the room didn't stink of hashish. 'What do you want?'

'I have a gift for you.' A pause. 'And we need to talk.'

I opened the door and Harry stepped inside. He had changed into a dusk-coloured robe and carried a tray upon which were three bowls of brightly-coloured powder: yellow, blue, and red.

'These are for you.' He placed the tray on the dresser, clasped his hands before him, and smiled.

'Thanks.' I returned the smile, waiting for him to leave. Then stared at the faded rug, the threadbare curtains, the open door.

Silence. Awkwardness.

And unease, as Harry shut the door and pulled up a chair at the battered table next to the balcony doors.

'Please sit.' He propped his head up with his hand, the fingers sinking into the fleshy folds of his cheek. He indicated the bowls on the tray with his other hand. 'You will use these, yes?'

'What are they?'

Harry stared at me for a long while, then leaned forwards, the chair creaking beneath his bulk. 'Gulal. Dye for the festival. For Holi. You are here and you do not know.'

I mistook his statement for a question. 'Know what?'

He leaned closer. Heat emanated from his

(...giant, clutching fingers...)

body. 'It is not too late. Spring has not yet arrived, my friend. Perhaps this time the winter will not pass.'

I laughed, a nervous hiccupping noise that scrambled from my throat. 'Look, Harry, I'm pretty tired and I don't know what you're talking about. Thanks for the powders, but I'm not going to buy them.'

Harry grinned.

The corners of the room twisted.

'It is a gift,' he crooned through his wide, white teeth. His hand suddenly on my thigh, the thick fingers squeezing. Moving towards my groin. 'You will become aware. I know. You always do.'

I tried to push him away, but I couldn't lift my arms

(...flames...)

and Harry released me, sitting back straight in his chair. My leg ached from his clutch and my head throbbed. I realised the heat was emanating from me, not from Harry, a thick line of fire sliding up my spine...

'Have you been drinking alcohol?' Harry's twitching nostrils loomed in my face.

...to the base of my head, fanning around my skull...

'It's been a while since I've had a drink.' Harry's bulk moved. 'Do you mind if I have one?'

...the room a blur; then a spasm swept my body. The hairs on my skin stood in the sudden chill. And normality returned.

Harry handed me a glass of whiskey and eased himself back onto the chair with one for himself. He took a sip, grimaced, upended the glass into his mouth, and refilled it. He took another mouthful.

'You know this is forbidden.' He tapped the bottle with his finger, one of his rings smacking the glass with a *chink*. 'Pushkar is a holy place, and you bring this here two days before the festival?'

'I didn't know it was a problem for non-Hindus.'

'Heh, heh, heh.' He drained the glass, grabbed the bottle, and heaved himself to the door. 'No, it's no problem, my friend.' With whiskey glistening on his fat lips, he leered and pointed towards the

bowls of dye. 'Just remember to use the *gula* on the eve of Dwa-dashi, the festival.'

Before I could answer, he closed the door behind him. I heard him chuckling as he walked away. I swirled the amber liquid in my glass, the whiskey whirling, forever and ever. I swallowed it, relishing the brief flush of warmth in my belly. What was this guy's problem? Did he hassle all single travellers? Most likely he got a kick out of it.

I should've told him to fuck off.

Another knock at the door; a gentle tapping, not the affirmative rap of Harry.

'Shane?' A whisper. 'It's Gupta.'

I opened the door. 'What?'

Gupta danced from toe to toe, glancing down the hallway. 'Quick. No want Harry see me.'

I let him in and, before I'd shut the door, Gupta had picked up one of the empty glasses and buried his nose in it. 'Whiskey!' He rubbed a finger around the inside of the glass and licked it. 'You have more?'

'Harry told me it's illegal. What do you want?'

'I have news for you.' He grabbed the other glass and began cleaning it with his finger. 'You sure you no have whiskey?'

'Perhaps. What news?'

'The woman asked about you. Sexy. She is waiting for you.' Gupta waved the glass, his face shining. 'She is wanting you.'

'Where?' I tried to contain a shiver of excitement. She wanted me? Jesus Christ. I'd had some wild times in India, but they didn't usually come this easy.

He shook the glass again.

And I'd been ripped off before, too.

'First you tell me, then whiskey.' I wasn't going to let the kid push me around too.

Gupta rocked his head sideways. 'By the lake, on the *ghats*.' He proffered the glass.

'After,' I lied. 'First you take me to the lake.'

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Twilight soothed the dusty streets, or perhaps Gupta's presence shielded me from the usual frantic activity at the merchant stalls lining the main road. The shopkeepers regarded us with cool glances as they sat within, smoking tobacco amongst desert textiles, bright silks, and embroidered cottons. Lights flickered on in small

cafes and restaurants, and the smell of spice and curry wafted on the breeze. Most of the tables were empty. The occasional tourist stared uninterestedly as we passed.

Not only the bustle was missing but also the noise; there was no *bansuri* wail of snake charmers, no rhythmic beat of the *tabla*, no *sitar*, no shitty transistor radios rasping into the night. Even the notoriously stoned *bhang* cafes were quiet, though the tourist population had, as usual, congregated there to drink yoghurt and hashish *lassis*. They conversed in hushed tones, punctuated with furtive glances and sullen looks. Pushkar was not soothed, I realised, not even subdued. Oppressed.

'Is this normal before a festival?' I asked. 'This place seems dead.'

Guptal didn't answer, but increased his pace, his skinny legs almost trotting. 'Hurry, before Harry sees I am gone.'

He led me to the end of the street and pointed to a narrow, winding lane lined with crooked walls.

'To the *ghats*. You will find her there.' He turned and ran back down the street, disappearing into the shadows and dust. He'd forgotten to hassle me for the whiskey.

I followed the lane down, wondering what this woman really looked like and why she wanted to see me. Guptal wouldn't even tell me her name. I suspected he had been setting me up, that she wasn't down here and that right now Harry was rifling my room for more whiskey. How could I have been so stupid?

I was almost at the lake now. What if she was waiting? A sensitive guy would have said he was following the unknown, the sense of adventure, whatever, but not me. I followed the wrong brain, the brain below the waist, down to the waters.

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The lake swam with shadowy reflections of the dying sun. It was cooler down here, a breeze rising from the surface of the water. An ancient, deserted palace hugged the opposite edge of the lake, its stone walls crumbling, encroached upon by neighbouring buildings. Picture-postcard sort of shit if you could be bothered. I couldn't.

She sat cross-legged near the water's edge, up on the *ghats*, staring at the sunset. She waved and beckoned me over. I climbed up the steps, the stone worn smooth by centuries of pilgrims' wet feet. My stomach fluttered as I approached and again I had that sense of the surreal, as if I'd been here before, with her blue eyes locked on

mine, an embrace deeper than a lover's. Sometimes, in a moment of vulnerability, I'd experienced this when meeting someone for the first time. That deep acknowledgement, a subconscious pull of mutual attraction. But never the feeling without meeting first.

'Hi,' I said, trying to keep my voice cool, staunch, wise. Travelled. 'I'm Shane.'

'Hello,' she said. A soft English accent, maybe London. 'Please sit; we don't have much time.'

She wore loose-fitting, dusk-coloured cotton clothing, typical long-term tourist attire. Her blond hair had been tied into a braid and hung over her shoulder, resting on her breast. Her perfume hinted of jasmine and sandalwood. As we made eye contact, I expected the deliriously uncomfortable feeling to continue, but it didn't. And her eyes weren't blue, they were hazel.

'You're late.' She stretched out her legs. In this light, they looked smooth and tanned.

'Guptal only just told me,' I said. She seemed pretty forward. I hoped that equated with eager.

She shook her head. 'You were supposed to arrive a week ago. We have little time left to begin the rituals.'

Overhead, the sky darkened as the sun dipped behind the horizon. From the east, clouds smothered the sky. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

I laughed. 'Look, lady, I think you're mistaking me for someone else. I don't know anything about any rituals. I don't even know your name.'

She smiled sadly. 'I suspected as much. We have less time than I hoped. How much do you remember?'

'I have no idea what you're talking about.' I hated it when people played games like this. Especially sexy women. I'd been played too many times before. 'I just got here. And now I'm leaving.'

She grabbed my arm as I tried to stand, her touch electric—a spark of sweat and flame.

'I'm sorry. Please, sit. You can call me Holly.' She slid her hand down my arm to my wrist, curling her fingers gently around mine. She pulled me back down.

'Let's start again. Why did you come to Pushkar?' she asked. The standard, comfortable getting-to-know-you question.

I didn't want to say I was suffering from fevers and diarrhoea. 'Felt like a good place to stop. What about you?'

Holly nodded. 'Exactly. I was drawn to this place. From the moment I arrived, I knew I was supposed to be here. Do you believe in reincarnation?'

I smiled. The spiritual ones were the easiest. Three months in the sub-continent had taught me that. 'It's something I'm interested in.'

'The closer you are to the source,' Holly said, pointing towards the lake, 'the more of your past lives you'll remember.'

'Is that what you meant when you asked me how much I remembered? How much do you remember?'

'By the time I arrived in Pushkar, I knew who I was. And now I know what must be done.' Holly smiled again and touched my arm. No sparks, just warm flesh. 'Sounds crazy, I know, but you must accept it.'

'I don't remember a past life,' I said.

'This will help you remember.'

Holly stood and slipped out of her clothes in one impossibly fluid movement.

I felt that hot surge of blood, an equal dose of desire and embarrassment, and quickly looked away, suddenly unsure of who had control of this game. That brief glimpse of her inner thighs so close to my face, the curl of hair above the slit. The thunder rumbled again, this time closer.

She waded into the lake, its dark waters claiming her skin inch by inch, moving up and over the curve of her cheeks until it caressed her waist. The muscles in her back shuddered. She pushed forwards from the *ghats*, propelling herself towards the centre of the lake. She turned back to me, her shoulders bobbing above the water.

'Are you coming in?'

I watched for a second, wondering if I was in a position to tease her, to make her come out and get me. To have that beautiful naked body dripping above me. To pull her into a wet embrace. But only for a second. I wasn't that stupid.

I stood at the edge, naked and self-conscious. The water felt warm, almost thick. A chill gripped me, instantly countered by a hot flush. I stood disoriented, staring at the surface of the sky as clouds filled the lake.

Holly called.

I followed the *ghats* down into the lake. Slime squelched between my toes. Holly bobbed further away, beckoning. The waters

sucked at my thighs, lapped at my groin, seducing me. Lightning split the sky over the ancient palace. Thunder roared, its anger rumbling across the *ghats*.

I dived into the lake, its once-smooth waters rippling with fat raindrops. Instantly cocooned, my momentum lost in an embryonic drift, I floated in a suspended state. In and back, further back....

need to breathe
suck
shapes in the blackness below
hungry, swarming
breathe

I broke the surface, choking on the scream lodged in my throat. I gasped, floundering, trying to climb from the water into the air. I gulped a breath before I sank below the surface again.

But it was water, only water, polluted by the filth of centuries: the essence of life. And here in this desert, an undrinkable bath. I trod water, looking for Holly. Around me, the surface of the lake danced and spat, the rain sheeting from above.

'This is a good sign.' Holly touched my shoulder from behind. 'They say it hasn't rained here this winter. Even that winter never came.'

I turned and we were in each other's arms. Our thighs brushed as we trod water; our legs intertwined.

Her body pressed against mine.

'This lake can wash away the sins of a lifetime,' said Holly. 'For some, it is salvation.' Her hand moved down to the small of my back and she pulled me closer. 'The water holds memories from as far back as creation.'

She smiled as our groins touched. I knew she felt my erection.

'And if the lake is salvation, where do you think the sin is washed to?' she asked.

'Who cares?' I kissed her.

We wrapped ourselves in each other's bodies and sank below the surface. Down. Mouths exploring, at first tentatively, and then, as our breath faded and lungs tightened, with more vigour. Holly wrapped her legs around my waist. As we sank, I gripped her buttocks, trying to position myself to enter her, but it was too awkward. Her hands cupped my cheeks as we kissed. I fumbled again, trying to guide myself in. My lungs burned. I slid my hands under her armpits

and kicked gently, trying to urge her to surface with me. She resisted, tightening her grip around my waist. Holly's fingers were suddenly in my mouth. She pulled away from the kiss, prising my mouth open. Her thighs squeezed tighter. I opened my eyes. Through the murk, Holly stared, her face a mask of concentration. She squeezed again and I gasped, sucking in a lungful of lake. I panicked and the water poured in, to fill me, own me.

I kicked upwards. Black lights burst behind my eyelids.

An arm around my chest. Pulled up and up and need to breathe...skin scraped on stone steps, bumping, dragged. Someone turned me on my side. I coughed and water gushed from my mouth.

Holly whispered into my ear, 'Don't believe what Harry says. He may try to kill you. Neither of us needs to die, but spring *must* come.'

Her footsteps on the *ghats* made wet slapping sounds that eventually faded away.

I lay unable to move as chills racked my body. The storm had passed and, though Pushkar was blanketed in darkness, the white walls of the deserted palace shone under the waxing moon. And soon that blanket of darkness lay over me.

- - -

A hand pressed against my face. Hot and smothering.

I tried to sit up, but was pushed back. Onto something soft. My hotel bed.

Harry sat on the edge of the bed, his big hands forcing my shoulders down onto the mattress. A damp cloth slipped from my forehead onto the pillow. He took it, dipped it in a bowl of icy water, and returned it to my brow. I was burning up.

'Easy, my son,' said Harry. 'You are safe now.'

'She tried to drown me!'

Harry shook his head. 'Calm yourself. Gupta, hand me the cup.'

Gupta appeared from behind Harry's bulk and gave him a small cup. His eyes no longer seemed lifeless; instead they burned with an intensity to match my fever.

Harry propped up my head and put the cup to my lips. A dark, murky water, reminiscent of the lake. It smelt of cardamom and cloves.

'Drink. You have malaria. This will help your fever.'

'No, I have pills. I need a doctor.'

'There is no doctor here any more.'

He poured the liquid into my mouth. Sweet and warm, and I swallowed.

'Your cries were heard all over the courtyard,' said Harry. 'I had to let myself into your room. You would not answer.'

'My room? No, I was at the lake with Holly. She tried to drown me.'

Harry shook his head, jowls wobbling. 'No, you were here on your bed. In the fever dream. We had to hold you down. So much sweat.'

I spied my wet clothes on the floor. Gupta held damp bed sheets, avoiding my eyes.

'Gupta, tell him!' I said. 'You took me to see Holly at the lake.'

The boy shuffled out of the room. My head felt thick; a numbing buzz danced over my brow. Harry leered over me, his face blurring into the back of the room. *He may try to kill you.* Leadens limbs. Mud on the floor. From the lake. Poison in the cup. Must move...can't....

Harry's voice spoke from the pillow. 'This will lend you strength, help you sleep. The memories will come.' His hard cotton lips whispered into my ear, 'You and the demon are eternally linked. She will try to kill you on the eve of the festival.'

Door closing, lights fading, fast....

- - -

I stepped over a blackened body, flames eating what little flesh still remained on the bone. There was no sun or moon; instead, the sky had been washed blood-orange. Waves of heat bellowed from behind, urging me up the palatial steps to where a Harry carved in youth and muscle stood waiting. His face showed no comprehension that all he was would soon fall apart. Ants swarmed over the stone tiles, oblivious to the heat. Long, coarse hair had sprouted from my skin, which was coated in yellow and red dyes. Harry slowly backed away, unable to take his eyes from the burning body. In the entrance-way to his palace, I tore open his throat to bring the rains.

God is great.

- - -

Morning sunlight slapped my face.

My muscles ached and my head felt cloudy, but aside from that,

I felt fine. I showered until the water ran from hot to cold, trying to gather my thoughts from the previous day. I was no longer sure what had happened. Memories bled into each other, indistinct and hazy, married with dreams. Harry had been here, though; the bowls of dye sat on the dresser. I suspected he'd given me hallucinogens. If I had malaria, I needed to find a doctor fast.

The courtyard was deserted, the hotel grounds silent. I rang the bell at reception and waited. The gates were ajar. The guard had apparently deserted his post. I rang the bell again. When no one came, I wandered into the street. The stalls were boarded up, the streets empty. Even the persistent flies had vanished. The air smelt electric and the charge was still building.

I wanted to go back to my room, to lie down and wake up again. But my legs marched forwards in long, confident strides. My body wasn't listening; instead it led me back to the lake.

The water mirrored the sky, an unbroken blue. Three-storied buildings with peeling whitewash ringed the shore of the lake. There was no palace.

Holly stood submerged to her waist, her back to me. The water splashed around her. It looked as if she held something beneath the surface.

'Holly!' I ran towards her.

She turned, her face impassive. Gupta broke from beneath the water.

'Prahlaad, help me!' he screamed.

Holly thrust him under again. 'He has chosen. He is free.'

'You're killing him!'

When I was within arm's reach of her, the thrashing in the water frenzied then stopped. Gupta's body bobbed to the surface, red blossoming around him into the blue. His head lolled backwards, almost severed.

'Oh, Jesus.' The words barely a whisper from my mouth. I wasn't running any more. I just stood there, hip-deep in Gupta's blood.

Holly brought a six-inch blade up to her mouth and kissed it. A smear of red stained her lips. 'Not Jesus. Vishnu. God is great.'

'What have you done?'

'Only what was asked.' She stepped towards me, her hazel eyes on mine. 'The demon has been set free.'

I couldn't move. The tip of the blade pricked the flesh beneath my chin.

Holly's face was calm, almost serene. 'Brahma forsook this place long ago. His worshippers are trapped here in bondage. Vishnu has returned to free them.'

She kissed me gently on the lips. Guptal on my lips. Her breath smelt sweet. Clean.

'I have always loved you,' she said. 'Our blood is the same blood. You have the choice. Join me.'

'Holly, please.' I tried to move, but my limbs were frozen. 'This is not right. You need help.'

'I know.' The soft English accent. So calm and understanding. 'Help me kill the king of the demons plaguing this oasis. Help me kill Harry. Or I will kill you.'

I knew none of this was happening. Guptal's body wasn't floating in the lake. She wasn't here. I wasn't here. But I didn't know where I was.

I heard someone screaming and wondered if it was me.

- - -

The shower pattered on the chipped tiles in the bathroom.

I stood naked and shivering on the balcony outside my room, looking out over the courtyard. Above me, the sun bled into the sky. People below were laughing and pointing. My chest, still damp, had been smeared with red *gulal*. My thighs were coated blue. I touched my face. A scab of yellow dye came away on my finger.

Wet footprints trod rainbow patterns across my room. Candles floated in bowls of fragrant oils, dozens of them, lining the dresser, the table, edging the walls on the floor. The door hung from its hinges. How long had I been standing here?

Someone screamed in a room nearby. Another scream, a piercing shriek that sliced off at its zenith. The people in the courtyard below scattered. Harry appeared from the shadows around reception. A grin split his face when he saw me.

'It begins. Stay there!' he yelled.

He unsheathed the scimitar from the wall behind the desk, then ran for the stairwell. Holly had been right. He was going to kill me.

I ran into the hallway. Maybe I could get to the walls of the hotel—fuck the broken glass; it wasn't to keep people out, I realised, it was to keep them in—and make the safety of the crowds of other people in the town. There had to be an embassy, a police station, something.

Holly stood at the end of the hallway, framed in the dying light of day. She stepped over the body at her feet—Guptal, huddled in loops of intestine—and advanced slowly. Her naked body glistened wet with blood. She pointed the blade in her hand towards me.

‘He cannot touch us until you decide. His fate is determined by your actions.’ Her face was emotionless. Blank.

Holly. Holika. The demon reincarnated.

‘You’re insane,’ I said. ‘What fucked-up, paranoid trip are you on?’

‘Are you with me?’ she asked.

I backed away. ‘I won’t help you kill Harry. I’m not Prahlad. I’m not your salvation. But I can help you if you put down the knife.’

Holly shook her head, her lips tight. ‘If you’re not with me, well, then....’ She lunged forwards, her blade missing me by inches.

I sprinted back to the door, grabbing the frame and swinging into my room. I slipped on the wet floor, crashing into the oil burners. The oil ignited. The muslin curtains whooshed, framing the window in flames. I scrambled to my feet.

‘Holika!’ Holly screamed, and leapt onto me, the *snick* of her blade slicing my ear.

We tumbled to the floor, her momentum sliding us through the burning oil. The knife slashed my chest and she lifted her arm to strike again. I caught her wrist. We held that position for what must have been only seconds, then slowly the knife made its way back down, inching closer to my skin. In my weakened state, there was no way I could match her strength.

Her hazel eyes stared into mine. There was no hatred there, no anger. Only pity. My other arm, pinioned by Holly’s elbow, had started burning, but felt detached from the pain.

The sheets on the bed burst into flames. Sweat dripped from her brow into my eyes. I groped blindly for the braid hanging down her back.

‘Forgive me, Holika,’ she said. ‘Vishnu gave you the chance. Remember I always loved you.’ The blade kissed my skin. She pushed against my grip.

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My fingers found her braid and I pulled her head back hard. She let out a grunt and the pressure on the knife relaxed. And then resumed. The tip of the blade pierced the skin of my chest. I gasped. So this was how it ended. No loved ones, no memories, no life before the eyes.

Holly's head shone like it was haloed. And for the first time, she allowed herself to show emotion, with a smile. The smile of a mother putting her child to bed.

Then the halo erupted into a ball of flame. The stench of burning hair filled my nostrils. She screamed, the knife forgotten, and tried to douse the flames with her hands. I bucked and she sprawled sideways, her head engulfed, still screaming. I kicked her away and picked up the knife. I stood up, legs shaking. I was aware I too was on fire, but I felt nothing. The dye, the *gulal*, burned instead of my skin.

Harry loomed in the doorway, the scimitar clutched in one massive hand. The sweat on his face shone in the firelight. He grinned at me.

'What have we here, sister? Have you killed my son yet?'

Holly managed to stumble to her feet and lunge towards him. He sidestepped and severed her head. Her body dropped to the floor.

He kissed the blade and nodded to me. 'Thank you, Holika.' His fat lips glistened with Holly's blood. 'But only one of us three can survive the festival. And with Prahlad dead, well...even Vishnu knows what must happen next.'

He advanced through the flames, the fat melting from his body, as I retreated.

I had never been Prahlad. I was Holika.

I leapt from the balcony.

- - -

I staggered naked into the street as flames consumed the hotel. Firelight flickered in the sweat on my body. Rivulets of red and blue and yellow burned away as they merged with the blood streaming from the gashes on my chest. There was no longer any dye; my skin had become *gulal*. Throngs of people lined the street, bodies pressed close. Black faces, brown faces, white and sunburned, cooked like leather and baby skin. The thud of thousands of feet pounding the earth, the incessant, rhythmic stomp of the mob.

Harry's laughter rose with the crackling flames, until I could no longer tell if they weren't the same, a roar crashing inside my head. I dared to glance behind. Harry strode through the fire, melting, shifting, transforming girth into height with every step. Hiranyakashyap walked again, Asura king of the underworld, cruel and ruthless. His eyes glittered, as did the scimitar slicing the air around him. The

rings on his giant fingers shone and sparkled, refracting the rays of the dawn sun.

‘Another year, Holika!’ he shouted. ‘Another year!’

I tripped and sprawled in the dust. My chin crunched and teeth snapped down onto tongue. Clambering to my feet, I spat out a mouthful of blood. It hit the dirt with a puff, a listless rolling of once-life coated in dust.

Beneath the roar, the slow-boiling chant of the crowd: ‘Holi! Holi! Holi!’

They pressed closer, funnelling me towards the far end of the street. I swung Holly’s blade before me and the throng leapt back, hissing, then closed in again. Pushing me, driving me forwards.

A water balloon exploded near my feet. Blue dye splashed the dirt. Steam rose from the earth. I ran, my vision blurred and stinging. Another balloon arced through the air, splattering my legs. Another hit my back as hard as stone, rupturing acid. I screamed and gagged on the blood in my throat. A flurry of balloons burst on me, my head, my groin doused in liquid fire. I tried to shield my face. More dye rained down and I ran forwards again. I could no longer hear Harry, only the thunder of the crowd.

‘Holi! Holi! Holi!’

Holi!

Cow dung hurled from the mass, striking me on the side of the head. Soon dung flew from all sides; fresh, wet, and cloying; hard and stale, cutting edges into my flesh. The crowd surged closer and bowls of blood were upturned, stinking coppery swathing heat.

I ran.

Chicken heads, feet, beaks, and feathers flew through the air.

‘Holi! Holi! Holi!’

Intestines, stomachs, livers, organs, flesh.

They were on me; hands clawed and tore. I swung the blade again, scything a path ahead of me towards the lane leading to the lake.

If this lake is salvation, where do you think the sin is washed to?

I could hardly breathe; the air tasted thick, like butter rancid from the sun. The crowd seethed closer, fists pumping into the air. One face, one chant.

‘Holi! Holi! Holi!’

Flames swallowed the hotel and murderous clouds billowed into the morning sky. The stalls along the street blazed, fire leaping

from house to house. Harry was nowhere to be seen. The crowd advanced slowly, forcing me down the lane.

I knew what they wanted. I knew where I had to go.

The lake caught the eye of the morning sun, the water a shimmer of flame and sparkle. The ancient palace of Hiranakashyap loomed over the *ghats*, its stone walls bulging impossibly, bullying the neighbouring buildings. Lights burned brightly in the once-deserted arches. Shadows of thick-limbed beasts fell over the massive tiles. Laughter and screaming echoed from within the palace walls.

The crowd urged me up the steaming *ghats*. The cracked steps sizzled the soles of my feet. The pain helped to focus, to drive. Up and up, to the lip of the lake. The surface churned.

Harry, now an oiled column of muscle purged of fat, stood in the palace entrance. He thrust the scimitar into the air with every chant.

‘Holi! Holi! Holi!’

The sun raced into the sky, burning away the clouds to sear the land. The lake hissed and heaved.

If I opened my mouth to swallow the water, to drink my sins, I would wake up. I’d be lying in my sweat on the hotel bed. Hot flushes and chills. Harry would speak to me of delirium and offer me pills. That is what I wished for.

But there would not be that awakening. The lake offered salvation, but the sins stayed in the water, always in the water. And when I swallowed, the lake would reveal my past lives in this death. That I knew.

The demon demanded to be set free. An awakening after all.

For I am Holika and I shall open Vishnu’s throat and Prahlad’s veins, bathe in your blood and bring down the rains.

I began to drink....

THOU SHALT

Hugh Fox

1.

Thou shalt THE FOXBOOK read and only follow
IT, as the leaves fall and the snows come,
the wheelchair sprite into bed, swaddled in her hair,
let's try Siegfried tonight and in the morning chocolate-
cheesecake muffins, a ride into hill/esker territory,
loving the trees that tower out of the roadside
pits, the rivers beginning to frost over, a huge bed
after wienerschnitzel lunch, *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*,
peach wine, sex as much as we can, and when we
can't, catch on to the clouds and new moon, the evening
news, thou shalt not kill, or even descend from your
high until you die...and maybe not even
then.

2.

Thou shalt never break child-garden, grammar-schule, high-
school, college, church-organization ties, old grammar-
schule-girlfriend, buddy ties, wives, uncles, aunts, cousins,
they drop off the LIFE-boat, mourn, mourn grandmutters
and grandvaters, Jeanne Anne (diabetes), Richard (intestinal
cancer), Phyllis (car accident), but as long as they're alive
maintain, call, e-mail, visit, the center is continuity, "I love
your hair," "You still look like you're eighty," "How's the sight
after the surgery?" "Bi-lateral...?" floating toward death always
on the same river of *Ich-liebe-dich-wie-du-mich-liebst*-Time.

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Thou shalt 70%-off mall-haul yourself through bean burrito,
flannel snow shirt, peach pop, laptop palm tree (13-0 outside)
last garage sales of the season, channel IFC oatmeal-cookie

stretch-out melatonin balloon pillow in the beginning was the snore-Time(lessness).

4.

Thou shalt not kill, you know, kids on their front lawn, Cicero-style, or girls in grammar/high school, Colorado-style, I'm not even sure about killing my balletic deer or what's all this blackened cajun alligator meat I've been eating lately, Michigan State loses to Notre Dame and Illinois, the whole game-town's crazy, talegating from nine a.m. until after midnight, no one killed...a bright October day, all the kids playing soccer in the schoolyards, get the leaves raked and bagged, a 60% moon...no guns, bombs, rockets, knives, a couple pages of Rest in Peaces...three minutes of light lost as the maple trees start looking like they're ketchuped-lipsticked, half the leaves already on the toss-out ground.

5.

Thou shalt not Orthodoxy A versus Orthodoxy B, allow the starving to die, use Jupiter's name as the excuse for your swords, I Buddha-fly through Time over Earth and see only my own satori grabbing onto the bearded dance-Time(lessness), OMMMM, OMMMMM, OMMMMM into a Now that says popcorn and dancing hands, plum wine and the banks of green willow, going back, back, back to In the Beginning was cloud-man, rain-man, sperm and egg and kindes-woman/man, papaya and truffles, pass the eternal peach wine and turn our flick-of-an-eye lives at least into les bons temps rouler/
the good times
roll.

closer in my heart to thee

Jeff Somers

I lifted the blinds a quarter-inch and looked out, the bright, hot afternoon sun hurting my eyes after the cool shadows of my half of the apartment. The car had deteriorated further since the day before, its rear windshield shattered to match the front one. The tires were long gone, as was the hood and most of the engine. It was the only car on the street.

Helen was screaming again. I would have put the stereo on to drown her out, but the power was off again.

“Bobby! Bobby, please! Bobbeeyyyy—”

She trailed off into a croak. It was painful to hear her dying, thirty feet away. It had been two days since her symptoms began, and even though I was pretty sure she was raving now, pretty sure she’d lost touch with reality, I shivered involuntarily. My sweet girl, dying, behind a flimsy wooden door.

An old man dressed in nothing but a pair of ratty green shorts pushed a broken-down shopping cart into my field of vision and stopped by the car. Glistening with sweat, he began to examine the husk of metal, his face a mask of concentration.

“Give up, old man,” I whispered. “Picked clean.”

He couldn’t hear me, of course. He got down on his knees, to get a closer look at the suspension or something. I scanned the visible block for any other activity—two days ago, just before the first tell-tale flush had appeared in Helen’s face, we’d seen Andy Murphy across the street, briefly, standing in his doorway. He’d looked like a ghost. The Sweat had taken his wife and two daughters weeks before, and we’d worried about him, but in that brief flash he’d looked healthy.

I let the blind drop, plunging the room instantly into gloom. Behind me, Helen continued to scream, her voice becoming rough and distorted, the words melting into mush, a low, warbling wail, as if words were intended but beyond her. I closed my eyes against it. I closed my eyes and thought of her last week, alive, healthy. I closed my eyes and tried to block her out, but she started to form words again, and they penetrated my thoughts.

“Let me out, please, please let me out....”

I began shaking. I hadn't seen or touched my wife in two days. I figured it would all be over by the evening. The Sweat rarely took more than three days to kill you.

Hungry, I moved to the kitchen, taking twenty minutes to edge past the bedroom. Helen was banging weakly against the door, calling my name, but she was in the most virulent stage—instantly communicable. We'd all seen the phenomenon in action. A person who was perfectly healthy to all outward appearances, exposed to a sick person, quickly—so quickly it was hard to credit—fell sick himself. My wife, on the other side of the door, was my own death, calling to me.

When I was halfway past the door, part of me wishing it would burst open and just end it, bring death upon me, the lights flickered. The radio came on, sounding far too loud. Under its cover, I ran into the kitchen, throwing myself against the wall, hidden from her unseen eyes. I slid down to the floor and cried, begging her to forgive me, somehow.

It passed; it always did. In two days, I'd never come close to opening that door for death. We had made a deal, Helen and I. We had agreed to live, as long as we could.

I chose a can at random, opened it, and began eating. Beef stew, still good. We had a few months' supply, especially now I was the only mouth to feed.

I went to the back window and looked out on our wild, overgrown backyard while I ate without tasting. A number of people had buried their dead relatives in their backyards, I knew. But the pace of that had slowed. Maybe people were becoming immune, like Andy Murphy seemed to be. Or maybe no one was left to do the burying.

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A knock at the door disturbed my reverie. I froze, the spoon in my mouth, and stood for a moment, panicked, because I knew the sound, and knew it required a response, but could not recall what.

"Hey, Williams!" A muffled voice muscled through the door. "I know you're in there!"

I snapped back into motion, licking the spoon clean and placing it back in the can. Then I continued to stare out into the backyard while the pounding resumed. I wasn't sure if it was my imagination, but I thought Helen began pounding weakly at her door in turn. I shut my eyes again, seeking peace.

"Go away, Mr. Dawson," I called out in the darkness.

The pounding stopped, and I soaked up the silence that followed for a second or two. Then Dawson cleared his throat behind the door. I imagined him, a squat man with a round, mashed-in face, dancing nervously in the dusty, abandoned hallway.

"Come on, Williams! We can't hide from each other forever! We're still human beings!"

More silence, then, as he waited. The only reply I had would gain me nothing. *You think I'm hiding from you?*

One final blow to the door, heavy with rage and frustration, and then I heard his sturdy tread moving away.

- - -

Listening to the news on the radio, I sat on the floor with my back to Helen's door. The TV was mostly reruns and static, when it worked at all. The radio was more reliable.

Despite its volume, I could hear Helen weeping weakly.

The Sweat was a plague, and incredibly contagious. I told myself this over and over. Our entire apartment building was under quarantine, marked by a huge red sticker on the outer door, block letters proclaiming us doomed. Under quarantine, hasty law declared that if I attempted to leave before the twenty-day period was over—for any reason—I could be shot. By anyone.

Out of thirty-three people who had been living in the building three months ago, eight remained at my last count. Helen would soon make that number seven, and if I gave in, I would quickly be next.

I felt her scratching against the door, muttering in delirium. Not knowing what else to do, I began to sing an old song my father had taught me:

*So fare thee well, my own true love,
And soon reunited we will be.
It's not the leaving of Liverpool that's ailing me,
But my darling when I think of thee....*

I sang loudly, over the radio, and was amazed to be joined in the next verse by Dawson's gravelly voice filtering down through the ceiling like heavy dust. With Helen's light, spider-like scratchings against my back and his deep bass voice twisting in with mine, I closed my eyes and imagined we had done this—sung together—before, in normal times.

I trailed off, but Dawson kept singing, his voice steady and strong. After a moment, I froze, unable to move, the blood turned to dust in my veins, because Helen was singing too, in a shaky, crazy voice, her fingers, blackened and swollen, brushing against my back under the door.

And I wished she would die, and put us out of our misery.

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I lifted the blinds a quarter-inch and looked out. There was a black bag outside the Singhs' house, gleaming wetly in the sun. It was the first I'd seen on our block in a few days, and I wondered which of the Singhs had passed. A few weeks before, every day had seen a new harvest of the black bags—which had been distributed generously after the hospitals had collapsed under the weight of untreatable patients—and every evening saw the red CDC truck moving slowly down the street. We had all been organized. Everything like clockwork.

But I hadn't seen the CDC truck in a while, either.

I thought about one of the Singh kids swelling inside that bag. Helen had grown quiet, and I wondered, but it didn't really matter yet. She would be contagious for several days after. I had a bag for her, of course, but it was going to be some time before I could use it.

I went to her door and stood there with my ear against it, listening carefully. After a moment, I thought I heard a faint groan, and concluded that she must still be alive. In the latter stages, but alive.

At least I would no longer be tortured by her cries through the door.

With my eyes closed, the stuffy smell of the apartment crowded in around me. It had been weeks since the windows had been opened, or the front door. The smell, for a while at least, had been more than enough reason to avoid the open air. And most importantly, it was dangerous. Even in the midst of all this death, there was murder.

I reached down and tried the door handle, to make sure it was locked, trying to be gentle so as not to rouse Helen if she was only sleeping. The metal knob felt hot to the touch, but I held on and leaned my forehead against the wood. From the other side, I thought I suddenly heard a whimper. And without warning, I was weeping, tears pouring from me, a torrent squeezed out in wracking spasms. My wife, my life, the core of everything, was decaying, falling, slipping away into an abyss, forever lost to me. And I was on the other side, cowering.

I was halfway to the front door before I realized I was moving. I tore it open and stepped out. For a second, I was disoriented and stood panting in the hall, frozen. The air was strange, too thin, filled with death, and I didn't want to breathe. But it was too late.

"Dawson!" I shouted. "Dawson!"

There was no response. The air shimmered around me, and my throat closed up against it.

"Dawson!"

I heard the upstairs door creak open. "Williams? That you, Williams?"

I took a hesitant step, then stopped. "Dawson, Dawson," I gasped. "Are you okay?"

Feet on the stairs, and then Dawson, gray and skeletal, in cinched clothes entirely too big for him, stood at the opposite end of the hall from me. He looked frail and bleached. But alive.

"Williams?" he said uncertainly.

We stared at each other. I felt like I hadn't ever before seen another human up close. I could smell him. He smelled terrible and wonderful all at once.

"Your wife," I croaked. "Donna."

He swallowed. "Dead two weeks now. Our daughter, too."

"How long—" I started, then my throat closed. Making ugly clicking noises, I forced the words out. "How long...did you wait?"

He swallowed air. "Seven days." He nodded to himself. "I kept her in the office for seven days."

I was weeping again. So was he. We stood fifteen feet apart, tears streaming down our faces.

"But you're alive."

He stared back at me. "Yes."

"Ah, shit," I sighed, looking down at my feet. Without saying another word, I turned away and started back inside, moving slowly. The death-filled air thickened and jellied around me.

"Williams? Wait a second, Williams."

I raised my hand and kept walking. Through the front door, through the dim and shrouded kitchen, head down, to her door. I pressed my ear against it. I couldn't hear anything, though I tried to be as still as possible, holding my breath and trying to will my heart to slow. Nothing.

Head pounding with white noise, I turned the knob and pushed her door open. I imagined I heard the hiss of a seal being broken.

Sweat immediately started pouring off me; the room was still and close and hot, its air catching in my throat. It was dark. Helen was just a gray lump on the bed.

For a second, everything was still.

Then she moaned slightly, and I rushed to the bed. She was hot to the touch. I pulled her and the blankets towards me; they weighed hardly anything. I clutched her tightly, her hair in my face. I breathed her in, death and my wife, all I had.

“Bobby?” she moaned. “Bobby?”

We were doomed. And my heart sang.

Contributor Biographies

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Rusty Barnes cofounded and oversees *Night Train* (www.nighttrainmagazine.com). He maintains webspace at www.rustybarnes.com.

Neal Blaikie is originally from Northwest Florida, but now lives with his wife and daughter in a small town in California's San Joaquin Valley, where he works for the local school district. He has had one story appear in *Interzone*, and has others forthcoming in *The Dos Passos Review* and *Gargoyle*. By the time this appears in print, he will be moments away from finishing an M.F.A. at California State University, Fresno.

Christopher Buecheler has been writing since age eleven, and writing well since age twenty-one. You can read more at cdebris.com.

Mike Capp (www.yessy.com/mikecappart), **Justin Hillgrove** (www.impsandmonsters.com), and **Shana Marcoullier** (www.artsofsnohomish.org) are all Washington-based artists. They share a studio in Everett, WA and all three enjoy art in all its forms. Visit their individual websites to see more.

Scott Christian Carr is a professional writer and television producer. His paranormal series *Dead Tenants* is currently airing on TLC, and his latest reality series *The Mole People* will be debuting soon on A&E. He's the creator of the post-apocalyptic sci-fi feature film *The NUKE Brothers* as well as the tie-in series *The LAST Wizard* and *KID Apocalypse* and the comic book *The Continuing Adventures of FAT Man and Little Boy...* His fiction has been featured in *Pulp Eternity* and *Horror Quarterly* and he is the author of *Champion Mountain*, a novel of superhero family dysfunction. Visit him at www.myspace.com/sardy.

Tina Connolly works as a face painter in Portland, OR. Her poems have appeared in *Strange Horizons* and her stories in *Son and Foe* and *Heliotrope*. She is a graduate of Clarion West 2006 and has a website at tinaconnolly.com.

Hugh Fox is a seventy-five-year-old writer, originally from Chicago, but after marrying a Peruvian and later a Brazilian and spending years in Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, Mexico, Spain, Chile, etc., he has become totally Latinized. A hundred books published, poetry, novels, criticism, archaeology, history, memoirs. Check out Hugh Fox on Internet Search. Especially look for *Way, Way Off the Road*, a literary memoir.

Born in southern California, **Jamie Dee Gale** was sent to ninja school for eighty-two years and came back and drew comics. His comics are about him and things that affect him. Like ninjas, pirates, robots, poo, love, and children. He has two sons, "Stephen" and "Jacob". They are about to start ninja training and will be gone for most of a century. But should come back with a prolific amount of training to help their father in his quest to overthrow the world. And he has a girlfriend named Katie. He loves her so much and she is pretty and has boobies.

A journalist and prizewinning short-fiction writer, **Vanessa Gebbie** also teaches Creative Writing, specialising in groups of marginalised adults. She founded and edits her own e-zine for writing from those whose lives have been touched by addiction, at www.tomsvoicemagazine.com. She is Assistant Editor of the small-press literary short-story and poetry magazine *Cadenza*. The first part of her novel in progress, *Boy in the Tunnel*, won the 2007 *Daily Telegraph* Novel in a Year Competition. Her first short fiction collection will be published in March, 2008, by Salt Publishing of Cambridge, UK. www.vanessagebbie.com.

Cameron Gray was born in Melbourne, Australia in 1984 and currently resides in Tasmania, studying Contemporary Art at the University of Tasmania. His tools of the trade include a G4 eMac with Photoshop, Illustrator, Bryce, Poser, Gimp, and Vue, a Wacom Tablet, a Canon S2IS digital camera, and an infrared-converted Canon G5 camera. Cameron's work is regularly displayed at ParableVisions.com and DarkArtsWorld.com.

Paul Haines was raised in the 1970s in the wrong part of Auckland, New Zealand and moved to Australia in the 1990s. Having vowed to never call it home, he now lives in Melbourne with his family. He's been published in *NFG*, *Ideomancer*, *Aurealis*, *Orb*, *Agog!*, *Dark Animus*, *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*, and others. He's made the Honorable Mentions list for *Datlow's Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* several times. Paul survived the inaugural Clarion South Writers Workshop and has won an *Aurealis Award* and three *Ditmars*. His first short-story collection, *Doorways for the Dispossessed*, was published by Prime Books.

Samantha Henderson lives in Southern California with various fauna. Her fiction and poetry have been published in *Strange Horizons*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *ChiZine*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Lone Star Stories*, and *Weird Tales*.

Jim Kacian is an internationally-acclaimed poet, theorist, motivator, editor, and publisher. He has published seven books, which have won major awards; authored *How to Haiku* as well as numerous articles on haiku form and praxis; cofounded the World Haiku Association, which encourages poets from around the world to share haiku and theory, as well as being a long-time board member of the Haiku Society of America; edits *South by Southeast* and *Frogpond* (the international membership journal of the Haiku Society of America); and owns and operates Red Moon Press, the most prestigious publishing house dedicated to haiku in the world.

Joseph Love has dropped out of three colleges, urinated on Faulkner's grave, and stalked J.D. Salinger. He is not particularly proud of any of these. He now drives a short bus around the country. He is twenty-one.

Kirstyn McDermott was born on Halloween, an auspicious date that perhaps accounts for her lifelong attraction to all things dark, mysterious, and bumpy-in-the-night-ish. She has been published in various magazines and anthologies, including *Shadowed Realms*, *Redsine*, *Southern Blood*, and *Island*. Her short fiction has been nominated for two Ditmar Awards, and has received an Aurealis Award Honourable Mention and three Honourable Mentions in Datlow and Windling's *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. Kirstyn lives in Melbourne, Australia, and is a member of the SuperNOVA writers' group. She is currently working on a novel-length manuscript.

Kristine Ong Muslim's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Ad-busters*, *Down in the Cellar*, *Jupiter*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, *Spinning Whorl*, *Sybil's Garage*, *Tales of the Talisman*, *turnrow*, and *GUD Magazine*. Her publication history is at www.freewebs.com/blackroom8.

d. richard pearce is a writer from the west coast of Canada. he is currently in exile because of crimes committed by his weasels. pearce writes in many perspectives, not least of which is third person, the style chosen for this biography. while this can be awkward and confusing in writing about oneself, it means that the label can be "BIO" and not "AUTOBIO." he likes writing sentences without Proper Casing, but only on personal websites or blogs, or, indeed, bios—never in stories—as he believes in saving avant-garde for the funny papers. more info can be found at drichardpearce.com.

Jeremy C. Shipp's written creations inhabit various magazines, anthologies, and drawers. They include over thirty publications, like *ChiZine*, *Bust Down the Door and Eat All the Chickens*, *Hub Magazine*, *Bare Bone*, *The Harrow*, and *Until Someone Loses an Eye*. While preparing for the forthcoming collapse of civilization, Jeremy enjoys living in Southern California in a moderately-haunted Victorian farmhouse. He's currently working on many stories and novels and is losing his hair, but not because of the ghosts. *Vacation*, his first published novel, debuted this year from Raw Dog Screaming Press. You can visit his online homes at www.hauntedhousedressing.com and www.myspace.com/jeremywriter.

Lucy A. Snyder is the author of the fiction/poetry collection *Sparks and Shadows*. Her work has appeared in a wide variety of print and electronic publications, including *Strange Horizons*, *Farthing*, *Full Unit Hookup*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *ChiZine*, *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, and *Masques V*. You can learn more at www.lucysnyder.com.

Jeff Somers was born in New Jersey. After an unremarkable childhood spent eating crayons, a series of head traumas resulted in a sudden interest in writing. In 1995, Jeff began publishing his own magazine, *The Inner Swine* (www.innerswine.com). Somehow this has not retarded his writing career. He has published dozens of short stories, including "Ringing the Changes," which was selected for inclusion in *The Best American Mystery Stories* for 2006. He has published two novels, *Lifers* in 2001 and *The Electric Church* in 2007. Aspiring to some day deserve his wife, Jeff plays chess and holds off despair with cocktails.

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.

Erik Williams is a twenty-nine-year-old writer who lives with his wife in Southern California. Since October, 2005, he's found homes for his work at *Down in the Cellar*, *From The Asylum*, *Black Ink Horror*, and other small-press venues. Not a large list of accomplishments, but Erik's wife seems impressed.



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