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The Strangers Are Tuning

Jesse Lindsay

Table of Contents

Unbound

Brittany Reid Warren..... 1

Q&A

Nik Houser 8

Mortality

Adam Ramirez..... 17

Unlike Red Tape, the Yellow

Lida Broadhurst 18

Flip Lady (1986)

Ladee Hubbard 19

Writing the Harvest

Lisa A. Grabenstetter 37

The Dancing Aliens

Mithran Somasundrum 38

Daya and Dharma

Shweta Narayan..... 53

Hidden

Rossana Reginato 67

Ghosts of Sweaty Air

Jim Pascual Agustin 68

Teaching Assistant

Ward Crockett..... 70

Shaula

Tree DeAngelis 71

Long Winter by Night

D. Elizabeth Wasden 72

Jesus Fucks an Atheist and Calls It Love

Lisa Feinstein 83

What Kafka Knew

Christy Rodgers..... 85

The Sheep	
Ursula Vernon.....	93
Unfinished Stories	
J(ae)D Brames	94
To a Skylark	
Rose Lemberg	103
The Thirst	
Kerry Hudson	104
The Catoblepas	
Lisa A. Grabenstetter	110
Vore; or, Levity in Dungeons	
Adrian Versteegh.....	111
Werewolf	
eric orchard	117
How Ramona Saved the Ducks	
Allan Richard Shapiro.....	118
Quack	
Brian Beatty.....	138
Forests of the Night	
Abigail Hilton.....	139
Idolomantis diabolica	
Jesse Lindsay	143
this infants spine	
Zac Carter	144
Stiletto	
Ian McHugh.....	146
Flotsam, 1968 - Extant	
Matthew Keuter	167
How's Your Sister?	
Anne Goodwin.....	169

A Man of Kiri Maru

Laura L. Sullivan..... 174

Note to J.

Matthew Keuter 192

Bird Liquor and the Boastful Ghost

Joseph Larkin..... 194

Maya's World

T. F. Davenport..... 195

Contributor Biographies..... 198

Unbound

Brittany Reid Warren

The sky pressed down from above, a heavy blue palm like the hand of God. The sun was still there, its light weak and timorous, but it was in flight. It fled across the fabric of the sky; I watched it go. The shadows pooled and formed and chased each other across our lawn like in a time-lapse photograph. No one noticed except for me, and I kept silent.

The day the world ended, my parents were arguing.

It was my brother's twelfth birthday and we were half-heartedly cleaning up the backyard after his party. There wasn't much to do. Only two people had come. My mother had bought enough chips and soda to fortify an army, had baked brownies and ordered a dozen pizzas. She imagined a swarm of locusts descending on our house, a legion of boys of which Sean would be the unquestioned general. My brother was fat and unpopular; in her mind she made him otherwise with the ease of a writer striking out an offending line of prose.

My father was angry. "You embarrassed him, Gudrun," he said, filling a cooler with unopened soda cans.

He was right; I'd been watching. The two boys had arrived, two nameless little pudges of dough Sean knew from school. They had goggled at the mountain of food, the ridiculous bounty, a gift from a smothering god. Sean had purpled when my mother asked, cruelly naive, "When are the rest of your friends getting here? The pizzas will be cold!"

I could have told her, but no one ever listened to me.

My mother was a high-tension wire. She vibrated with anxiety and anger and stubbornness, shook so hard her bangles made shivery noises at her wrists. "How was I supposed to know he only invited two people?"

My father stared at her; the tail of his shirt flipped in the sudden breeze. I watched the strange interplay of shadows and tried to ignore them both. Their voices, raised and roughened, sounded like crows.

"That's unfair," she was saying. He put his hand on her elbow; she pulled away, her mouth a little bow of disgust. "I didn't do this. I thought he wanted a party."

My father's voice was full of hard edges. "Gudrun, did you even ask him?"

"It's snowing," I said. And it was.

Inside, while my parents marveled at snow in May, I made cocoa. Sean, foul with rage, refused his. He sat in his room at his computer, playing something loud with lots of explosions. He was a connoisseur of pixilated bloodshed. I scratched at his door; when he ignored me, I counted the kitchen knives and left him to himself. If I'd known the world was ending, I would have tried harder.

The snowfall made a blanket on the world. I went outside and caught a few flakes on my tongue; they tasted bitter, like ashes.

Mr. Larribee, coming outside to empty his trash, saw me. "The end is coming, you know," he said. I shook my head. "Smell the air," Mr. Larribee said.

I put up my face and sniffed. There was something on the wind like the low stink of a relentless predator. My father had once trapped a rabid raccoon in the woodshed that smelled just the same way.

"Smell that?" Mr. Larribee asked, and I nodded. He pointed at the sky with one long yellow finger. "You watch. The snow's just the first sign. Soon the wolves will catch and devour the sun. Then it's all over. The Ravener will run free and we'll all go down his gullet—a swallow. Barely tasted." Mr. Larribee shut the lid tight on his trashcan. "Damn raccoons will spread it all over the yard."

I went back inside.

My mother stood at the sink, running her hands under the water and humming. As I watched, the water grew into strange shapes on her palms: now a tree, many-branched and reaching; now a snake, curling over a tangled rope. Now my father's face. Now mine. All the while she hummed, and her voice was water rushing over stone. When she saw me she smiled, sharp and white. "I wanted so many things for you," she said. "Come here."

I came and she held my hand under the flow of water. As they had for her, shapes rose on the flat of my palm: now a man, in love with me; now a dress and a diamond's hard-edged gleam. Now a child, who toddled across my hand and laughed soundlessly. "Such small dreams," she said. "You won't need them now."

My mother turned my hand and my future fell away from my fingers. She dropped my wrist and turned from me. "Go away," she said fretfully. "I need to be alone." Water pooled around her feet.

I left her standing in the kitchen and went to my bedroom. I found a book on my shelf, a strange one I didn't remember. It had a picture of a man on the cover, a man in a cloak and wide-brimmed hat, riding a horse with too many legs towards a ship helmed by a man with a wounded mouth. "Ragnarøk," I said, trying the word on my tongue. It had a sound like bones breaking.

I opened the book but there were no words—no words that I could read. The words of the book were written in spears, in torches and swords. It was written in sticks and slices, a straight-marching tongue like the creaking of trees in a high wind. I got up from the floor and closed my window. The wind howled and pressed its face against the glass; it stuck sneaky fingers through cracks in the pane. The book in my hands shivered and flipped its pages.

There was a picture of a wolf with its head twisted back and its legs tangled up in its tongue. Its mouth was open and it was howling; its howling was the wind's howling, empty and vast as its belly, and as hungry. It was vicious. Greedy. Its tongue lapped at the ground. I shuddered and the earth shuddered.

There was a knock at the front door. I left my room and went into the hallway, still holding the book in my hands. My father stood at the door with one hand on the knob, staring mutely into the swirling snow. There was a man there, broad and hooded against the darkening storm. He asked if he could come in.

"What do you want," said my mother, meaning *I know you* underneath. Her eyes lit on the man's face and there was something terrible and alive in them. Something fearful and greedy.

"Hospitality," I said. The man looked at me and nodded. His eyes were blue, a hard blue like ice in the mountains. This was a man who would understand the words made of swords; this was a man who might have written them.

"Hail, Lifthrasir," he said.

"That's not what I named her," my mother said. "That's not her name."

"No," the man agreed. "It's her purpose."

I asked him to sit while my mother brought him pizza. She sat next to him on the couch with one foot tucked under her body, her fingers alive in her hair, twisting and twining among the strands. Her hands were speaking a language of caverns and water; she was weaving a spell in her hair, a spell of water to slake her thirst in the

man with the ice-hard eyes. My father watched her, his face drawn with longing. She watched the man. The man watched me.

I showed him the book. He tapped a finger on the picture of the bound Ravener. "We tied him up with a rope made of things that aren't real. The strongest prison is one made of lies. I gave up my hand to put him there. It was betrayal that bound him when nothing else would."

"Why did you bind him?"

"He was hungry." The man shrugged. "There were three child-monsters born to the lie-smith. We tamed the first with a throne in a dead kingdom, threw the second into the ocean to coil around the roots of the world. The third would not be tamed and could not be killed, the favorite son of a blood brother. So we bound him in lies and forgot him, him and his howling and hunger."

"Where is he now?" I whispered this, my eyes on my mother.

"He broke free. Even lies won't hold forever. The son of a half-mad father runs towards creation with an empty belly."

I looked down at the book and the picture was empty. There was a sound on the wind like the approach of great padded paws. "The Ravener comes and the end comes with him."

The man hesitated. "Not the end, exactly. The unmaking. Everything we built was to keep chaos at bay, to bar the door from the winter and the wolves. The Nornir wove our story into the fabric of the world, but they are the children of chaos and so crafted our ending before we'd even put up our walls. Nothing can exist long without changing, not even the kingdoms of gods."

"Who are you?"

"A son of a father." He ran his hand over the cover of my book. "I'll kill a dog who will kill me, when hell is opened and a ship made of corpse-nails sails into the world." He looked at my mother. "I have some time, though."

"Who am I?" I asked, as my mother took his hand and led him up the stairs.

"A witness," he answered, eyes a flash of ice over his shoulder.
4 My mother never looked back. Not once.

My father sat alone on the couch. "I thought I could keep her, but I couldn't." His hands lay on his lap, upturned and empty. His eyes were worse, like pools made for drowning. "I'll die without her."

You'll die anyway, I thought but did not say.

The only noise in the house was the voice of the wind, gibbering at our door. There was a slow rhythm we could not hear, though we strained our ears. The house was shrinking around me so I left; no one would notice that I was gone. I walked into the frigid night, pausing at the door to see if someone would call me back. No one did.

Outside, the snow whirled in strange, shifting shapes. I shivered in the cold and felt grief like stones in my belly, like my heart breaking.

"You won't need that," said the snow. I left my heart behind me and felt the present drop from my fingers like a trail of crumbs.

I walked down a frozen street, my sneakers crunching in the snow. The snow was gray—an ugly snow, and sick. This snow was the frost-blood of the jotnar, this snow was a cold death like sleeping where life slows in the veins and skin goes slowly black. I sang to myself, a lonely sound in an empty world, but the words fell from my lips and tumbled like ice to my feet. Just ahead, I could see the gnarled figures of birch trees hunched at the corner of a street made empty by the unmaking of the world.

There was a sudden high keening. The sun flared like a match in the darkness, and then there was nothing but a thick, unbroken blackness. I froze, lost and shivering on a familiar street made strange by blindness.

"The wolves caught the sun," a woman said, standing at my elbow with her face turned towards the sky. "The moon too." She sounded gleeful. "The sun and the moon and all the stars in the sky."

There were three of them, three old women with faces dripping like soft wax candles. These were the figures I had mistaken for trees, candle-women at the crossroads, filled with their own inner light.

"If the sun and moon are gone, the earth is next, and we'll all be eaten with her," I said, accusingly, as if these women were the architects of our misfortune. I could see their ancient hands, hoary as frost, with six knobbed fingers each.

The old women snorted. "The earth is the rotting corpse of a giant, drowned in a lake of milk and piss," they said. "Mourn the sun if you must—she was a beautiful thing—but the earth is no friend of ours. The earth bred the monsters that plague mankind."

“The wolf, too?”

One laughed, a high scatter of notes like fingers on my spine. “The bastard issue of a twisted seed. The wolf is ours. We wove the possibility and wyrd did the rest. Pride and pestilence grew in the blood-brother’s heart; he got the death of gods on an icy womb, despite a warmer bed in another hearth.”

“The man with the wounded mouth.”

“Clever girl,” they said, as if I was. “They sewed his mouth shut, but like his son, his tongue proved impossible to fetter.”

“Like lies.” I watched as they steeped their fingers into cages.

“Just so. Impossible to contain.” Their finger-cages broke apart, as though the very seed of deceit lay upon their ancient palms.

I found myself frowning into the blind sky. “What happens now?”

“Now?” They shrugged. “What has been made will be unmade; what has been woven will be unraveled thread by thread. The work of the fathers and the mothers of the world is cast into oblivion.”

“And that’s it? We’ll just be...eaten?” I imagined whole cities, countries, *worlds* lining the cavernous gullet of some enormous beast, drowning in his acid spittle. Smothered by his blood-red tongue.

“What’s been cast down may rise again. Children rise from the ashes of their parents like phoenixes, and who knows what may be created when their hands are set upon the wheel.”

I eyed them. “*You* know.”

They were silent for a long moment. When they spoke again, their voices were the breath of wind through a funeral pyre. “Yes, we suppose we do, at that.”

“Tell us your name,” they said, so I did. “You won’t need that,” they said, and I felt who I was slip away into the yawning blackness.

Then they were gone, and I stood alone at the crossroads. I raised a hand to my face and felt my tears frozen to my cheeks. What can rise from the ashes of what’s broken but something broken in itself? *It’d be better*, I thought, *if nothing ever rose at all*.

I sat on the ground amid the litter of ice and snow. The hungry cold ate its way into me, through fat and bone and marrow, until my very blood was frost.

From the distance came the sound of a discordant harp, a frigid melody of inhuman joy. The jotnar celebrating over the grave of the world. The song grew louder, and at the horizon a light bloomed. It flickered and licked at the edge of the sky. Shapes danced within the reaching flames, and I wondered what was burning.

"All the works of man, little witness," came a voice.

I turned my head heavily and beheld a vast ship, bobbing gently on a sea of asphalt. The road humped in waves and threw up sprays of black grain against the keratinous hull. Its crew of silent dead stood watchful.

The man who'd spoken rested his elbows on the railing and lit a cigarette. In its red-orange glow I saw the scars that puckered his lips and the madness burning gleefully in his eyes. "Need a ride?"

"You're riding at the head of an army of death, Lie-Bringer," I said, the words slurring past my frozen tongue. "Why would I want to ride with you?"

"Stay here and die, or come along and see," he said indifferently. Shadows leapt and flickered in the hollows of his ruined mouth.

I climbed up the rope they lowered and shuddered away from the hands they put out to help. Even through my coat their touch was bitter cold. In the distance a vast cloud wheeled and churned, blacker even than the starless sky.

"Ravens," he said. "Crows. They smell the battle and come to taste the flesh of gods."

We sailed along the edge of the unmade world and I put my face towards the wind. It tossed my hair and stung my cheeks. It smelled of copper and of death.

I turned to the man beside me. "I've forgotten my name," I said.

"You're Lífthrasir," he answered. "You're the one left behind."

Lífthrasir, I thought. I formed the name with my tongue and said it into the bitter wind. It tasted like life, like growth, like order out of chaos.

It tasted like...hope.

Nik Houser

Standing over the corpse of the letter Q, no one knew quite what to say. The Q's and A's had lived in peace for years.

The Q had been found dead in its apartment, its curved body mangled, its glossy black ink smudged across the living-room walls. It was unspeakable. Unpronounceable.

"Jesus," murmured Amos. The deputy had only just arrived, five minutes behind Forensics. "What happened?"

"See for yourself." Sheriff Abernathy gestured without looking up. The victim's body had been broken apart, its round sides straightened, the tail at its base torn off and stuffed into its midsection. An inkblot test would be needed to reveal its sex. It was hard to tell with Q's. The fact that there was only one way to pronounce them was just one reason their presence in the town of Great Faith had always made some A's uncomfortable. "What's it look like?"

"It looks like...." Deputy Amos coughed into his sleeve. He couldn't finish the thought aloud.

"...turned it into an A," the sheriff finished.

"You think an A did this? You think it was one of us?"

Sheriff Abernathy nodded to the wall behind the deputy, at the murderer's message written in the victim's own ink:

No Vacancy.

It was an old expression from the days when the first Q's came to settle in Great Faith. A's who opposed the Q's' arrival posted signs on their lawns and in storefront windows that said *No Vacancy*, implying that Great Faith had no room for Q's.

"I thought all that was over," the deputy said, kneeling finally for a better look at the victim.

Sheriff Abernathy circled the dead letter, careful not to step in any ink. Black stains dotted the room, like someone had fed a stick of dynamite to a leopard.

"Hate's a trend that never entirely goes out of fashion, Deputy."

"So that's it then? You really think an A did this?"

"I didn't say that. And don't you go saying it either. We don't know who did this. The message could be intended to blame the

wrong letter. Could just as easily have been a Q who hated his fellow letter. Or a Q that hated us A's, and thought this poor thing acted too much like one. Don't draw any conclusions till we see what else he's capable of."

"What else?" Amos looked up from the body. Sheriff Abernathy saw a question form over the deputy's cap like an umlaut made of shit. "What do you mean 'What else he's capable of,' Sheriff?"

There were cries from the hall. A group of lowercases had snuck through the police tape and stood crowded around the apartment's front door, screaming. Their parents rushed down the hallway and took them away.

"I mean I don't know what provoked this guy," the sheriff said, "but I don't doubt that it'll happen again. Takes a fury like you and I can't imagine to do something like this, a kind of anger the ink of one smudged letter isn't going to wash away."

- - -

The call came during dinner the next evening. Sheriff Abernathy hadn't touched his food, lost in thought while the twins laughed and messed around beside him, his wife warning Alex and Andrew to stop playing with their food, entreating her daydreaming husband to help. Their daughter Annie was having dinner next door with a family of Q's whose daughter was friends with Annie at school. They were going out to a movie together and wouldn't be back till late.

Sheriff Abernathy had been thinking about his father, how the old preacher had hated the Q's, how he'd openly demonized them every Sunday at 9:30 and 11:00. The old man himself had coined the phrase *No Vacancy*, had put up the first sign on the church's front lawn.

Look to your lowercases, he had warned his patrons. They already look too much like lowercase q's, so round and impressionable. All it takes is one good push from the wrong influence, and before you know it, they're growing little freak tails of their own, with decadent, blasphemous curves at the end. Is that what you want your sons and daughters to be? Unholy freaks?

"You gonna get that?"

Abernathy snapped awake, looked at his wife as he rose from the table. He'd been expecting Amos's call—was surprised, in fact, that it hadn't come earlier.

"Evening, Deputy," he said when he picked up the phone, not bothering with the caller ID.

"How'd you know it was me?" Amos's voice warbled in the receiver, like he'd just thrown up, or was about to.

"Where is it?"

"Sir?"

"The next victim, Amos. The one I can only assume you're calling me about in the middle of my goddamn repast. Where was it recovered?"

"At the school, sir. But how did you—"

"Q or A?"

"What?"

"Was it a Q or an A that was murdered?"

"It was a q, sir. A...a lowercase q. But—"

The sheriff hung up the phone. In the same gesture, he reached for the high closet shelf where he kept his shoulder holster.

He supposed he should feel bad, or surprised, like he hadn't been expecting the call. But the only emotion Sheriff Abernathy felt as he kissed his family goodbye was disappointment. He'd hoped it would be an A that got it this time, cruel as it might sound. Because a murdered A would dispel the possibility of a hate crime. Sheriff Abernathy would have much preferred a motive of greed or jealousy. Emotions were flammable things, and tended to burn the people they touched, but hate burned hotter than the others, and its flames spread much quicker.

- - -

The q's tail had been cut off.

"Turned the poor kid into a lowercase a," Amos murmured. "Used its ink to leave a message, just like before."

Sheriff Abernathy said nothing, merely stared up at the butchered q where it hung from the top of the school's flagpole. After hanging his victim up to dry, the murderer, nimble son of a bitch that he was, had climbed up the pole and tied the rope off at the top. No one could reach or climb high enough to retrieve the lowercase. The fire department was on its way, but the trees near the school were short and the flagpole was awfully tall. Rubberneckers were already swarming in from the sidewalks while others parked their cars along the curb and on the grass.

"You wanna see the message?" the deputy asked. "He wrote it across the—"

"No," the sheriff said.

"You sure? It says *No Va*—"

"I know what it says, Deputy. Besides, the message wasn't meant for us." Abernathy started back towards his car, hiking a cold thumb at the gathering crowd. Having grown up with a preacher, he could recognize a sermon from a mile away. "It was meant for them."

"Where you going, Sheriff?"

"I gotta call somebody to cut that goddamn flagpole down. Whole thing needs to be impounded as evidence."

Sheriff Abernathy got into his car and shut the door. He dialed home. His wife picked up. "Hey, it's me. Is Annie still over with the Q's next door? All right, I need you to give them a call and tell them it's time for her to come home. Yeah, I know, she's gonna have to miss the movie. I know what we said, I was there. I don't know, just make something up. I don't want her going over there again. Just do it, please? I'll see you later."

- - -

That night, it was Sheriff Abernathy's turn to read Annie her favorite bedtime story, *ABC's of the World*. It was a book about all the different letters, and how they were all special in their own unique ways. As he read, Sheriff Abernathy's attention wandered to his daughter falling asleep beside him.

He looked at her backside, at the vestigial tail that would disappear during puberty. Was it starting to get longer?

"Daddy...."

Abernathy looked at his daughter, who was curled away from the reading light. "Yeah?" he asked.

"You stopped reading, Daddy."

"Oh, sorry. Where'd I stop?"

"At the I's. You were right about to do the I's."

"Sorry," he said, and resumed the story. When he came to the chapter about the Q's, he didn't notice skipping it. Annie was almost asleep and didn't notice either. The pages just seemed to stick together when he got to that part.

- - -

When the phone rang just before dawn, announcing the discovery of a third victim, Sheriff Abernathy once again felt no surprise. Only disappointment came to him, this time because his alarm clock still had eighty minutes to go. He picked up the cordless in the kitchen, leaned against the fridge as he wiped the sleep from his eyes.

"Where is it?" he asked the phone. "Where's it this time?"

"Behind you."

Sheriff Abernathy felt his sides straighten. His angles went sharp and stiff.

"Don't turn around," the voice on the phone said. "Please."

The sheriff remained frozen in place, his gaze fixed to the refrigerator door at his shoulder, to a drawing stuck in place with a magnet. Annie had made it in school years ago. It was a picture of the whole family, including her grandfather, who'd died before she was born. Though the picture was old and tattered, Sheriff Abernathy couldn't bear to throw it away or even take it down. It was the only picture he had where his father was smiling.

"Good morning, Sheriff."

"What do you want?" Abernathy asked the picture, the stranger on the phone. It was the single universal truth he'd known in the twelve years he had spent at his post: Every criminal wanted something, whether they were committing genocide or stealing a stapler from work.

"I want what you want, Sheriff. Clean drinking water. A nice place to live. Good schools for my kids."

Sheriff Abernathy listened hard, trying to discern whether the stranger was in the room with him. It was too hard to tell with the refrigerator's hum in his ear. He reached forwards and eased open the nearest drawer, but found nothing of use inside, nothing sharp—nothing the kids could reach and hurt themselves with. He drew out a silver punch ladle they'd gotten as a gift at their wedding and never used. Better than nothing.

"We've got those things," he said. "Great Faith has the best schools in the state."

12

"Don't lie to me, Sheriff. *They* lie. They fill our children's heads with nonsense about where letters came from, how we evolved from German and Latin and Greek. That's heresy. Plain and simple. They're giving them the wrong idea. They're *changing*

them. You spend too much time with a Q, you turn into one. Everybody knows it.”

“That’s not true. There’s no scientific—”

“*To Hell with science*, Sheriff. Who are you trying to convince? I’ve seen the way you look at your daughter.”

Abernathy dropped the phone, spun around, and hit the tile on one knee, ready to fire the giant spoon. The kitchen was empty. Through the archway he could see into the dining room, which was also empty. A window in the opposite wall opened on the neighbors’ house. Through it, he could see a light on in the Qs’ living room.

“Don’t waste your time, Sheriff,” said the voice from the phone at his feet. “Instead of looking for me, you should be looking in the mirror.”

Abernathy glanced down at the phone, picked it up. “What are you talking about?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, Sheriff, you’ve put on a few pounds. Your sides are starting to bend out, just a little. Are you losing your edge, Sheriff? Been spending a little too much time with the Q’s, have we?”

Abernathy crept to the dining-room window, pressed his free hand against it. All the shades were drawn in the Qs’ house next door. A dark shape loomed in the nearest window. A shape with straight, rigid sides, like an uppercase A.

“Why are you doing this?” asked the sheriff.

“Why *aren’t* you doing this?” asked the stranger. “Why am I the only one? You can see what’s happening. We all can. Yet I’m the only one doing anything about it. For now.”

Sheriff Abernathy retrieved his revolver from the closet shelf.

“Our lowercases are starting to grow tails.”

“That’s not—”

“The sides of even our most devoted A’s are starting to bow outwards.”

Out through the downstairs bathroom window, and Sheriff Abernathy landed on the grass at the far side of his house, the only point of egress that couldn’t be seen from the Qs’ place.

“Because as soon as you make room for one Q, they make room for another. Great Faith is our home, our shelter, our safe harbor from the world outside, and they want to tear it all down.

And that terrifies me, Sheriff. It should terrify you, too. Because Great Faith is *ours*. And we are *nothing* without it.”

Back around the house, Sheriff Abernathy stood in the pooled darkness of the alley, directly under the window where he had seen the stranger. It was open, a yellow curtain allowed to flutter out into the cold.

“Hello? Sheriff, are you there?”

“Yeah.” Sheriff Abernathy raised his gun. “I’m here.”

He sprang through the curtain and pounced on the figure behind it, crashed with it onto the living-room rug. A lamp. He coughed, flushed, imagined what he would say to the Q’s when they rushed downstairs to see what the commotion was about.

No one came. Then he remembered, they’d gone to a movie. Might have run late. But this late? He picked up the phone, which he’d dropped to tussle with the county’s most-wanted lampshade, and went back outside.

Both of the Qs’ cars were still parked in the driveway. Looking at them, with the house silent behind him, Sheriff Abernathy felt his stomach turn like the hands of a clock forced backwards.

He went back up the steps and through the open front door, turning on every light switch he found as he went from room to room—and accidentally activating the garbage disposal.

All the doors were closed upstairs. Sheriff Abernathy remembered the phone in his hand. The little green light was still on. The last caller was still on the line. He put the phone to his ear, hearing nothing as he opened the first door.

Mr. and Mrs. Q lay still in their bed. There was no sign of foul play. Nothing looked out of place. Except that the bed sheets went all the way up over their faces. Abernathy went back into the hall.

The bathroom was next. It was empty.

The last door led to the daughter’s bedroom. Sheriff Abernathy paused, telephone held tight to his ear. A labored, huffing sound came on the line. Like the person on the other end was running. He heard the same sound in his other ear, coming at him from somewhere in the house. It was getting louder. The sheriff held his gun up to the empty hall, then pointed it at the closed door before kicking that down.

The pain hit him immediately, a burning heat like a fork sterilized in flame and shoved into his neck.

Then the pain was gone, and with it the hallway.

- - -

It was dawn before the paramedics arrived. By then Deputy Amos had come and gone and come again. The neighborhood was awake now, each family's morning ablutions put on hold as they lingered on their lawns or ventured out into the street to get a better look at the scene. There was no note from the killer this time, no public address. There was no need. Everyone knew what the flashing lights meant, the yards of police tape. The sheriff's neighbors were the only Q's on the block.

Sheriff Abernathy gave a statement to the deputy, told him about the conversation, about discovering the bodies, about getting knocked out and awakening later to the sound of the paperboy's station wagon coming down the block. He needed coffee and a shower, told Amos he'd be in his house if anything came up. His kids had to have breakfast before getting ready for school. Abernathy did that chore with his wife before the coffee and the shower. Didn't want to, but she was more shaken than he.

She hugged him fiercely when the school bus had come and gone, let out all the tears she'd been holding in for the sake of their lowercases.

He didn't find the killer's note until he was alone, with the shower steaming behind him. Head aching, he took off the robe his wife had put over him when he first came in from the crime scene, then removed the shirt he could swear he'd worn for days.

The letters were perhaps four inches high, carefully tattooed across the sheriff's chest in black ink over his natural blue tone: *No Vacancy*. The killer had written it backwards so Abernathy could read it in the mirror.

He stared at the words, feeling nothing. There was no need to panic. The queer graffiti could be removed easily enough. There was a specialist two towns over who could do it, a Q doctor from the coast. Abernathy thought of going to the Q's office, thought of the Q's unreadable eyes examining the plain block letters tattooed across his chest. A slow phantom dread stole over him as he imagined these things. Of course, he didn't have to see that doctor in particular. There were other doctors in other towns. Only he couldn't think of any. For some reason, the only doctors that came

to mind were Q's. Anywhere his mind looked he saw Q doctors, Q teachers, Q neighbors. It made him feel exposed, like his heart had been undressed. He wanted to hide. Only there was no place to go. Because they were everywhere. He had no place to—

The phone rang on the sink. Must've followed him in. He watched it ring, knowing it could mean only one thing. The sheriff felt no surprise. Nor did he feel disappointment this time. His only sensation.... He didn't want to call it relief. But he no longer felt so dizzy, so exposed.

The telephone stopped. Then started again.

He reached out to the handset, watched his hand float over it as it continued to ring.



Mortality

Adam Ramirez

Unlike Red Tape, the Yellow

Lida Broadhurst

So accustomed we have grown to tape being red, yet invisible,
as we can hardly see it unrolling, sticking our lives together like
carelessly-cooked spaghetti.

But its cousin, the yellow stuff, dancing prettily in the wind,
gets washed by liquids to a slick fairy sheen. Easy to imagine
Rumpelstiltskin weaving it from dead grass to please some
princess who mourns dragons, craves fresh scenes of blood loss.

All we know, it is tied to poles, marking the boundaries of lives
now lost to us. Black runes proclaim disasters, death, certainly no
celebrations. Everyone nods in acceptance.

We stand puzzled, knowing commentators will come soon, tell
us what to think, to plan, to dream. Naturally, we don't wish to
dance in its charmed circle, but for those surrounded, it marks the
boundaries of their grief, our sly rejoicing.

Flip Lady [1986]

Ladee Hubbard

I.

History.

Ray Ray hears the sound of laughter, puts down the book, and peeks out the window.

Here they come now, children of the ancient ones—the hewers of wood, the cutters of cane—barreling down the sidewalk on their Huffys and Schwinn. Little legs pumping over fat rubber tires, brakes squealing as they pull into the drive, standing on tiptoes as they straddle their bikes and stare up at the house with their mouths hanging open.

Just like before. Some of them he still remembers: he made out with that girl's sister in the seventh grade, played basketball with that boy's uncle in high school. This one was all right until his brother joined the army, that one was okay until her daddy went to jail.

And you see that girl in the back? The chubby girl standing by the curb, next to the brand-new Schwinn? She hasn't been the same since the Invasion of Grenada three years ago, in 1983.

The spice island. When the Marines landed she was living in St. George near the medical center with her mother, the doctor, and Aunt Ruby, the nurse. The power went off, hospital plunging into a blue tide pool of sirens while machine-gun fire cackled in the distance like a bag of Jiffy Pop. *Oh no*, Aunt Ruby said. *Just like before*.

It's all there in his book: colonizers fanning out across the Atlantic like a hurricane, not exactly hungry, but looking for spice. They cultivated cane, they built the mills, they filled the islands up with slaves. Sugar kept the workers happy; it distracted them from grief. And four hundred years later you had your military invasions and McDonald's Happy Meals, your Ho Hos and preemptive strikes. Your Oreos and Reaganomics, your Cap'n Crunch.

And Kool-Aid. They can't get enough of it. They sit in the driveway, they shift in their seats, they grip the plastic streamers

affixed to their handlebars. One of them kicks his kickstand and steps forward, fingers curled into a small, tight fist as he raps on the kitchen door.

“Flip Lady? You in there?”

Just like before. They roamed the entire earth in search of spice, so why not here, why not now?

“Flip Lady? You home? It’s me, Willis....”

For the past few weeks they’ve been coming almost every day.

Ray Ray closes the curtain. He shakes his head and turns towards the darkness of the back bedroom. “Mama? It’s those fucking kids again.”

II.

The squeak of old mattress-coils, a single bang of a head-board against a bedroom wall. The Flip Lady wills herself upright and sets her feet down on the floor. Sits on the edge of her bed and stares at the chipped polish on her left big toe. Reaches for her slippers, straightens out her green housedress, and walks out the bedroom door.

The Flip Lady shuffles into the living room, where her nineteen-year-old son sits on a low couch reading a book—long brown body hunched forward, elbows resting on his knees, lips moving as he peers down at the page in front of him. In an instant his life flashes before her in a series of fractured images, like a VHS tape on rewind. She sees him at sixteen, face hidden behind a comic book, then at seven, when his feet barely touched the floor. And before that, a chubby toddler, gripping the cushion with his fat, meaty fists, laughing as he hoisted himself onto the couch. Without breaking her stride and for want of anything else to say, she mutters, “I see you reading,” and passes into the kitchen.

The Flip Lady lifts a pickle jar full of loose change from the counter and stares out the kitchen window.

20 “That you, Willis?” she says to the little boy standing on her porch.

“Afternoon, ma’am.” Willis smiles.

She twists the lid off the jar, opens the kitchen door, and squints at the multitude assembled in her backyard. Willis plunges

his hand into his pants pocket and pulls out a fistful of dimes. He drops them into her jar with a series of empty pings.

"Well, all right then," the Flip Lady says.

Willis glances over his shoulder and winks.

She walks towards her refrigerator while Willis stands in the doorway. He cocks his head and peers into her living room: glass angel figurines and tea set on the lace doily in the cabinet against the wall, bronzed baby shoes mounted on a wooden plaque, framed high-school graduation photos and Sears portrait of her two sons sitting on top of the TV set, a stack of LPs lined up on the floor. The back of a dark-green La-Z-Boy recliner and the edge of the plaid couch where her younger son sits staring at a book. Willis turns his head back around and sees the Flip Lady standing in the middle of her bright-yellow kitchen, easing two muffin trays stuffed with Dixie cups out of her freezer.

The Flip Lady studies Willis' face as he scoops the cups out of the trays: licking his lips, eyes lit up like birthday candles. She smiles. Her boys were the same way when they were that age, clustering around her back door with all of their friends, giddy with excitement as they sucked on her homemade Popsicles. She used to hand them out on weekends; it was a way to keep them all in her backyard where she could keep her eye on them from the kitchen window. Being a good mother, she wanted to get to know how her boys passed their time and with who, wanted to memorize their playmates' faces and study their gestures. Until she felt confident she could tell the clever from the calculating, the dreamy eyes from the dangerous, the quiet from the cruel. She hadn't done it for money. No one had to thank her, though her neighbors told her many times how much they appreciated her looking out for their children that way.

The Flip Lady frowns. Of course everything does change, eventually. There comes a time when a mother just has to accept that the promise of sugary sweets has lost its ability to soothe all grief. They don't want your Kool-Aid any more. They busy, they got other things to do. One day you find yourself standing alone in the kitchen, hand wrapped around a cold cup, melting ice dripping down your fingers as you wonder to yourself when exactly the good little boys standing on the back porch became the big bad men walking out your front door.

She looks down at Willis. "How was school today, son? You studying hard, being a good boy? You doing what your mama tells you?"

"Yes, ma'am." Willis walks around, passing out Dixie cups to his friends.

"Well, all right then," the Flip Lady says.

III.

What you get for your money is a hunk of purple ice, a Dixie cup full of frozen Kool-Aid. The girl in the back stares down at hers. It's not quite what she was expecting, given how far they have come to get it. According to the black plastic Casio attached to her left wrist, they rode for a full twenty minutes in pretty much the exact opposite direction from where she was trying to get to, which was home. One minute she was in the schoolyard unlocking her bike and the next they were standing over her, the whole group of them saying, *Come with us*. As soon as she looked up, she knew it wasn't an invitation but an order. They were taking her to wherever it was they went when they sprinted off after class, their laughter echoing in the distance long after they disappeared past the school gate. How could she say no?

She lifts the cup to her open mouth and runs her tongue along its surface, absorbing flat sweetness and a salty aftertaste.

"It's just Kool-Aid," someone says.

The girl closes her mouth. She looks around the parking lot of the Radio Shack, where they have parked their bikes to eat. Everyone is pushing the bottoms of their cups with the pads of their thumbs, making those sugar lumps rise into the air. They're tilting their cups to the side and pulling them out, melting Kool-Aid dripping down their hands as they flip them over then carefully place them back inside the cups bottoms-up. They're sucking on their fingers, they're licking their lips, their mouths are pressed against their homemade Popsicle flips.

22

"What's the matter? Don't they have Kool-Aid where you come from?"

The girl looks down at her cup. She pushes her thumbs against the bottom, but presses too hard; the hunk of ice pops out fast, soaring over the rim. Hands fumble as she tries to catch

it, as it slips through her fingers cold and wet, as it tumbles down the front of her shirt and lands with a thud on the pavement at her feet.

“Now that’s a shame.”

The girl wipes her hands on the front of her shorts, her palms already sticky. She blames her upbringing, all those years spent stuck on that rock; how to flip a homemade Popsicle is just one more thing she should have known. She got the exact same looks from the kids on the island when she first moved there with her mother and Aunt Ruby all those years ago: *What you come here for? What you want with this rock, when everybody trying to get off it?* As if only white people were supposed to spin in dizzy circles like that, as missionaries or volunteers or tourists on extended leave.

She can still see her former playmates in the eyes of her new school’s handful of immigrant kids, with their high-water pants and loud polyester shirts, huddling and whispering to each other as they move down the halls. They look tired, fagged out from the journey—but at least they have an excuse. She’s not even West Indian. Everyone knows her uncle lives right around the block from Lakewood Elementary and has been living there for at least twenty years.

“What a waste.”

When her mama said they were moving back to the States, she had been like everyone else she knew, picturing New York or LA like she saw on TV, not some narrow sliver of southern suburbia wedged senselessly in between. Now she looks up and is surrounded by a whole parking lot full of distracted, sucking kids who don’t like her anyway.

“Go get another one,” someone says. Willis, usually the boss around here, though sometimes they take turns.

“It’s only ten cents. Ain’t you even got another dime?”

“What’s the problem? You scared to go back by yourself?”

“What’s the matter? Don’t you want one?”

Of course she wants one. But she wants that one there, already dissolving into a pool of purple ooze at her feet. If she can’t have it then she just wants to go home, sit on the couch, eat leftover Entenmann’s cookies from the box, and watch *Star Trek* reruns until her mama gets home from work at the hospital.

She looks back at the Flip Lady’s house, now halfway down the block. She’s tired of traveling the wrong way, dragging herself

in the wrong direction without real rhyme or actual reason. But she also doesn't want to cause trouble, doesn't want to make waves. She reaches for the handlebars of her bike.

"Naw, leave it." They lick their lips and smile. "We'll watch it for you."

But they lie: In a few minutes they are going to teach her a lesson about realness, about keeping it. Because even her accent is fake. Because she rides around on a Schwinn that is just like theirs except it is brand new.

"Go on, girl."

Plus she's fat.

The girl nods her head. She already knows they are going to start talking about her just as soon as her back is turned. They're a mean bunch; she's already seen them do some terrible things. She's already figured out that it does no good to wander in and out of earshot. Either you've got to stay knuckle to knuckle, packed tight like a fist, or you give them a wide berth and do all you can not to draw attention to yourself.

She turns around and starts walking. She can hear them whispering and laughing behind her, a hot, humid jungle of bad moods circling her footsteps, gathering in strength with each step she takes. A flash of fear tickles her nose, like when you're swimming and accidentally inhale water. But she does not stop walking, convinced that to turn around mid-stride would only make things worse.

She knocks on the Flip Lady's door, expecting to see the kindly face of the woman who answered it not a half hour before. Instead it's a man, dressed in a pair of sweatpants and a blue tee shirt, a little brown Chihuahua shivering in the palm of his left hand. She stares up at his flaring nostrils, dark eyes, and arched eyebrows.

"Yeah?"

"I dropped mine."

Ray Ray shakes his head. He doesn't like kids and his first instinct is to shut the door. But this girl looks like she's going to cry. "Mama's not here. You hear? Flip Lady gone. She went out. Shopping. To buy more Kool-Aid, most likely. So why don't you just come back tomorrow—"

A harsh peal of laughter cuts across the horizon. The girl puts her head down. She reaches into her pocket and holds out a dime like a peace offering.

Ray Ray recoils. "I don't want that. What am I supposed to do with that? Girl, you better just go on home."

He hears more laughter, looks up and shakes his head. "Those your friends? Little heathens...."

Then the harsh scrape of metal against concrete. He steps out onto the porch and squints into the distance. "Hey girl, that your bike?"

She can hear their rubber soles pounding on the spokes. She stares down at the mat in front of the door.

"Hey girl. Turn around. Look."

She shuts her eyes, feels a stiff pressure in her groin like a sudden, swift kick against her bladder, then a sharp tingling sensation between her legs.

"Hey, girl, turn around...."

Her eyes pop open again and when she looks up she sees another man inside of the house, walking through the kitchen holding a bag of sugar up to his nose.

"Turn around...."

The girl turns around and stares up at Ray Ray. "May I use your bathroom, please?"

The man in the house puts down the bag of sugar and smiles.

Ray Ray stares at the girl on the porch, breathing hard with her thighs clamped together, shifting her weight from side to side. He nods and points down the hall, past his friend Tony, who is standing in the middle of the living room grinning from ear to ear.

"You from Jamaica?" Tony says as the girl rushes past him.

She runs into the bathroom and slams the door.

Ray Ray shakes his head. It's all there in his book, he thinks. It's always the weak and the homely that get left behind. Stranded on the back porch, knees shaking as they quiver and dance, thin rivers of pee running down their ashy legs.

IV.

The girl sits on the toilet in a pink-tiled bathroom, staring at a stack of *Ebony* and *Newsweek* magazines in a brass rack near the sink. She thinks about her bike, about how much she is going to miss it. She's only had it for a few weeks, but still. It's something

she begged and pleaded for, something she swore she needed to fit in. Now she doesn't even want to look at it. A few minutes ago, the Flip Lady's son knocked on the door and told her he would fix it so she could ride home, but it's too late. It's already ruined. She's already peed herself and run away.

Everybody's always so busy running, so busy trying to save their own skins, she remembers her Aunt Ruby telling her. *That's what's wrong with this world. We've got to stand together if we're going to stand at all.* And the girl had liked the sound of that, even if she sensed that it didn't really apply to her.

She'd seen her aunt and mother working in the clinic, had stood numb and mystified by the deliberateness with which they thrust themselves into other people's wounds. Stitching a cut, dressing a burn, giving a shot, connecting an IV. It was intimidating, the steadiness of her mother's hand sometimes. Even now, even in the midst of grief. Like those nights when she stomped into the living room and cut off the TV in the middle of the evening news, her voice damming the flood of silence that followed with the simple statement "They lie."

The girl reaches for the roll of toilet paper and wipes off the insides of her legs. She pulls up her damp panties and zips her shorts. Opening the door, she finds Tony crouched down on the living-room floor, peering behind the stack of LPs lined up against the wall.

"You feeling better?"

When she doesn't say anything, he puts the records back. He stands up, shoves his hands into his pockets, and stares at her.

"So you from Jamaica?"

The girl shakes her head. "I come from here."

"Not talking like that you don't." Tony walks past her and stares down at the couch.

"I live on Grenada for a time—"

"What's that?"

She watches him kneel in front of the couch. He peers underneath the cushion like he's looking for spare change.

"Another island," she says.

He puts the cushion down and flops back on the couch, bouncing up and down a few times to force the cushion back into place.

"Y'all smoke a lot of ganja down there too?"

The girl shrugs awkwardly. She wonders what about her appearance might remind this man of a Rastafarian. Rastafarians wore dusty clothes, had callused feet and thick clumps of matted hair. They sat in the waiting room, making the clinic smell like salt and homemade lye soap. Her mother checked their charts while Aunt Ruby rubbed their arms with cotton pads coated in alcohol. When they saw the needle, Aunt Ruby smiled and told them it was just a pinprick. *Don't worry, it will be all right, she promised. Just look at me.*

No, she didn't smoke a lot of ganja.

"That's all right," Tony says. "You still got that sweet accent, huh?" He pulls a bouquet of plastic flowers out of a white vase, peers down inside the vase, and then holds the flowers up to his nose. "I like things sweet."

He puts the flowers back in the vase and reaches underneath the table, running his hand along the wood panels underneath. The girl stares down at the books stacked on top of it. And next to the table, an open cardboard box with still more books tucked inside.

The front door swings open and Ray Ray steps into the living room, tossing a wrench onto the table, next to the stack of books.

"How far away you live?" He can already see the girl starting to blink rapidly. "I mean, I tried. But the body's all bent; you're going to have to just carry it or drag it or something, I don't know...."

"Damn." Tony shakes his head. "What's wrong with these fucking kids today? Why you think they so evil?"

Ray Ray looks at the girl: short, stiff plaits of hair standing up at the back of her neck, dirty white tee shirt with a pink ladybug appliqué stretched across the stomach, plaid shorts, socks spattered with purple Kool-Aid stains. He used to feel sorry for awkward, homely girls like that. But now sometimes he thinks maybe they are really better off. "I tried," he says.

"Why they do that to you, girl?" Tony says.

She just stands there, hands clasped behind her back, swaying slightly from side to side.

"You gonna be all right?" Ray Ray nods towards the front door. "You want a glass of water or something, before you go?"

"Hey, Ray, man, you remember us? You remember back in the day?"

Ray Ray shrugs. All he knows is that the girl is not moving. She just stands there staring down at the stack of books on the table.

"I think we were just as bad," Tony says.

"Let me get you that glass of water," Ray Ray says and disappears into the kitchen.

The cabinet squeaks open, followed by the sound of crushed ice crumbling into a glass.

"And your mama with them flips," Tony yells from the couch. "When'd she start up with that again? I haven't seen those things in years."

"Well, you're lucky," Ray Ray calls back. Just thinking about all those little kids crowding around his mama's yard is enough to make him wince. She started making those fucking Popsicles again almost as soon as he came back to hold her hand at the funeral. He's convinced there is something wrong with it, that it is unhealthy somehow—an unnatural distraction from grief. And then look at the kind of hassles it leads to. He puts the glass under the faucet and pours the girl her water. All he wants is to get the child out of his house before she has time to pee herself again.

"When did she start charging people?" Tony says.

Ray Ray closes his eyes and shuts the water off. He knows Tony doesn't mean anything by it, but really, that's the part that bothers him the most: all those jars of fucking dimes. He walks back into the living room.

"Man." Ray Ray shakes his head. He hands the girl her water. "I don't want to talk about fucking Kool-Aid."

Tony cocks his head and then shrugs. He looks up at the girl. "They used to be free."

V.

There are too many people in the house, that's what it is. Ray Ray can sense that—Tony and the girl flooding the space, making him feel crowded and cramped. For the past five days it's been just him and the books, the box he found hidden in the back of his brother's closet. And it had shocked him, because he had never

actually seen his brother read anything more substantial than a comic book. But he knew they were his brother's books and that his brother had read them because he recognized the handwriting scribbled in the margins on almost every page.

The girl lowers her glass and nods her head towards the stack on the table. "Are all those yours?"

"Naw." He shakes his head. "They belong to someone else."

"Just a little light reading to pass the time, huh, Ray?" Tony says. He picks up a book and glances down at the cover, assesses its weight. "Looks dry."

Ray Ray shuts his eyes. The word "fool" bubbles up in his mind involuntarily, before he has a chance to quell it with guilt. He's known Tony for twelve years, ever since they both got assigned the same homeroom teacher in the second grade. Somehow, when Ray Ray went to college, he'd imagined himself missing Tony a lot more than he actually did. He opens his eyes and looks at the girl.

"Why did you ask me that? About the books? I mean, what difference does it make to you who they belong to?"

She points to the one lying open. "I know that one."

"What do you mean you know it?"

"I mean I've seen it. I read it."

"That thick-ass book?" Tony glances down at it, then back up at the girl. "Naw. Really?"

"Parts of it," the girl says. "Aunt Ruby gave it to me."

"Now you see that?" Tony says. "Another one with the books. Now we got two...." He stands up and disappears into the kitchen.

Ray Ray squints at the girl in front of him, who is rocking slowly from side to side as she peers up at him over the rim of her glass.

"Look, girl. What's the problem? Don't you want to go home?" He studies her face. "Are you scared? Worried your daddy is going to beat you or something, for letting them fuck your bike up like that?"

"I don't have a daddy."

"Then what is it?"

"It's the bike." The girl shakes her head, lower lip popping out in a pout. "I don't want it."

"What do you mean you don't want it?" He winces at the sudden loud clatter of pots and pans being pushed aside in one of his mother's kitchen drawers. "You don't want to take it home?"

The girl nods.

"Well, leave it then. You just go home and I'll keep it in the garage and you can come back for it later, like when Mama's here or something—"

A drawer slams shut in the kitchen.

"Hey man, what are you doing in there?" Ray Ray yells.

"Where she keep it?"

"What?"

"The Kool-Aid. I'm thirsty."

Ray Ray purses his lips together and shuts his eyes. "I told you she went to the store," he yells back. "What the fuck is the matter with you?"

Tony's face appears in the living-room doorway.

"There is no fucking Kool-Aid in this house," Ray Ray yells, breathing hard.

"I hear you." Tony nods. He looks Ray Ray up and down and frowns. "Don't lose your cool."

Tony walks slowly backward into the kitchen, his eyes locked on Ray Ray, until finally his head disappears behind the door.

Ray Ray looks at the girl. "I'm trying to be nice."

VI.

Tony stands in the middle of a bright-yellow kitchen, staring at the dimes in a pickle jar on the windowsill, thinking about Ray Ray losing his cool. Baby Brother is clearly not well. Tony could see that as soon as he walked into the house—had sensed it just from talking to Ray on the phone. Something about his brother Sam having all those books in his closet had really tripped Ray up for some reason. Maybe Ray forgot other people could read, had a right to read a fucking book when they felt like it.

Ray just needs to get out of the house for a little while, Tony thinks. Ray just needs some fresh air. Have a beer, smoke some weed, take a walk around the neighborhood and relax. Tony has it all laid out in his mind, the speech he's going to give Ray about how fucked up everything is, about how Ray needs to get back up to school before it's too late. *Anybody who likes reading books as much*

as you do needs to be getting a college education, can't be fucking up a chance like this. He will shake his head and tell Ray he understands wanting to be here for your mama and all, but sometimes you got to just put shit aside and go for yours because How you supposed to help anybody else if you can't even help yourself?

Sam would want him to say all that: *Listen to Tony, you know Tony got plenty of sense, always has.*

He's going to tell Ray about how proud of him Sam always was. Tell him that, as much as Sam rolled his eyes, everybody could see how much he liked saying it: *Naw, that doofy herb ain't here no more. He up at school. The eye-rolling was just reflex. My baby brother, at college....*

He will make up a little lie about how one night he and Sam had actually talked about it, tell Ray how ashamed Sam was for hitting him—especially that last time. Knocked his books on the floor, slapped Ray across the face. *Now pick it up.* And really there was something pitiful about it, big man like Sam hitting a little boy like Ray—Tony could see that even then.

But of course Tony hadn't been the one getting slapped. Tony was the one standing on the sidelines watching, the one who had his hands out when it was over, always ready to help a motherfucker back onto his feet. Dusted him off, handed him back his books, said, *Here you go, Ray, and, Damn that motherfucker is mean.*

And Ray cut his eyes and said, *Oh, that son of a bitch is probably just high; he don't even know what planet he's on half the time—which Tony knew was a lie. But he just let Ray say it, because it made him stop crying and sometimes people just say things.*

Tony spins around, opens the door to the pantry. Ray's mama has got all kinds of shit in there: baked beans, Vienna sausages, Del Monte canned peaches, Spam, a half-full jar of Folger's Crystals that has probably been sitting there for years. Tony sucks his teeth, thinking how his grandma is the same way, can't throw anything out, no matter how nasty or old. Jars of flour, baking powder, baking soda, cornstarch, cornmeal, sugar. He can see how someone might get confused in a pantry like that. If they were crazy, say, or couldn't smell nothing because their nose was too stuffed up from crying all the time.

Ray's mama is not taking very good care of herself these days. That's what Tony's mama said, when he told her he was going out to visit Ray: *Saw her shuffling around the supermarket the other day, poor thing, with her wig on all crooked and walking around*

in that nasty housedress. Just grieving, poor thing. She not taking very good care of herself these days, looks like. If Tony's mama hadn't pointed it out to him, he might not have even noticed. To him, Ray's mama just looks old, but she always looked like that, even when they were kids.

Tony stands there for a minute, looking up at a jar of sugar. If Ray walks in and asks him what he's doing, he'll just shrug and tell him he's got a sweet tooth is all. He twists the top off the jar and looks around for a place to put it. He's opened a drawer near the sink and pulled out a plastic sandwich bag when all of a sudden he hears a knock on the front door.

He walks back into the living room and sees Ray Ray peeking out the window.

"I told you," Tony says.

Ray Ray stares at him. "Just wait here."

VII.

The girl watches Ray Ray walk out the door. She puts her glass of water on the table and then stands by the window. She can see Ray Ray heading towards a car parked by the curb. An arm spills out of the driver's-side window—a man's arm, thick and muscular—fingers outstretched to clasp Ray Ray's hand. Suddenly Ray Ray looks different to her: thin and awkward, like a boy.

"That's his brother Sam's friends." Tony shakes his head and sits down on the couch. "Everybody's cool now but let's see how long it lasts."

The girl watches as another man's hand appears, dangling out of the rear window holding out a forty-ounce of beer.

"Somehow they got it in they stupid heads that Sam took something that belonged to them and hid it somewhere—maybe right here in his mama's house."

The girl watches Ray Ray take the bottle and twist off the cap, spill a sip onto the pavement before raising it to his lips.

"And you know what's fucked up? I mean really fucked up? I'm starting to think that too."

The girl turns around and sees Tony staring at her from the couch. He lowers his eyes, looks down at the stack of books. "Hey. You really read this? For real?"

"Aunt Ruby gave it to me." The girl nods.

"Well, who the hell is Aunt Ruby?"

"Mama's friend. She come down with us, as part of the Unity Brigade."

Tony picks up the book and nods his head. Somehow this makes sense to him. Of course there is a Unity Brigade. Somewhere. Full of the righteous marching proudly two-by-two with their fists in the air. The book is a call to action; he can tell that just by looking at the cover.

"That why y'all move down there, to that island? Help the needy, feed the poor? That kind of shit? What, you part of a church group or something?"

"Not really."

He flips the book over and then back. Outside he can hear the revving of a motor, music blaring through open windows, the screech of brakes as the car tears away from the curb.

"Why did you stop?" he says to the girl. "I mean, why did you all come back?"

The girl stares at him. She has to think for a moment about how to answer because, in truth, no one has ever asked her that. They ask why she went but never why she came back. Most people she has met here don't even know what Grenada is, except to sometimes say, *Didn't we bomb the shit out of that place a couple of years ago?* And everyone who hears about the Brigade seems to assume that it was bound to fail simply because it did. "Aunt Ruby. She gone now."

"Gone where?"

"In the kitchen. She take a bottle of pills."

Tony looks away from her. Tries to picture the woman, Aunt Ruby, but can't. So instead he thinks about Sam, someone he knew all his life, someone he loved, truly. He rises to his feet and thrusts an abrupt finger towards the cardboard box. "You see all them books? The one who left them for Ray? He gone too."

He walks past her and peeks out the front window. He can see Ray still standing on the sidewalk, staring down the block. He has already figured out that Ray is different, that something is not quite right. Him and his mother both, stuck in the righteous purging of grief. One has history, the other has Kool-Aid, and from where Tony stands he can't see how either is doing them a bit of good.

"Hey, girl. Look what I found." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small plastic bag full of white powder. He opens it up and pokes it with his finger. "You know what this is?"

The girl stares down at it, then up at him. If she had to guess, she'd say sugar.

"It's medicinal, is what it is," Tony says. "Like what the doctor give you when you got a cavity. Novocain. Rub it on your gums, and the next thing you know, you can't feel a thing. Go ahead and try it."

The girl stares back at him while he keeps nodding. She raises her hand and dips her finger inside the bag, then rubs the powder onto her teeth.

"You see what I mean?" Tony says.

A dry, metallic taste stretches up from her tongue, shoots through her nostrils, and clears a space for itself in the front of her brain.

"You see what I mean?"

All of a sudden she's dizzy. She sits down in the La-Z-Boy, struggling to keep her eyes open. Tony stands there studying her face. He backs away from her slowly and sits down on the couch.

"I like you, girl. For real." He nods. "You just keep your head up—you'll be all right. You know why? Because you're cool. I could tell just as soon as I saw you, standing out on that porch." He winks. "That's why I want you to listen to me, okay? I'm gonna tell you a secret. And don't tell Ray I told you either. Because I love Ray's mama and all—she's like an auntie to me. But she also silly simple. You know what I mean?" He twirls his finger in the air near the side of his head. "Something not quite right. And if I were you I wouldn't drink any more of that woman's nasty Kool-Aid. You understand?"

The girl stares and Tony shakes his head. "Not even if you paid me."

VIII.

Ray Ray stands next to the curb, watching his mother pull into the driveway. When she opens the car door and the light clicks on, he can see the frantic look in her eyes, her lips moving as she mutters to herself. She can't help him, he knows that. It's

all she can do to keep herself upright, to drag herself out of bed in the middle of the afternoon, open the door for her little flip babies, collect her parcel of dimes.

He helps his mother unload her grocery bags from the car and listens to her talk to herself. Blaming herself, trying to make sense of what happened. How could she have lost her son? How could things have possibly gone so wrong? What could she have done differently if only she had tried? She looks at Ray Ray, a quiet hysteria animating all of her gestures.

"Help me get these bags in the house. I've got work to do. I'm running out of time."

And that is what is needed more than anything, he thinks. Time. So much history to sort through, struggling to make room for itself, scribbled in the margins of every page. The books he found are full of secrets, the private truths of a man talking to himself, whispering things that Ray Ray can scarcely imagine being said out loud. Clearly his brother was standing on the precipice of a new understanding, and now there is no one to finish his thoughts but Ray Ray. He doesn't want to be interrupted. Not yet. He still needs time.

"Is that Tony sitting in my living room? Go tell that fool boy to come out here and help me with these bags...."

When Ray Ray walks back in the house he takes one look at the girl sitting with her mouth hanging open and Tony shoving a plastic bag into his pocket and knows that something is very wrong.

"What the fuck is the matter with you?" he says, and Tony laughs.

He laughs, even as Ray Ray pulls him up by the collar, pushing and then hurling him towards the front door. Even in the midst of grief, Tony is laughing. "Remember what I told you, little girl...."

The door closes behind them and the girl can hear them scuffling out on the porch. She leans back in the La-Z-Boy and stares up at the ceiling, trying to negotiate the shifting rhythms of her own heartbeat. She is in the present, she is in a suburb in the South, and everything is quieter than before. There is no fist in the air, no promise of the New Jewels. When she looks up she does not see the words from a book or her mother's hands or Aunt Ruby's face or the kids in the yard or the Rastafarians in the clinic waiting room. She doesn't see a needle or blue lights or even the little brick house across the street from the strip mall where her

Uncle lives. When she looks up at the ceiling, she sees something even better: a blank page.

And just as she is about to smile, Ray Ray's face appears, hovering above the chair. She stares up at his pursed lips, dark eyes, arched eyebrows. He reaches around, takes her by the arm, and gently pulls her to her feet.

"Little girl? It's time for you to go home."

IX.

The Flip Lady stands in her bright-yellow kitchen, unpacking a bag of groceries. She takes out a large pot, fills it up with water from the sink, and sets it on the counter. She empties a canister of Kool-Aid and stirs. She adds a cup of sugar, watching the powder swirl through the purple liquid then disappear as it settles on the bottom. She thinks for a moment, then scoops out another cup.

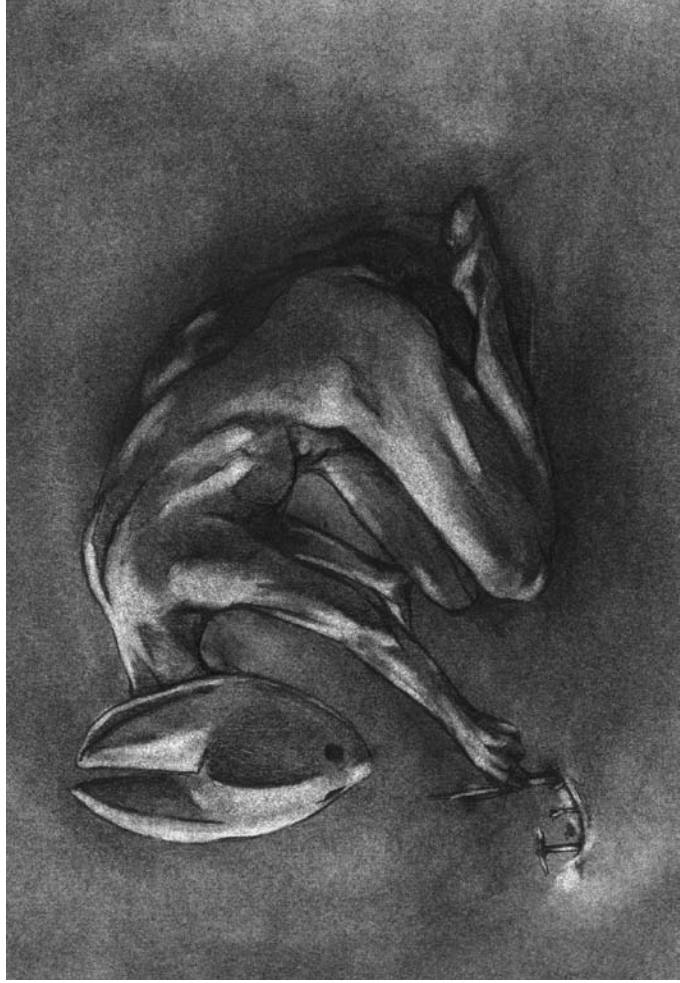
"Little heathens," she chuckles. Just like Tony, always thinking she can't see past their smiles. But she watches everything from the kitchen window and she has seen it all. Nothing has changed. It's just like before; she always could tell the good from the bad.

"Bet y'all sleep good tonight," she mutters to herself.

She doesn't do it for the money. No one has to thank her.

She smiles, thinks about all the little flip babies in this world. Her hold on them won't last; nothing does. But for now they still come running, gather around her back porch, and hold their hands out for the promise of something sweet.

And she will give it to them.



Writing the Harvest

Lisa A. Grabenstetter

The Dancing Aliens

Mithran Somasundrum

The dancing aliens are here. They're in the squares and parks and shopping malls, and sometimes out on street corners. They're still in the clothes they appeared in, the flapping white shifts, which by now are more of a dingy grey. And with winter coming they wear Earth-based additions: a woollen hat here, a denim jacket there, a pair of worn-down boots. They don't seem to understand how incongruous it all looks. The aliens don't have dress sense, just like they're willing to eat almost anything. I was going to say they don't have style, but no, that's not true. They have a style of sorts. They have their dancing.

With the big show here at last, the World Show, with it on the news and all, everyone wants to tell you they were there when the aliens first arrived. Everyone wants to tell you they knew they were aliens right away. For me, that's actually true. At least the first bit. I work for British Telecom, that big building on Shaftesbury Avenue. In the summer, it got to be that I'd stroll down to Leicester Square on my lunch break. I'd pretend to myself I was a tourist: grab a kebab or a pizza slice, drift with the summer crowd, watch the mime guys, see what films were on. For half an hour it would feel like a weekend.

So I must have been one of the first people to see the original group, the group that appeared in Leicester Square. They were in that broad pedestrian space opposite the Empire cinema—the one every tourist in London seems to dawdle through on the way to Oxford Street—where the buskers and the sketch-your-portrait guys collect. There were three of them of course, as always. And no, we didn't think they were aliens. We just thought they were mime guys. That seems mad now, when you think about how, well, alien they look. How could we see the high, unnatural planes of their faces, their too-wide mouths, their black irises, their ice-cream-white skin, and think they were in any way human? But you don't think, do you? You don't just say to yourself, Here's a life-form from another planet. We thought they were wearing masks.

And they were dancing, of course. What else would they have been doing?

They caught people's interest soon enough, drawing attention away from the dreadlocked guitarist and the painted-in-silver pretending-to-be-a-statue guy. I think it's the lack of music that makes them so compelling. It gives them a *seriousness*, a constantly-listening quality, almost as though there really is music, and if you concentrated as hard as them, you could hear it too.

I joined the crowd, pizza in hand. I watched while one of them stood tapping forefinger and thumb together like pincers, and the other two swept out diagonally, bent over double, arms behind them, turned, and then swept back. Then one stood with his legs wide apart, while the other two swayed from side to side. Then all three were coming towards us in long, slow steps. And so it continued, simple variations on simple movements. It's strange how engrossing it always is. The nearest thing I can compare it with is watching the apex of a fountain—the way the water never quite repeats the same shape twice, and how, waiting for it to, you let go and drift. I looked at my watch that first time and realised I was already late getting back to work.

At five-thirty, when I finished, instead of going straight down into the Tube station, I crossed the square again. I'm not sure why. I just felt I hadn't got the whole story on the dancing guys' act. There was something else, right?

But no, they were still just dancing. Only now, perhaps, without the same crisp precision. When they moved together they weren't exactly in sync—and what was that, a leg tremble? Suddenly I had the odd, worrying idea they'd been going since noon without a break. Surely not?

And another strange thing. People had by now started to throw money—not much, just a light scatter of silver—but no one had tried to collect it. While I watched, a Japanese girl in knee-high suede boots tossed a twenty-pence piece. One of the dancers stopped his sideways crab-like glide and put the coin in his mouth. His jaw shifted, and under the white make-up (well, I thought it was make-up) a look of sadness crossed his face. He spat the coin out. A murmur went through the crowd. They don't really do comedy, you could see everyone thinking. Should just stick with the dances.

I left the square then; took the Tube train home and forgot about it. But that night, lying in bed in the dark with Sarah after making love, feeling spent and caring and full of concern

for the world, I asked, “D’you want to go to Leicester Square tomorrow?”

“What about the curtains?” (It was the Saturday we’d agreed to look for new ones.)

“We can do that later; there’s this dance group I want you to see. They’re...different.”

If Sarah had pressed me for that difference, I don’t know what I’d have said. Perhaps just something about the look of those three when I’d left them, dutifully swinging their arms in front of the indifferent crowd, the long shadows jerking over the pavement, and their pained determination. But Sarah didn’t need any further convincing; she’s a great one for acting on her instincts and for that reason she’s willing to trust other people’s. If I wanted her to look at some dancers, fair enough.

On the Tube train down, she asked, “How do you know they’ll still be there?”

I didn’t really, I told her. It was just a feeling I had, a sense they were people with nowhere else to go.

But when we got there, they’d done just that. They’d gone.

“D’you want to look around?” asked Sarah. Which is one of the things I like about her. She has the capacity to take up other people’s concerns very quickly and without question.

So we checked the streets fanning away from the square. Pushing our way through the summer crush—the girls in their tiny T-shirts, the backpackers, the mothers surrounded by a flotilla of children—we found them eventually outside a take-away kebab place. They were gesturing to their mouths and going through a weary, weak-limbed version of yesterday’s dancing. An Arab guy was slicing meat off the big revolving skewer and glancing at them between cuts. “Ha ha,” he said nervously.

Two dancers tried to do the bent-over-double, striding-forwards thing, but they didn’t have the strength for it. With each long step they’d wobble sideways and threaten to fall over.

“Ha ha,” said the Arab guy again, meaning, ‘Okay, now piss off someplace else.’

“They were a lot better yesterday evening,” I told Sarah.

The dancers got the message in the end and shuffled off. With unspoken concern, we followed as they trudged back to the square. Once there, they tried again, but it was pathetic really.

They weren't dancing so much as staggering from one spot to another, hopelessly out of time with each other. The blank whiteness of their faces and their silence gave the whole thing a quiet desperation.

And they were unnerving people. The tourists and shoppers were giving them a wide berth. This wasn't a fun show any more.

"Well, honestly," said Sarah. "Honestly."

She snatched off my 'Welcome to Egypt' baseball cap and used it to collect up the few remaining coins from the pavement. (Most had by now been pocketed, or perhaps just kicked away by passing feet.) Then she stopped in front of anyone who lingered, jingling the cap.

"Come on, this isn't free you know. They've got to make a living." To a muscular guy in Ray-Bans and a Calvin Klein T-shirt, she said, in a voice so saccharine-sweet it was painful to hear, "If you can only afford twenty pee, petal, then for you the show is free." He immediately pulled out some more change.

Sarah brought the cap back to me and we counted out what we had. "One pound eighty. God, that's not much, is it? That's barely one kebab between the three of them."

"Is that what you want?" asked a bald guy with an Arsenal shirt stretched down over his belly. "Oh, well why didn't you say?" He pulled out a fiver. "There you go, get them some kebabs."

We went off to the take-away place and Arsenal Guy came with us. "Not bad, are they?" he was saying. "I was here yesterday afternoon. Have you noticed? It's never the same thing twice. You get into it, don't you?"

With the money Sarah and I put in, we had enough for six medium-sized donners. We carried the kebabs back to the square, hot from the grill, and when we handed them over, the result was frightening. They didn't so much eat as inhale them. Two bites to finish each one. (It's those wide mouths they've got.)

"That hit the spot," said Arsenal Guy.

The cure was immediate. All three began a crouch-sideways move, arms swinging up to shoulder height and down. They were in sync now, seriously back on the job, their black eyes shining.

"What we need," Sarah said, "is a really big cardboard box," and she marched off to get one.

That is another of the things I like about her. At BT training courses, we're always getting some spanner from Personnel in, droning on about being "proactive", but the thing is, Sarah really is proactive. Not in a dull yuppie way, but in the way where she cares about what happens to people. If I was going to be honest about it, I'd have to say she's the one who's proactive about this relationship. But let's stick to the aliens, shall we?

Sarah got a big, empty box from the Burger King opposite Warner's and, borrowing a marker, wrote 'Donate Food Here' in large black letters. Then she carried it back to the square and placed it in front of the dancers. "It's no good throwing them money; you've got to give them food," she told the spectators. (The dancers weren't visibly suffering any more, so they'd drawn a crowd again.)

Then we went off to get the curtains.

Riding the Met-Line train back to Harrow, Sarah was doing one of her 'Why are people like this?' routines. "...and everyone just ignores them or flings coins. What good's that supposed to be? Doesn't anyone think?" When Sarah's irritated she takes it out on her hair—brown and down to below her ears and always unruly. She ran her fingers through it now, and then put her hands in her lap. "I mean, they're obviously not human, are they?"

- - -

It didn't take long for the rest of the world to figure that out. Not least because they kept appearing. Dancing aliens....

In the news,

In the park,

Opposite your house.

It wasn't just Britain either—although they only appeared in the developed nations, whether by luck or judgement no one knows. The deal was always the same: They'd dance till exhausted and hope for food. Where were they coming from? we all wondered. How did they get here?

There was a *frisson* in those early days. We were excited and pleurably scared. What's next? we all wanted to know. Bug-eyed monsters with tentacles? Is this Plan B for the domination of Earth?

But no, there was no next step. Just dancing aliens, glad of anything we'd give them.

As a result, most countries took it in their stride. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain announced that even though the Prophet (peace be upon him) hadn't ever mentioned aliens, there was nothing anti-Islamic about them. In the US, the Department of Homeland Security decided the security of the homeland wasn't being threatened, and meanwhile the Scandinavians had them housed and fed so quickly you'd think they'd been doing it for years.

Here in the UK, in the absence of existing Home Office guidelines, we gave them the same deal as asylum seekers. That is, stuck them in dingy, crowded hostels, where they rub shoulders with the Albanians and the Afghans and the Azerbaijanis. They get on with everyone, apparently, and why not? They keep to themselves and don't have religious issues.

People were encouraged to donate spare change as well as food, only not to the aliens themselves, obviously. Local groups were set up. In Harrow, Sarah took charge of ours. They put collection boxes in the news agents' and check them once a week on a rota. And you know what? Inside of a month, they were getting enough to pay for the housing.

The food donations have been quite generous as well. Although it's got to be said, the aliens aren't exactly sampling the high points of Earth's cuisine. At least, not if the UK is anything to go by. Mostly they get half-finished packets of chips from McDonald's, sections of chocolate bars, already-opened crisp packets, partly-eaten jacket potatoes. A reverse Atkins, basically. If people give them anything better, I've noticed it's usually food that's gone past the sell-by date—slices of blue-tinged Sainsbury's ham, mould-flecked ciabatta, blocks of cheese that've become hard and waxy. The aliens appear grateful for all of it though, and don't seem to make value judgements. I mean, I saw a boy on Regent Street offer one group a single bar from his Kit Kat, and it was divided carefully into thirds and eaten with genuine pleasure, and for that one bar, the boy got a dance all of his own.

"It's so unfair!" the girl next to him wailed. She was in a mini-skirt and makeup, and looked all of thirteen. "Just look at what they eat and they never get spots." And with that she tottered off on heels she hadn't yet learned to walk in.

People are quite protective of the aliens, I find. When *The Sun* ran its now-infamous headline ('Alien Paedophile Scandal'), the result was anger and a backlash. Rebekah Wade ended up having to

apologise, or at least come as close to it as she ever does. Namely, publish a big, self-congratulatory banner the next day ('Feed the Aliens: Celebs Back Our Campaign'), along with a photo of some ex weather girl putting food in a box.

Of course, everyone's got their own theory of what it all means. The lefties love how they can't understand money and are "outside the capitalist padrigram", as I think someone put it. A cult in California believes they're angels and actually worships them, while some woman in *The Guardian* thinks their willingness to eat almost anything is 'striking a blow against body fascism and providing a critique of our figure-obsessed times.' Well, whatever pulls your chain, dear.

And celebrities have taken to the aliens in a big way. When Madonna put on her show at Wembley Arena, she had three dancers made up to look like aliens, although their movements weren't as effortlessly synchronised as the real thing, in my opinion. (And inevitably, being Madonna, she had to go down on them.) David Bowie rereleased "Loving the Alien" and it reached Number Two in the charts.

And David Byrne and Brian Eno decided they'd introduce the aliens to Earth music, an attempt that was the subject of a marvellous NBC documentary. Brian Eno, looking scholarly in a black roll-neck sweater and tweed jacket, talks to the camera about alien life-forms dancing to human rhythms. The ultimate cross-cultural exchange. He explains how he and Byrne are putting together a "summary and personal critique" of Earth's musical history. "We're also, hmm, seeing how they, hmm, respond to us as artists," Byrne adds.

There are shots of them deep in discussion behind the sound-proof glass of the mixing room, and then they're out on a New York street ('Six Months Later' says the caption). They set down this huge boom box in front of three aliens in grubby shifts and Yankees caps. Byrne switches it on and steps back, and the aliens just stand there, staring out from their bare white faces, looking blanker than ever. There's a long pause while Brazilian beats thump out over the traffic noise. Brian Eno says something to Byrne, who comes back into shot. He pauses and then, looking unhappily self-conscious, starts to wiggle his hips. Still nothing. He turns to the camera and makes a slicing gesture. 'Cut, cut.'

The aliens' street cred went right up after that.

It's not just the celebrity business, though. I think the aliens have affected us in quieter ways. For one thing, people seem more tactile these days. Have you noticed? It's the way they'll squeeze the listener's arm to emphasize a point, or stroke their shoulder. We talk with our hands now. We're becoming Italian. And it creeps into emails, too. The way people write 'HOH' ('hand on heart') at the end of a message. Did we do that before? I can't remember.

Also, I don't know if it's just autumn, with the pale sun glinting on roofs and dead leaves whispering over the pavements, but there's a feeling of relaxation on the streets. Part of that could be the aliens. Take our local group, outside St Ann's Shopping Centre. Sometimes, when I'm passing by, I watch the crowd. I've noticed how a shopper will finally turn away, then catch someone's eye and smile. It makes me think, This is what our cities are like now: dancing aliens in the corners, quietly reminding us we're human.

- - -

Of course, commerce did catch up with the aliens in the end. It came in the form of Kamal Weston, a thin trendy with gold earrings and a Robert Pires goatee, who claimed to have once promoted the Spice Girls. (Later it became even vaguer than that—he claimed to have run a modelling agency with Simon Fuller, their ex-manager.) According to Weston, the aliens want to put on a show. I mean, they've told him this? Scientists at MIT can't get on the same wavelength as these beings, but they'll chat with some mush called Kamal?

Anyway, Weston says it's going to be staged at exactly the same time, in groups of six, by all the aliens everywhere. How that can happen I don't know, but it sounds like just the kind of thing they're capable of. And get this. There's going to be music. A bloke called Nate Etherington is writing it now, to the aliens' specifications. I bet Brian Eno's pissed.

The show is billed as the aliens' way of thanking us. It's going to happen in sync at theatres, town halls, football stadia, and make-shift stages all over the developed world. And there are cover charges. In England, it's five pounds per head. Weston says this is only to cover the running costs; he's not making a profit. Yeah, right. And no doubt they're going to flog CDs afterwards. Who gets the rake-off from that? Not the aliens, I don't imagine.

I asked Sarah, "Have you met this Weston guy? What d'you think he's up to?"

We were sitting over our usual Sunday breakfast—a fry-up for me, croissants and coffee for her—and performing our usual trick of scattering grease and crumbs over the Sunday papers.

"A couple of times at the Arundel. And I don't think he's 'up to' anything. He's a very sincere person, very committed."

The Arundel is the pub where the housing committee meets, to check they've got their finances in order. I could imagine Weston turning up there with his goatee and his Simon Fuller anecdotes, talking about commitment while he got the drinks in. I've met the housing committee. They're not hard to impress.

"But how come the aliens have told him this? I mean, the aliens don't talk to anyone. They don't even talk to each other."

Sarah was sitting with her back to the kitchen window. With the morning light behind her, she was almost in silhouette, and for a moment I wanted to see her clearly, because I had the idea she was worried.

"It's just something Kamal knows. He knows this is what they want. But I don't think he knows *how* he knows."

And that, for me, is a little too pat. It's just the kind of thing I can imagine the housing committee swallowing. I mean, I have a lot of time for Sarah, who I love dearly, but look at the rest of them. There's Dawn, who wouldn't even be doing this if she had kids of her own. Sorry, but there you are; the woman's broody. Then there's Clive, who has one of those David Niven moustaches, drinks gin and tonic, and should by rights be a retired fighter pilot, but has actually spent the last thirty years of his life working for the Prudential; he's involved with the aliens because God help someone should organise something in this borough without asking his opinion. And then you've got Katie, she of the long, dangly earrings and gypsy skirts, who went to India on a gap year a decade ago and now likes to think of herself as multicultural, but is actually just culturally confused. I imagine the housing committees all over England are made up of people like this, filling in because no one else wanted the job: not bad people, but not exactly captains of industry either. It wouldn't take much for Weston or his representatives to talk them round, and then he's got...what, exactly?

"Jon, don't start."

"What? I haven't said anything."

“I can see the sarky comments written all over your face.” And then the uncertainty was gone and she was briskly putting jam on a croissant and refolding the *Observer Review*. Sarah, putting her world in order.

And gradually, as the big show approaches, that world has come to include Weston. He has a place in Pinner, unfortunately, which makes him close enough for Sarah to be dealing with the man himself, rather than “his people”. She invited him and the housing committee round to talk logistics, and made it clear I was welcome to leave for the pub. But I knew better, and hung around till Weston turned up—in black leather trousers, would you believe, and a burnt-orange cashmere sweater. The guy dresses like a pop star, but he’s no one.

Sarah put everybody around the kitchen table, because she said that was friendlier and less formal than the living room (and gave me a look on the word “friendlier”). I thought that was quite funny, actually. Weston arrives as though he’s ready to go clubbing, and Sarah’s got him hemmed into this suburban kitchen, with Katie on one side and Clive on the other.

I put the kettle on for coffee and handed round a plate of HobNobs, and meanwhile Weston lost no time in explaining to everyone how he was an “ideas person”, a “concepts man”. He’s one of those types who from the off wants to sell a particular image of himself, and is constantly scanning you to see if you’re buying it. It’s tiring being around people like that, their vanity always needing feedback.

Sarah, I noticed, responded to him on cue, with the praise and admiration he was looking for. But then, that’s just a part of her kindness. When she meets new people, she tries to connect on their terms. It’s not cause she was buying his act. I felt like telling him, It’s not cause she’s buying your act.

Eventually, they got into the nitty-gritty of organising the seating at Harrow Leisure Centre, and I decided Sarah was right and left for the pub.

Two weeks later, over a pizza-and-Chianti dinner (there’s a little place we know in Ealing), she announced they were having a “finalization” meeting. Which sounded suspiciously like Weston’s vocabulary. “And Jon, either stay or go, but don’t sulk off halfway through.”

"What are you on about, sulk off? I left because I didn't have anything else to contribute."

"You weren't contributing anyway; you were just pulling faces whenever Kamal said anything."

"Sarah, this guy Weston. Can you honestly tell me you don't think he's in it for the money?"

"Underneath it all, yes, as it happens. All that 'I'm a businessman' stuff is mostly a front."

"Exactly, it's a front. He's got this line, hasn't he?"

"I don't mean like that. I mean he wants this deep down, but he can't put it in other terms. He can't verbalize it."

"He was verbalizing enough last time."

"Jon, this gets really tiring, you know? You don't always have to be looking for everyone's angle. People can actually be just what they claim to be." And then she started yanking her barrette through her hair, so I left it.

But I sat there looking out past her shoulder at the candlelight on the other little tables, and I thought, My whole life, who do I know like that? Other than her?

In the end they had four other "finalizations", and I made sure I was out at the pub for all of them. Back after the first one, I didn't ask about the meeting and she didn't tell, and then it was like the wind changed and we froze that way. We didn't talk about the World Show at all; it was just something going on at the back of Sarah's life, somewhere out of sight. I thought, If that's the way it's going to be. She doesn't have to include me in everything; we are separate people.

Even if it would have been a nice gesture.

I didn't even get the time and date from her; it was the BBC morning news that told me. It turned out to be on a Saturday evening, at 7 p.m. Nice, but I couldn't think what the Aussies and Americans would make of it. "So how come they pick a time that's good for us?" I asked over breakfast. I felt strange saying it. It was the first time in weeks we'd acknowledged to each other this thing was going on.

I was expecting another lecture about Weston, but instead she frowned and said, "Well, the first group arrived at Leicester Square, didn't they? So it's like, this is their time zone."

Right. It's not because they've got a British promoter.

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So anyway, that's how I came to be here. Queuing up in the early dark, outside Harrow Leisure Centre, hands in pockets, turning my back on a knifing wind. Sarah says we're lucky to have gotten these tickets—they were sold out, apparently, but the housing committee gets first crack and all that.

Finally, the doors open. Everyone's eager to get out of the cold. Inside, the lobby's warm—soon oppressively so—with a vague smell of chlorine. We shuffle upstairs, where our tickets are collected by Dawn, who looks disapprovingly at me and then chats with Sarah, both of them speaking with a hushed excitement that leaves them almost whispering. I realise how, for the people involved in settling the aliens, today is a vindication of sorts.

The show's being staged in a big gymnasium. Climbing racks have been pushed back against the walls, and benches set up on two sides in an L. Four spotlights glare down on the scarred wooden floor. Everyone's seated long before seven. They can't risk late-comers because of the doing-it-in-sync thing. So here I am killing time, listening to Robbie Williams on the PA and thinking about the woman I'm sitting next to. I want to put my arm around her, but don't. It must be so simple to be like the aliens, knowing each other's thoughts, never injuring without intent.

The murmur of voices fills the gym. There's a school-play type of atmosphere; people are not so much expecting to be entertained as just hoping the aliens do well, anxious on their behalf. In spite of what Sarah says about me, I'm hoping it works out too. Though I can't stop one traitorous thought: Given there's only four spotlights, what exactly did my five pounds go on?

The hall lights dim and it starts all at once. Talk fades out over the opening bars and here come the aliens, gliding through the semidarkness. They step under the strong vertical spotlights and their features lose subtlety, so that they all look like the same alien. I can recognise one of our three, though—he's got that dippy red bobble hat he always wears.

The music is the sad swelling of violins. It sounds vaguely familiar. I think that this Etherington guy has ripped off some soundtrack. The aliens start to move, but it's not their usual dancing. They're jerking without rhythm and out of sync. Then I realise this is not a dance so much as a kind of mime. They seem to be miming farmers, planting seeds. Don't know what I think about that. We don't want the aliens going all Earthling on us—

I mean, we can do mimes. Still, I suppose they want to show us they appreciate the food.

The violins fade and an insistent drumbeat picks up, rising in tempo over clanking xylophones and some moaning wind instrument. The whole thing sounds tribal and vaguely menacing. The spotlights readjust to form a single hot circle and the aliens are dancing around it, bowing down to it. I think this represents worship. They approach the circle of light and fall back, approach and fall back. The tempo's getting faster; they fall back as though burned. I'm not sure I'm following this, really.

A reverberating crash of cymbals and the music fades, the spotlights dim; the aliens are lying on the ground. There's scattered applause, as some people take this for the end of part one. But then, to the high, lonely sound of a flute, the aliens are already rising. They move hesitantly. I think they're trying to convey confusion, or perhaps disorientation. Percussion and xylophones come in, and, after a bunch of other stuff, they're basically farming again. This time, three of them are acting as the actual crops, snaking up from the ground, growing; two are doing the farming, looking after their fields (I suppose they're fields); and one is standing stock-still, doing nothing at all. It occurs to me that no one actually knows when this is supposed to finish. It's not going to be some ten-hour passion-play thing, is it?

Suddenly, the mood changes. Harsh synthesizer chords shudder through the gym, and the spotlights again swivel into one. The crops die, the farmers sink to the floor.

Now I get it. This isn't our planet, it's *theirs*. The spotlight is their sun. For some reason, it's not steady and reliable like our good old sun. The way I'm seeing it, every so often, it pulses and just about kills them. But this time, as the farmers rise, the alien who's been standing still starts to move. The other aliens are watching him. I think the idea is that Standing-Still Guy knows how to get them back on track. He's remembered all their technology. The cycles continue, to the sound of violins again, and the instructions—if that's the right word—from Standing-Still Guy start to change.

They become a dance.

I wonder if I should explain all this to Sarah, to show I'm paying attention. But given the intense way she's watching—

leaning forwards, legs crossed, chin cupped in palm—I decide not to distract her.

Now there's another big crash, with all four spotlights again focused into one hot beam. A piano traces out something plaintive. Five of the aliens are on their knees, barely alive. Standing-Still Guy is now basically going through the dances they do for us. But it's not helping.

I think I know what happened. They found a way to preserve a select few through these cycles of disaster. They stayed alive for however long the pulse lasted (years? centuries? millennia?), and had all the knowledge stored up, ready to play back. But in time, the message became corrupted; it became an art form. Which is ironic, really. These dances are nice for us, but useless for them.

Now the music picks up. There's a high keening from an instrument I can't quite identify. It's like something heard only once, long ago in childhood. Then the xylophones begin again and below them, just audible, is either chanting or a deep wind instrument. The tempo rises and the chanting comes to the fore until it's hammering around us.

And above that, a truly alien sound begins. I know it's alien because it's singing from inside me; I can feel it using my body to enter the world. My sense of place, my rootedness dissolves. I could look up now and see harsh alien skies and it would mean nothing.

Everything recedes quickly, like a wave sweeping back from a beach. It's sudden and leaves a silence that feels desolate.

Then someone cries out. There are spots of commotion in the crowd. The benches are in semidarkness, so I can't see what's going on at first. Then I realise. Aliens are appearing among us. But these are different; these aren't the dancers. This is the dying race they left behind.

They're skeletal, in rags, and withered away. Like this, diagrammed by starvation, they look more alien. You can see their long rib cages, the narrow parallel bones of their arms, the bird-like hinges of their shoulder blades. Amid the benches stretching down, it's like seeing the survivors of an alien Belsen. Sarah gasps; crouched at our feet is a wasted, bird-like child. My leg jerks up. How can I describe it? He wasn't there. Now he's there. It's too bizarre to get your head around. I have a sudden horror of the bird-child touching me, but it's okay; he doesn't seem to want to

move. He's staring ahead with dull, unfocused eyes, and I doubt he even knows where he is.

Meanwhile, the original six are back on their feet and dancing. This isn't the show any more, just their normal routines. It's all they have to offer, and I think they know it's not much. After all, this must be happening on stages everywhere. I try to multiply up the incoming, from Harrow to London to England to Europe, but the numbers are too big and get away from me. I think of how the aliens would eat anything at all, but not put on weight—did we never wonder where all that energy was going?

The alien child rests its head against its upraised knee. And you know what? I'm sitting here amid the shrieks and confusion, and, more than anything else, I'm feeling optimistic. I mean, we can do this, can't we? Don't we make enough food? In spite of everything I know about human beings, in spite of everything we've done to each other, I've got a feeling it's going to be okay.

And after all, who knows; who knows what it was they thought they were reaching out for, when they reached out to us? Perhaps, dying on their world, they looked up at a bright infinity of stars and thought, There, that lot: the nutters with the email and the Pilates and the reality TV shows, they'll help us if anyone will. Which has got to count for something.

Let them all in, that's what I say.

Daya and Dharmā

Shweta Narayan

Daya opens her eyes to the colors of dusk, though she smells and hears midday. Soft light picks out yellow and turquoise stones and the bright fire of gul-mohar flowers, but the heat is Surya at his fiercest, making all else pale before his glory.

She turns over, dazed and sluggish, listening to the distant clash of copper pots, breathing in spices cooked in coconut oil—then jerks upright. Why is she lazing in daylight hours? The Rajkumari, the princess, will be angry.

Why does her head hurt so? She puts a hand to it, feels something sticky. She brings her fingers to her face. Red. But only the princess wears henna.

A sparrow hops into a patch of turquoise. His feathers turn as blue as the stones. Daya stares at him, then looks up, into strips and swirls and diamonds of glowing color. Surya is almost overhead, a bright, veiled circle. The stones are not blue. The *light* is blue. And yellow, and red.

The sparrow hops up to Daya. Sparrows have never feared her. Perhaps they sense a kinship; she too is small and brown and plain. She wipes her fingers absently on her gaghra, looking at the stain they leave on the skirt. Blood. She must have fallen.

The sky is made of silk. Surya's rays soften as they fall through it, taking on its brilliant colors; he holds back his fierceness in respect for the kingly cloth. Daya can imagine him running his fingers through it, as she used to when dressing the princess.

The walls of this new world are also silk, more silk than she ever thought to see. She is caged in a fortune and painted in colored light.

Her head is throbbing. She picks up a flower and twirls it. Four petals are pure red; the fifth is streaked with saffron lines, twisting like tiny rivers. Gul-mohar. When the trees come into bloom, they seem ablaze. Like the red bird.

Daya once put a gul-mohar flower in her hair. The Rajkumari thought it was funny. "Look," she told her other attendants. "A sparrow wearing peacock feathers to be beautiful!" Daya wore the

flower for its beauty, not her own, but she did not care that the other girls laughed, because she knew the princess loved her.

Daya stops twirling the flower, and looks up to keep the tears inside. There are crows squabbling in the tree above her. They do not seem to care how they look, though they were people in their last lives. She takes a breath, lets it out in a sigh, and shifts her gaze over to the peacock, who clearly does care. Her lips twitch. He is a little ridiculous, strutting around to outdo the other birds.

The peacock was presented to the Rajkumari by one of the first princes to court her, and his dance outdid that of any other bird in the palace. When he first spread out his tailfeathers and swayed to music Daya could not hear, her breath caught. But the Rajkumari was not impressed by either the gift or the prince.

She did not care for the singing fountain, either, nor the gaghra woven from gold thread and embroidered with thousands of tiny pearls, nor the magical flute whose music brought happiness, nor the white mare with the silver mane and tail, nor even the circlet carved from a single emerald. Nor did she care for the men they came with.

Every prince and king in the known lands tried to court her, but she would have none of them. And Daya agreed, for who could be worthy of her princess?

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Then one day, the red bird came.

He flew into the court, the size of a sparrow and the color of a gul-mohar bloom, bearing on his head a crest of feathers like small red leaves. At first, he went unnoticed among the other wonders of the palace, but then he fluttered down in front of the Raja himself and started to sing, his song so sweet that a circle of silence grew around him.

Daya glanced up from her place at the Rajkumari's feet. Her mistress had a little smile on her face. Priya, who was fanning her, was smiling too. Daya sighed a little as she looked back to the bird; all was well.

54

The Raja himself had closed his eyes to listen. Daya did the same.

"Hear me, O great king," she heard.

She looked around. Nothing but birdsong. She closed her eyes again, and heard, as if the bird were singing a tune to which she

knew the words, "I come from the court of the Rainbow Prince, for the Rainbow Prince seeks a bride."

Daya's eyes came open, and she looked around. People looked bewildered, but for the Raja, whose eyes were closed, and the princess, who was glaring at the Raja. "What is it?" she snapped. He did not respond.

Daya whispered, "Close your eyes, my mistress; I think it is magic."

The Rajkumari's hand came down on her shoulder, and Daya was pulled around. "How is it *you* know?"

Daya shook her head. "Accident, my mistress, nothing more. I closed my eyes simply for the pleasure, and I heard speech...."

The Rajkumari let go. Clumsy as always, Daya almost fell, missing several more lines of the bird's song. She closed her eyes to hear, "But this I must tell you. The Rainbow Prince will wed only a true beauty."

The Raja replied, "He will surely find here what he seeks, for any man may see that none surpass the beauty of my only child." He looked over at the Rajkumari, then back at the bird with a smile. "In the brightness of her eyes, in the whiteness of her face, in the poetry of her form, in the music of her movement, she is the loveliest girl ever to have graced a court."

The Rajkumari smiled at this and asked sweetly, "But what is it my honored father in his wisdom has learned from this bird's song?"

The Raja's smile grew fond. "Dearest of all possible children," he said, "I have heard of a great land, overflowing with riches, bursting with color and laughter and riches and music and joy and, and riches, ruled by one known as the Rainbow Prince. It is said—or sung, rather, by this most wondrous of messengers—that the Rainbow Prince is brave and generous, strong and noble, wise and fair—" he paused for a breath "—to look upon. He has also a court full of wonders—of which this bird is but the smallest example—and is therefore more than a mere mortal man; he seeks a bride, a beauty, and it is understandable that, that such a man would not settle for any maiden less lovely than yourself—" the Raja paused again "—and it may be perhaps that he is to your taste?"

Daya wondered how the bird had managed to say so much in so little a time. Truly his song must have been magical.

"If he is all the bird claims, O most beloved of fathers," replied the Rajkumari, "then he is well to my taste. The bird is a fitting gift, and I shall keep it to sing to me in my chambers."

The bird ruffled up his feathers, and the Raja looked dismayed. "Jewel of my crown," he cried, "treasure of my realm, the bird is a messenger. It is known by all that messengers are inviolate."

The Rajkumari smiled and tossed her head. "I shall have it as a treasured gift. It was surely meant as such, for it will tell me tales of my own dearest love, and how could I be other than miserable without some token of his esteem?"

At this the bird rose into the air, his tiny wings beating desperately, but a maid swung a peacock-feather fan at him. It knocked him out of the air. Priya threw her own veil over him and bound it closed—a shameful, immodest act, but forgivable, in the Rajkumari's service. Daya closed her eyes against the pitiful fluttering of the trapped bird's wings.

The bird shrilled his words into the air. "O free me, free me, Rajkumari, someone! Have you no honor? This is unjust!"

Yet they caged him and took him away. The princess must not have heard his words.

In the evening, when Surya steered his chariot down behind the mountains, the Rajkumari retired to her chambers. Away from the men, she removed her veil and seated herself in front of a window. Daya unwound her glorious long hair from its braids and started to comb it. Her other attendants sat at her feet, and they had for a little while a comfortable silence. Then Priya asked the Rajkumari, "Will you take us with you, mistress, when you go to the Rainbow Prince's court?"

The Rajkumari smiled. "I may, if you are good. I will certainly take Daya with me, for in such a court of wonders, I will need her to remind me that ordinary things exist!"

The other girls laughed.

Priya left the chamber and returned with the bird in a delicate golden cage. "Your gift, my mistress," she announced, and set the cage on a table.

56

The Rajkumari clapped her hands together. "And is it not a handsome present? You shall also come with me, Priya. Come, bird, tell me of the Prince!"

The bird piped a brief, weak little tune. Daya leaned around the princess to see what was wrong.

He lay on the bottom of the cage, a little huddle of dull red feathers, wings bent forward, face hidden. Her breath drew sharply in. "Oh, my mistress, he is unwell," she whispered.

The Rajkumari laughed. "Nonsense. The creature is pretending."

Daya replied, "It does not seem so to me, Rajkumari."

Priya cried angrily, "And who are you, who thinks herself wiser than the Rajkumari?"

The princess tossed her head. "Her name means 'mercy,'" she said, "but it should mean 'stupidity.' She knows nothing of subterfuge, so she believes this animal's lie. And she has stopped combing my hair, and for that perhaps I shall leave her here when I depart for my new home."

Ashamed, Daya drew back, and continued with her task.

But later, after the Rajkumari and the other girls were asleep, she returned to the cage and watched the little red bird. He looked back with one dull black eye, not moving. His beak opened, but the sound coming out of it was little more than a wheeze. The cage was lined with feathers.

It was a fragile thing, that cage; strong enough to hold a bird, but no barrier to even a small girl. Daya grasped two bars and pulled them apart, then reached in and picked the bird up. His heart trembled against her hands. She took him outside and set him down, aware that it was probably too late.

As the night air brushed his feathers, the bird's head came up and he cocked it at Daya. His eyes were bright again, and he stood, then took to the air. Thrilled, Daya watched until he was lost in the branches of a tree.

His voice came to her in song more lovely than ever, and she hurriedly closed her eyes. "You are gentle, little sparrow, and kind. You will do nicely."

Daya said, "My Rajkumari did not know how ill you were. I am sure she meant you no harm."

The bird trilled a laugh. "Ah, did she not?"

Daya shook her head, turned, pushed aside the beaded curtain, and returned indoors—

And came face to face with the Rajkumari. The birdsong had woken her.

And so it was that Daya found herself caged.

The princess was angrier than Daya had ever seen. She woke the whole palace to give her orders.

It was done while she slept. Her people worked through the night, and they did not wake her until it was done. Those who were not sewing silk were felling trees to drive into the ground as pillars. Their work was lit by candles and lanterns. They all had bloodied hands before the night was out.

When the Rajkumari rose, she inspected the cage. Then she had Daya thrown in to be its first prisoner. Graceless as ever, Daya hit her head.

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A flap of the cage opens, a bright wedge of outside world appearing for a moment, then narrowing again to nothing.

It leaves a net inside, full of birds struggling to get free. Daya hurries over to help them before any lose tailfeathers or eyes. She is slow and clumsy, her bloody fingers fumbling with the knots, and the birds scratch her as she releases them. The first few scratches are painful, but she realizes she has earned this pain. After all, it is her fault they are trapped.

She frees them all with quickening breath, fearing the flash of red that will tell her that her little friend has been caught. Even now, she hopes he will go free, though she hates the part of herself that could choose to defy the Rajkumari.

But the red bird showed her that the world could be wondrous, and she does not want to see that die. It does not occur to her, just then, to wonder how a cage would kill someone.

She releases seven crows, a bulbul, and four sparrows into captivity, then retreats to the cover of a gul-mohar tree and stares up into the flowers. At first, the red flowers and green leaves are yellowed by the silk above, but soon they begin to look normal. When she glances around again, everything seems too blue. She goes back to the warmth of the flowers. Their beauty is not tainted by captivity. They do not suffer.

A speck of red falls away from its branch far above. She watches as it comes closer, her eyes held by the color and movement. Then, with growing dread, she realizes that it is bigger than it should be. Still she tells herself it is merely a large flower. It has to be.

Just a flower.

But he unfurls wings to break his fall, flaps once, and lands in her lap, and all hope fails. She has betrayed her Rajkumari; she has given up her future; she has brought innocents into captivity with her; and all of it was futile. The red bird is caught, and now he will die.

A drop of water falls on the red bird's head. A tear. "Oh, little friend." She scrubs at her face. "I am sorry."

He cocks his head at her, his eyes still bright. He cannot have been here long. Then he tilts his head back, and she hurriedly closes her eyes to listen.

"Stop crying, child," the song tells her. "I will free you."

"Free me? It is not for myself that I fear, but for you!"

There is a pause. "But why?"

"It is you who cannot live in a cage!"

"Ah...so it is." His tone is embarrassed. "Though it comes to my notice that they have neglected to feed you. You cannot live in this cage either, Daya, not for long."

She cannot deny it. But.... "I am nobody. If you die, then with you dies your music, your magic."

She can feel his wings flutter against her lap, an irritated movement. "Nobody? Perhaps. But I shall make you somebody, child."

She can feel tears leaking from her eyes again. "Even your magic cannot make me somebody."

"You underestimate my magic."

She shakes her head, eyes still closed. "I am not beautiful, nor graceful, nor even loyal. While I served the Rajkumari I had a place in the world, but I lost that place along with her trust. I deserve this death. I am a traitor, and doubly a traitor in wishing, even now, that you had never been caught."

"I let them catch me."

"But why?" She stares at the bird for a moment before closing her eyes again. He looks no worse than he did a few minutes before. She wonders if the size of the cage helps him. "Why would you risk such a thing?"

"Did you really think those imbeciles could catch me against my will? I did it for you."

"But...why?"

"I want you to come with me. Forget your Rajkumari; I can take you away to the land of the Rainbow Prince."

She shakes her head. "I cannot fly away, little bird. Can your magic take me away from all this? You could not even free yourself!"

"I did not choose to free myself."

"You.... But then I did not need to free you, to betray...?" She opens her eyes, and the music fades into notes. The little bird stops singing and glares up at her with one bright black eye. She closes her eyes again.

"The Rainbow Prince does not wish the powers of his realm to be generally known."

"Then why tell me?"

"Because you'll be coming with me to the Rainbow Court."

Daya catches her breath in fear. "And what will the Rajkumari do with me there?"

The bird laughs again. "What makes you think your petty mistress will ever hold power there?"

"Will not the bride of the Rainbow Prince hold power?"

"Certainly, but she will not be your Rajkumari. The Rainbow Prince has no use for such a girl, so vain; it is mercy that his land stands in need of."

Daya almost opens her eyes, then, in protest. "My princess is not vain!" she cries. "She is so very lovely, how could she not know her own beauty?"

"Her beauty is a shallow and fleeting thing. In five years she will have it no longer, and her selfishness will be merely ridiculous."

"Three times you have insulted her now. It is not so!"

"No? For her pleasure alone she has caged a messenger, her own maidservant, and hundreds of helpless birds. She has no honor."

Daya shakes her head. His words turn everything upside down. "I don't believe you," she shouts. "You are wrong!"

And then she hears a familiar voice. "Who is wrong, Daya? Tell me, to whom do you speak?"

She starts, and her eyes fly open. The Rajkumari stands almost above her, just beyond the reach of overhanging branches—for branches might catch at the embroidery on her choli. She is flanked by guards. Daya freezes.

The Rajkumari's voice cuts into her fear. "Come here, Daya. I asked you a question." Daya can feel the little bird crouching down into her lap, his heart beating faster against her leg.

Daya has none of the Rajkumari's grace. She is a disheveled, dirty, plain girl, and she knows it, and at that moment it is her strength. She rises, catches her foot in her gaghra, and stumbles, kicking up dust and setting the skirt to wild flapping. She staggers forward, trips, falls heavily to the ground. She has a vague impression of fluttering wings.

The Rajkumari laughs, harshly. Daya scrambles to her feet, sinks to her knees. "My princess, I was arguing with myself. Part of me believed you would simply leave me to die here, and I was telling that part she was wrong. And she was; you are here."

There is a small silence, and Daya hopes, wildly, that her words are true, that the Rajkumari is still somehow the friend she had as a child.

But the Rajkumari looks down with disdain. "Why would I be here for you?" she says. "No more lies, girl. The red bird. I heard its song. You know where it is. Return it to me, and you shall go free."

"Rajkumari, I do not know." It is the truth. Daya realizes it is not the only truth that has been spoken this day.

"You must!"

"I do not." Daya stands, holding her arms out, and comes slowly forward, showing that the red bird is nowhere on her person, hoping he will take the time to flee.

The princess grasps her shoulders and shakes her. "Tell me where it is."

Daya looks at her feet.

"Look for it," the Rajkumari tells the guards. "A red bird should be easy to find."

They search, and Daya's heart fails. One goes behind her to search the tree. Her eyes follow the other. He strides into a patch of blue, straight through a flock of sparrows, who rise in a cheeping, fluttering cloud before him. Two crows hop cawing out of his path. There are no other birds nearby; all the wild ones are on the far side of the cage. Daya sees no red bird, only brown and black, and she fears he is hiding in the gul-mohar tree.

One brave sparrow returns to the ground, and, slowly, the others join him. She watches them despairingly. But one bears a

crest on his head, a line of feathers no sparrow could own. She looks away, at the pond, wondering how he could have made himself brown. More magic?

Losing patience, the Rajkumari pushes her away. She falls again. The princess calls the nearest guard from the tree, and orders him to catch a bird. Any bird.

He walks into the sparrows and they rise again, scolding. He waits for them to come down, but they fly a little distance from him before settling. They are not that tame. But crows are. After all, who would hurt a sacred bird? He catches one as she hops lazily to one side, and brings her cawing to the princess.

She glares at Daya. "Your stubbornness drives me to this," she hisses. Then, to the guard, "Wring its neck."

The guard's eyes widen in horror. Daya cries out, scrambles to her feet. "You cannot kill a crow!"

"Then show me where the red bird is."

Daya is caught. Crows are people, and she cannot let this one die. But the red bird is also a person. How can she choose between their lives?

The Rajkumari snaps, "Do it!"

The guard looks frightened, but takes the crow in a firmer grip. Daya stares. She cannot speak, nor hold her silence.

A blur of red feathers swoops down and the guard cries out. The crow flaps away, cawing; the guard does not even try to catch it. He is looking at his hand, at the blood running red between his thumb and fingers.

As the bird flies from yellow light into blue, his feathers turn brown. He lands among the sparrows, almost another sparrow; then, when he takes off again, the whole flock rises with him and he is lost to sight. The Rajkumari looks from the flock to Daya, her face more terrible than beautiful.

And in that moment Daya knows who to stand with; and she knows what to do.

She steps forward. "My princess," she says softly, "I beg you, do not harm them. I will bring you the red bird; only leave the cage so he will come to me, and I will capture him for you."

62 The Rajkumari's eyes narrow. "And what do you expect in return?" she asks.

Daya keeps her eyes humbly lowered. "For myself, nothing," she replies. "I know I have offended you; I cannot expect forgiveness. Only release the birds."

“Except for the red bird, which is mine.”

“Rajkumari.”

The princess is silent, but Daya feels the weight of her eyes. She continues to look at her feet.

“Very well.” The Rajkumari turns to leave. The wounded guard follows her, holding his hand close to his chest. The other guard, noticing from across the cage, returns to his position. And Daya is alone again.

Not entirely alone. Soon the flock of sparrows settles near her. She walks up to them. A few birds take flight, but they settle again. Daya is no threat. Daya has never been a threat.

The red bird flutters to her shoulder. She closes her eyes and hears him ask, “And what is it you plan? What I see in you is not defeat.”

She replies firmly, “You must trust me.”

“I must, must I? Tell me your plan.”

“Trust me. When you can leave, do.”

She cups her hands out in front of her, and he flutters down into them. She closes them over him. His heart hammers against her hands. He is small, and helpless, and trapped. Daya knows what that is like.

She opens her eyes to find the door flap of the cage. He asks, “And what of you?”

She blinks, surprised she can still understand him, then shakes her head. “There is nothing you can do. Tell your Prince, if you will; perhaps he will extend mercy to me.”

His song pauses for a moment before it returns. “The Rainbow Prince is known for justice, not mercy. No, the power to break your bonds is in you; no other can do that. But if you truly want to leave this life, I will help.”

She realizes that she does want to leave. For all the years and all the love she gave her Rajkumari, it was the bird who judged truly. She has nothing left here. And since the bird spoke true about the princess, Daya trusts him.

He sings again to her as she approaches the door to the cage, and the music is sweet, coaxing. “Daya. I came seeking true beauty. I found it. Come with me.”

Her eyes widen at this, and she almost drops him. But she is near the edge of the prison, now, and the Rajkumari has seen her. Two guards pull aside the silk and pin it back. Daya squints against the sudden tall slice of afternoon brightness, and approaches.

The Rajkumari steps into the gap, small and black for once against the light. Daya draws close and murmurs, "My princess." The Rajkumari smiles, triumphant.

Daya does not smile. "My name means 'mercy,' and so I must be kind—" she extends cupped hands "—to all living beings." She sweeps her hands to the sky, opening them over her head, over the Rajkumari's shoulder; and the bird flutters out and up beyond their reach.

The Rajkumari turns to follow it, eyes widening. Then narrowing as she turns back to glare at Daya.

That look would have made her cringe, once. Now she meets it coldly. "You see," she says, "I have learned something today: Compassion is not a weakness." She can feel, behind her, building inside the cage, the power of a thousand birds who have just seen one of their own fly free.

Daya drops to the ground just as wings beat over her, through the space she was in. It is an age before the sound fades and she dares stand again.

The Rajkumari has mud in her hair and angry tears in her eyes. Blood runs down her face and wells from a rip in her choli, and her gaghra is muddy and torn. It tangles her feet as she tries to rise. And Daya did not warn her.

The sight gives Daya little joy. She offers a hand.

The Rajkumari stares up at it with real hatred. She chokes, "You—" and she starts to cry.

Daya lets her hand fall. She is dry-eyed. "I know you now," she whispers. "You are just a girl, just another girl."

"You!" The Rajkumari stumbles to her feet, spits blood. "What gives you the right—" Then she whirls, to glare at the guards. "The cliff. Throw her off the cliff! If her precious birds can save her then, she may have her life."

The Rajkumari is just another girl, but her word is law.

But Daya does not believe she will do it. Until she finds herself in the air, falling, she does not believe it will be real.

The cliff is high. She has time to wonder if the birds will help her, and time to know they will not even try. They have flown to their lives, and care nothing for Daya.

But then she hears the mad flutter of tiny wings, and the song of the red bird. The Rainbow Prince. And she knows he is come to save her.

“Now you must trust me.” The notes are blown away by the wind, but still she can hear the words. “I promised I would take you to my land.”

He thinks she has true beauty. She does not know what magic he will do, but she knows he will do something.

“And in my land you shall be queen, for my land has need of mercy.”

The ground is rushing closer, closer, jagged black, and she is scared; but she trusts him. With all her heart she trusts him.

Then she hits the rocks. The world spins, sun-bright, though thunder crashes distant in her ears. She tastes blood.

He flutters close, a red smear across white pain. “Remember,” he sings cheerfully, “that you shall be queen.”

How...? Her head whirls. The red bird...he opened her eyes. He spoke of honor.

But he also pretended to be dying in the golden cage. He let her free him, not caring what it would do to her. And he came back to talk her into blaming the Rajkumari.

She screams; her body makes only a broken gurgle.

“Pain is temporary,” he tells her.

Pain is everything. Streaks of agony lace through her head, her heart, her shattered hands. She cannot feel her legs. He is wrong. She must tell him so. She tries to take a breath, but there is no air.

“My realm is free of sensation, and you will be there always.” He says this as though it is a promise, his voice bright in the fading world.

She falls, cringing with the last of her death, into the realm between lives. A man stands before her, his clothes as red as a splash of blood on rocks. He is the only color in a world of shifting greys. He grasps her arm. Smiles.

Her arm is as grey as his realm.

“Did I not tell you that I would bring you into my land?” he asks. “Never say I lied to you; I never would.”

- - -

He does not love me, of course. He does not know love. Only Dharma; only Justice. I am his wife because his land needs mercy to balance his harsh rule, no more; and since I brought myself here, there is no injustice in keeping me trapped.

Do you understand yet?

He is kind to me, as you were not, though he has no warmth or care. He needs my power. He cannot force me to serve. But you were right about him, as he was about you. And I, I was betrayed in you both.

My power here is simple: I may send you on to a good life, or leave you to misery unending. That is my choice. Mine because you sent me here, and because the Rainbow Prince binds me here, away from the sun and the sky. Away from the colors and the sounds and smells, the sensations that made life bearable.

I am not so innocent as I was. I finally learned the lesson that you had guessed and the Rainbow Prince knew: Dharma is empty, and Daya is a game. Power too often used is weakened. I have had years to understand this, and years, princess, to think about what to do with you.

I know it is unjust. That you were only the spoiled child we let you become. The one I should hate is my lord and husband—and I do, though he merely acted in his nature. But justice is not my domain, and you shall have no mercy here.

For I have power over you, as I do not over him. What else do I have, after all?



Hidden

Rossana Reginato

Ghosts of Sweaty Air

Jim Pascual Agustin

The first cold rain has pushed summer
into the past. And the fine hair
on my skin remembers home
is closer to the equator than this.
Two and not four seasons.

There, rain stomps dusty roads into mud.
Almost in an instant, on impact,
a scent escapes from the ground,
dances with ghosts of sweaty air.
Crouch and you will hear a hissing.

But that is not what I wanted to tell you.
Memory has a way of making mazes
out of lives once lived, paths I never thought
I'd abandon. Unprepared, I broke away
from everything familiar. I leapt

Into the unknown. Here, now, I grope
blindly, far into memory, for something
not much use to anyone but a child.
How to make paper boats. Yes,
how to make paper boats.

But the mind is weak.
I have to rely on my hands
to try and remember. Take a rectangle-
piece of paper. Make a horizon,
fold sky and land into each other.

Top corner to top corner,
then open up again, like a book.
There I stop with the words.
Ah, it is impossible to describe
the rest, which was merely shown

By my mother one monsoon-
ravaged afternoon when school
was called off just as it had started.
I can still do it, make paper boats
with my eyes closed.

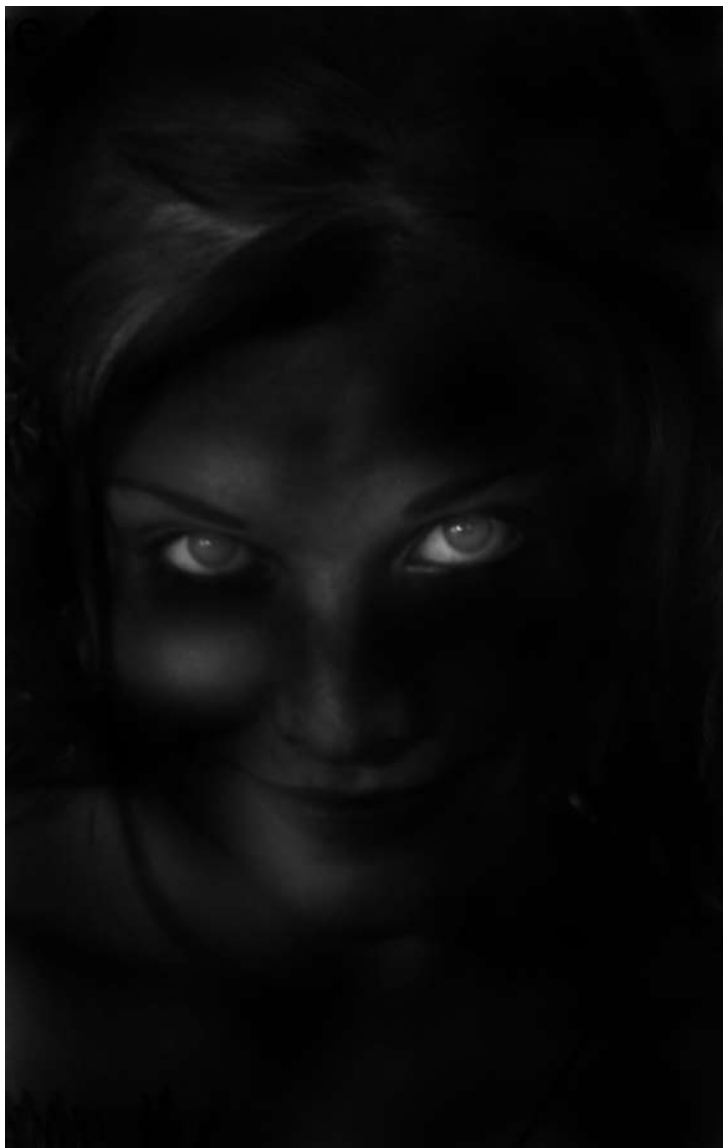
Just the leap from a rectangle
into triangles that get folded
into themselves again
and again is difficult to share
with mere words.

I am still struggling to tell you
where I come from, who I am.
Maybe one day I can send you
a paper boat. Something that once
filled the eyes of a little boy with awe.

Teaching Assistant

Ward Crockett

Her back is the keel of French
[hand on hip]
fingers widely plaintiff and professor
sometimes buoyed by a khaki belt loop
[elbow flat like ballet
or pointed as captain]
bra strap loose on her Milo shoulder
and soprano at the mast
though tenor and steady when teaching tenses.



Shaula

Tree DeAngelis

Long Winter by Night

D. Elizabeth Wasden

"It's settled. You will go." Iosif Stalin tapped on the bowl of his pipe as he spoke. He pointed the tip at Lavrenti Pavlovich Beria and jabbed it towards him. "Don't fuck up."

The thick scent of sweet wine permeated the air, lined Beria's nostrils, the back of his throat.

Beria licked his lips as he stared at the map that covered his legs. A red triangle in the Ukraine, southeast of Kiev, marked his destination. He pinpointed where the line of engagement had been an hour ago and calculated where it would stand now based on how fast the Germans had been advancing since Operation Barbarossa began. "The Ukraine. That is Khrushchev's territory."

A match scraped against a rough surface, and then the bowl crackled to life. Stalin's yellow eyes flared with red as they captured the flame. He puffed away at his pipe, smoke plumes expanding and multiplying. It reminded Beria of a lamb roasting, of Minsk on fire.

"You are the People's Commissar of Internal Affairs. Khrushchev has enough to swallow," Stalin said, shoving a file at Beria. "You will go."

Beria straightened the papers in the file, cramming the ones that threatened to escape back into the sleeve.

Stalin's voice grew louder. "Get out, then! Don't come back unless you find the old bitch."

Beria enveloped the file with the map. He pressed the bundle against his chest, holding it in place with his left hand, and strode out of the room. He maintained his pace downstairs. Outside. To his car. The door opened. He slipped inside and dropped the materials on the back seat next to him. He unfolded the map on the seat and then lifted the folder.

"Baba Yaga," he read. He gave the Kremlin a final glance through the car's darkened windows as the Packard roared out of the gates and onto the dark, wary Moscow streets.

Within the hour, three black ravens—NKVD cars, iridescent in the brightening Moscow dawn—and a detachment of guards in an equally black ZiS-5 cargo truck were rolling southward. Beria

rode in the third car, with the truck immediately following. The road spread before them like scrawled ink slashes.

- - -

In the back of his car, Beria slumped down and laid his head against the dark leather seat. The last lingering glow of light had retreated to the west. His fingers worked at the clasp of his collar, and he pulled it apart and undid the first button of his tunic. The scattered photostats covered the rest of the seat like manically-placed tiles on a floorboard. His thick lips curled into a smile.

Have so many been duped? He sat up again, regathered the papers, and thumbed through them. A joke, a conspiracy, an act of desperation—he could not be certain which description fit this particular fool's errand. A letter from Skuratov to Ivan the Terrible. One from Potemkin to Ekaterina the Great. A series of memos from Third Department heads and Okhranka chiefs to tsars. Dzerzhinski's reports.

He paused at one of Dzerzhinski's papers detailing the elimination of Makhno's anarchists in the Ukraine.

"Sergo," he snapped, still gazing at the paper.

There was a yawn. "Yes, Boss," Sergo replied, his voice dry and hoarse. Beria heard him adjusting and fumbling in the front seat.

"You know of Frunze?"

A click sounded and then a steady stream of air infiltrated the car. Burning tobacco mingled with the scent of summer. "Yes, Boss," Sergo said, his voice clearer.

"Died during a stomach operation, yes?" Beria asked.

"Yes."

Beria removed his pince-nez and pinched his nose. He could see two versions of himself, one in mufti, seated in a chair, and the other in uniform, reclining against the desk in his office. The one in civilian clothing always spoke first.

Stalin's orders.

The operation or the death?

The former.

Both?

Possibly.

He replaced the pince-nez and the two Berias dissolved. "Do you believe in fairy tales, Sergo?"

"Of course not, Boss. They are superstitions. Created by the Church to control the population. Like a narcotic." Sergo turned his head; Beria could see one of his dark eyes. It seemed to shine in the low-lit car.

Not content, Beria leaned forward so that he could capture the other man's gaze fully. "How do you think Makhno escaped? There were multiple orders for his assassination. He was known for retribution against the Chekists."

Sergo blinked slowly. "The Red Army dispatched his group. What else would he do but flee?"

Beria's eyebrows hitched upwards. *Not exactly what I wanted.*

You can't be surprised.

A ricocheting bullet sometimes hits a target.

Sometimes it hits the shooter. Or the man standing next to him.

Other times the trajectory is correct, but there's something else beyond the target.

Follow the path, then. But don't be surprised if the bullet explodes in your face.

"Frunze made his move in 1920. The Red Army surrounded Makhno. Targeted him. Still, he fought. Took prisoners. Escaped in 1921. Perhaps he made some kind of deal." He paused. "Or was he simply a coward?"

"Anarchists are cowards. Were cowards. Enemies of the people." Sergo looked down.

Beria ran his hand over his skull and massaged the scruff of his neck. "No. No, Makhno was a fanatic. Not a coward. He believed in his cause. Did he not?"

Sergo shifted in his seat. Beria continued to stare at him. "Did he not?" Beria repeated.

Sergo glanced up. His eyes had dimmed, drowned in the darkness inside the vehicle. "Yes, Boss."

"Fanatics never give up anything." *The Bolsheviks never did.* "So how did Makhno survive in the Ukraine? What protection did he receive? Who helped him? There's another explanation."

"Yes, Boss."

Beria sighed, slumped down, and leaned his head back. If his own son Sergo had been in the front seat, he could have helped. Or even Nina, his wife. This Sergo? Only good for his willingness to give his life for Beria. If that.

Frunze was capable. Makhno was an anarchist, had assisted him, had his own legion of contacts and supporters.

How many assassination attempts were there? Several. He survived every one. Escaped. Then, nothing.

Perhaps he had too much local support. The Bolsheviks, not enough. Besides, the group at least was destroyed; Makhno fled to Paris. What good was he there? That could have been enough for the Politburo. Most of them.

Not for me. What good was Trotsky in Mexico City? His fucking mouth. His ideas. And at the least, Dzerzhinski would have wanted justice for his Chekists. Makhno should have been shot.

Dzerzhinski had other concerns. But this nonsense—superstitions. A witch assisting him? Protecting him? All it takes is one highly-placed, sympathetic traitor. Or many supporters. Luck. The boy must be right about that at least.

If he's not?

Better to not know.

Better to find some random old hag instead and to speak to her.

He reached for the front seat and pulled himself forwards. "Where are we?"

"Just west of Rostov-on-Don, Boss," Vasili replied. He kept his eyes on the road, a bonus in a driver.

"Nothing from the wireless?"

"The clouds are low tonight," Sergo said. "More rain, possibly. We have excellent cover. Consistently reported for our route."

Beria reclined and pressed his hand to the back of his neck. His knuckles rubbed against the starchy, loose tunic collar.

Excellent cover.

He would never know.

He has eyes everywhere. This fool, this Sergo, he's one of Stalin's, not ours.

He can't even read a map.

Doubtful that he would be so stupid. Predictable, yes.

We don't have the luxury of time. No turning back, soon.

This is mad. Whether these papers are true or not. We alter our course now.

Even as his lips parted and his tongue began to form the first syllable, a loud crack reverberated in the air. A shockwave rattled the car. Beria rolled down the window. His neck craned as he

peered towards the sky, as the gray clouds above transformed and curled into thick white cottonballs. As if a hand had gathered them and sorted them on either side, an opening appeared, then widened. Bright streaks of moonlight streamed through. Within a few seconds, the beams joined and bloated into a wide oval that illuminated the convoy. They had been pinpointed, as if caught in a spotlight.

Beria ducked his head inside the vehicle. He continued to glance upwards at the shifting sky and lick his lips. "The wireless?"

Sergo fumbled again and tried to crank the device to life. "No reception. Nothing."

A trio of very dark patterns formed. Long wings stretched against the backdrop of light. Doubled wings. Biplanes. Distinguishable for a few seconds were iron crosses on the undersides of the wings.

"Floor it," Beria said as he furiously wound up the window.

Sergo continued to crank the wireless and then speak into the receiver. He wound the machine faster each time.

The ghostly shadows behind them dived towards the earth. Beria stared straight ahead. What use was there in looking? What sense could be made of any of it? He had seen those same planes in 1917 on the front.

Another crack sounded. Orange flared as the car took to the air for a few seconds, plummeted to the pavement, and then bounced a couple of times. The tires squealed and the car angled side-to-side.

Clutching the edge of the seat, Beria finally turned his head. Behind his car, plumes of smoke arose from the pavement. The truck pushed through the billowing screen behind them and then skidded towards the opposite side of the road.

As they slid to a stop, Sergo dropped the wireless receiver and gripped the door frame. Beria's fingers slid from the seat. He launched forwards, and his knees hit the floorboard. His left shoulder dug into the back of Vasili's seat, which softened the blow when his head made contact. His pince-nez popped from the bridge of his nose and arched upwards and into the front seat.

The car's engine continued to chug. Beria lifted his head and shook it. He squinted as he attempted to locate Sergo, but

anything beyond a foot away blurred. He pushed off Vasili's seat with his shoulder and was assaulted by an incendiary reek.

"Sergo. Vasili," he called as he oriented himself, pulling himself halfway up. He gripped the backs of their seats, hunched, and peered over. Empty. He licked his lips as he felt around Sergo's seat and caught his pince-nez between his fingers. He immediately replaced it on the bridge of his nose and reexamined the front seat. Still empty. Even the wireless radio had disappeared without a sound.

He eased back onto his seat and turned the door handle. After flinging the door open, he slipped outside. The sky had darkened again, although ripples of white swirled through the gray like cresting surf in a dull sea. He leaned against the driver's door, glanced ahead of him and then behind, looking for the two other cars, the truck. Nothing. No one but him.

He slid to the ground, hunched on his heels, his back against the car, and patted his holster. The well-oiled Tokarev bulged inside.

Perfect for neck shots.

But what of head shots?

Our head.

Yes.

Could you?

Could you not?

If something were worse.

A last resort.

He slid his hand over the holster. His fingers circled the buttoned clasp, then he dropped his hand to the ground, pushed himself up, and stepped away from the car. As he scanned the roadway and the sky, a flicker of light, as of flint touching metal, caught the corner of his eye.

He spun around. The car had vanished.

He glanced down at his holster. Still there.

When he looked up, an illuminated, bright-yellow dacha sat in the middle of the road, like a daffodil sprouted from a bulb beneath the pavement. He studied it for a few moments as he rubbed the top of his head. Lush green grass overran the black of the road; one lemon tree formed, then another. He began to move towards the dacha and its garden before he realized it, and he forced himself to stop.

The tangy, acidic scent of citrus. A slithering hiss as grapevines wrapped around trellises. The plump lemons bending the branches of the trees towards the grass.

The smell of salt air rushed into his nostrils as a red carpet, which had rolled from the dacha's doorway, collided with his boot.

He dragged the tip of his boot across the end of the carpeting. It did not move. He knelt down and ran his fingers over the red fabric. Iron stirred in the air, and his fingertips felt moist. The carpeting looked as if it had melted and melded into the roadway.

He rose to his full height and strode towards the door, stopping to retrieve a pair of lemons from the tree nearest the red path. He dug his thumbnail into one of them; the lemon squirted into his hand, filling the air with its sharp, pleasant scent. The juice pooled in his palm and tumbled to the ground.

After dropping the lacerated lemon, he ran his thumb over the other one. The bumps in the peel. The round yet firm curve. A squeeze, and the lemon's pliant softness. He pocketed this lemon in a tunic pocket. He reached into the other pocket, withdrew a white handkerchief, and wiped the sticky fluid from his palm.

He deposited the cloth back into his pocket and continued to the door. He raised his arm to knock, then hesitated. His fist was curled, knuckles jutting out, prepared for contact.

After a few seconds had passed, he tapped on the door. It immediately swung open.

Beria peered inside the well-furnished dacha. The red carpeting curved around a corner. Cut flowers adorned a quartet of tables, and plush burgundy chairs decorated the front room. Light descended from the ceilings; candles flickered in the high crystal chandeliers. A number of oil portraits hung on the far wall, including those of Skuratov, Benkendorf, and Makhno. To the right of the painting of Makhno, an empty frame held a barely-silver shimmer. Beria moved towards it, passing from the front room and into the dining room. Leaning forwards until his face was but inches away, he tried to decipher the pattern within. As he watched, the translucent image swirled and formed into a very familiar face—Stalin's.

Behind him, the door clicked shut. He eased back until he stood on the red carpeting. Until he could see *her*. Dressed in a

loose white gown with a low neckline, fair, slim, athletic, her blue eyes sparkling in the candlelight. A string of pearls encircled her neck.

"Lavrenti Pavlovich," she said, and then curtsied.

Beria licked his lips, which had gone quite numb. "Baba Yaga," he said.

"It only sounds strange to say it the first few times," she assured him. She came towards him and slipped her fingers around his forearm.

He stared at her long, thin fingers and then took a deep breath. "Koba said you were an old bitch. I disagree."

She laughed. "He hasn't changed." She faced him and placed her other hand on his chest.

"You know him?" He remained still, rigid.

"I have for quite some time," she answered. "I've been expecting you, Lavrenti Pavlovich. To think that you were considering not fulfilling your obligation. That disappointed me." She leaned forwards, closed her eyes, and inhaled deeply, sniffing a trail upwards to his partially-exposed neck. "Yes. I can bargain with you. The intelligence doesn't always give the full story, as you know."

Baba Yaga lowered her hands, turned, and moved towards the chairs. She settled into one of them, burgundy now draped with white, and crossed her legs. Her fingers glided across the thin, silky fabric on her thigh.

Beria's eyes followed her, the pit of his stomach ever warmer and tighter, its heat fueled by her movements.

"Come sit, Lavrenti Pavlovich." She swept her hand at a chair. "Let us discuss war."

"How much can you do?" Beria asked, maintaining his position.

Baba Yaga smiled. The tips of her canines gleamed. "The better question would be how much would I be willing to do. But I cannot strike directly. I cannot kill a single man." She stretched towards an adjacent chair and ran her fingers up the arm. "Sit. Please. I've always preferred comfortable negotiations. We're not at your Lubyanka, now are we?"

"No," Beria said. He walked to the chair next to hers and sat. "Where are we? And when did a hut with a chicken leg become a dacha with a garden?"

"All things to all people, Lavrenti Pavlovich," she said. Her fingers rested on the arm of his chair still. "We are safe. That is what matters. Any explanation beyond that would be meaningless."

"I think an explanation would be in order," Beria said. The back of his head pressed against the chair's soft, plush covering. "Where are my men?"

"Safe in a moment of time. As are we," Baba Yaga replied. "It does require a lot of power. I should thank you for Katyn. All of your good work. We all have need for fuel."

"Fuel," Beria repeated. "The legends say that you are a cannibal."

"Not completely true."

"That implies it's not completely false."

"The dead alone interest me. Their passing. That is what is important to me. That is all you need to know." She leaned across her chair towards him. "That is all you will know." Her breath, strikingly cool, caressed his forehead.

"That is your payment."

"Yes."

He broke her gaze and studied the room. "What of the paintings?"

"Remnants. A small part of each of them. A memory. A minor price for my works."

"Koba's painting?"

"Incomplete."

"Why?" His eyes locked onto hers.

"Only with death do the paintings congeal. As blood flows through his veins, so does it flow within the painting." She eased back, but her fingers continued to press against the arm of his chair. "The Wehrmacht moves across your territories as we speak. There is war. I have a bounty to feast upon—with or without a bargain on your part. I wonder if you could afford to return to Moscow without an agreement."

Beria's fingers found the back of his neck. "The orders were to find you."

"You believe that will suffice for Koba?"

Beria gazed upwards. The candles cast dancing shadows on the ceiling. "I thought this a mad errand. Who would believe such a thing?" His narrowed eyes met hers. "He set me up, didn't he?"

She gave a hearty laugh. "That's a strong phrase, isn't it? I believe he sent the best man for the job. Besides, he cannot return. This is a one-time affair."

The two sat in silence. Finally, Beria said, "The Germans are not equipped for long-term maneuvers. It will be some time before supplies can reach them."

"The quick victory, yes," Baba Yaga said. "That is their plan."

Beria took off his pince-nez and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "We must increase the time of engagement. Slow them down."

She ran her index finger across her lips and then folded her hands in her lap. "How do you propose to accomplish this?"

He resettled the pince-nez. His eyes gleamed. "The skies split for you. Do they follow your bidding in all ways?"

She nodded.

"Rain. Bring the rains, and then...a long winter. A very brutal winter."

Baba Yaga smiled. "An agreement has been made." She stood; her dress glittered in the light. "There remains a final act."

Beria pushed himself up from the chair. Her cool breath lashed at his skin, wave after wave, as he approached her. "A final act?"

Smiling, she leaned into him. Her hand glided up his chest, around the back of his neck. He pulled her towards him, pressed his lips against hers. Despite her toned appearance, his fingers grasped only hard bone. He could taste only bitter frost on her tongue.

She ran the back of her fingers against his cheeks, and then, suddenly, pressed her thumb against his forehead. The coldness of her touch, winter in her very fingertips, forced Beria to shiver as he pulled back from her. On the wall, next to Stalin's still-incomplete portrait, a new frame appeared as Baba Yaga, her gleaming canines, and the dacha faded, grew increasingly transparent, and dissolved.

Beria stared at the back of Sergo's head once more. His lips twisted as he undid the remaining buttons of his tunic. He slipped out of it and tossed it on the seat next to him, covering his papers and jolting the lemon from the pocket. It rolled across the seat and tapped against his thigh.

Beria picked up the fruit, examined it, squeezed it in his palm. Still soft. A pattering on the car top sounded, joined quickly by the swish of wiper blades.

Beyond Vasili and Sergo, he could see the two lead cars. He shifted his head enough to glimpse the truck's lights.

"Turn around," he ordered.

The two men in the front seat exchanged glances but said nothing. Sergo wound the radio and communicated with the other vehicles as Vasili slowed the car. He swung it around and fell in line once the leading cars had turned north.

"Everything's okay, Boss?" Sergo asked.

"Winter," Beria said, rolling the lemon between his hands. "A very long winter, even in the Russian summer."

The car sped towards the north, towards Moscow, under the cover of gray night and rain.

Jesus Fucks an Atheist and Calls It Love

Lisa Feinstein

Water

will never be wine,
and the willingness of the divine
to partake in sleight-of-hand trickery,
legerdemain, Houdini-brand spectacles
born of boredom and the inane desire
to reel in the masses,

sell ten-dollar passes to a sideshow circus,
can only be seen, if the scene is truly set,

as a plea for attention, an off-Broadway production
not even worthy of mention in hotel pamphlets
and tourist tickers.

I buy essential truths in the form of oils
from an old man on the corner
of this way and that, he is
thin and brown, smiley and small, seeping courage
from beneath his rolled trousers. Eliot never saw that.

There is a pliancy to his hands that belies the bible
he has stashed beneath his belt,
and the reality he deals is stacked, stacked my friends
like a brick shithouse,

hardcore, and swaying against the grain of incoming traffic,
the assaults of history,
and the perspective passers-by spit like tobacco
into window-shopped spittoons
only miscreants and the unhomed

can consume and regurgitate
without wincing
at the taste it tattoos
on your weather-vane tongues.

Have you had a taste of that schwag?
Pump your stomachs, swallow the tube,
but I beg of you,
oh I beg of you, you dispossessed children of a language
that bound you in less-than-chains, compelled you
to purchase your dignity, limb by limb,

I entreat you, give up that bile,
the rhythms you ingest as if they are old,
older than your soul,
singing songs of six times six, the square root
of evil preceded by its half,
and laugh,

laugh like the whores you are,
the body you've become,
and hear that man
whispering in your ear,
licking your lobes and calming your fears,

but don't call it love.

Don't ever call it love, child. Water
will never be wine.

What Kafka Knew

Nonfiction by Christy Rodgers

“There is hope, an infinite amount of hope—but not for us.”

—Franz Kafka

Lately I have found myself drawn to reading Franz Kafka again. Kafka, almost unrecognized in his own short lifetime, has obtained iconic status by now, at least among writers, so I don't know how much anybody really *reads* him any more. It's a difficult and discomfoting task; there's very little actual enjoyment involved—and I say this as someone who has appreciated darker visions in everything from punk music to Expressionist art. For me, there is no one who so completely creates the atmosphere of nightmare in his or her work, or really the *lived experience* of nightmare, without garish excess of any kind, without sensationism. You can have your Stephen King, you can even have your Edgar Allan Poe or Mary Shelley or Bram Stoker. The only writer whose stories really horrify me is Franz Kafka. And perhaps this is because the horror he describes most vividly is the banal horror of everyday life in the modern world.

Writing at the very beginning of the twentieth century, Kafka had already seen beyond its end. Even the form of his narratives—fragmentary, shapeless, some as short as a couple of paragraphs, most of his few novels unfinished—was indicative of the times to come, the postmodern *Zeitgeist*. It was Kafka who gave the modern Western world, so enamored with the idea of eternal progress, a parallel symbolic world in which no progress was possible, through which humans moved with the languid or frenzied illogic of a dream, where no one was innocent, all were complicit, where time effectively ground to a halt and yet constant, ambiguous activity continued. It was Kafka whose most well-known character was a man sent catapulting back down the evolutionary ladder, transformed overnight into an insect. It was Kafka who first voiced the deepest anxieties and discontents of modern “civilization” in his stories, with a

85

remarkable eye for the tiniest details that actually dominate the lives of those who, thanks to that civilization, struggle daily for meaning and purpose, rather than immediate physical survival—that is, people like you and me.

Kafka was not in any narrowly-defined sense a political person or a political writer. But the political implications of his work are everywhere, and, for me at least, he offers a way of understanding why things in the political realm tend to play out as they do. “Kafkaesque” has entered the language as the way to describe an ordinary person’s experience of bizarre and malevolent power structures. Kafka repeatedly depicted the operation of dominance and submission in human relations, with an emphasis on the highly personal and even intimate ways power operates, how it unerringly discovers individual weaknesses and exploits them. And how it is fed by a self-absorption that has become ever more extreme in modern societies, although Kafka never connected this self-absorption (as I do) with the material comforts those societies have produced. It came to me chillingly while I was reading Kafka’s stories that if my personal agonies and frustrations could be displayed using a sort of meter that measured their emotional intensity, the graph thus plotted would show bigger spikes when some vacant-eyed woman on a cell phone stood indifferently in my way as I tried to get off a bus, or when someone in the workplace (the site of many of Kafka’s most dismal human situations) undercut me in some unchallengeable way, than when I read about the distant carnage in Iraq or Lebanon, or even, closer to home, saw images of the bodies of the poor floating in the filthy storm waters of Hurricane Katrina.

That’s a horrible confession for a supposedly-conscientious person to make, but it’s a dirty secret I’ll bet I share with anyone who isn’t directly affected by the worst consequences of the system in which they live, except perhaps the most saintly, or the most self-righteous. How does power function? Kafka knew, better than a host of political commentators, better even than Marx: Then as now, it functions because we are isolated and self-involved, because we are afraid, and because we are complicit.

Rather than building toward a sense of climax or apocalypse, and/or a heroic resistance, like the epic tales that the capitalist system's critics tell about the deadly operations of its power structures, Kafka's stories never end with redemptive conflict or overarching catastrophe. In fact, they hardly seem to end at all. It's not cataclysm but a sense of paralysis you are left with as characters like Josef K. in *The Trial* merely vanish with their fates unresolved. Except for poor Gregor Samsa, the bug-man of "The Metamorphosis," whose story is at least in part an allegory of terminal illness, Kafka's narrators or central characters do not usually die, heroically or pathetically. On the contrary, they often escape some situation of inexplicable menace or threat, like the doctor in the blandly-titled "A Country Doctor" or the anthropologist in "In the Penal Colony," but it is a spurious escape, one that does nothing to diminish the evils they have encountered. In fact, by escaping, they merely reinforce their complicity in the suffering of those they have been unable to help. I think about all the Holocaust narratives reviewers and the public have canonized in which any discussion of the complicity of survivors is the ultimate taboo; instead, we idealize their individual survival at any cost. Only a few Holocaust writers, like Art Spiegelman in *Maus* or Primo Levi in his sensitive memoirs, have dared to raise the question of whether individual survival is ever thoroughly admirable when it comes at such a price. In some way, Kafka is always posing the question, *Why should we live?*

Still, even though much of Kafka's work points to deep and substantive wrongs, the devil is definitely in the details. There is a Big Picture, but it is highly inscrutable, it is always beyond understanding, and it seems, if not hostile, at least utterly indifferent to the attempts his characters make to understand it. Kafka's world, as stylized and as symbolic as it sometimes appears, is to my mind the world of the mostly apolitical US public, which undertakes little scrutiny of the operation of things at the largest level, relying instead on bland and comforting platitudes to guide it through reality. Such commonplaces are revealed as truly unsettling when Kafka isolates them and employs them in his context, as in this signature greeting from a minor character in

one of his stories: “Good morning—the sky is overcast—I’m selling a lot of kerchiefs—yes, the war....” Instead of trying to analyze the distant operations of Power, most of Kafka’s central characters are depicted as beset and distracted by irritating and unexceptional details, often having to do with another character’s aggressive body movements or tone of voice, some nasty gossip, a troublesome relative, or a misplaced intimacy. Lack of money and personal influence and frustrated or inadequate sexual connections are other constant fears.

Of course, Kafka’s major works, *The Trial*, *The Castle*, and stories like “In the Penal Colony,” all have to do with power and authority in the most direct sense. The atmosphere of nightmare is generated in these works by the sense that power acts for its own sake and according to its own rules, and that it is capable of picking individuals seemingly at random (Kafka’s almost-nameless namesakes K. and Josef K. become these everymen) and embroiling them in its operations so thoroughly that all sense of the “normal” world in which they used to live, or thought they lived, finally disappears. Guilt is automatic, as in Orwell’s *1984*; you are already potentially guilty because you are alive, and the system chooses to punish you not for the specifics of your individual actions but merely to demonstrate to others that its authority is absolute. This idea is incarnate in military invasions and occupations, in racial profiling and ethnic cleansing, and in the punishment of dissenters; it is not a fictional exaggeration or a phenomenon of a particular society in the historical past, but a pretty accurate description of how power continues to operate all around us, right now.

George Bernard Shaw reportedly said, “If you want to tell people the truth, you’d better make them laugh, otherwise they’ll kill you.” He should have added, “or themselves.” Kafka may have believed something like this; there’s evidence that he admired and wanted to imitate Charles Dickens, whose darkest novels are always tempered with sometimes-clownish humor. I can’t read Kafka in the original German, and I know that humor, like poetry, is one of the most difficult things to translate. Still, while I can find examples of what I imagine are attempts to be funny on Kafka’s part, the whole context is so bleak that his

little jokes tend to fall flat. Instead, when I think of Kafkaesque humor, I think of the grimmest, most cynical jokes that have ever made me laugh. I think of sci-fi parodist Douglas Adams on the beginning of economic activity on earth; his anecdote tells how primitive humans decided to use leaves for currency, but then realized they were so common that an individual leaf was almost worthless, so set about burning down the forests to raise the value of the leaf. Or the joke about the man who leaps out the top-story window of a hundred-story building, and, as he passes each floor, can be heard muttering, “So far, so good.... So far, so good....” That joke has always seemed to me to be one of the best analogies for the past century of industrial capitalism.

But does Kafka really speak to the world I live in, the suburbia-über-alles, imperial-fast-food-nation America of the twenty-first century? While Kafka’s settings and attitudes might seem hopelessly bound to a peculiarly European and even Eastern-European milieu, to the continent and culture and epoch that gave us the concepts of alienation and existential dread, it’s arguable that the United States of America, Europe’s child, has just taken a few more decades to arrive at a similar conceptual cul-de-sac. Several of Kafka’s fables of cruelty and violence have a medieval-village setting, which at first seems quintessentially European. But the US population, for all its surface infatuation with whiz-bang ultramodern gadgetry unimagined in Kafka’s time, has ideologically entered a very medieval period—with the mass of people barricaded in their homes, terminally suspicious and fearful of strangers, alien marauders, and supernatural forces, bending either grudgingly or complacently to the will of rich, powerful, and bellicose elites who rally them from time to time with patriotic slogans or enemy threats but have nothing but their own power and profit at heart. Kafka’s European context is only apparently different, because the skeleton underneath the flesh of the shop-and-bop-till-you-drop diversions and unfettered personal ambition of US life is, and has always been, the sterile gray grid that Europe set down upon these lands, to keep both land and people in line.

In the US, more than in Europe, any vision of social transformation has been expunged from mass consciousness due to

the relentless promotion of the far-more-marketable mythology of personal transformation. Ironically, what the narrative of personal transformation conceals is that true maturity only results from realizing, *à la* Kafka, that there is actually no hope for some fundamental elements of your personal situation, no total remedy for or final purging of the past. Our commercial media instruct us unceasingly that the opposite is true; we are kept eternally immature because that's how to get peak levels of consumption out of us. And that's why Kafka, who chronicled the absurdity of our social relations and the complementary hopelessness of our personal situations, was and remains wiser than we.

But if one of Kafka's main concerns was the workings of power, then what about protest, organized resistance, solidarity? Those elements are always part of the equation, always present when power manifests itself as abuse, as oppression, even if resistance does not triumph. At some point in many consciousnesses, the revelation comes that only in our connections to others do we humans actually matter at all. But Kafka doesn't go there. In his world, the individual is utterly alone and surrounded by menacing forces, most of them embodied by other individuals: parents, co-workers, petty authority figures, chance acquaintances. There is a cautionary tale here (though Kafka never intended his work as such): If you succumb to isolation as profound as that which Kafka's characters experience, your hell, as Sartre said, really is other people.

Kafka's parables are too slippery to point to a sadistic god or any metaphysics as responsible for this horror, but he's nothing like a dialectical materialist either. His situations strongly suggest that history has *stopped*, that it no longer moves forward, if it ever did. It's this grim idea that often seems to resonate with me when I think of the political trends that have dominated in the US, and much of the world, not just for the last eight years, but most of the last thirty years. And if the climate itself is now in reversal? Even Kafka never imagined that.

There is a telling exchange in the film version of neurologist Oliver Sacks' book *Awakenings*, when a prominent doctor is asked why he believes catatonic patients are not capable of

higher brain function. "Because the alternative is unthinkable," he replies. In other words, because a fully-conscious life under such conditions would be too horrible to imagine.

In a similar way, most Americans who are still able to distance themselves from the worst consequences of their system resist dwelling on the horrors that it has produced, because of the unthinkable burden of responsibility, particularly for other people's suffering, that real understanding would force upon them. But it was only because he was able to imagine the unimaginable horror of a conscious catatonic's imprisoned existence that Sacks was driven to free those patients from it. Unfortunately, the analogy is not perfect. One visionary doctor's revelation can help free a handful of people. But since civilization began, no society has been able to free itself from the ills that were there at its beginning: organized violence, the endemic violation of the powerless by the powerful. Efforts have been made, and will continue as long, I think, as what we call civilization exists. The repeated failure of these efforts seems to demonstrate that countless millions would have to be able to think the currently-unthinkable if a shift as great as the one some of us think necessary is to become possible at all. Otherwise, the people who do manage in the face of all odds to free themselves from self-absorption, complicity, and fear become isolated martyrs, voices in the wind. The trick, in the face of the failure to date of all formulas supposed to deliver that massive and general revolution in consciousness, is in continuing to believe that it is possible.

Kafka's ability to imagine and portray the unimaginable horror of conscious human life, imprisoned in power structures that function on the psyche as catatonia does on the body, may not seem to be generative of engagement for social transformation; certainly it was not in his personal case. What Kafka knew was a depth of despair that most Americans, and most particularly those of us with a concern for social progress, find shameful to acknowledge or to speak of at all, except couched in recurrent warnings of potential catastrophe. Kafka knew that the smallest human twitch in the present moment could be more truly horrifying than any potential future cataclysm.

He believed that we are only a bad day of God's; his vision of humanity's destiny was uncompromisingly hopeless, something which is totally proscribed to anyone who still lays claim to the term "progressive."

And yet, as I think of hundreds of millions of Americans continuing to gape distractedly at, or scramble frenetically to board, the party-boats of power and profit while multiple tsunamis appear to be rising over their collective heads, it is just such a despair that I sometimes deeply feel. Kafka is the man to articulate that despair for me, but also, surprisingly, to teach me how to live past it. If there are days when I feel that life on earth will be reduced to two idiots battling to the death on a charred cinder (yes, I do have those days occasionally), I read Kafka. I feel the suffocation of nightmare, but I feel the possibility of awakening from nightmare as well.



The Sheep

Ursula Vernon

Unfinished Stories

J[ae] Brames

Before Albert can crack open the rebirth canal, we have to scrape a suitable body off the road. *Suitable* means no burst eyeballs, no pancaked skulls, no severed limbs. No spat-up stomachs or tire-tread tattoos. Alive, twitching but not fighting; some internal damage is expected, but no jellified innards—sick of the ghost, unable to afford the ghost, considering cold-turkey ghostlessness, but not giving it up just yet. And as long as we're cruising the route, Albert says, we might as well be delivering the mail.

Albert creeps the truck up to Ira and Nancy Chartier's mailbox, which is shaped and painted like a rusty-breasted mallard. A mallard can live more than twenty years. I pass Albert the envelopes, careful not to drool on them.

"Bills," he says, giggling.

I only twitch a grin, because even redemption can't make me muster the will to laugh aloud at that pun every damn day. As we drive off I can hear Ira inside his house, quacking to us.

The rough road is a series of humps, a monstrous snakeskin draped across rolling hills, a woodland fatality waiting to happen. Albert straddles the shoulder and coasts, foot hovering above the brake, toward the Dolans' mailbox, which is shaped like a squatting squirrel. Squirrels, if well cared for, can live sixteen years before their bodies quit.

"Story needs an ending," Albert says. Now he's anxious. We're three from zero hour and have yet to scrape up a proper quasicadaver, but no rush, let's do our federal duty; it's an unfinished story that finally gets Albert's ticker tocking.

"It'll have an ending soon," I assure him.

"She ain't gonna finish the story today. Would you have wanted to?"

I'm a fan of redemption. Call it a communicable disease. Steal my lunch, and I'll buy you dinner. Steal my life, and I'll be your best friend. Even so, my first priority upon waking had been to scratch and slide my drippy carcass out of Albert's cradled claws—Gallup polls say mortal terror trumps Story Time nine rescues out of ten.

The mail truck drifts across the double yellow. Sweat beads on Albert's greasy noggin. He tenses his brutish bulk, as though losing a soul-size battle to the steering wheel or to his own urge to become a psychotic *Geisterfahrer*.

A car shoots over the crest of the hill and honks and doesn't slow. I snap at Albert's forearm—it's like gnawing on a tree trunk—and he gasps to life and jerks the wheel. The car honks, swerves across the shoulder, clips the tall grass. Honks and whips by like a low-flying aircraft shattering a pathetic sound barrier. Honks, locates the lane, and cruises on.

Albert parks at the side of the road and laughs. When movie directors want their actors to blast a maniacal cackle, they demonstrate with a tape of Albert's everyday laugh. And his face, for the duration of the laughter, is a sharp crease of hatred and horror. To meet Albert relishing a punch line is to double-check all window locks and deadbolts before bed for the rest of your life.

As we watch the unfamiliar car climb the hill behind us, framed in the side mirror, a small gray animal darts out into the road, rethinks the decision, re-rethinks, oscillates in the middle of the car's lane as though bouncing off invisible hands closing in for the kill. The car screeches, fishtails, and then gives up the impression of remorse; the brake lights go out like angry eyes squeezing shut to bear the impact. We hear a Styrofoam thud and see the gray animal skip into the grass, a linty tumbleweed. Albert stops laughing. The car keeps on going.

"People...." Albert says, a simmering cliffhanger that implies the characteristic ending, "should have their heads bashed in with a hammer." He looks like he might cry.

"Maybe we've found our quasicadaver, Albert."

"It's not supposed to happen like that."

But that's how it happens. Always. Animals don't die of old age here. They don't succumb to cancer in the soft shoulder. They don't give their lives for a greater good. Drivers get too relaxed about the hills and high speed limit, and unprepared animals eat bumper. And no one stops. No one pulls over for a possum; no one weeps over a skunk. Very few drivers will seek out the owner of a flattened doggy. People hit and run. It's a wonder an angel like Albert feels any guilt.

We turn back and park where the accident took place. *Accident* is a hell of a word for what cars do to living things. Look

at the splattered accidents scattered across a windshield—poor soaring insects. The twisted legs of a dog. The crushed teeth, the leaky gray matter. The rusty-red smear on the pavement. Fresh from the rebirth canal, when I thought I was in Hell, Albert called it an “accident.”

“Hilton,” Albert says, climbing out of the truck, “please do something for me.”

“Sure, Albert.” Call it a disease, or a purpose.

“Tell the rest of the story, please.” He sifts through the waist-deep grass. I hop out the driver’s-side door and sniff around with him, find the prize before he does. Albert mats down the grass around it, as though clearing room for it to breathe, the way a lifeguard would for a half-drowned swimmer. This victim, this roadkill, this accident is a mottled-gray cat, curled into a bloated asterisk of mussed fur, blinking slowly. It makes no effort to fight or bolt when we squat in the grass, evaluating the state of its unsustainable body.

“Superpuss. The Dolans’ kitty,” Albert says, like a priest delivering last rites. “She loved the outdoors, and she was good at crossing the road, and she was well cared for. She let me scratch her behind the ears.”

“On a positive note, I think she liked to chase squirrels.”

Albert gives me a disapproving glare. Slowly, it eases. “I guess.”

“She’s a goner,” I say. “Look, her ribs are crushed.”

Albert agrees. We play God. Maybe she’d be back stalking squirrels by next week if we got her some veterinary aid. We make choices. We’re part of the accident, and what does life really mean? It’s the souls we’re worried about.

Albert scurries to the back of the truck and returns with a wide wooden paddle, formerly used to handle pizzas. (The pizza place went belly-up. We’re good at recycling.) He slides the business end of the paddle through the grass, under the Dolans’ cat, who doesn’t gripe or twitch. Albert carries her to the back of the mail truck and slips her gently onto a drawn-and-quartered cardboard box, beside a tray of computer-sorted envelopes, a bin of hand-sorted magazines, and a bloodstained claw hammer. Purring in sympathy, he pats Superpuss’s head. Scratches her behind the ears.

The unfinished story. Yesterday, Greta Reynolds began thrilling her mail carrier with the tale of a witch who was raised to be wicked, but who wanted nothing to do with it. She lived in a gingerbread house (the witch did; Mrs. Reynolds lived in a Dutch Colonial), but only because she had inherited it. She owned a big kid-cooker, but she used it to broil chickens and wild pigs, which she caught with a handy sleep spell. And yet, at her core was a voice generations old urging her to spread plagues, tyrannize townspeople, gobble up unsuspecting children. This instinct wasn't difficult to suppress, though, because she lived deep in the woods and encountered neither villager nor voyager.

"It should end happy," he says, as we stuff junk mail into the Dolans' metal squirrel. Albert has childlike sensibilities, an innocent attachment to the gentler twists and turns. Unfairness worries him. Unhappiness is an aberrant state and must be alleviated immediately.

Norman Dolan is out spraying his apple trees with insecticide. His loss won't break him—Superpuss was more sacrifice than pet.

One day, a child came to the witch's house, a rotund gobstopper of a boy, but polite—he knocked on her door instead of just munching away on the sugary siding. When the witch saw his pudgy cheeks and round belly, that pesky evil instinct kicked in. She invited him inside and stuffed him with boar, corn, and plates of chocolate-glazed shingles and rock-candy windows and gummy sugar-caulk, the whole time telling herself she was simply playing the proper host and would never endanger this little boy. But every time she thought *little boy*, and whenever she would glance at his bulging belly, her mouth would water, and her deeper nature would force her thoughts back to that huge oven behind the boy's chair, door agape as though waiting to feed.

"All she had to do was push." Those were Mrs. Reynolds' final words in this world. A cliffhanger. Then Albert succumbed to his deeper nature and killed her.

The average life span of a human living on this rural through road, in this patch of cursed forest: maybe fifty years, before the cliffhanger. Albert told me that he used to be a handyman, half a century ago. Before that, he lived in a cave. He lurked through these woods at night, in a time pre-dating deadbolts. His eerie laughter caused wary farmers to stoke their fires. He told me

that his eyes used to blaze red in the dark, and that it's possible to hear a soul scream.

The Ismaels' mailbox is a five-point buck. The antlers are real, last season's. In the front yard, a herd of white-tailed deer plucks cherries from one of several fruit trees. Deer will live a maximum of twenty years. They stop to watch Albert, who flaps envelopes at them ingenuously. Mrs. Ismael is hanging a birdfeeder from the side deck, where a bug zapper strung from a post is noisily frying its latest victims. Albert waves her over. She waves him off, chuckling, her neck jerking, eyes attentive like a cautious doe's. Albert jabs the mail into the box, suddenly sullen.

"All the witch had to do was push," I say, and he perks up. The cat mewls. "Finally, the boy, plugged with fatty foods and sugary sweets, let out an appetizing belch that shattered the witch's will-power and threw her into a delirious hunger frenzy. She tipped the boy's chair back, cackling, consumed by his sweaty, delectable boyishness, maddened by his shocked screams. She tipped him back toward the monstrous oven."

Albert's breath quickens. He stops at Byron and Edna Dzewski's mailbox, a woodchuck facsimile. Woodchucks don't live past ten years. I can't talk while I'm giving him the small stack of letters and a *National Wildlife* magazine.

Then we cruise on to my box, a dog—golden retriever, specifically. Thirteen-year life span, if I'm lucky. Death occurs because the body quits, whether the soul is ready or not. Albert designed the mailbox for me, the same day he buried my collection of hunting trophies: mounted bucks, stuffed sage grouse and bobwhite—a taxidermic game preserve.

"The witch tried to regain her rational side," I continue, "but her evil side was too strong, and killing the boy was as simple as tipping him backward. He cooked, shrieking at first, his clothes bursting into flames, as though he had been delivered straight into Hell. The witch caught hold of her cackle, then, and doused the oven fire, but it was too late. She had destroyed an innocent, God-fearing boy."

Albert nods. His forehead is creased and his eyes look big, his gaze distant as though seeing a truth that no one else can. "Shouldn't have had to die," he whispers.

"But he did die. He crossed the wrong lane, stood in the way of the wrong speeding human. It wasn't his fault, and the witch felt

immediate remorse. She had let her evil win. A soul had suffered. The odor of the roasted flesh made her sick even as it made her salivate. She vowed to kill herself."

"She couldn't," Albert says, straddling the white line, staying vigilant for darting animals.

Mosquitoes and butterflies and bumblebees with shoddy timing are pasted on the windshield. Ahead is a mailbox built to look like a striped skunk: a fifteen-year body. Beyond, a possum mailbox, with a salt lick to lure deer to the road—possums live only a few years.

"The witch climbed inside her oven, remorseful, longing for Hell. Her hair burned, and her skin blistered, but she survived. She couldn't stand it—why should she be invincible, while innocents suffered and died? She caught sight of her hideously scarred face in a mirror. She looked like a true wicked witch. Gazing at herself, seeing what she was, she had a revelation."

Albert nods. We pull into a driveway. The mailbox reads "REYNOLDS"; it's shaped like a mailbox. Albert excuses himself and gets out, rings the front doorbell.

Mr. Reynolds bursts out of the front door like a cat dashing after a mouse, his face scorched by wrath. He tackles Albert, who allows him to—Albert is a big guy, a beast in a federal uniform, and Mr. Reynolds is gray-haired and frail, slashing with a butcher knife. Albert holds the knife by the blade. Blood jots a line down his wrist. On his back, in the grass, he explains his curse, Greta's damnation, what he can do about it. He tells Mr. Reynolds, "I had to borrow your hammer." He tells him to buy a pet, let it run freely.

I have to go to the bathroom, so I dash into the woods. Running calms me; I can't say how. I run until the other urge takes precedence, then I squat.

The Palma boy sees me. He's burning ants with a magnifying glass. He waits for me to finish, then he comes over and pets me. I don't like his scent. He tugs my tail, and it hurts all the way up to my teeth. I want to nip at him, but he's a boy; later, he'll regret the evil that made him do that. "Stay clear of the road," I say, and he bursts into terrified tears and scampers toward home, as though fleeing a wicked witch.

Back at the truck, Mr. Reynolds is bandaging Albert's hand.

What Albert tells you, after he wakes you up, is basically the behind-the-scenes history of mankind. Gods, angels, devils,

demons. Contests for souls—you can be morally immaculate and still go to Hell. But the main thing Albert tells you is that he can't abide being a demon, and also he can't help it. So he learned how to do the work of the angels, and now he's his own cosmic balance. He doesn't mention his general preference for animals.

We wrap up our route. Mr. Reynolds lends a hand, sparing the envelopes my tooth marks. Then on to Albert's.

"And put up birdfeeders," Albert is telling Mr. Reynolds. These are the commandments. "And your pets can't be spayed or neutered, because animals need babies. And plant fruit trees, and keep the bugs off. Soon as you see a caterpillar tent, hit it with a broom. No more mousetraps or stuffed kill. You've got deer targets out back, I saw yesterday. With arrows sticking out."

"I'll throw them away," Mr. Reynolds promises.

"Bury them."

At Albert's house, which has an orchard in the front yard and a metropolis of birdhouses and feeders in the trees out back, Mr. Reynolds plays human gurney for Superpuss and follows us into a corrugated-metal garage. Albert has worn himself out with repeating the rules, the way I'd imagine God would get tired of punishing humanity—which, one might speculate, is why He left us with Albert, who squints down at me, unable to sustain eye contact, and asks me to finish the story.

"The witch realized that she had spent a lifetime craving human meat—only a withdrawal from civilization could have curbed it, and civilization was growing. She was bound to meet another little boy. She had been eating animal meat for these many years, never enjoying it, always spiting herself in the eating, destroying one innocent creature to preserve another because cannibalism was worse than carnivorousness. As she looked in the mirror, though, she realized that she wasn't, after all, human. She was a witch. She was vile, inescapably vile, made to be. She had destroyed innocent animals in trying, fruitlessly, to deny her nature.

"But she had power. She could make up for her destruction. She could consume the meat and save the life."

Mr. Reynolds watches me, horrified. I'm not sure if it's the story or the body. Albert, grinning, leads Mr. Reynolds around the chalked pentagram on the concrete floor. An aquarium sits on a table, surrounded by flickering candles in tiny jars, like vigil lights for a hundred victims. At Albert's behest, Mr. Reynolds lays

the dying cat in the shallow water of the aquarium. Superpuss shifts weakly, drowning. Albert herds Mr. Reynolds into the back corner and arranges himself into a meditative position at the hub of the pentagram.

He says he must act at a certain time in order to snag a captive soul from Hell—about one day after he sent it there—but the timing is never precise. We're roughly twenty-three hours clear of his last accident, but the moment he closes his eyes, the water in the aquarium begins to churn ferociously, as though the cat were being mauled by demonic piranha. "I'm still listening, Hilton," Albert says, so I continue, speaking over the boiling water and the ineffable hum of a cracking cosmos.

"The witch pored over her books of spells and located the proper one, and she found a dying bird that had fallen from its nest."

The water churns, and Mr. Reynolds quavers in the corner, and Albert might for all the world be a placid monk; like the incarnation of a clear conscience, like an angel, he is no longer touching the ground.

"She prepared her herbs, her incantations, set the fading bird on an altar, and performed the spell. The witch, evil, a murderer but not a permanent one, reached into the beyond and rescued the boy, deposited him into the bird. The bird's body, bolstered by a spare soul, healed, and boy melded with bird."

It would be easy to kill him right now. Never let Albert cause another death, not a fly nor a deer nor a human. But I remember Hell, even if I only remember it as a hit and run, my body quitting at the side of the road, and Albert's arms.

A pale fireball of preternaturalism swells from the quitting body of Superpuss. The rebirth canal. The candles are snuffed out, the water boiled off. Mr. Reynolds screams like a deer that has been shot in the flank with a thirty-ought-six bolt-action rifle. The room goes dark, except for a green ball of ghost light burned onto my retinas.

"The witch had found balance between desires and scruples. She had her evil and her redemption. She feasted on the boy. Never before had she tasted such savory meat—and she didn't need to feel guilty, for as the flesh digested in her belly, the soul continued on. When she had eaten him all up, she flew to the nearest village and, using her handy sleep spell, snagged another child, and she

cooked him, then returned his soul to the body of a wounded roe. The bird-boy and the roe-boy forgave her, as did the rest of the children and the villagers, in time. And the witch moved into the village and lived with the animals, accepted, forever. The end.”

I nudge the lights on with my nose. Mr. Reynolds is weeping, but he springs up when Albert calls him. Superpuss is supine in the empty tank, blinking. “Oh god,” she says, over and over, in the voice of Greta Reynolds. I know how she feels.

Albert lifts her and hands her to Mr. Reynolds, who blinks away tears, cries his wife’s name in a crackling contralto—a genuine souls-reunited moment. Mrs. Reynolds will be fine. So will Superpuss.

And, soon, Albert will be forgiven. This is the big finish, the point in the story where I metaphorically soul-meld him to the witch and applaud him for balancing his born-and-bred evil with kindness—but, honestly, I don’t think Albert’s eyes ever glowed. I think Albert is a mortal man, exploiting a found loop-hole in eternity. I think he’s a nearly-ordinary nutcase, who likes animals and loathes people, who lives to overcome his humanity, and then lives to succumb to it. I wish I had it in me to kill him. But he rescued me. He murdered me, and he saved me. Show me redemption, prove the presence of sin and salvation, and I’ll be your best friend. Prove there’s more to life than eating, sleeping, and chasing my tail.

Albert spots an ant crawling across the floor, smooshes it between his fingers, and pops it into his mouth, chews the crunchy exoskeleton. Scratches behind my ears. “The witch lady’s an angel,” he says, “to defeat her evil like that. Right?”

“Complete angel,” I agree.

Call it a disease.

To a Skylark

Rose Lemberg

Broken metal feathers shine on my lark's belly. Cogs roll
waking or asleep when I take it apart. Every dial
a memory of happy happy deep-fried
in machine oil. It stains my fingers, stinks like a *thou*
of death must deem crushed under my lark's rubber wheels
is my own desperate, disembodied mind. Paint smell screeches
shamefully to cover *things more true and deep*
the decayed metal heart—*than we mortals dream*
of my skylark. But it reassembles,
fuels up on my blood, it scrapes out of my veins,
half-broken and rusty with pen nibs for wings
it wobbles *or how* up the air *could thy*—
opens its mouth, thrusts its golden tongue out, and
notes flow.

The Thirst

Kerry Hudson

Her pale foreign eyes dropped to the foil package between them.

"You eat this?" she asked.

"Wha— No, not right now," Dave answered.

"I thanking you." Her sparrow hands snatched his egg sandwich and she took gulping bites, leaving a red crescent around the ghost of white teeth in the bread. Dave felt he had been bitten, by proxy, by sandwich.

"I go tomorrow," she said through an egg-mayonnaise mouthful.

"What? Where?" asked Dave, his mind still stumbling over her directness.

"I say I go tomorrow." She exhaled through her nostrils, noisily.

He raised his voice a little. "And last night where did you sleep?" He enunciated every syllable, left large pauses in between the words.

"Houstel, Peckham," she replied, looking at the ceiling.

"Hotel? You're on holiday?" Finally, he felt he was getting somewhere.

"No, *houstel*." She matched his laboured speech. "I live here. Tomorrow I go and find room to live."

"Where was your *home* before London?"

"Braşov."

He felt stupid. He'd have to guess: "Europe?"

The slightest raise of a mocking eyebrow as she responded, "*Romania*."

Above them, leggy blondes thumped up the stairs carrying shoeboxes. Later, the girls would sit at this same table and gossip about the redheaded shoplifter. Now, the stolen shoes, silver brogues made of slippery, soft leather, lay between Dave and that redhead.

As she crumpled the rough brown crust into her mouth, her left hand languorously caressed a shining, domed toe. Her eyes

batted up to Dave; she had a childish smear of mayonnaise just above her lip. Those lips gave out an exasperated sigh.

"I am apologising you. I get confusing." As she spoke, she counted off each point on her ruby-tipped fingers. "I am new, I try on shoes, I get confusing about taking off."

It occurred to him that the rise and fall of her accent put him in mind of swallows on the wind at Hackney Downs. His stomach churned; he thought he had indigestion from the sandwich she had eaten.

"You walked out of the shop wearing them." He pulled out a curling pair of blue flip-flops. "You left these behind. You set off the alarm and still tried to leave the store."

She straightened, then leaned forward. The tip of her tongue licked off the mayonnaise, and left a maddening shining smear. She looked just one inch above Dave's ravenous pupils and pouted.

"I am apologising to you. I say I feel sorry. I make mistake. I am new and it is easy being confusing. This city it is big and people don't like talking and it is so much money for toilet even! I ask you understand this. Make this just a mistake; shoes are here still and nothing is losing."

He looked at her oatmeal skin, her hair the colour of old brick. Saw her almond-shaped eyes widen around her tap-water-coloured irises. He saw those sparrow hands, her teeth biting that full bottom lip, and knew it was no use pretending. He would do whatever she asked.

The next day, she caught his arm as he left the shop on his way home, her ruby-tipped fingers kneading his soft arm urgently. Of course she didn't even need to touch him; just a fleeting, sharp glance from those colourless eyes would have been enough. Any sentence in her oboe-like voice would have worked. She didn't need to be persuasive. To buy him a milky washing-up-liquid coffee in the steamy café, where she drew a smiling face on the fogged-up window and said, "Thanking you," when he offered her his sofa.

There was no need for her to climb into his bed later that night smelling of toothpaste and baby oil and put her bony body around his and whisper to him impatiently in her staccato mother tongue. She didn't have to share his bath and push her sharp chin into the muscle between his neck and shoulder or curl her legs around his waist. It was unnecessary to furl around his heart by

storming out when the dinner she cooked him ended in crumbs of blackness.

When she said, "I think I am in loving you," in Argos, looking at kettles, she couldn't know that Dave already had all he wanted. When he had looked at her that first night outside the shop, waiting for him, needing him. He already had all he wanted.

- - -

Six months and three days sober. No meetings or twelve-step plans. Just regret, some blame, misshapen knuckles, and a pile of creased photographs. She couldn't have known how hollow he had been. How Dave's life had corroded, before she'd arrived on the back of Cupid with kleptomania. There had been a kind of thinness to his life, Dave thought. He had lived it from behind a pane of glass, all the colours turned down on the screen.

Sober Dave was a quiet, soft, slumped sort of man. Always watching, thinking and wanting in his silence. Every day he was consumed with the task of just being. He trusted himself with nothing more.

She came and warmed him. She touched him in every way. Dave knew theirs was a small affair, of delicate and fragile happiness. But he, who thought hope was more dangerous than addiction, quietly began to snag his future on the foolishness of expectation.

In many ways, life was still the same. He woke and went to the shop, and she stayed in bed drinking the coffee he had brought. But he fell into inevitable love with her petulant morning self, playful weekend self, and selfless night self. She seemed to burst breathlessly with all she wanted to say, do, see, eat, hear. His insideness became less acute. She was outside for both of them.

She streaked the bath orange dyeing her hair and left bras in the kitchen. Every night he came home from work to the smell of burnt toast and the sound of *EastEnders* blaring above Radio 1. She spoke to dogs in the park, and bought whole bin bags of clothes at the church jumble sale. She did not steal any more shoes, but somehow Dave did.

She never drank, and never suggested they should. Dave wondered if she saw the purple blooming in his cheeks or the way the paper shook when he did the crossword and made a gentle sacrifice on his behalf. In return, he, after the first angry rebuttal, never asked about the time before she came to him. Like his shaky

hands, though, or his mottled cheeks, her past left signs. Dave read the angry scribble of silvery scars running up her arms and listened to the nub of a broken rib as he circled her waist. Sometimes, she would withdraw, remove a fleck of acrid tobacco from her tongue, close her face down. Dave understood, respected even, that insideness, and gave her the solicitous space she needed. She always came back full of life, full of love.

- - -

Dave's pockets bulged: a Kinder Egg, Turkish Delight, two Flakes. The door was slightly ajar and inside he could smell burnt toast and hear the bath running full-throttle. He pictured feeding her a Flake while she lay in the water.

The flat was messier than usual and her things were dragged across the hall floor. He could feel his abdomen loosen just slightly. "Love? Are you in the bath?" His breathing quickened. Picture her, he thought; picture her in the bath with her Walkman on, smoking a soggy roll-up.

The door crept open, a silent conspirator. She was standing by the sink, naked but for a yellow vest, her small, round nipples dark and hard under the fabric. A hand with a painful-looking grip about her waist belonged to a pinched-faced man. The stranger's eyes were so deep-set they were pools of shadow. Dave stood and looked at that ugly hand clamping the flesh of her gently-curved tummy and then at her face, usually so expressive, now wide-eyed and distant. Her four fingers pressed against her mouth and on that arm a small droplet of blood snaked down her winter-sky skin. He couldn't breathe; the man said something in a whisper to her and she nodded almost imperceptibly, fingers still to her lips, her eyelids fluttering.

Dave inhaled. "In my fucking bathroom?" he started, willing the tears not to come. "The place where I shit? Where you dye your bloody hair and use tampons and—" Breath plunged from him. His eyes betrayed him and the tears escaped. He sat on the bath's edge.

The stranger's eyes, flinty stones, were sparking in the shadow; he waited, his hands balled at his sides. She started toward Dave, arms outstretched, mumbling, an echo of herself. Dave grabbed her arm and the man pushed her body into Dave and ran, whipping his head back to shout out to her, a warning in a battery of guttural sounds.

They sat on the edge of the bath long after the stranger's rapping footfalls faded on the stairs. Dave, slumped, biting the insides of his cheeks, shaking his head. She, silent, startled, dragging ruby nails over the fresh needle-prick on her soft, pale skin.

Later, she climbed under the duvet to lie with him. Pressing her face between the mattress and the flesh of his shoulder. Her body shuddered and her breath sounded like it was whistling. It occurred to Dave that she'd never cried before; he knew her so little. She rolled onto her back. Tears and mascara marbled her face. Her teeth clawed at her wet red lips.

"I make mistake. He is from before and I am sometimes very lonely." She rushed the words between sobs. "I make a mistake. I'm asking you to make this a mistake and understand."

Dave spoke in no more than a whisper. "This wasn't a pair of shoes. That's a mistake. How could I be so, so fucking stupid? I wanted something and I know that I am not the person who's allowed things. I'm sitting here thinking that we're starting to make things better for each other. This wasn't your mistake." He turned his body away. "It was mine."

"It's not fucking, or even kissing him. I have a bath and he is coming. He is from past and makes me small again. Scared. I'm not doing anything bad to you—" she brandished her arm with the needle mark and the lashes of four ruby-tipped nails "—only to me."

She clutched his bulk, warmth, safety, and said through her aching tears, "Please, please. Make this only a mistake. I am asking you. I am here and you are here and there is nothing losing."

But Dave was gone to a dank, barren inside place where her warmth would never reach.

- - -

She stayed for longer than he thought she would. Masking the edges of his life. Making stumbling talk that was never returned. Microwaving food that was left to solidify. Dave thought how strange it was that any anger he felt could be quenched by such concentrated sadness. A vaccine, or a dose of what ails to cure.

But soon there were no more petrified meals or stumbling second-language conversations. There were no bras or burnt toast. Dave didn't listen to Radio 1 or watch *EastEnders*. He sat, silent and solid, and waited for days to pass. That was all. Just for

them to pass. Eight months, seven days sober. No meetings or twelve-step plans. And no her.

- - -

"I'm doing my fucking best." Dave threw the can opener, which refused to cut and open, against the counter.

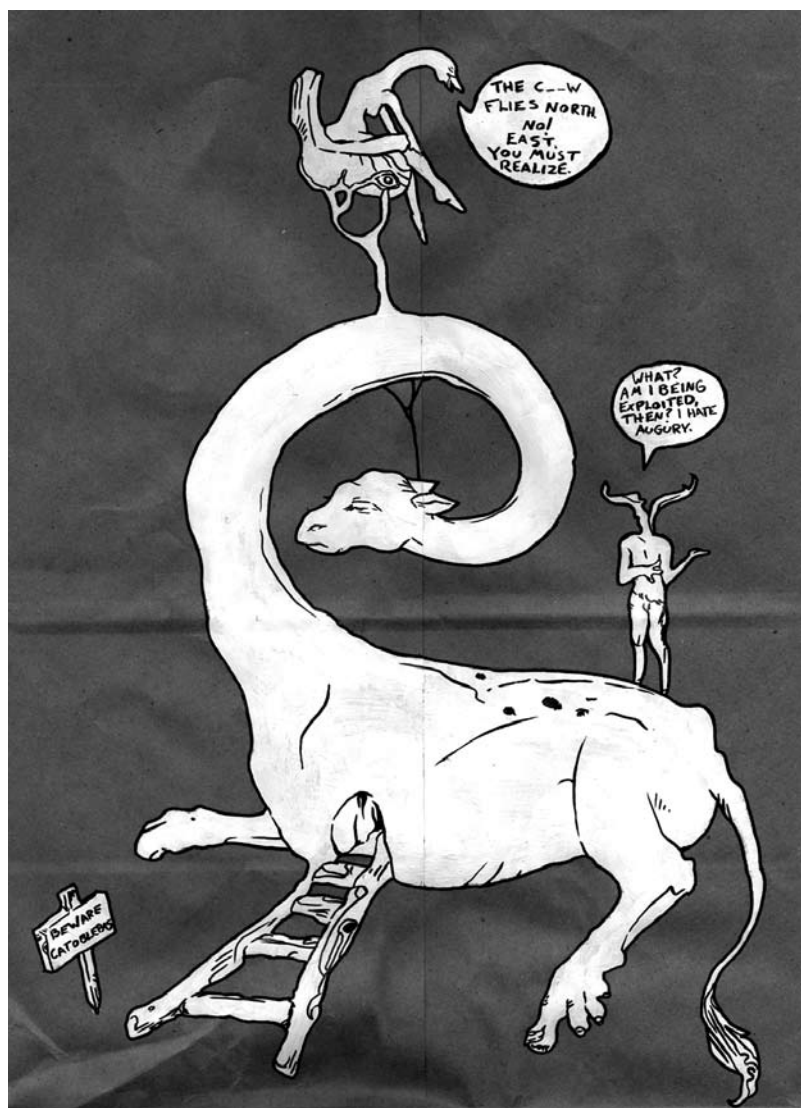
All the symptoms were back: the sweating, the feeling of being on the edge of fury, the need to move all of the time and to eat. Right at that moment he wanted cold, metallic rice pudding from the tin. He wanted it to coat the insides of his cheeks and stop up his gullet. He wanted to choke on the stuff. His skin felt too alive, as though it was straining to reach something an inch away, spoiling for a fight. His thoughts snapped like a shutter on all the colours he had known. He was ravenous, but the can opener wouldn't work, so he decided he must be thirsty.

There, at the back of the cupboard behind the scratching wool blanket with the green stripe, his old stash. Renewed after that yellow-vest day, just in case. Dave's hand reached under the blanket and his heart pummelled his chest like a hysterical locked-in child. He laid them on the table, mouth and eyes filled with water but with no shake to his hands.

Two things. His liquid relief and a brown parcel left by her. Tongue against upper lip, he unwrapped the paper. A mountain-range postcard with an address and the crooked handwriting of someone who knew what it was to be thirsty too.

"Don't make this your mistake my Dave. I am loving you. I am asking you. Miruna."

Dave sat down with the bottle and the postcard. His heart began to quiet.



The Catoblepas

Lisa A. Grabenstetter

Vore; or, Levity in Dungeons

Adrian Versteegh

Trevenen awoke with his hand in something damp. He decided against opening his eyes. He was lying on his side with his vertebrae pressed against a smooth surface. He shifted his limbs. There was a rustling and something brushed the stubble on his chin. Newspaper. When he inhaled he could smell the ink. And something else: stink, but not just his own. He lifted his eyelids and blinked away the film.

Philip of Macedon was curled up at Trevenen's knees. The man's coat and gloves were gone and his sweater was unraveling at the neck. A taut strand of wool was caught between the rills of his chapped lips, as if he'd been munching on his collar while he slept. His face was slack, and he looked a decade younger than he deserved. There was a peaceful cadence to his breathing. Trevenen kicked him.

"Phil!"

The man wrapped an arm around Trevenen's calves and curled in tighter. Trevenen shook the soggy newsprint from one hand, then sniffed his fingers. He drew his shoulder blades together and sent his dry hand behind his head to investigate. Glass, and unusually warm.

"Phil!" He ground a foot into the man's gut. "Time to get moving."

There was a tap on the glass. Trevenen squeezed a curse from his sore throat. "Rise and shine," he hissed. "Welcome overstayed, Phil." He started to twist around. "All right," he said over his shoulder, "we're going, we're going."

On the other side of the glass, a little girl with wide eyes was leaving smudge marks with one pointing finger. She giggled when Trevenen rolled over. Next to her was a woman smiling down, one hand laid protectively on the girl's shoulder. A group of people stood in a semicircle behind them. Some were waving.

"Phil...." Trevenen could see a number written backwards in pink marker on the glass. "Get up, Phil!" He kicked harder.

III

- - -

"Well, I think it's marvelous." The woman set her purse on the counter.

"At first," said the salesgirl, "it was only because of the cold—"

"Viciously cold, this year."

"Yes. So we brought them in—"

"The cages were—"

"The habitats."

"The habitats were empty?" The woman licked her lips.

"Yes," said the girl, "and after a while...." She looked embarrassed and poked at a parakeet by the register. "Well, we had so many inquiries that we thought it best to put up a sign. They are taking up space, after all."

"It's the humane thing," said the woman, opening her purse.

- - -

King Philip was awake. He was arguing with Trevenen.

"I see what you're getting at," he said, "but degradation is relative." He smiled with his cracked lips and lifted his chest. "Even for royalty."

Trevenen started to reply, but Philip raised one hand magisterially and turned his head to suck on a metal spigot attached to an upended bottle of Colt 45. The sounds beyond the glass were joined by voices from the opposite wall.

"We call this one Trev."

"Cute."

"Isn't it? He doesn't always respond, but he'll learn his name eventually."

There was a click and one half of the ceiling drew back. Hands reached for Trevenen and pulled him out. He looked at Philip and moved his jaw in mute panic.

Philip began to cackle. "My son," he called out, "ask for thyself another kingdom." He spread his arms, elbows bent into the corners of the enclosure. "For that which I leave is too small for thee!"

- - -

Dark, this time. Trev was balled up, and his naked skin felt sticky where it touched the metal of his confines. His bladder was full. He rocked on his haunches. Finally he started pushing against

the walls, one by one, running his fingers over protuberances on the surface. He leaned back and was suddenly falling, adrenaline blooming deep in his guts, chin tucking instinctively into his chest. Then he rolled sideways, brought his hands under his body, and found himself on cold tile. He stood tentatively.

It was a kitchen. The stainless-steel appliances were faintly blue in the gloom. Through an archway he could make out the dim forms of living-room furniture, a bulky couch and a coffee table with rounded edges. He padded toward the door.

There was a murmur. Trev stopped. He heard it again. The words were muffled but unmistakable: "Take me with you."

He turned and scanned the living room. The coffee table was moving. He knelt and crawled over. It was a woman, wrapped in clear plastic. He examined her glazed head; there was an opening beneath her nose. He worked his fingers in and began peeling the plastic away. It unraveled from her limbs in long swathes. "Is this Saran Wrap?"

"Shhh." The coffee table dug her nails into Trev's forearm. "You'll wake her up."

A light came on in the kitchen. The woman reassumed her table pose. Trev dropped the plastic and ran on the balls of his feet into the hallway. A figure barred his way.

"You're not supposed to be out."

"I'm sorry. I had to use the washroom."

"I don't give a fuck," she said. "You're meant to baste in your own juices. Go baste." The oven door was still open. She dragged Trev over and shoved him back in. He banged his head trying to fit into the cramped space, and whimpered. When she closed the door, his fingers were nearly crushed.

"Stay in there this time." She flipped the latch and turned out the light.

- - -

Trev stewed.

The darkness was thicker in here. He mashed his face against the glass. The tiny window gave him an indistinct view of the refrigerator directly opposite. After a while, he imagined that his eyes had learned to resolve the vague reflections on its broad steel surface. He thought he could see the hulking oven, the transparent square at its center, and himself within it. There was movement. A shape occluded his view. He heard a soft snap

as the oven latch was released. The door tipped forward and Trev clambered out.

It was the coffee table. He stood and looked at her face. She still had a fragment of Saran Wrap clinging to her hair. Pressing a finger to her lips, she guided him to the foyer. Once there, he gestured toward the door.

"No," she mouthed. Bringing her lips to his ear, she whispered, "We can't leave yet."

Bits of her hair, filaments in a static field, caught the stubble on his face. He realized that his legs were still wet and took a step back. Then he raised his eyebrows and held up his palms.

She leaned in again. "We have to rescue the pony."

"What?"

"Follow me," she said.

- - -

King Philip was holding court. "For my part," he said, peering down at Trevenen from his perch atop a wooden crate, "I was relegated rather unceremoniously to a shelter."

"A shelter...?"

"Yes, that sort."

"Not up to your usual standards, I suppose."

"Sadly not."

Trevenen stood and crossed the alleyway. They were gathered around a fire he had kindled inside a low steel drum. The coffee table, whose other name was Melanie ("Like melamine!" Philip had pointed out, giggling), was hunched over the flames, turning a makeshift spit. It sagged with meat, still rare. Huddled nearby was a taciturn woman on all fours. Her sable mane shimmered in the halftone flicker. Trevenen extracted a plank from a smashed pallet and added it to the fire.

"Imagine the indignity," Philip continued, "of watching one's stock drop—in pink marker, no less—the numbers struck through and reduced by the day—by the hour, even—until each glyph on the glass becomes another notch on a prison wall. To the end of my days, I believe, my soul will sink on notice of the word *sale*."

Trevenen held a wet hunk of meat in his hands. He shivered and reached into the snow; they had soaked their skewers in the slush to keep them from burning. He pressed the flesh onto the point of his stick and looked at Phil. The older man's skewer curved like a fishing rod, the meat held in place by a nub at the tip.

"Thus unsold and unwanted," said Philip, "I awoke one afternoon in quarters far less commodious than those we shared before your departure. It was then that I realized my *tempus* was *fugitting*."

"How did you get away?" asked Melanie, crouching to eat by Philip's feet.

"Before long I knew the game. I was forced to act the fool. I hammed. I capered." He paused to rip a piece of loose skin from his lower lip. "So much as my confinement permitted. I solicited the attention of the world beyond the mesh. A family was brought in. Adoption was spoken of. My cage was even opened for a child to pat my head. A girl, pigtails. In my excitement I allowed myself a moment of incontinence. A royal prerogative, to be sure, but it quashed all chance of release. I was slated to be euthanized."

"The humane thing."

"I'm afraid so, my boy. Fortunately, the guard sent to deliver my last meal was a young female of uncommon tractability." He glanced at the women. "Through guile and the application of certain inborn charms—" he grinned and ran his tongue over his teeth "—I was able to effect an escape."

"You just hit her over the head, didn't you?"

"*Lèse-majesté*," murmured Philip, narrowing his eyes.

Trevenen put his back against the alley wall. Keeping the loaded end of his skewer above the rim of the drum, he slid his tailbone down the brick. They sat in silence, listening to the fire. Trevenen shivered again and pressed the soles of his feet against the warm barrel. The space was starting to make him nervous.

Finally, Philip tore a chunk of meat from his skewer and tossed it at the pony. "One thing I can't comprehend," he said to her. "Why did you keep the saddle?"

The woman stared back, her eyes wide and lustrous. Melanie spoke up. "Ever tried to take a dog's collar away?" she asked. "They'll beg for it back."

The other woman neighed in agreement.

"A noble steed." Philip put a hand on Trevenen's head and bent down to whisper. "A tad one-dimensional, these two, wouldn't you say?"

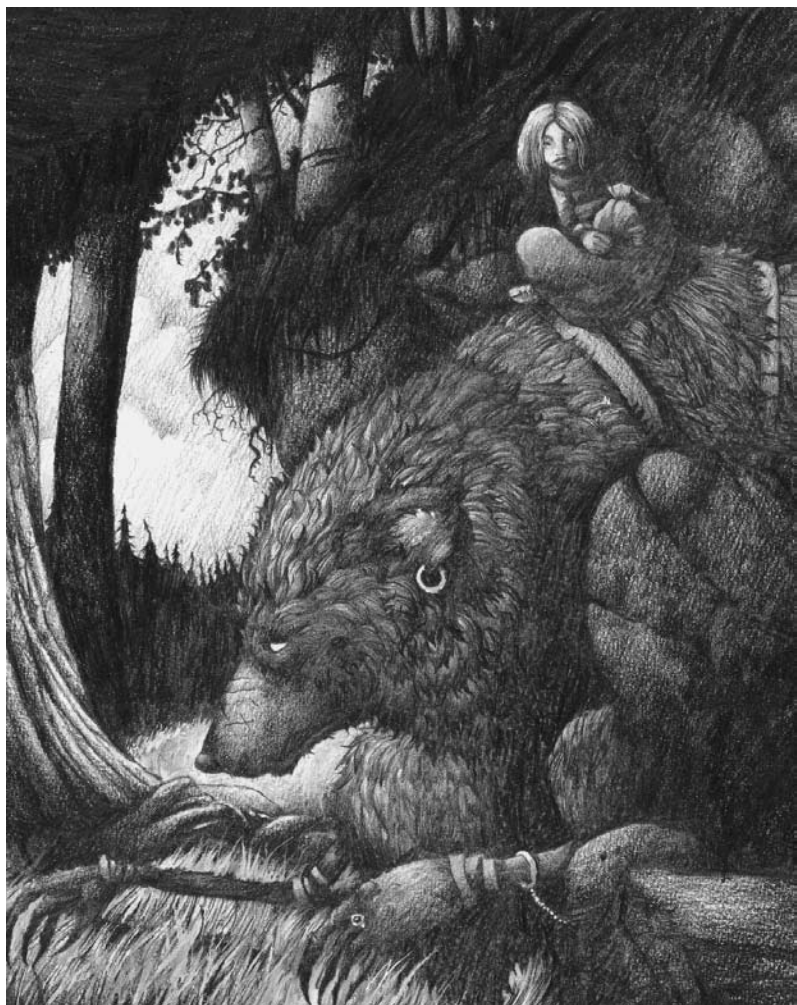
"Not everyone has your depth of character." Trevenen withdrew his skewer from the flames. He tested the temperature of the meat with his fingertips, then crammed a chunk onto his

tongue. Between bites, he turned to Melanie. “Would she really have eaten me?”

“Hard to say,” she replied. “Not right away, at least.”

Trevenen stopped chewing. “Then this isn’t really fair, is it?” he said through the corners of his stuffed mouth.

Philip of Macedon laughed, then thumped his stomach and belched. His lips were crimson in the firelight and the juice running from his mouth made his chin glisten. “Fairness is relative,” he said, leaning back and putting his feet up on the coffee table.



Werewolf

eric orchard

How Ramona Saved the Ducks

Allan Richard Shapiro

"Stop talking to your dress, Mona."

"Sorry, Mommy."

Eleanor has her elbows on the table and her hands together. At first glance you would think she is saying grace, but she is actually praying to God to grant her the strength to not murder her husband. Her parents, Sergey and Stella, are seated to her right; Esau's, Iris and Stanley, to her left. Sitting between them, Eleanor experiences subsequent fits of rage and calm. Irresistible well-being when she looks at Esau's mother and Sodom-and-Gomorra hellfire when she looks at her own. "Mona, honey, can you please go find your father for me."

"Sure, Mommy." Ramona looks down at her empty plate and then at her dress. "I know," she says to it, "I know already. Geez!"

She hops off her chair and continues to talk to her dress while she walks away. After a few steps, she stops and turns around. "Be right back," she says.

"And Mona, honey, tell him we're waiting."

"Okay, Mommy."

"And tell him we're hungry."

"Sure."

"And that the food is getting cold. And that I'm *hungry*."

Ramona is in the hallway. "Okay."

"And tell him to hurry."

Ramona is at the foot of the stairs. She nods her head convincingly. "Sure."

"And Mona, honey, sweetie, tell him that Mommy loves him very much." This statement emerges through clenched teeth.

Ramona knows what that means, and giggles. "Yes, Mommy."

Eleanor smiles at Ramona's reaction, then she lifts her eyebrows and her head in the direction Ramona should be going.

Ramona knows what this means too, and hurries up the stairs, which are inconveniently not made for her height.

Once she reaches the second floor, she walks on her tiptoes. Ramona knows that when you are looking for somebody you have to find them very quietly, otherwise they'll know where you aren't, and Ramona knows those are the best places to hide. But it is hard to be quiet when you are fully embroiled in a debate with your dress.

"I know," she is saying, "but I already told you it's toooooo late." She holds her hands out in frustration. "I am only four years old!" She shows her dress four fingers.

Ramona is halfway down the hallway. She has already passed her room and her brother's. She can see the light on in her parents' bedroom and she can see that the door isn't closed all the way. The way she is walking on her tiptoes, the way she is holding her hands out to steady her steps, the way her mouth is open and her eyes stare, have all turned the quest to find her father into something else entirely. This is the end of the movie, when the young heroine discovers that the man hiding behind the curtain pretending to be a god is actually her dad—a finale Ramona always considered rather melodramatic.

When she is at the door, she takes a deep breath, pretending she is gathering the courage to continue. Her eyes open wider as she pushes the door open with her tiny hand. Then she does a giant bunny hop into the room.

"Daddy!" she yells with all the awe and wonderment of melodrama on her face.

Esau was sitting at his desk typing on his computer; now he is holding his chest. "Ramona, baby, how many times have I told you how much Daddy doesn't like that game."

Ramona is quickly at her father's side, a hand on his arm. "Did I give you another heart attack, Daddy?"

"I'm afraid you did, baby." He looks down at her, sullenly nodding his head.

"What are you doing?" she asks, switching her attention from pseudo-concern over her father's health to the computer screen.

"Just typing an email for work," he says as he returns his attention to what he was typing, which, in fact, had nothing at all to do with work. Esau is actually on a Jewish internet dating site, and he is just about to finish an email to one Smoochies79. "Tell

Mommy I'll be right down." He still has Sassajap, Jewreanchick, and HalfJewHarriett to write to.

"Oh, Daddy," Ramona says, squinting to make out words she doesn't understand, "it's already too late for that. What does 'com-min-gling' mean?"

"It means stop reading Daddy's emails. Is Mommy mad?"

Ramona looks up and nods her head. "She told me to tell you that she loves you very much."

"Oh, shit! It's that bad?"

"She told me to tell you that she's *hungry*."

"Oh, no. What do you think our chances are?"

Ramona hops up onto her father's leg. "Well, Daddy," she says, still intent on the mystery of the words she doesn't understand, "my chances are a hundred percent."

Esau thinks of something else to type and then types it—something like "We are not that different after all." He adds aloud, "What about mine?"

Ramona watches his hands while he types. "Yours are negative fifty."

"Negative fifty percent? You're kidding!"

"Afraid not, Daddy."

Esau hits *Send*, shuts down the computer, and plucks Ramona off his leg. He turns her around so they are facing each other. "Well, Ramona, looks like it's about time we went on the lam. I'll climb out the window. I want you to go downstairs, get the car keys, and meet me outside. Make up some Ramona story if you have to."

"Can I tell them about the pirates and the ponies?"

"What about the pirates and the ponies?"

Ramona shakes her head at his ignorance. "They're at war, Daddy. Duh."

"Oh, sure, tell them about the war between the pirates and the ponies. So, what do you say, kid? Are you in or out?"

"Where would we go?"

"Where would we go? We're heading to Mexico, baby. We'll be Ramona and the Gringo." Esau stands, picking Ramona up, and slowly begins to make his way to the dining room. "Have you ever been to Mexico?"

Ramona shakes her head and laughs.

"Oh, it's just fabulous this time of year. There's not a white person for miles around and the women all wear roses in their hair and the cactus are made of chocolate and the donkeys are made of marzipan and all the rivers are filled with tequila. It's a regular Candy Land on acid."

Ramona laughs again. "What's acid?" she asks.

"Acid is what adults do in college, baby—or instead of college."

This is one of Ramona's favorite games. "And what's tequila?"

"Tequila is the reason why you're here, baby."

They are already at the stairs. Esau makes sure to take as long as possible to navigate each step, and talks as loudly as he can without yelling.

"Do you think I'll like Mexico?" Ramona asks.

"Oh, I think you'll love it. Plus, you know how Mommy *hates* spicy food, so she'll never come to Mexico to look for us. But you're going to have to learn Spanish."

"Just like the pirates!"

"Your pirates speak Spanish?"

"Only the ones from Spain, Daddy. Duh."

"Of course. What was I thinking?" And then he kisses her on the cheek and lets her down. They have made it to the first floor, but are still out of sight of the table. "Here's your first Spanish lesson. Say '*Mucho gusto*.'"

"*Mucho gusto*," she repeats with an exaggerated curl of her lips. "What does it mean?"

"It means 'Biiiig tuuuushy,'" Esau says, deliberately timing it for the exact moment Eleanor's snarl comes into view. Her hands are balled into fists in front of her face, a face filled with all that Thanksgiving earnestness, all that happy-holiday approach to everything—like mixing hemlock into a banana daiquiri.

Thanksgiving at Esau and Eleanor's is not for the faint of heart. Every word is rife with savage subtext, every gesture an encoded message to the adrenal gland, every pause in conversation just another opportunity for silent interrogation. Those in attendance often find themselves sweating profusely; extra napkins are provided if requested in advance. There is nervous teeth-picking. There is wine-gulping. There are awkward apprehensive glances

at one's dining companions, like at the last supper before a prison break. But nobody can escape this. This is holiday.

Ramona is still laughing at the *Mucho gusto* joke as she takes her chair facing her little brother Zachary. The children have been seated on Esau's end of the table after forty-eight hours of his demonstrative urgings. It was either that or the combo parents/in-laws special.

"Nice of you to join us," Eleanor says as Esau sits down. The parents take turns staring at him. Ramona is still giggling. Zachary is waiting for the perfect opportunity to stick his finger in his nose.

"I am so sorry about that, everybody. Really I am. Oh look! You already carved the turkey. You really didn't have to wait for me. Really you didn't." And as he's looking at Eleanor: "I really wish you didn't." Eleanor shows her fangs. Esau winces. "Let's eat!"

Oh, if it was only that simple. If only empty plates could be filled with food and that food could satiate such an appetite as Eleanor's. It helps, yes, but it also hurts.

"Family," she begins, "should eat like a family on holidays." This from a woman who has been known to eat families, on holidays or otherwise. "Like a family," she concludes.

Esau steadies himself for the flood.

First it's his mother: "Family! Yes. It's the only thing we can count on in this world."

Then it's hers: "The only thing," and now there are tears in her eyes as she thinks of all the family she left behind in the Ukraine. "When I think of all the family I left behind in the Ukraine, it brings tears to my eyes." She displays the tears in her eyes by slowly turning her head a hundred and eighty degrees.

Then it's her father: "You shouldn't take such things for granted, Esau. Without family, Esau, you're like a body without a soul. You're like a grain of sand without an hourglass. You're like.... You're like...."

Esau's father: "You're like an anus without an us."

Back to her father: "Exactly!"

"What's an anus?"

"It's where Daddy hides his brain, Mona."

The parental units applaud. Even Esau nods his head in approval, with a "Well done" to Eleanor.

"Thank you. Thank you," she says, doing a pretend bow in her chair.

Food is distributed. First to the men and then to the children; this is old-country style. This is how things are done on the inside of the other side. Not for Eleanor, though. She has all the instincts of a capitalist, and already has her claws in the carcass.

Discussion lulls and somber expressions replace disgruntled ones. Plates are filled with food and glasses are filled with wine and hearts are filled with the anticipation of heartburn. Not for Esau, though. He has all the instincts of a suffragist, and as he hiccups and eyes his food, he plots his revenge.

It begins innocently enough, with, "More potatoes, please." Three words and a flat smile at his mother, then, "More, please," then another smile, another hiccup, and another nod of his head for another plop of mashed potatoes.

Esau's plan is a brilliant one. What begins with a mountain of inedible mashed potatoes will soon be combined with a molten mass of sweet potatoes and liquefied marshmallow to become a gluey, oozing Thanksgiving conglomeration, which he will explain is a conceptual art piece illustrating the new American ideal of obesity. This will be followed by a discourse on the appropriateness of having an American football team named "The Redskins"—the home team of the city that houses the nation's government, as if culture is merely a condiment to aid in its digestion of its citizens. He will wrap up his performance with his best impersonation of Charlton Heston, announcing that the cranberry sauce is made out of people.

A brilliant plan, until Eleanor notices what he's doing and says, "Esau! What are you doing?"

Which also wakes Iris from the trance conditioned by some forty years of serving more food to people than they could ever possibly want to eat. "Yeah, Esau! You never eat this much."

"Ignore him, Ma. He's pouting." Eleanor takes a scoop of mashed potatoes from Esau's plate and adds it to her own. She notes her accomplishment in acquiring more mashed potatoes. Then she says, "It's not like you're even going to eat that much!"

Esau sneers at Eleanor and says, "Whaaat? I'm hungry!" He attempts to prove it, and immediately regrets his haste as a Spackle-like glob of mashed potatoes makes its way reluctantly down his throat, resulting in another hiccup. It seems to stop time. He adds, around the paste still coating his tongue, "Or at least I was."

Eleanor narrows her eyes. Eleanor loves her mashed potatoes.

Esau continues. "And I was only trying to properly celebrate this wonderful *holiday* of ours." He plays with his molehill of a mountain and concludes with, "I was only trying to say *thank you*."

Eleanor is already shaking her head. Eleanor is already opening the second bottle of wine. Eleanor says, "You're welcome."

His parents, who have been listening rather than eating, share a chuckle.

Her parents, who haven't, both say, "Thank you."

Esau grits his teeth and forges on. "Only in America," he mumbles.

"Not again, Esau," somebody whines.

"Every year," somebody else mutters.

Esau continues, victorious. "No, only in America would we make a holiday out of this. It would be like Germany celebrating the Holocaust and calling it Happy Jew Day."

This produces various expressions of agitation and exclamations of his name. On such occasions, the group defers to Iris to act as the voice of the masses. She has upshifted from casual distaste to outright disgust. "Why do you have to say things like that, Esau? In front of the children, Esau!" She smacks her lips at him. Eleanor quickly refills Iris's wineglass.

"What did I say?"

"Esau. Don't be stupid," says his father.

"Whaaat?"

And then back to his mother; they like to take turns. "What do you mean 'What?' Thanksgiving is about family and saying thank you for everything you have."

"Based on massacre."

"What's massacre?" comes Ramona, looking up from her dress and her uneaten plate of food.

"See what you started." Iris makes a face at Esau but inwardly congratulates herself on predicting the future. "Don't you worry about that, dear. Have some turkey. Mommy made it. Isn't it good?" It isn't, but she chews on a piece, smiling like she is eating a lemon.

"But Grandma," she says, and then back to her dress, "I know, I know, but what can I do!"

Grandma isn't paying attention to her anymore; she has turned to Stella. "He just doesn't appreciate what he has. It's always something else." She shrugs her shoulders as if nothing can be done. "What can you do?"

"What can you do," Stella echoes with more certainty.

"Love the one you're with," Esau mumbles.

"Don't be stupid," says his mother.

"I'm not being stupid, Ma."

"Of course you are. You can't just fill your head with what's wrong with everything. You have to appreciate what you have." She takes a gulp of wine. "That's why you have trouble maintaining your erection."

Esau has many words in his mouth at this moment, most occurring on instinct, the less-desirable ones tumbling towards the tip of his tongue, but then there is conspiracy among them; there is treachery. So instead nothing comes out and he is left silently shaking his head and staring at Eleanor. Stella and Sergey look at each other and then at their daughter, who has her head lowered, trying to hide her smile.

"What's an erection, Daddy?"

"The key to Pandora's box, baby."

"Oh," she says, and then turns back to her dress to whisper to it, "I don't know what that is either."

Stanley and Sergey nod their heads in sullen agreement. The women share scowls.

"Cute, Esau," Eleanor says, after finally regaining her composure enough to consider the cranberry sauce.

"Thanks." Smiling at Eleanor, he continues now with nothing to lose, "And you're right, Ma. I don't know how anybody couldn't appreciate this family. The love and good feelings around this table are palpable."

Eleanor looks up from the feeding. She narrows her eyes at him and shakes her head. Even Ramona knows what this means. Esau, however....

"Family," he continues, "I agree, is the single most influential factor in the actualization of who we are, or rather, the single most influential factor in the necessity of such an actualization. Very important, indeed. What could be more important than being with the ones you love?"

Preemptive eye-rolling ensues. Some head-shaking. Just a hint of muttering. It is like the Olympics of passive-aggressiveness, and currently Esau is poised for the gold.

He continues. "It's funny. When people come up to me—random people mind you—and say, 'Hey buddy,' or, if they know me, 'Hey anus,' and ask me what's the secret to my obvious happiness and overall joy in life, I tell them it's right here in this room. It's all about the people you love, regardless of how they love you back. Isn't that right, everyone?"

Eleanor is still shaking her head, as are the other mothers. The two older men look at each other and share a smile, knowing what Esau is in for. Ramona is still arguing with her dress.

Iris turns to her son with a look of disbelief. "You don't think we love you, Esau? You think we, your family, don't love you? You don't think we always just wanted the best for you and your brother?"

Esau wants to laugh at the way his mother says the words "your brother". Esau wants to ask his mother to say his brother's name out loud. This is not their first Thanksgiving without Jacob, but it is the first gathering where none of them have seen him for this long a time. Nothing but strange, sentimental phone calls from the steps to Grace Cathedral, with Jacob mumbling something about Joseph and a door and a dream, nothing but photographs of his foot with the caption "the other foot" mailed to the ones he loves, nothing but incoherent emails entitled "Valentine's Day"—which was the day before the last day any of them saw him, the day that Esau begged his brother to come home while Eleanor begged Daphne not to leave him.

Esau feels himself moving out along the edge, but pulls back before the fall. "Ma, I'm not saying that," he says, trying to focus on the process of cutting up turkey for Zachary, who, by turns, puts one piece in his mouth and one in his glass of water. "Shake, please stop doing that." Then turning back to his mother to say, "I'm not saying that at all," while at the same time realizing that that is precisely what he is saying, but saying it anyway and then nodding his head in agreement with himself.

His mother is still shaking her head as Sergey asks Eleanor if Esau is still calling Zachary Shake.

"Yes, Dad. He is," she whispers.

Esau's mother continues, "So what *are* you saying? That we didn't love you right? That we did something wrong?" She has the disgusted look on her face again, due in large part to her son and some small part to the cranberry sauce.

And now Stella gets in on the act, joining in whisper with the entire Eleanor side to discuss the issue of their grandson's name. Finally she holds her arms up in frustration and says out loud, "Why can't he call him the same name as you?"

Iris downshifts from disgust to disbelief. "You're not still doing that? Are you, Esau?"

Esau is shaking his head and squinting at Eleanor. "Second date. April, 2001. I say, 'Well, Eleanor, if I ever have a son, I think I would name him Shake.' And she says, 'Teehee, what a cute name. God, I love that name.' Remember that, honey?"

"I thought you were kidding! Who would name their son Shake?"

"I would! Right, Shake?" Shake has his finger in his nose and his tongue hanging out of his mouth in snot-picking bliss. "See! Look at that face! He loves being called Shake."

"You can't call your son Shake! It's not even a name. It's what a twelve-year-old buys his date after a movie." This is from Stanley, Esau's father. "Don't be a schmuck, Esau."

"Don't call Esau a schmuck in front of the children," says Iris.

"But he is a schmuck."

"I'm not saying he's not a schmuck. Just not in front of the kids."

"What's the difference? You think the children don't know he's a schmuck?"

"Oh, they know," Eleanor chimes in.

Ramona looks up from her dress to giggle and say, "I know."

"He's not always a schmuck." This is from Sergey, the only one who actually likes Esau.

"Most of the time, though," says his wife.

"Oh yeah, most of the time, sure, sure."

Esau, meanwhile, is pondering his own castration, wondering if he will need the carving knife and the salad tongs, or if just having two sets of parents will be enough. "So at least we all agree that I *am* a schmuck," he says as he looks around the table.

Everybody nods their head in agreement, even Shake.

Esau wonders if he has been at the table long enough to excuse himself for a cigarette, then says, "I need a drink. Anybody else want a drink?" Not really caring if anybody else wants a drink and not waiting for anybody's answer. "Do we have any Scotch left?"

"No, you finished it all last night during *Iron Chef*."

"*Fuck!*" Which sets off a barrage of glares and exclamations of his name, as if he just bit the head off a puppy.

"Sorry. Sorry." Esau takes a gulp of wine and rolls his eyes at Shake, who promptly throws a piece of turkey at him. "Thanks, Shake."

"See! He's always been a schmuck. We didn't do anything wrong," Stanley says to Sergey and Stella. "The kid wet his bed until he was twelve and likes to blame that on us too."

"Dad!"

"What? Both of you were always nuts." He dismisses his son's objections with a wave of his hand and turns back to the alternate parents. "The two schmucks used to write messages to each other on the bathroom wall."

"Messages?" Sergey asks.

"Yeah—" snorting and taking a gulp of wine "—in Magic Marker, too. Every year we'd have to repaint cause they'd cover the walls."

Esau takes his own gulp of wine. There are things you forget to think about, and when you do, it's like it just happened. This is how Esau stares at the surface of his wine before taking another gulp. This is how Esau remembers Jacob appearing in the bathroom mirror behind him, that smile on his face like he knew something, like he had a secret.

"What would they write?" Sergey is asking.

"Oh, who knows, such nonsense. All over the walls like hieroglyphics."

"More like cavemen, Dad. We weren't sophisticated enough for hieroglyphics."

Sergey has a smile on his pudgy Ukrainian face. "What would you write, Esau?"

"Oh, it was stupid." It was every day for seven years. "Just two stupid kids."

"I'm curious," Sergey says, with a gulp of wine. "Indulge me."

Esau looks at his hands and thinks of the way black letters look on a bathroom wall. Esau thinks of the way he would sit on the toilet and stare at the words written all around him, fascinated more by the way they were written than by what they said; thinks of how careful Jacob was not to go over any of the words; thinks of how eventually what was written looked the same as what was not, just black and white walls, just a window and a mirror, just the same thing, inevitably the same, all around them, which was always Jacob's favorite part. Esau remembers opening the bathroom door and finding Jacob curled up on the floor around the toilet, the marker in his hand, a look of absurdity on his face as he scrunched his chin into his chest so he could look at his brother to say, "I think I found a spot."

Esau wants to laugh, but he also wants to cry. So he smiles while gritting his teeth and says, "Let's not talk about it. It was stupid."

He searches for something to change the subject to. Unfortunately for Ramona, she is always an easy target. "Ramona, stop talking to your dress and eat your food," Esau announces, which sparks everyone's attention, and they then wind in a circle expressing their doubt and consternation over the children's eating habits.

"But Daddy," she is moaning. "But Daddy...."

Esau is still scraping himself off the bathroom wall of his youth. He is trying to swallow down his turkey—a process made all the more difficult by the turkey. Eleanor is staring at him, trying to get his attention so she can express her sympathy, express the love evinced by pain alone, whether she is the cause of it or not.

Ramona is still saying, "But Daddy," and since her pleas are not being answered, her face is scrunching up and is on the verge of crumbling altogether.

Esau has already begun the crumble, starting with the first thing Jacob ever wrote, on the bathroom mirror right below where their faces would appear: "not you again". Esau laughs and looks up to see Ramona on the edge. "What is it, baby?"

She shakes her head; her lips take on that strange curl of a child about to cry. "But Daddy," she says, "I'm not talking to my dress."

"Who *are* you talking to, then?" Esau asks, not sure yet if he should be concerned. It is Ramona, after all. A quick glance at Eleanor; she is equally unsure.

"The ducks, Daddy, I'm talking to the ducks." Ramona is wearing her favorite dress. It's the blue one with the yellow ducks on it, and all the ducks have their necks out and their wings out and their beaks open, and it looks like they're all quacking at once.

"Oh," Esau says, nodding his head, "suppose that makes more sense than talking to a dress." Esau glances again at Eleanor, who nods in agreement. "Well, can you talk to the ducks later and eat your food?"

"But Daddy," she says, not knowing what else to say, not knowing how best to express the importance of the issue. She is, after all, only four.

"What is it, Ramona?" Esau stands and leans over the table to grab Ramona by the armpits and place her in his lap. "What is it, baby?"

Ramona always feels better when enveloped by someone who loves her. She looks up at her father and then at the turkey and then back at her father, and scrunches up her face again. "The ducks, Daddy," is all she can say.

"What about the ducks, baby?" Esau can only smile at her sincerity. Ramona has yet to realize that the world is more than it seems, even if it just seems that way.

One last look at the turkey and then back up at her father. "The ducks wouldn't eat *me*, Daddy."

Everybody laughs, more out of relief than anything else. And the laughter is all Ramona needs, and her face finally breaks and all the sadness of her sincerity is in how tight she holds onto Esau and how she cries against his chest. It is such a simple thing, and all Esau has to do is put his arms around her, kiss her on top of her head, say her name softly in a whisper, feel the sadness of how much it hurts to love somebody so much.

Against his heart, she snuffles and wipes her nose.

Esau is not sure if he should laugh or cry. His daughter, one of the few people who loves him in this world, quivering in his arms, and his son, oblivious to all that does not lie in wait within his nasal cavity, and his wife, the only woman besides his mom who has ever told him that she loves him, and his parents, who have pretended to be parents too long to know the difference,

and his in-laws, whose faces turn beet-red after one glass of wine, and, finally, Esau himself, stuck on the temperamental toilet of his youth, the marker cap between his teeth causing him to slurp his own spit as he writes on the wall in front of him the words "One day you will remember writing this."

Esau is looking down at Ramona and shaking his head with a smile on his face. All the better things in life is in how he rubs her head. He looks up at Eleanor, still smiling, and mouths the words "What the fuck."

Eleanor shrugs her shoulders and says, "She's trying to save the ducks."

It is only then that Esau realizes what is happening and laughs, this time nodding his head. "She is," he says. "She is trying to save the ducks."

His father is the only other one who seems to realize what it all means; he is smiling and leaning back in his chair.

His mother is confused and whispering to her husband, "I thought it was a turkey. Is that why it tastes like that?"

Stella has tears in her eyes, thinking of all the ducks she left behind in the Ukraine.

And Sergey is asking Eleanor if they have any more wine.

"Dad! We're kind of having a moment here."

"Oh," he says. "Tell me when it's over."

Esau, for his part, has not been a father for very long and is still getting used to the idea of how a person produces another person and how the process is defined by the word 'family' and how the only actual connection one person can ever have with another is defined by another word, 'love'—all very interesting things to contemplate, but all having no practical bearing on the situation at hand.

Esau realizes this and decides to do the only thing he can. He lifts Ramona up so she is standing in his lap and looking at him. Her whole body shakes each time she sniffs. "Do you want to save the ducks?" he asks her.

She wipes her nose on her wrist and nods her head, sniffing again, shaking again. "But it's too late, Daddy," she manages.

"Well, it's too late now, but it won't be too late tomorrow. Right?"

Ramona thinks about this. "I guess," she says as the perfect logic of it becomes clear to her. "But Daddy," she says, scrunching up her face again.

Esau says, "I know." And then he stands with her arms around his neck and carries her over to her mother, who gives in to the instinct to hold on as tight as she can. After closing her eyes for a moment, Eleanor looks up at him, knowing what is coming next, and emphatically shakes her head while mouthing the word "No."

"It's too late now," he says apologetically, then he picks up the platter that holds the now-defunct creature of the earth and proceeds to go from plate to plate collecting all the sad remains. He apologizes to each of them as he does this: "Sorry, Mom," "Sorry, Dad," "Stella and Sergey, sorry, really," "Shake, your choice, the turkey or the booger." And once he has it all together, he makes his way with cautious steps to the kitchen, holding the platter out in front of him with both hands like he is carrying the decapitated head of a husband to his headless queen of a wife. And when he is standing above the trash can, he looks back at everyone looking back at him, all in awe at what is about to happen, and says to them, "Happy Thanksgiving," and then he throws it all away, platter and all. Then he looks up, laughs, and says, "Dessert, anybody?"

Dessert is a much easier affair. Pie is easier to eat than cranberry sauce made of people. Esau is still very proud of his place in the world. Especially after Ramona marched through the house crying out in triumph, "We saved the ducks!" and even after Zachary joined in, not knowing what his sister was saying and so instead saying the only other thing he'd heard cried out in triumph in the house, "Daddy is a schmuck!" This went on until both of them exhausted themselves, and now they are lying unevenly on the couch like two stoners, watching Sesame Street. His parents' objections eventually turned into amusement and an understanding that everything remains the same, no matter how much has been lost. Her parents, more recently acquired by America, still have the sensibilities of poverty and want, and the disposal of food, duck or otherwise, makes as much sense to them as naming a child Shake. But this is family, and a holiday.

Things have calmed now. The edge is soft and slippery, and to some, strangely enough, a very comfortable place to be. And so, along the comfort of this edge, they talk of coffee and ice cream. They ask Ramona if she's trying to save the pumpkins too. They speak of weather and the war, of grandparents and politics, of cunnilingus and congress. This is the happy aftermath of the massacre, when loved ones gather to honor the memory of the

dead—always a joyful occasion for the ones in attendance, since it serves as a reminder that they are not dead. Blank stares begin to blue and they begin to accept their circumstances and reconcile themselves to the idea of being all together and all alone, just like a family should be.

Eventually the children fall asleep on the sofa and have to be carried up to bed. This is the cue for the grandparents to take their leave, and Eleanor gathers their coats as Esau gathers up Ramona.

Esau cradles her in his arms so she can continue to sleep, but she stirs while being lifted up and her eyes half-open. “Daddy,” she says.

Esau says goodnight to everybody and then says, “Yeah, baby?” to Ramona as he starts to climb the stairs.

“Thank you,” she says, opening her eyes and closing them again.

“You’re welcome, baby.” Esau is still in awe that this person is his daughter. “What’s more important than the ducks.”

Ramona smiles in her sleep. “Daddy,” she says again when they are at the top of the stairs.

“What, baby?”

“Last night I had a dream about Uncle Jacob.” Ramona has yet to realize what this name means.

Esau says, “You did?”

They are in her room now, and Ramona’s eyes are open again as her father gently places her in her bed and sits down on the edge beside her. “He was so sad, Daddy,” she says with a frown on her face.

Esau can feel it softly trembling inside of him like air circulating within the sensitive walls of his heart. “It was only a dream, baby.”

Ramona puts her hand on her father’s. “He said he missed me, Daddy. He said he was sad cause he missed me. But it’s okay, Daddy.”

Esau is wondering how it is possible to love somebody so much. “It is?” he asks.

“We came up with a plan.”

“You did?”

“We did!” Ramona is smiling to herself and looking straight up at the ceiling, perhaps through it. “We decided that from

now on Uncle Jacob will be invisible and will change his name to Nobody." Ramona is so happy with the idea of it that she turns back to her father, giving in to the melodrama with a huge smile that Esau can only think of as contagious. "That way we'll always be together cause nobody will know who Nobody is. Isn't that smart, Daddy?"

Esau is holding her hand now. "It's brilliant, baby."

"It was mostly Uncle Jacob's idea," she admits.

"Well, I'm sure you helped."

"It was my idea to name him Nobody."

Esau's smile grows and he tickles her while saying, "That's my favorite part," while she laughs and says, "Mine too!"

Then Esau kisses her on the forehead and says, "Goodnight, baby."

"Goodnight, Daddy. Is it okay if I sleep in my dress tonight?"

"Sure, baby." And then Esau bends over to kiss her on the belly and say, "Goodnight, ducks."

Ramona is glad her father remembered; she turns onto her side so she can watch him as he turns off the lights. She is waiting for him to say something else, and when he doesn't, she stops him at the door with a "Daddy!"

He turns to look at her from the doorway, this curling question mark of an angel, this little redheaded child of God. "I know," he says. "Goodnight, Nobody."

Nobody says goodnight too, and then Esau turns off the light and drags himself to his bed, where he takes a moment to crumble before he goes into the bathroom to have a cigarette. He smokes it with the lights off.

One cigarette in an unlit bathroom can quickly breed another, and by the time he is ready to relinquish that need for another, Esau is exhausted and coughing and his brother is everywhere. Then a waterfall of Febreze and so much Listerine it feels like he melted his tongue off.

134 When he returns to the bedroom from the bathroom, from the world of smoke and darkness to the world of compact-fluorescent light and *Nightline*, Esau is himself again, and his wife is his wife again.

Eleanor is on the bed in her nightshirt, one leg up, one leg down. Eleanor is applying moisturizer. Eleanor likes to do this

and then hold her arms out to her husband and say, "Hurry up while I'm still creamy."

This time, however, she is waiting for the smoke to clear before she bothers to notice him. This time she is trying to reconcile snarl and sympathy. Typical of holiday, she chooses both. "You know you set a precedent, yes?"

Esau has already forgotten one thing for another, remembering them now as the same thing and then shaking his head and saying, "I know, but I don't want to talk about it." Then he says, "I'm tired," and instead of joining his wife tiredly in the bed, he tiredly sits down at his computer and turns it on.

Eleanor is still moisturizing. Eleanor will go through half a bottle after an evening with her mother. Eleanor is still remarking on the sincerity of their daughter. "That girl is going to grow up to be a lawyer just like me, I bet you!" she says.

Esau is rubbing his eyes. Esau is listening to what words sound like in his head. "Either a lawyer or a prophet," he says, turning back to his wife, who is like a shining beacon of creaminess in an ocean of eczema, like an angel...like his wife in lotion and compact-fluorescent lamplight.

"She had a dream about Jacob the other night," he says, saying it so quickly that he forgets what he is saying, then realizes what he is saying and wonders why he felt like it had to be said, and then wondering why he was smiling when he said it.

Eleanor slows her moisturizing to feel her heart pound until her stomach is pounding too. It is easier for her to worry about everything than to worry about one thing, and she tries to take a deep breath before she begins to worry if she's stopped breathing too. Then she asks, "What kind of a dream about Jacob?" as if there was a good kind of dream about Jacob that Ramona could have had. Just to confirm it, she adds, "Something bad?"

Esau is still smiling, or maybe he's not smiling. "Actually, it was something good," he says.

Esau is still thinking about how Ramona was smiling, or how Jacob was. "I think," he says.

Esau is still wondering why he is smiling. "Actually, I have no idea," he says, smiling his smile until he realizes it's not a smile at all. "Actually, I have no idea of anything anymore," he says, with all the confidence of knowing that he isn't really smiling.

Then he turns back to his computer so he can shake his head and his thoughts, so he can read emails, so he can know everything he would ever want to know about a world he has never known. And while he reads about how to make his penis longer and about a grandmother who loves gang bangs and about a Jewish girl fresh from grad school and about the new Magritte at MOMA, he tells his wife, "She said that from now on Jacob will be invisible."

He tells her, "She said that from now on his name will be Nobody."

And then he reads about his brother on Valentine's Day.

Eleanor's jaw drops and her eyes go wide in horror. "Oh my God!" she says. "What did you say?"

Esau is still shaking his head. Esau says, "I thought it was a great idea." His brother's voice in his head and then his wife's, the words "it is warm outside", the words "but I dare not open a window".

"Why would you say that? That's a terrible dream! I should go talk to her."

Esau chokes on the words "It's okay."

The words "blood has covered the pane entirely", the words "and from what I can see many other windows have similar problems".

"Okay? How can it be okay? Esau, what's wrong with you!"

Esau knows exactly what's wrong with him and he reads his brother's words out loud to prove it. "The heart that beats within a fist spurts," he says. "But we do not have the strength to crush it." Then he nods his head as if it's the only thing that makes any sense anymore and turns to his wife with a feeling of profound ambivalence.

"She said that she dreamt Jacob was sad because he missed her," he says.

"She said it's the only way for them to be together forever," he says. "If Jacob was invisible and named Nobody."

Eleanor is staring at her husband. Eleanor is trying to understand what is happening, and she gets out of bed to read the words for herself. Lonely words about love, lovely words about being alone. Jacob's words to be whispered aloud.

The words "hidden away in all the hearts". The words "the love to let it bleed".

Eleanor reads these words and then shakes her head. She wants to cry, but she doesn't because he is, and even though she knows she should say nothing she turns to her husband and asks, "What do we do now?"

His brother and his wife, and his daughter, and his brain encased in a cotton ball, and hearing Eleanor's words as if through cotton, and Esau is feeling like he felt that first morning without Jacob—the first and last time Jacob was ever sent "somewhere". Esau is in the bathroom, nineteen years old and home from college for the summer. Esau did not sleep last night and is refusing to look at himself in the mirror. Esau would rather not think about anything, and just pee his pee and then drink his coffee and read his paper and be himself. Esau would rather not think about his brother, but how can he not think about his brother, and then he lifts the toilet seat and he reads the last message Jacob ever wrote, to be read by Esau once he lifted the toilet seat, the words "the best is yet to come".

And so he says, "We do nothing now."

And while his wife stares at him, he stands up from his desk and takes her hand. He kisses the back of it. Then he says, "Let's go to sleep."

He doesn't want to think about it, but how can he not think about it, and when he tries not to think about it, when he tries to make love to his wife, it is all he can think about, even when he's not thinking about it, and he says, "Sorry," and starts to cry and she says, "It's okay," and holds him like he is her child.

This is how he falls asleep, and when he awakens the next morning, he remembers everything, and when he looks at himself in the bathroom mirror, he says, "Not you again," and then starts to laugh, and then starts to cry.

This is the day after Thanksgiving and Esau loves his brother so much he hates him.

Quack

Brian Beatty

The mystic said
my spirit

animal
was a duck

because—
I forgot to ask why,

I was so distracted
by her

week-old loaf of bread.

Forests of the Night

Abigail Hilton

Adel arrived at our small hospice late one afternoon. Her family—an impeccably-dressed couple in their late twenties—hid behind sunglasses and surgically-enhanced smiles. I wondered why they'd chosen our small-town establishment. They looked like they could afford something better.

Adel trailed after them, an ancient woman following along like a lost puppy. She looked rumpled in her thin cotton shirt and trousers, somewhat stained. Her fine white hair gave the impression of a cartoon character who has just stuck a finger in an electrical socket. They told us she was ninety-seven and in the final stages of terminal breast cancer.

No, they just could not handle her anymore. Yes, she was confused—had been confused for years, even before the cancer. Yes, she had a tendency to wander. Here were her medical records, doctors' orders, and insurance information. Here was a very large check. Here were her belongings—one pitifully-small suitcase. Here was their phone number. They would be in touch.

Adel did not appear to understand any of this. A water-color image of a woodland on the far wall caught her attention, and she stared at it while her grandson and granddaughter-in-law talked to the hospice administrator. I watched her family drive away and knew they would not be in touch. She had become a burden and an embarrassment. They would pay her bills and return only to collect a body.

Looking at Adel, I did not think they would have to wait long. She was painfully thin, with almost-transparent skin stretched over webs of blue veins. Her eyes were a watery blue-gray. I introduced myself, but she did not seem to hear. I took her hand to lead her to her room, but she resisted. The painting had her full attention. "De forests of de night," she muttered in a thick German accent. She touched the picture, looked at me.

I felt sorry for her. "How old were you when you came to this country?" I asked.

I didn't expect an answer, but she said, "Sree hundred and seventeen."

I smiled.

She sighed. "Ve all get old. Evenshually."

I nodded. "Yes, we all do."

"I vant to run again," she whispered.

"That might be dangerous for you." Her toothpick legs did not look fit for walking, let alone running.

Over the next few months, I revised my opinion of Adel's mobility. She was the worst wanderer we'd ever had. She was docile when accompanied by a staff member, but given the slightest opportunity, she would escape, and not always via the front door. The staff caught her crawling out of windows, through fire exits, over the garden wall. Fortunately, she was slow and weak and easy to catch. She never argued when we brought her back, just looked wistful.

Our hospice grounds bordered an orange grove, and she always headed in that direction. Once she succeeded in escaping for an entire day and was found completely naked the next morning on the edge of the trees. She'd even removed her dentures. She cried when we brought her back. "I have forgotten how to *verwandeln*." She began muttering in German.

She had moments of lucidity when she would talk of her children in their infancy, of lovers long dead, and of forests. Always of forests. She would sometimes forget how to speak English and would prattle gravely in German for hours to whoever would listen.

Adel had other eccentricities. She craved meat, but wanted it undercooked, in spite of the fact that she hadn't a tooth in her mouth and her much-abused dentures could not handle rare steak. She hated to bathe, but if not carefully supervised, she would jump into the garden fountain and splash and sing and undress. She took off her clothes frequently in all kinds of places.

I could understand why her family had become frustrated. Still, I wished they would at least call her. One day, she said plaintively, "I've been dumped." And she rocked back and forth. "Dey should have put me in a sack vis a rock and tossed me in de river."

“Oh, honey, no, no, no....” I held her hand. She forgot about it a moment later.

Then one day, Adel stopped eating. We encouraged her, spoke gently to her, but she said she was not hungry. And this was a hospice, after all. People came here to die in peace. There would be no feeding tubes, no CPR, nothing to prolong her suffering. Her family was notified. I wished they would come to visit her, but they did not.

Adel grew too weak to leave her room. She seemed sadder and more confused than when she’d arrived. She was constantly trying to remember how to *verwandeln*. I looked up the word in a German dictionary and discovered that it meant “change.” I wished I could change something for her. I took the picture of the forest from the front lobby and hung it in her bedroom.

“See,” I told her playfully, “I’ve brought you the forests of the night.”

She stared at it all day. When she wasn’t staring at the picture, she stared at the window. I made sure it was latched. I knew she wasn’t strong enough to open the latch—she shouldn’t have been strong enough to walk across the room—but I had already learned not to trust her apparent weakness.

Two days later, I was scheduled for a night shift. Around three in the morning, I heard a commotion from Adel’s room. I opened the door and froze.

Standing near the window, I saw a huge, pale-gray wolf. I’d never seen a live one before, but there was no mistaking it for anything else. I opened my mouth to scream, and the wolf whined. I stopped. I looked for Adel and didn’t see her, although her clothes were scattered about the room. Her dentures lay on the floor. The wolf came towards me. I saw that its legs were thin. Its coat was sparse, and its ribs showed. Its muzzle and face were frosted white. Its eyes were watery blue-gray.

Hesitantly, I put out my hand. *She’s got no teeth*, I remembered.

She sniffed. She whined again.

As though in a dream, I walked across the room. I unlatched the window and opened it. The wolf gave a little cry. She bounded through the window into the light of a full moon, and she *ran*.

I saw her run across the garden, up over the wall, and she was gone towards the grove.

No one ever saw Adel again. I reported that I'd found her room empty. We searched for her, put out media alerts, contacted the police. No one ever found a body. We expected a lawsuit, but her family seemed unsurprised and uninterested.

I wonder how far she got. Probably a long way. I like to think that her old heart gave out running through the moonlight and the trees, through the forests of the night.



Idolomantis diabolica

Jesse Lindsay

this infants spine

Zac Carter

we configure like gods.

we and the clumsy girl. she with legs gone unhealthy thin
shuffling along on sunday
flats. on a scuffed wooden floor and
we the ugly ones. our voids like
magnets.

we see without speech.

we and the collapsing boy. he with the sickly arms
dying to challenge
the clouds alone. he is shirtless and searing
and we are ugly like he.

my sisters are sixteen and bleeding into concrete and wood
and screaming with their hips and delicate thighs.

my brothers are fourteen and staring up a gun.
quaking with the machinations and
the muzzle of that.

and there are portions of a second and we are exploding. they are
exploding. my
sisters gone bleeding on secondhand rugs.

we are a thousand malformities. we are geniuses with asymmetrical eyes.
we are this family in that corner and we are talking to shelves.

we and the shapeless girl. her with the memories
of heaven casting her to drown.
we and the basement boy. he with the dark arms
that can fly like a crow.

and now there is this girl with stooped shoulders and a boy with
swimming eyes and all they can do is lean toward each other
when they move.

all of them and all of us and the rest are designed to dangle from trees.

we are of the bruised and faulty. we are of the abilities
suppressed.
we are ugly and ground under heel. we can feel the treads and the
mud in between.

our sister says she can feel the treads and the mud in
between.

our brother says he can feel his scrapes on the cheeks
of his lover.

our mouths say we can feel our scars oscillating like cosine waves.

we are made of cigarette paper. we are flammable ephemera.
we are hurriedly assembled. we are glue where we should be soul.
we are rotting sunsets rattling off like firecrackers where we should be
alive.

and had we no need to place our thick fingers
on this thin paper, we would decorate the mountains with what our
minds
deigned to leave of your bodies.

but we are still just struggles tiny and furious,
we can only bluster through your silent attempts to
make us invisible.

but we say we permit your nodding and loquacious solutions.
we say we allow your disregard for our insomnia. we stare at your
faces in infantile reverence
as we are fascinated by the hands of your clocks.

we are trying to forget.

but we know that

our daughter too will be created diseased. a porous
bat, spiraling at night, her senses
a half inch ahead of her and splattering
like glitter on the cliffs.

Stiletto

Ian McHugh

She didn't react immediately when the bookshop's door alarm chimed and two men walked in. Not until one of them—the taller, clean-shaven with braided hair—said, “Ruby Tuesday.”

Then she flinched.

With careful deliberation, she marked her page and closed the book. Set the taped-together paperback on the countertop and squared it against the edge with finger and thumb.

“Mira Bookman, these days,” she said, and kept the tremor out of her voice, if not her hands. “Haven't used that handle in five years.”

Since the Junta fell, she didn't say, and she'd burned her glad rags and run. Only as far as St Kilda, in the end, from Bellarine round the other side of the Bay, the Redlit City beside the seawall where Spire-dwellers went to indulge their darker vices. Couldn't make herself leave the megalopolis, even knowing it was the only way out from under.

She'd tried; got as far as Ballarat and stayed half a year on the edge of the desert, before the glow on the night horizon had drawn her back. She should've gone further, past the ghost towns out west, across the border to Adelaide. But she could no more free herself of the city than, apparently, she could free herself of these two.

“We know,” said the shorter—wider, shaven scalp, pointed beard, and tattooed hands—and, “Why we're here.”

Mr Oliver, he called himself, and his partner Mr Stanley, their choice of names the only humour in their double act. Both of them wearing Chinese silks cut to Indian fashion, one in rust and the other moss green. It marked them out—was meant to—as cops in plainclothes but not undercover. That and their mirrored polyoptics, like bug eyes that covered their cheekbones and half their foreheads.

“Your system on the net, Ruby?” Mr Stanley asked, his shadow crossing her as he sauntered around the shop, touching this and stroking that.

She guessed the question referred to both the fisheye on the ceiling, which was obvious, and the samplers round the door, which weren't. Some systems were networked and some weren't in the liminal zone that bordered the Ring around the Bay, where the Als' outermost tentacles penetrated from within and the unregulated mess of Melbourne's ghetto and shantytown sprawl encroached from without.

"Ain't even working, really," she said. A truthful answer and the one they wanted to hear. Mr Stanley disappeared behind a rack of Spike-era elektronika, reemerged with a data scroll half-unfurled, dropped it carelessly underfoot.

"You got out clean, Ruby," said Mr Oliver, back to sneaking up on the reason for their appearance. Mr Stanley chose a book and glanced at its cover, then put it back on a different shelf.

"Apparently not."

Mr Stanley laughed, a high-pitched trill intended to set the teeth on edge and having the desired effect. He planted a stilettoed heel in the seat of a paisley reading couch to reach and pull down another antique hardback, flipped some pages, and tucked that one under his arm to take. Mr Oliver remained in the doorway, arms folded and filling it side-to-side, silk jacket straining around his shoulders. Ruby knew the routine and wished she wasn't impressed by it.

"Only us that know," Mr Stanley said. "Only us that tracked you down, Ruby Tuesday. Why we're here. You're clean, Ruby. Makes you our hole card. No one knows who you were, that you know us and we know you."

And she knew and they knew what their hold over her was worth. Two words they needed to whisper—Junta informer—and she was walking dead, no better than a borg ready for retirement. That these two had survived the purges after the Clean Hand toppled the Junta didn't mean they were straight, just smarter and more subtle than the average run of Junta thugs. That they'd survived meant only that they'd stayed ahead this long, like her—and now fate was catching up. That the Hand would use them, regardless, said much about the true degree of difference between the Junta and their incorruptible successors.

"Need you to do a job for us," said Mr Stanley.

"You remember a kid, name of 2Fly," said Mr Oliver. "Used to run with the Bloodied Angels, back before."

A street gang, teens and preteens, one of dozens armed by Junta cops and set to vigilante violence. The Bloods were one of the big ones, with the Shinboners and the Dons. All of them broken when the Hand swept in from Hong Kong or Singapore or whichever puritanical oligarchy it had been.

Ruby remembered the kid; of course she did. She'd fucked him enough times.

"He had a brother," she said, neutrally. "Big behemoth with a temper."

"Blinky Bill," said Mr Stanley, batting his eyelids at her before he went back to flipping through the trays of copyright-hacked one-time wafers.

"Just steer clear of him," said Mr Oliver, with a quirk of his lips that told her she wasn't fooling anyone. "They got out clean, like you, Ruby. Got themselves a place in the commune. 2Fly's working as a courier, up Richmond way. Got himself a girl."

A girl. Leverage, they meant. Ruby asked, "What d'you want him for?"

Mr Oliver answered. "Owes us a favour."

She hadn't known about that, but she knew the language of favours and knew it meant a greater price than what they were asking of her. She closed her eyes a moment, held the sadness inside, for the tough kid she remembered and his girl. She opened them again and stared at nothing while they told her the who and the where and the how.

After they left, she sat a while in the shop and thought about how she might get out from under this, and thought she probably couldn't, would wind up a dead woman if she tried. There were only two reasons that she could think of why that pair in silks and stilettos didn't want to lean directly on 2Fly themselves. The first was that they wanted her as a cut out, a breakable link in the chain between them and the dirty work—could even be they were banking on her running once the job was done. The second was that they wanted their hooks into her again, and wanted to know if she'd still do as she was told. Either way, she thought that this was it, enough, and after it was done she would run, finally. Head west or buy her way onto a ship.

She went outside and locked the shop and rolled a cigarette with shaking fingers. Took a long drag, then another, before heading down to the Strip. Derelicts sprawled in the gutters, unregarded

by the brittle-bright young things who stepped over them and filled the cafes and bars.

A pair of borgs scooped up a dead or near-dead body to load into their van. Living dead men themselves, with half their brains scooped out, wired to some city AI in the Spires. The guy they carried had service flashes on the shoulders of his coat, had most likely spent half a lifetime up Sydney way flying prion dusters out of Picton and Katoomba, keeping back the hungry sentience inside the interdiction zone. This, his reward.

She crossed the Strip and kept going down to the Esplanade, with its double tang of brine and bird shit. She strolled beside the brass wall of the Ring, translucent as gauze, grown up where the beach should've been, covered in guano and graffiti now, cracked and plastered over in places, monument of a billion billion smart-matter corpses.

A gusty wind ruffled her clothes and hair. There were storm clouds to the south, roaring in off Bass Strait. Distant lightning reflected off the siren Spires out in the middle of the Bay.

She'd been there many times, back when she was a trophy of perverse fashion, to the glass city on the water. She'd seen how its glamour dulled up close, seen it for what it was: the unbeating heart of the megalopolis. Symbol of what might've been, were it not for the wild sentience building sky-high sails and coat-hanger bridges where Sydney once was.

When 2Fly had come to her, a skinny white kid with a burn-scarred ear and a child's attempt at a moustache, he'd been just another street thug, but smart and a survivor—not the usual junior sociopath, unlike his brother. It'd taken her a minute to sort him out from among the crowd of Bloods who'd surrounded her a fortnight earlier. He was the one who'd done the talking, had kept his brother reined in when Blinky Bill wanted to keep her as well as the man she'd brought.

She remembered how he'd convinced her to let him buy her time, when she was really out of his league—a plaything for Spire-dwellers alone. He'd kept coming back, paying every time, which must've been more than he could afford. She'd minded him less than most of her clients, because he was respectful and willing to do the things she wanted. In truth, she'd been flattered to be the object of such a sincere obsession.

Now she'd be the death of him.

She dropped the butt of her cigarette under her heel and ground it into the tarmac.

- - -

Friendly's drawer came up thirty dollars over. She palmed the extra, on the grounds it would have come out of her wage if the count had been short. Doubtful anyone would ever know—or care if they did—with the borgs on the entry the only security networked to the head-office AI. The camera feeds went no further than the branch manager's office, and the drawers were only a manual count.

She stopped by the toilets on her way out to secure today's opportunity inside her undies before she strode past the slouching borgs and out the loan-office doors. She spared the living dead men not a sideways glance.

Outside, Friendly endured the scratching edges of the plastic notes for half a block before she lifted her smock and took them out. Few people took any notice, with hookers strutting past flaunting far more than a flash of bare legs and underwear—big business with the cargo port and the air base both less than a kays away.

She spent nearly half of the thirty dollars on herself before she caught the train, bought a kebab roll and a not-quite-fresh orange at the cluster of stalls outside Tullamarine Station, seeing no reason to take it all home and have 2Fly and Blinky Bill blow it on nothing useful.

She ate the kebab on the station platform, watching a giant Indian cargo lifter climb almost vertically into the sky against a backdrop of storm clouds over the southern half of the city. The lifter's wings morphed as it rose, tapering for ultrasonic flight.

The train, when it arrived, was a shaking, groaning, screeching behemoth that had been old before the Spike. Once inside the crowded carriage, Friendly fished out her pod to text 2Fly and find out when he'd be home.

She pictured his face when she showed him her sixteen dollars and change. His lopsided smile, the skin of his right cheek pulled taught by the scars around his ear. They'd add it to their pile, he'd say. Their ticket to India—every little bit counted. Then he'd spend it all on meths, if his brother didn't take it first.

Following his mother, they'd be, if they ever managed it, who'd lit out when her boys were nine and seven, gone to Adelaide they

thought, and the refugee camps there that might get you passage to India or China or the bright young cities of the Trans-Arctic.

Friendly had thought, more than once, of following in that unknown woman's steps, with or without the money 2Fly couldn't save. Hadn't, only because her imagination failed her at the city's edge, leaving her blind to the world beyond and not knowing if it offered any better than the little she had here.

She ate her orange standing in the carriage with her elbow hooked around a pole, dropping rind at her feet.

- - -

2Fly misjudged the gap in front of the tram; guessed wrong, too, that it had a human driver to apply the brakes. When he realised the tram wasn't going to slow, he threw his weight in the opposite direction and wound up with his bicycle on top of him, sprawled in a puddle of filthy water and excrement beside a blocked storm drain.

He lay for a moment, winded and slightly stunned, after the tram swept by with a herd of other cyclists slipstreaming in its wake. He told himself it was a cheap way to learn they'd brought networked trams onto this route—remote-wired to AIs that had less concern for potential roadkill than for precious schedules.

He picked himself up and righted his bike, wiped the worst of the filth off himself and his delivery satchel—no wetter for his mishap, just more pungent.

A woman had stopped to watch him. She held his gaze from under the shelter of a black umbrella. She was tall, six feet at least, topping him by a few inches. Imperious, with the height and that cool stare and her young-middle-aged face, the skin only just starting to loosen into jowls. 2Fly stared, certain for a minute that he was mistaken, or that she was an apparition rattled loose by his knock to the head.

But it wasn't a mistake. It was really her.

Whore, informer, siren.

"Ruby Tuesday," he murmured.

She lifted a cigarette, protected under curled fingers, and took a drag, then flicked the butt out into the rain. "Hello, 2Fly. I've got a job for you."

Cold—as if her bare tits had never bounced in front of his face while she rode him. Like she hadn't enjoyed delivering all the lessons he'd bought from her, back when.

He gestured at the bike. "Got a job already."

Her cool scrutiny went down to his feet and came slowly back up again. "Mm." She made him feel like a little kid, like he hadn't felt since the first time she left him standing with his pants round his ankles while she undressed over the other side of the room.

"Come on, I'll buy you a drink." She turned on her heel, not waiting to see if he followed, and, because of that, he did.

He found himself watching the swing of her hips, obvious even under her loose, plain-spun garb, the rhythm of her gait a lode-stone for any hetero male gaze. Utterly different from Friendly's square-hipped, mannish stride. He flashed to the last time he'd watched this woman walk away from him, in the dark, with a man from the Spires standing beside him waiting to die.

Ruby Tuesday strutted across the road and into the Ghan enclave of Zoo Park. The noise of the city vanished behind them half a block in, as though someone had slammed down a door. The suburb had an otherworldly feel, with its architectural fusion of New Mughal and Twenties Organic Adobe. Whitewashed round walls curved seamlessly into roofs and onion-topped towers, high windows peered down from the homes, and wide-arched open frontages revealed shops and cafes and hashish dens.

The residents were Ghan, which meant Muslim, their family origins anywhere from Marrakech to Ambon. The Zoo's spaghetti laneways were full without seeming crowded, the residents dignified beneath ubiquitous black umbrellas. There were Spire-dwellers among them, flashes of pale skin and rich Chinese silk here and there, most with the faint pearl glow of repeller haloes rather than umbrellas keeping the rain off.

Ruby seated herself at a table in the shelter of a cafe's arched front, facing out on a circular patch of couch grass and the dark leaves of a Moreton Bay fig. Fist-sized mynah birds bickered amid the branches and shrieked avian imprecations at passers-by. Ruby shook and closed her umbrella and dropped a tobacco pouch and envelope of papers on the table. 2Fly propped his bike and then stood, still half in the rain, wondering whether to commit himself by sitting as well.

A waiter arrived and she ordered coffees for both of them.

"I've got a delivery to make," he said.

The corner of her mouth quirked, amused. "Not your problem any more. Here." She offered him a rollup. He hesi-

tated, took it, and sat, turning the chair opposite her so that he was side on to the street. She passed him a lighter and rolled another for herself.

2Fly lit up and took a long drag. He tried to match her cool tone. "What do you want?"

She kept her eyes down, on the cigarette she was rolling with meticulous care. "Couple of mutual acquaintances came to see me. They say you owe them a favour."

She might as well have kicked him in the guts. For a minute he couldn't move or breathe. He'd known the price when they'd taken him off the death bus to Mount Royal, not a mile from where he sat now. But he'd thought, once the Junta had come down and he and Blinks found themselves clear of the wreckage and still breathing, that he was out from under.

His eyes burned. He managed a breath that wasn't quite a sob. "I'm out of the game."

She lit up, looked at him through the smoke. "So am I."

Resentment welled up. "What if I won't?"

"Ain't just you to think about, is there?"

He started to rise. "You fucking...."

Ruby clamped a hand on his forearm and pushed him back down. Emotion cracked her cool facade for the first time. Anger. "Don't shoot the messenger, kid."

2Fly glared back at her for a minute, then subsided and shook his arm free as he looked away. The waiter arrived with thimble-cups of thick Turkish coffee. Ruby Tuesday sipped hers and 2Fly toyed with his, watching the fall of water over the archway.

"I never asked them to do me any favours."

"Way it works."

He tried a sip of his coffee, pushed it away. His cigarette had burned down to ash. She nudged the kit his way.

He shook his head. "What's the job?"

"You ever run into an Islander, name of Siaso Tialata?"

He had to think about it. "Tia. I heard he was dead."

"Seems the Hand dug him up," she said. "There's a corruption trial on at the Barracks Courthouse. Bunch of cops in the dock. Our Tia's giving evidence tomorrow. He knows our mutual acquaintances about as well as we do. He can name them and they can name us. He hasn't been asked the wrong questions yet. Before he is, they'd like you to give him a message."

He felt sick. "In the courthouse?"

Ruby nodded. For a moment, he thought he might've caught a flash of sympathy in her expression, but when he looked at her straight, all he saw was business. He thought she'd tell him again that was the way it worked, that they'd given him his life once upon a time and that meant they owned it, and now they wanted it back. Or that at least his sacrifice would save her life and Blinky Bill's, and Friendly's as well, with the Hand as unlikely as the Junta to discriminate on the basis of guilt or innocence.

Instead, she said, "They tell me security'll be hacked to get you in with the message. Borgs'll go off-line. Long enough for you to have a chance to get back out."

It wasn't much and what it was was more than likely a lie, but he clung to it. He tried not to think of the men her false promises had lured to their deaths. "When?"

"Man's due to testify at four. The delivery's to be made while he's in the stand. They'll probably be running late. You got a pod?"

He nodded, wanting home, and Friendly.

"You can track it on the web. You got a courier pass at the Barracks, right? Won't matter if you hang around a little while—but not too long." She gave him the rest of the details then, while he struggled to take it all in, his brain full of nothing but Friendly: her frowning over some burnt might've-been-a-meal in the kitchen; her toothy smile, too wide for her narrow face. Ruby's image intruded, laid out in naked glory on the bed beneath him. He shook his head to be rid of her.

When she was done talking, he stood. He shivered as the breeze caught the damp fabric across his back.

"I'm going home," he said. To tell Friendly he loved her, to make love to her. To lie, unsleeping, with her warming his back.

Ruby made to hand him his satchel. Fumbled it so that the top came open. He glimpsed a cloth-wrapped bundle slip from her sleeve and into the bag. She closed it again and passed it up. He hesitated, thought of not taking it—and dying within a block of walking away, no doubt, but not giving them the satisfaction of doing their bidding. Impossible, with Blinks' life and Friendly's both on the line. And Ruby had held out the hope, however slim, that he might come through it. Because of that, he was hooked.

He took the bag.

She held his gaze. "Thank you," she said.

He gritted his teeth to hold in most of what wanted to get out, said, "You know where I live." A nod. "I don't come out, you go tell them—Friendly and my brother—you tell them what happened. Tell Friendly."

He waited for her to nod again, a dip of her chin, still holding his eyes.

He turned away, suddenly blind.

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Ruby watched him go—almost forgetting his bike, walking it away, straight-backed and refusing to bow, even though what she'd done to him must've broken him all the way down.

"Poor fucking kid," she said aloud.

He'd changed since she knew him before, become something of the man he'd promised. Got weak, the old him would've said. Grown up, she would've told him, had he asked. She remembered the last time she'd seen him, years ago, a week before the Hand had come and silver men had rained from the sky. She'd delivered a man marked for execution by Mr Stanley and Mr Oliver into the untender care of 2Fly and his fellow Bloods. The last of the three times she'd done it. She'd met 2Fly's stare, briefly, but turned away without a word, not waiting or wanting to see him participate in the violence to come.

She rolled another cigarette and stood, dropped money on the table, and stalked out into the rain.

She wove her way along the Zoo's long axis, under the girders of the elevated train line and through the gated brick wall that enclosed the enclave's northeastern tip. She skirted the strip of weed-cracked tarmac separating the Zoo from the featureless white cube that overlooked it.

In there, the Missionaries of Charity had made their home since their expulsion from Kolkata. Where they brought the dead and dying and their meagre worldly goods, the latter to be hoarded for the greater glory of God, the wired-up husks of the former to be sold to whatever temporal authority happened to be bidding high that day.

Mr Stanley loitered at the corner of the Zoo Park wall. Ruby knew for a certainty, then, that they weren't using her because they wanted a cut out. That she'd be assuming the Missionary Position,

more than likely, if she tried to run: face down while they sawed open her skull.

He fell into step beside her as she turned onto Brunswick Road and joined the foot traffic. Pedestrians veered aside from the man in mirrorshades and silk, as though the repeller field around him cleared his path of people as well as rain. The same invisible force caused their eyes to slide away from the woman in the company of the cop.

"Well?" he asked. His ridiculous heels clicked on the concrete—they said he didn't need to chase you; his reach was long enough that he'd catch you anyway.

She refused to look at him, dry under his halo while she was bedraggled; it only now occurred to her that she'd left her umbrella back at the cafe.

"You heard," she said. It was a guess, that they'd got a bug onto her when they'd come into her shop, the kind that would weave itself into her hair and spoor onto 2Fly and whoever else she happened to talk to for more than a few seconds.

"Done us proud, Ruby Tuesday," he said.

"I'm out of the game," she replied.

He smiled—the way the Devil might when he's holding five aces and all you've got is a busted flush.

"I'm leaving," she said. It was bravado to say it, and stupid, when she knew they weren't done with her yet.

He didn't reply, only smiled his Devil smile.

She extended her stride and left him behind.

- - -

Home was the usual when 2Fly arrived, with Blinky Bill filling the couch and vibrating gently to himself. His eyes were open but glazed behind his plastic visor, jacked in to some Cantonese fantasy site, no doubt, chewing up bandwidth and racking up a bill. Working out, Blinks called it, and spent most of his time at it when he wasn't out chasing debt runners, living in virtuality while his implant wires stimulated his muscles.

Friendly wasn't in.

The usual jumble of sounds and smells penetrated the apartment's paper walls. A neighbourly tumult, most days, but today it was too much to bear, to sit and listen to life going on all around. 2Fly left his brother to his virtual porn and went up to the roof.

He leaned on the low parapet—no point seeking shelter under the solar panels when he was already drenched. He tried not to think about the dead weight of the gun in the bottom of his satchel. He desperately wanted to soak up the sensations of the moment: the patter of raindrops in his hair and against the clinging fabric of his shirt, the leisurely *vroom* of the wind turbines—spinning, but too slowly to generate any power. He couldn't hold his mind to any of it.

The clouds were low enough to swallow the tops of the tallest towers, their bellies disintegrating into misty tentacles. The scent of herbs—rosemary and mint—reached him from the roof garden of a neighbouring building. The clamour of the Bourke Street souk drifted across from a block north. The sun, unseen, slipped away, and lights blinked on across the faces of the commune's towers—one here, two more, a handful over there. An island of functioning anarchy amid the predatory dysfunction of the megalopolis.

A shiver made his elbow slip, jolted him out of his daze. After a few moments more, he stood, ignoring the protests of stiff legs and back.

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When she heard 2Fly come in, Friendly was in the kitchen, brushing the wet out of her hair and browsing the meagre contents of the larder for what they might have for dinner.

"Hey, babe," she called out. "Where you been? You get my text?" She turned, saw his face. Her smile died. She stopped brushing, frowned at him. "What's wrong?"

His expression pulled into a grimace that was just short of tears. He got it under control a moment too late. "I gotta say goodbye, babe."

"What?"

He reached out a hand. She drew back, folded her arms. The narrow expanse of floor yawned between them. His fingers hung in no man's land.

"What're you talking about?" she asked. Panicked possibilities tumbled through her brain: another woman, trouble with his dealer.

His chin trembled as he drew a shaky breath. "I owe some guys a favour, babe. They're calling it."

She didn't understand—it wasn't her language; she'd been a communard all her life. "What kind of favour? Fly? Tell me."

"They did me a favour. Back when, before. Got me off the bus to Mount Royal."

"Mount Royal?" Now she had a dreadful inkling. "What did you do?"

His face told her he didn't want to talk about it, that she was sidetracking from what was important here and now. "I killed some men, babe. Me and Blinks."

"You had to. You had to survive after your mother abandoned you," she said, and she knew she was rationalising even before he started to shake his head.

She stared at him in a long silence. "Then we'll run."

He shook his head again. "Can't." And now she understood who he owed, or near enough, from the weight on that word. "I got to go tomorrow. I might be back."

Now she crossed the gap, grabbed handfuls of his sodden shirt. "Go where? Do what?"

He lifted his arms around the outside of hers, pulled her close. She submitted, but stood straight, her temple against his cheek.

She heard the sofa creak in the next room, Blinky Bill stirring. He groaned and she pictured him standing and stretching.

"There some dinner happening?" Blinks came into the kitchen and into Friendly's line of sight. His watery eyes narrowed behind his spectacles. "Bro?"

"Been called, Blinks," said 2Fly.

Blinks' face twisted up, his comprehension instant. "No." He blinked rapidly, the way he always did when he was agitated. His arms started to shake, veins standing out on his thick muscles as the adrenaline triggered his wires. The quaking spread quickly across his shoulders and chest and down his torso to his legs.

"No. Fuck 'em. Fuck them!"

Friendly pressed herself closer against 2Fly, tucked her face into his neck. She felt herself shutting down, her emotions going cold in front of Blinky Bill's anger, always the best way to deal with it.

She heard the same coldness in 2Fly's voice. "Can't, Blinks."

"I'll do it."

"Has to be me, Bro," 2Fly said. "Me, or it's me and you and Friendly."

Blinky Bill closed his eyes and opened his mouth wide in a silent scream, his chin pulling back into his thick neck, fists clenched in front of him and arms so taut that the muscle cords started to separate.

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It was an act of stupidity to go to the Barracks Courthouse the next day, but Ruby went, feeling obligated. She'd been unable to sleep, imagining 2Fly with his girl, clinging to each other and the false hope she'd given him, knowing damn well that the borgs being off would get him in, but there wasn't a chance in hell of him walking out again.

Someone who knew should witness his passing. Besides which, she'd promised she'd take the news to his girl afterwards and wanted to be able to tell her, for a certainty, that she'd seen him fall with her own two eyes.

She arrived during the afternoon adjournment, took her place in the high public gallery that overlooked the courtroom before proceedings resumed. Slow-spinning fans hung from the ceiling, their blades only slightly above her eye level. The air they wafted felt cool across her freshly-naked scalp. The benches below began to fill with lawyers and accredited bloggers. The lawyers on both sides were hooded, their identities protected. Ruby was surprised to see no phalanx of olive dress uniforms filling the back rows. The blogs had mentioned their presence, an intimidating show of support for their colleagues, at all previous sessions.

She fished out her pod and logged on to the courthouse net, found a couple of news and opinion blogs that described the trial in depth. She felt a stab of unease when she discovered that Tia wasn't mentioned among the witnesses scheduled to take the stand.

Armed borgs brought the accused into the box and left them to stand. A stir passed among the prisoners, who were nudging each other and nodding towards the vacant rear benches—wondering, Ruby thought, if their fellow cops had abandoned them.

The disembodied voice of the courthouse AI said, "All rise." God moonlighting as a legal clerk.

The judge—like the lawyers, genderless beneath hood and veil and flowing black robes—appeared behind the armoured glass of the podium and sat. Everyone bar the prisoners took their seats. The judge's synthesized voice gave no hint, either, of their

identity as they banged their gavel and called on the prosecution to resume the case.

A witness took the stand. Time dragged as both legal teams got bogged down in minutiae. The trial was a propaganda piece, its ostensible purpose the Hand's relentless pursuit of corruption. But the Hand had used the prisoners as ruthlessly as it still used Mr Stanley and Mr Oliver, until these had been foolish enough to get caught with their fingers in the till. The trial's real message was that the city's new masters would tolerate no subversion of their oligopoly. In that, they differed not at all from those they'd overthrown.

At 3:45, a shining silver man strode through the courtroom doors. Another followed. They moved as fluidly as any flesh-and-bone human, their gleaming metallic skins seamless over bodies like Michelangelo nudes. The defence lawyer trailed off in mid-sentence as a murmured shockwave washed across the room.

"Christ," whispered the man seated beside Ruby.

Close enough, she thought, as startled as anyone by the sudden appearance of High Baroque Chinese tech in their midst. Metal feet clicked on slate as the Ming-kuang positioned themselves to flank the door. Two robed figures followed another couple of Ming-kuang. All eyes locked on the pair the shining men escorted, robed and veiled like the court officials, but head to foot in purple, except for the bright flashes of white gloves on their fingers.

Clean Hand.

The pair sat together in the empty block of benches the supporting cops normally occupied. The blunt symbolism of that action was not lost on Ruby. Nor, she suspected, on anyone else present. She jumped at the crack of the judge's gavel. After a pause, the defence lawyer collected their thoughts enough to resume questioning the witness.

Ruby ignored them, still staring at the two in purple. Siaosi Tialata wasn't the target at all. Or perhaps he was, but only in the sense that the unhappy coincidence of his arrest had accelerated an already-existing schedule. Or, as likely, Tia really had died way back when, and everything Mr Stanley and Mr Oliver had told her had been a lie. Either way, the pistol she'd dropped into 2Fly's satchel was not a functioning gun.

The sons of bitches were launching a coup.

She'd checked the pistol over before she'd passed it on, out of habit and knowing who she was dealing with; probably 2Fly had done the same. But how the bomb was integrated and how it might be triggered, she could only guess.

She tried to breathe, but her ribs wouldn't expand. She got up, stamped on the feet of the guy next to her, and mumbled an apology. A Ming-kuang lifted its shining, sculpted face. Ruby fled.

Out the door and down the stairs, trying not to run, to keep it all off her face. Along the corridor and into the long central hall, flat soles slapping on the stone tiles while the skin tried to crawl off her back and overtake her. Across the foyer, past the security point, and out the doors. Down six steps to the red-paved courtyard, the gate ahead, open, iron railings painted green.

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2Fly perched on a bench in the courthouse's central hall, pretending to compare his delivery schedule with the contents of his satchel. He fished out his pod to start drafting a text message.

Security borgs slumped, motionless, in their alcoves—impossible to tell whether they were shut down or not. The gaze of a living security guard settled on him, slid away again when 2Fly gave him a what-can-you-do smile.

The guard's head turned abruptly towards the front of the hall. His jaw fell open.

2Fly looked. The bottom dropped out of his guts as half a dozen Ming-kuang marched across the slates. Purple-robed figures walked between them. He watched, numbly, as they strode past. The Clean Hand and four of the Ming-kuang went through the doors of the courtroom that he'd been waiting to enter himself. The last pair of silver men took up posts on either side of the doors.

2Fly's fingers tightened around his satchel, feeling the hard ceramic lump of the gun concealed within. Not a gun at all. Suddenly he knew, with brutal certainty, there was no way he was walking out of there. Puffy-eyed and haggard, that morning, really had been his last sight of Friendly. He hadn't quite believed it until now, had held tight to the false thread of hope Ruby had offered. He didn't know whether to spit with fury or cry at how she'd duped him so thoroughly.

As though summoned by his helpless anger, the siren bitch chose that moment to appear on the stairs down from the courtroom's public gallery. Ruby didn't see him as she hurried past. Her gaze was locked on the exit. Her face was grey-white, like she'd just looked into her own grave and found something grinning back at her.

He knew, then, that she hadn't lied to him. She'd come to witness his passing, in case he didn't make it. Had put herself at risk to do it. Had only figured out the lie seconds after he did, when she saw the Clean Hand and their Ming-kuang guards for herself.

He watched her hurry out the front doors and down the steps. If he walked away now, they were both dead.

Them, and Friendly, and Blinks.

He stood.

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Ruby was a hundred metres up St Kilda Road when she heard the flat *crump* of the explosion. She felt it through her feet, her knees going momentarily weak. She kept on walking, ignoring the klaxons and shouts that started up behind her. A tram went by, slowing, and Ruby crossed the traffic lanes and joined the back of the queue to board.

She stayed by the door, hanging from a wrist strap while she wiped away tears with her other hand. She felt as hollowed-out and empty as a borg.

Not out of this yet, she told herself.

The tram rolled down towards the river, past the fortified cylinder of the Concert Hall Watch Station, and then over the water with its rainbow skin of volatiles. Past the avant-garde angles of the Federation Square squats and the unroofed buttresses of St Paul's Cathedral, into the lee of the commune's towers.

She got off where the tram crossed Bourke Street, stepped out into the middle of the souk that had permanently converted the mall into a single-lane thoroughfare for trams and rickshaws and pedestrians to share. Yesterday's rain had evaporated already. The crowds of shoppers moved within a haze of reddish dust.

Ruby faced downhill, towards Spencer Street, where the trains left for Ballarat and places west. She turned away, went the opposite direction, up to Russell Street and right until it intersected with Little Collins. She found the right building easily enough, and had the luxury of an elevator ride up six storeys. She made her way

past paper-walled apartments, the air thick with the smell of too many bodies. Someone's kids were gleefully murdering each other, one of them communicating entirely in ear-piercing squeals.

She knocked on a particular doorframe.

A girl answered, long-faced, with a body built of bony angles. She'd been crying.

"You Friendly?"

"Do I look Friendly to you?"

A man loomed behind the girl. Ruby had time to recognise Blinky Bill before he was shoving Friendly aside, a hand lashing out for Ruby's neck. The girl bounced off the doorframe and down. She caught herself awkwardly on one elbow and the opposite hand.

Then the behemoth had Ruby by the throat and was lifting her, one-handed, till her toes only just brushed the floor. She didn't struggle, just hung there with her eyes filling with blood, rasping air through clenched teeth and staring him down.

With a mewl of anguish, he dropped her. Ruby sprawled on the floor with 2Fly's girl, Blinky Bill standing over them and quaking with unexpended rage. Ruby hacked and spat.

"Just the fucking messenger," she rasped.

Blinky Bill pulled back a foot to kick and she rolled away, curling into a ball. The foot came down again without lashing out. Other people had come out into the corridor: a young couple, butt-naked, an older man beyond them. Blinks put his face in his hands and shook.

Ruby uncurled, twisted her head around to look at the girl. She didn't need to tell her 2Fly was dead.

"Come with me," she said.

"Where?" the girl asked.

"West."

The girl's eyes unfocused—not exactly thinking it over, Ruby guessed, not in any conscious sense, more likely just numb and blanking out, her mind on some detail of her life with 2Fly. Ruby waited.

The girl nodded.

Blinky Bill didn't react as they slipped past.

Halfway down in the elevator, the girl asked, "What's your name?"

"Mira."

"I'm Friendly."

They walked side by side across the ground-level lobby and through the doors.

Mr Oliver was loitering across the street.

He unfolded his tattooed hands as they came outside, pushed his silk-clad shoulders off the wall he'd been leaning against.

He patted his own hairless scalp. "Like the new look, Ruby."

Ruby stopped, facing him. "Thought you'd be busy," she said, and thought she'd probably used up the last of her bravado on those words. She didn't try to hide the shaking of her hands.

He smirked. "Always got time for you, Ruby."

She found another ember of defiance in herself, after all. "How you going with those Ming-kuang?"

He sniffed. "Like Paris with Achilles," he said, and she wondered if his offhandedness was forced or real. "Where you off to, Ruby Tuesday?"

Suddenly, she wasn't sure if she could answer. "Leaving," she croaked.

He smiled at that and shook his head. "Still need you, Ruby."

"If you win," she said.

"Already have, bar the shouting," he replied.

She couldn't believe that. Couldn't credit that the Hand would be ousted without levelling half the city. Not that the outcome mattered much, when the argument was between the Devil and his twin. The methods of the corrupt and their evangelical opposite had little to distinguish them when viewed from underneath.

"We're leaving," Friendly said, and put a hand on Ruby's arm. The mirrored gaze shifted to the girl; Mr Oliver's lip curled.

Ruby reached inside her waistband for the roll of dollar and rupee and yuan notes that was everything she had of transportable value. She pressed it into Friendly's hand.

"Go," she said. The girl stared at the money stupidly.

There was a bellow from inside the building. Mr Oliver snapped into a fighting stance. Blinky Bill charged through the doors. Ruby pushed Friendly aside.

"Go!" Ruby screamed at her. Knowing the likely outcome and hoping Blinks would stay alive long enough for Friendly to get away. Thinking that if she stayed then Mr Oliver might not

reach his long arm after the girl. Thinking that it was only what she owed 2Fly.

She watched Friendly sprint up the hill towards the souk, standing quietly while Mr Oliver threw Blinky Bill at the walls.

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Friendly ran, her lungs feeling like they were tearing up, the breath not wanting to come. Thank you, she should've said, but she hadn't been able to make the words, not knowing who this tall, bald woman was, stabbed by what her history with 2Fly might be.

She heard Blinky Bill cry out, an animal in pain, but didn't turn. She couldn't think about whether 2Fly's end had been as hard.

Thank you, she thought. Damn you.

She reached the souk and turned west, lost herself in the flow of walkers—White Austros and Islanders and Ghan—who schooled around and between the slow-moving electric rickshaws. A tram rolled by, coming up the opposite way. People and rickshaws alike sheered off around it as though magnetically repelled, finding refuge in the spaces between the stalls.

At Spencer Street she veered away from the train station, climbed the wide bridge over the tracks. At the apex, people clustered. Friendly stopped to follow their stares. North of the city, the great white cube at Mount Royal was cracked open, oily black smoke spilling from its guts.

Change was coming among the city's masters. It had happened before. She looked towards the commune, its ranked concrete towers on either side of the bustling souk, with their wind farms and washing lines and rooftop gardens. She wondered if they would stay untouched this time. She turned south, to the crystal towers rising out of the Bay. They glittered in the sun; no telling what might be going on within.

2Fly was a jagged, hurting place inside her, that might fade or scar over in time, that right now made her want to curl over on her knees with her forehead on the ground.

She turned her back on the towers, concrete and crystal, hurried down the other side of the bridge, and turned northwest, her objective the grand caravanserai on Ballarat Road where the camel trains came and went.

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Ruby sat, legs crossed, on an abandoned plastic garden chair by the brass gauze wall of the Ring. A seagull perched nearby, scraping the muck of the Bay from its feathers with its beak. Its brethren leaned on the breeze; they held station in midair like a flock of tethered kites. Out across the water, the Spires rose, untouched and unchanged by the turmoil of recent days. Only the pecking order of the parasites within was altered.

The wind bent the brim of her sun hat. Ruby took a long drag on her cigarette. She wondered where 2Fly's girl was, if she'd got to the border and across. Ruby liked to think so. She exhaled smoke, breathed in air. She flicked her cigarette away, a dying spray of hot ash where it struck the dead matter of the Ring.

Footsteps approached, stiletto heels clicking over the cracked concrete of the Esplanade.

Flotsam, 1968 - Extant

Matthew Keuter

We went camping to save our marriage
With your mother full as the monsoon clouds
Holding their water above next year's canyon fires.

From the pass, the valley looked like an armpit: a
Black tangled sweat with no trees to sponge it.
Your mother couldn't get right in any kind of clothing.

Naked, she looked like a parade float exploding into the future.
Where she lay down, the horizon disappeared behind three
mountains.
When she asked me to describe her feet, they were a foot & a
half wide each.

At night we listened to the radio. When they shot King
We surrendered under the cottonwood's white flags
Dropping like parachutes on fire out of the sun—

Listen little slippery one, be unborn as long as you can:

Kennedy. King. Kennedy. Vietnam. It's murder out here
Beneath the sun. Noon shadows straight as coffin nails. Heads
hot as grass
In a compost heap. Wading into the river was like stepping into

A meat locker & hanging your breath. Your mother's breasts
were tugboats
Outmatched by the barge sitting low in river silt. Rolling
Onto her back, she raised a camel walking towards you under
water.

Her knees swelled like starfish, her hair was a secretive
Sea anemone, her teeth snapped shut like an octopus
Dragged into the sun: a living dandelion head.

I blew her downstream, steered her like a skiff.
Scooped her like a shovel moving moonstones.
Tasted her like apples ripening in a barrel of rain water &

In the shallows boiling with silver fish
Feasting on the tenth-month amnesia cloud,

Squatted in the river like a bear to catch a salmon.

How's Your Sister?

Anne Goodwin

Whenever I'm catching up with friends, we always end up chewing over the same old topics: how our dream jobs have given way to marking time till retirement; how those gorgeous hunks we lost our hearts to have matured into middle-aged bores; how our angelic children have transmogrified into grunting adolescents. Once we've dealt with those old chestnuts we'll move on to analysing, depending on the season, *Desperate Housewives* or *Celebrity Big Brother*. And then they might ask about my sister.

- - -

So how's she doing these days?

She's doing fine.

Hell of a thing to come to terms with.

She's happy enough.

What was it again?

Cancer.

What she must have gone through. Puts all our grumbles in perspective.

You could say that.

Well, pass on my regards when you see her next.

Sure.

- - -

So how's she doing these days?

"Why don't you go round?" says my mother. "You could see for yourself."

I don't exactly tell Mum I won't go. I tell her about the latest reorganisation at work—four middle managers having to reapply for three posts. I tell her I'm thinking of asking my GP to put me on HRT. I tell her about the endless negotiations with the builders about the loft conversion, and the dust that finds its way into the unlikeliest corners.

"You should see what your sister's had done to her place. The kitchen units are about a foot lower than normal so she can do the washing up from her wheelchair."

169

My husband and I had this fantasy of creating a teenage den in the loft, sealing off all the noise and hormones from the rest of the house, and what we've got is builder's dust in the saltcellar.

"You can't be too busy to drive ten miles," says my mother. "It's not like it's the other end of the country."

It's not.

"You didn't even send her a get-well card."

I didn't.

Selfish cow, me.

- - -

She's doing fine.

Or so my mother tells me. But she's always been one to find the silver lining where Emily's concerned. "You should be pleased for her."

I search and search for a part of me that can be pleased for my sister. It should be in me somewhere. Even if it's not where I want it, like the dust in the saltcellar. She's living her own life; I must be pleased.

"At least it's put an end to all that waiting. All that fighting. She's happy now."

I believe in empowerment. I believe in a woman's right to choose. Lots of us are going in for cosmetic surgery these days. Lots of us are dissatisfied with our bodies. Who among us wouldn't fix ourselves if we got the chance?

"I hate to say this," says my mother, "but you've always been jealous of your little sister."

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Hell of a thing to come to terms with.

Or maybe not. Not if it's what you've always wanted. "You know what Emily told me last week? She said, 'I used to feel like I was trapped in the wrong body. Now I feel complete.'"

Trapped in the wrong body. All her life, my sister needed to lose some of herself in order to feel whole. To be less in order to be more. She was like that exercise we had to do in English class: *précis*, it was called. They gave us a passage and we had to chop bits out without losing any of the meaning. Cutting through the crap. I used to quite like it.

Weren't we all like that, in a way? Right through grammar school, didn't we compete as much for the pounds lost as for the marks gained when the homework was returned? It's even worse

these days, with the size-zero supermodels and all the pressure on children to succeed.

So my sister was just like the rest of us. Just that bit more dramatic in her desire to be less. Just that bit more determined to achieve her goal.

"You're always saying a woman has the right to do things her own way," says my mother. "You should be proud of her."

And I am. Surely I am.

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She's happy enough.

Or so my mother keeps insisting, banging on about it like she's hammering a wonky nail into a particularly stubborn wall. Persuading me? Persuading herself?

"All that stuff your dad and I pushed on her when she was little. Thinking she was enjoying it. Ballet lessons. Tap. That bike with the basket on the front we got her for Christmas. When all she wanted was to sit in a wheelchair and let her legs wither away. Remember when she fell off the shed roof and broke her leg?"

Jumped. I said it then and got slapped for it. They said I begrudged her the box of chocolates they gave her for being so brave at the hospital. Jumped, not fell. It all makes sense now.

"Now she's telling me breaking her leg was the high point of her childhood." My mother's voice quavers. "Poor little mite. She must have felt so lonely. So misunderstood."

"You just treated her normal." My voice comes out unnaturally loud. Angry.

Better calm down.

- - -

What was it again?

She told us, didn't she? Warned us. In her own way. Gave us twenty years to get used to the idea. Or block it out of our minds.

Her twenty-first birthday. Didn't want a party. Didn't want a fuss. Just her and me and Mum and Dad and an ordinary lunch at home. And her coming-of-age. Coming out. Sharing her ambitions for the future. Her ambitions of never having to walk or dance or a ride a bike again.

"Why?" I asked her. Back then, when the mere idea of it drove away our appetite for lunch. Back then, when we thought the idea was all we needed to get our heads round. When it seemed

like a crazy dream that could never be realised. No doctor would perform the operation, we thought, no matter how much she said she wanted it.

Mum sat at the kitchen table, tearing crumbs off a paper napkin. "You've got lovely legs, Emily. What makes you hate them so much?"

"They're a lot better than mine." I looked down at my own thick ankles. My worst feature. "Why don't we do a swap?"

"Why don't you take me seriously?" said my sister.

"I'm trying to. I just don't understand. How can you imagine losing your legs is going to make you happy? Is it something sexual?"

Dad was warming up the Bolognese sauce on the hob; tears were running down his nose and into the pan. I had never seen him cry before.

Why do you think you need to be an amputee? Is it something sexual?

I'll never forget the look my sister gave me. It was as if I were offering her a gift of used tampons. As if I'd just shat on her dinner plate. As if I were the one who was going against the groove.

- - -

Cancer.

That's the line the family's taking, anyway.

"What am I going to tell people?" my mother asked Emily when she found out it was really going to happen.

"I don't know," said my sister. "Tell them it's none of their business."

"I'll have to tell them something. I'll say it was cancer."

No, I've never heard of cancer of the legs, either, but that's not to say it doesn't exist. Or at least some form of cancer that means you have to have your legs chopped off above the knee and flaps of skin sewn together across the stumps and spend the rest of your life in a wheelchair.

When my mother told me, I said, "Cancer of the brain, more like. It's a psychiatrist she needs, not a surgeon."

"She's seen a psychiatrist," said Mum. "Told her there's nothing he can do for her. Anyway, he can hardly call a halt to the operation. Not now it's got to this stage."

That psychiatrist needs his head looked at too.

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What she must have gone through.

Sat up all night with her legs immersed in a bath of dry ice. Sat screaming along with the night-owl radio phone-in while the blisters and blackness spread from her toes to her thighs. Knocking back the vodka while her legs turned to stone so she couldn't have run away even if she'd wanted to. Passing in and out of consciousness. In and out of sanity. "Takes a certain kind of courage, that," says Mum. "Must have been agony. And all on her own, too, poor love."

At least she didn't press-gang Mum into sitting there with her. Holding her hand and whispering words of encouragement while her perfectly-functional legs were slaughtered.

Once she'd survived that night the surgeon had no choice. Once the frostbite had taken over, her legs were as good as lost anyway. It was either chop them off or watch them turn to gangrene. She must have felt some kind of triumph as she hauled herself out of the bath and reached for the phone.

No more having to strap her leg up and hop around like someone playing Long John Silver in a pantomime. Like she did when she was little and it made us laugh. No longer having more to her body than she believed in. No more struggling to be taken seriously as an amputee-in-waiting.

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Puts all our grumbles in perspective.

You could say that.

Or you could ask why my mother's scared to go to bed for the nightmares and my dad's on antidepressants. Ask why I haven't been able to bring myself to tell my kids, even if they are self-absorbed teenagers who wouldn't give a monkey's. Ask why I feel I've lost my sister, not just her legs.

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Pass on my regards when you see her next.

When, if, whatever, maybe.

Selfish cow, me.

A Man of Kiri Maru

Laura L. Sullivan

Kiri Maru, as far out into the Pacific Ocean off the Peruvian coast as anyone would care to go, had always welcomed visitors, even in the days when its residents occasionally ate them. But those times were long gone, or so wrote Lessa Aldridge, and today they only welcomed visitors with feasts, even as in other parts of the world killing a divine king dwindled to an animal sacrifice, and eventually mere bread and wine were scapegoats for flesh and blood. Kiri Maru was peaceful now, and though they still kept a great many of the old traditions, you could lie upon its pink or yellow beaches and never have to wonder which of your shipmates you'd be having for dinner.

Kiri Maru was so far from anywhere, out past the Humboldt currents in depths where unknown creatures lay dreaming, that it had never been conquered, and in all the colonial days—even in the last great war, when the most worthless pile of volcanic rock and sand was considered strategic—no one had bothered Kiri Maru.

“Kiri Maru” meant something like “island held in red arms” in the subtle native tongue. But many also knew the island by another name, Bastamar. Legend said that a Spanish ship crossing the Pacific (whether it had originated in South America or the Orient the legend did not say) had been stalled many weeks on dead winds, and the sailors, bored with the sea, were considering mutiny, mostly for something to liven up the voyage. When the captain spied Kiri Maru, thinking it was the continent he sought, he cried, “¡Gracias a Dios! ¡Basta mar!” Which, loosely translated, meant “Thank God! Enough with the water already!”

And though they never conquered the island, they were still a conquering people, and wrote their history for themselves. Ever after, on Spanish maps, the island was Bastamar, and it was only in recent years, these days of safe, soft exploration and ecotourism, that select adventurers again made their way across the seas to Kiri Maru, and learned from the natives to call it by its right name.

You may have heard of Kiri Maru's most famous resident, Lessa Aldridge, for she was not a native, and spent the first forty years of her life making a name for herself in the rest of the world.

She was (and, perhaps, still is) an anthropologist, archaeologist, and mythologist of the old, unspecialized, adventurous school who, in the sixties and seventies, bashed around the world with her loyal, harried camera crew, telling everyone that his favorite religion was exactly like the religion of the person he'd been fighting a holy war with for centuries. She dissected cultures' pasts and simmered down their old gods and rituals until they fell apart in the universal stew she was cooking. She showed us that Christianity and the cults of Isis were exactly the same, that battling Jews and Muslims might as well have been hacking at their own image in a mirror, that today we believe, and practice, and worship, the same things we have since man's first inception, albeit in slightly altered form. In short, she told the world as plainly as she knew how that it was a fool, and, though a great many people didn't like her, she was always asked to provide a quote.

She came, in her travels, to Kiri Maru, and there she had three revelations. She found what she had not believed to exist: a religion and system of beliefs that did not mesh neatly with every other one she had studied. She also found that even a woman of no religion, or a woman of all religions (she did not herself know which she was) could be struck by a heavenly epiphany and be converted one magical night in shallow island waters. And at last, at forty, she found that thing most trivial and wonderful, love, in the arms of a Kiri Maru man. She sent her film crew home, took off most of her clothes, learned to spear fish, and made two baby girls. At seventy, when one child was twenty-nine and the other just nineteen, Lessa Aldridge was bitten, though not eaten, by a shark, and died. It was considered a lucky way to go.

"They have one god," Lessa wrote in what would become the authoritative text on Kiri Maru ways. "Or rather, *had* one god, for they say that he is dead. He has not gone away, he is not sleeping, he will never be reborn. Just dead. And he didn't even die performing a miracle, or from great age. He created man, and the earth, and all the creatures in it, and dedicated most of his free time (when he was not fishing or making palm toddy) to, well, not guiding them exactly, but listening to their problems, like a modern shrink, vaguely suggesting possibilities, and leaving them to make their own decisions. And then, sadly, when he was climbing up a coconut palm one morning, he lost his grip and fell, striking his head on a rock. I think he was tipsy. Bad luck, eh? Have you ever

known a god to die from sheer silly bad luck? The Kiri Maru shrug, and say it can happen to anyone.

"They go on," she continued, "to confess that it was not a very auspicious way for anyone, particularly a god, to die. Methods of death feature prominently in their beliefs, and the luck generated thereby is passed on to the rest of the community. Murder here is nonexistent for the very reason that being deliberately killed is the most unlucky way to die, and no one would bring such bad fortune on their own people, no matter what the grudge. Random accidents are not very lucky either. Drowning is fairly good; poisoning from one of the cone snails or tiny deadly octopus very lucky indeed. But the best way to die is to be ripped apart by some wild animal. When that happens, the village celebrates and shrines are erected in memory of the deceased, so that the good fortune generated may be perpetuated for generations to come."

"In their culture," Lessa wrote in a later chapter, "there is no concept of a single day. 'Day and night go into each other,' they say, 'so how can you tell where they begin and end?' It is their version of the chicken and the egg, but rather than speculate, they ignore the dilemma. They pay the least respect to the sun of any culture I've encountered, though they quite value the moon. All periods of time are determined by the moon. The hours of the new moon do not technically exist to the people of Kiri Maru. They are outside of time. When the moon is dark they are wary, and seldom leave their homes. They believe that the things they do then are not real. Most do as little as possible in that time, though some will do the things they wish never to speak of, things they will later forget as though they had never happened. Woe to the man who dies at moondark, for then there is no luck, good or bad, at his passing, and it is as if he never lived.

"So there are no days that begin and end. People eat when they are hungry, or when they can catch fish. They sleep when they are tired. There is no order to things. We regulated urbanites might think them savages for such indifference, and indeed, at first it was hard to adjust to such a life. But oh, what a paradise, when there is no time set to work, or play, or make love, when all things desired are free and easy to come by. You will scoff, say they are unambitious, stagnant.... But they will answer you, 'Why should one desire that which he cannot have? Or for that matter, that which is hard to get? There are so many things in the world,

you will never run out of them.’ Or, as another once said, ‘The world is so full of a number of things, / I’m sure we should all be as happy as kings.’

“There is one more thing you must know about time on Kiri Maru,” Lessa continued in her book. “That month is considered one unit of time. No, that doesn’t make it clear at all. That lunar cycle is considered one discrete moment in time, a palpable instant in infinity. Anything that happens in that moon phase is considered to happen in the same moment. Do you understand? Whether it happens in the quarter moon or the day before full, they believe that it happened in the same moment. No, I don’t quite see it either. But the people of Kiri Maru see the world in aeons, and know that they are but a breath, a speck in all of that. A day, a month, a year, forever.... It’s all a meaningless chunk compared to the infinite. For savages,” she wrote sarcastically, “they are really very deep.”

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One day there came to the happy isle of Kiri Maru a great ship named *The Dachshund*, which set anchor outside the lush reef that fringed the mountainous emerald jewel where Lessa’s daughters, orphaned, still lived. (Their father had been stung in the throat by a non-native wasp blown in from the mainland, and died of shock and asphyxiation. There was great debate about how much luck this odd death brought.) From this ship there came a man still very like a boy, as men are when they have spent most of their lives in universities, and he called himself a scientist. He was looking, he said to the Council of Youths with some hesitancy, for the giant squid, *Architeuthis*. He planned to sail to Australia and New Zealand to further his quest, but before that, he’d felt compelled to stop on the island where he’d heard they worshiped a smaller sort of giant, *Dosidicus gigas*, the Humboldt squid, the red demons, who were bigger than men. He wanted to learn of the smaller distant cousins, he said, before he tackled the greatest monsters of the deep.

The Council of Youths exchanged amused glances, much to the man-boy’s discomfiture. He’d asked to be taken to someone in authority, a chief or wise old elder, and found this gathering of bronze young men and women with flowers in their hair a bit off-putting. He did not know that on Kiri Maru governing was left to those who had the greatest stake in it, the vibrant men and women

between twenty and thirty. It was for them to arbitrate in the rare disputes, to lay down what laws long tradition had not established. Life was so kind on Kiri Maru that their role was almost symbolic. But when a stranger asked to see a person in charge, he was brought to a healthy, supple-limbed youth.

"I'm afraid you've been misinformed," said Landa, the elder of Lessa's daughters, as the other youths wandered away. Landa sat in her last year on the council, and was thought to be steady enough to answer this fellow's questions without embarrassing him with laughter. "We do not worship the red man of the currents."

For a moment he was too surprised by her accent—perfect English with the distinct sounds of Brooklyn showing through the staccato sharpness of Kiri Maru speech—to answer; then it took him a moment to realize that by "the red man of the currents," she must mean the squid, so that all in all he stared at her so long he felt more a fool than before. "But I've seen pictures of your shrines. They show Humboldt squid more than any other figure.... Carvings, paintings, engravings, all of squid."

Landa shrugged her lovely golden shoulders. "If a cowboy paints, he paints cows, and horses. That is what he knows, what he sees every day. He does not worship them. Or if he does, he doesn't know it." She tilted her head at this last, thinking her mother's thoughts.

The scientist found it difficult to listen to her, for after years of pale, serious women in lab coats or cheerful, empty students, this mahogany-haired, hazel-eyed creature was as a shot of whiskey to a teetotaler, and the blood seemed to burn more hotly in his veins. The people of Kiri Maru tended to be beautiful, with a Polynesian cast, but Landa, whose features more closely resembled the caucasian girls with whom he was most comfortable—though carved in topaz and tiger's eye—struck him the way all but the most deadened souls are in one way or another stricken by tropical-island life. He felt a mad desire to what he would call "go native," to do what Landa's mother had done in her time, and rip off his clothes to cavort in the waves. But with three heavy, myopic blinks he beat the impulse back. It may have been his dignity that stopped him, or the noble, unwavering scientific purpose from which he dared not be swayed...but I rather think it was the thought of his own narrow chest, the color of new milk, that stayed his impulse of wildness.

"The red brothers live in these waters, as do the small silver squid, and the orange-veined cuttlefish. You will find them, if you look. But perhaps I should get someone to show you."

"Can't you show me?" he asked, almost breathlessly.

"No," she said firmly. "I am very busy. I'll send someone." And with that she turned from him and spoke briefly to the next person she passed, before sitting down in the sun some distance away. She stretched her long limbs, and soon seemed to be asleep. As you see, she was very busy indeed.

That person she spoke to soon spoke to another, who in turn passed the message along, until sometime that afternoon this efficient form of communication reached its end, and Landa's young sister Karisi strode along the beach from her occupation of slowly prying raw limpets off the rocks and eating them, and, approaching the scientist from behind, took him by the shoulders.

"You would like to see squid?" she asked, smiling, when he turned, as though he had granted her the most delightful favor.

In the face of this new vision, he forgot that Landa existed. Karisi was fashioned along the same lines as her sister, with a form somewhere between a panther and Aphrodite. Her skin was much darker than her sister's, perhaps a shade or two lighter than a ripe coconut. Her eyes were a blue-grey that almost shocked him by their seeming artificiality against that brown skin, and her hair, a wonder amid the collection of sleek, straight ebones, coffees, and umbers, was a glowing reddish gold that crinkled down her back.

"I would.... I would like...." He could not find words for what he would like just then.

"You are beautiful," she said, calmly and pleasantly. "Your eyes are blue. I am the only one here with blue eyes."

"Are you.... Were you born...."

She laughed, thinking that his education had done little save take away his ability to say what he meant. She, who had learned everything she needed to know from her mother and father, from the sand and mountain and waves, very rarely had such trouble making her desires clear. "My mother was American, my father a man of Kiri Maru. Does that help?"

It explained a thing or two, but it did not help at all with the growing confusion of his body, which said, "Kiss her now!" while his mind argued that civilized people didn't kiss on first sight, and he should not strike up an acquaintance when he'd be sailing

away within the week. Nor did it help when she took both his hands in hers and led him into the pandanus grove, saying simply, "Come."

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The next morning, the sisters sat in the gentle surf of ebbing tide, wriggling their toes, like the pink tongues of flame shells, in the tug of the outgoing waves. Each was the other's closest friend, though, particularly since their mother had died that year, the elder felt inclined to offer gentle guidance, even as the younger unobtrusively sought approval.

"Did you make love with the stranger?" Landa asked with casual curiosity.

"Yes, on the sand bar, with the silver squid beginning to spawn," Karisi replied, flexing her feet as she felt bloodworms beneath the sand (named for their color, and lacking any vampiric tendencies) writhe against her soles.

"Tomorrow is the full moon," Landa said. "The spawning will be at its strongest. Shall we invite him to hunt?"

"I think so. I will need to be with him one more time, at least, to be certain."

"Certain of what?" Landa asked, knowing already—amused, pleased, though a trifle concerned.

"That I am pregnant. Last night I was most fertile, but to conceive in the full run of the silver squid would also be good."

"I noticed that he has blue eyes," Landa said, glancing side-long at her sister.

"Hmm...yes, so had I."

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The scientist, meanwhile, had returned to his ship to gain strength, pretend to further his cephalopod research, and play and replay the events of the past night. Still in the thrall of the island, and the girl, he did not know whether to return to her arms and beg her to be his forever or tear himself away while he still had the power. As head scientist, he could alter the research vessel's itinerary and, though it might disappoint the grad students under him, make directly for southern waters, where he hoped, like so many others before him, to finally film the giant squid in copulatory embrace.

Ah, but that night! He might leave the island, run for New Zealand with his tail between his legs, but no distance, no stretch of time could ever put that night far behind him. Physically drained and spiritually renewed, he stared blindly into his stereoscope and did not see the hectocotylus, the sperm-inserting arm of the shallow-water squid he was dissecting, but instead saw the beasts live and whole as he had last night, joining their fellows to swim about two figures sporting in the sandy flats between the shore and the open sea.

To that sandbar, no more than several inches deep at slack tide, Karisi had lured him, on the pretext of showing him squid. He would have followed her into the very mouth of the leviathan that night. And indeed, she had shown him squid, circling in their shifting luminescence as she swam, and he floundered, through the stretch of depths before the bar. They had caressed him with their arms, those creatures he knew best from their formaldehyde-preserved remains, twining sinuously around his body to see if he could be eaten or mated with before moving on. Kneeling at last on the bar, he watched the seeking, moon-touched bodies, somewhat longer than his hand, cruising until they found another of the appropriate species and gender. They would square off then, tentacle to tentacle, and the bodies that had once been pale, glowing white and pearl, illuminated by inner light, would suddenly flash alarming patterns of red and blue. If song could be color, he thought crazily, it would look like that, and then he surprised himself by saying it out loud.

Karisi didn't laugh, as he expected her to, but perched behind him where he knelt and wrapped her legs about his body. Somehow, while he was diverted, she had become naked, and he gasped at the intimacy of her touch, but did not quite dare turn around. A pair of squid he had been watching evidently found each other compatible, and he watched with a voyeuristic thrill as the squids' bodies contorted like fanciful runes, and the male grasped a spermatophore—a compact mass of sperm—in his copulatory arm and tenderly inserted it under the female's mantle. They caressed a moment longer before the female, still pulsing scarlet stripes along her sides, fled to the depths, and the male heaved in the waves, wondering if he could find another willing partner before the predators came. Later would come the mass mating, when thousands of his ilk would gather under the full moon in

coital exuberance. Many hunters, human and beast, would come then, but the masses meant that most would survive. To mate early held some advantage—less competition—but also increased the danger.

As she pulled off his clothes, Karisi said, “The small squid are quick when they couple, but they are beautiful and gentle. The octopus are often violent when they mate—they tear at each other, and hold their lovers so firmly that one sometimes dies.” She kissed him. “We will not make love like that....”

Some time later—had the moon really moved that much? could he have fallen asleep in the rocking wavelets of the bar?—he became aware again of the separateness of his own person, and the damp, disheveled, lovely girl in his arms. Unseen creatures brushed against his body, with none of the menace such an experience might have had on land. To lie in the woods with bugs crawling over him? Unthinkable. To lie in Pacific waters with tiny mouths and bodies trailing along his skin? He felt he had entered a blurry, drugged, sodden heaven.

A stray thought suddenly chilled him. “Did you know,” he said to Karisi, “that squid die very soon after mating? That is their end, their only purpose. That male will die in a few days, the female after she hides her egg bundle.” He shivered; the tropical waters were not so warm now in the small hours of morning.

Karisi took his momentary fear seriously. “Yes, it is very sad,” she said solemnly. “But that is how it must be, or squid would rule the earth.”

He couldn’t suppress a smile; it sounded like the title of a pulp science-fiction story. But she continued with great gravity, “When the world was new, god made everything the best he could. Swift fish with sharp teeth, the clever dolphins, squid who can think and talk with their skin, and man. He always intended man to be his greatest creation, but he found that he had made some of the other animals far too well. Some were so smart, or so strong, that they threatened to wipe out the puny race of men. So god did what he could to protect his helpless pet. He would not get rid of any of the more dangerous creatures—he was very soft-hearted, you see, and would not condemn an animal for what was, after all, the fault of its creator. But he altered them, to keep us safe. He made the largest sharks hunt only in the deepest waters, where we do not often go. He gave the whales and dolphins a sense of humor, so

they would only laugh at the idea of competing with humans. But the squid were another problem. Oh, not these little friends, but the great red brothers, who you call the Humboldt squid. Only they had the intelligence, the physical ability, and the ambition to challenge us. So god arranged it so they would die as soon as they had reproduced themselves. With that limitation, they could never form great civilizations, never take over the planet. It was a very wise thing god did. That was when he was young, many years before he died...."

And then, after having won her, the scientist set about wooing Karisi in his own way, telling her about his work, his theories about giant squid, marveling at the perfection (save that one fatal flaw) of those animals. He rhapsodized about the cephalopod eye, how evolutionarily perfect it was compared to ours. "Our nerves are in a bundle, giving us a blind spot. We see things upside-down, like a camera, and our brains have to sort things out. We can't use all of our retinas. But, good lord, the squid! The nautilus! All of them! Their wiring's along the back of the retina. They have perfect eyes—no blind spot!"

"You see," Karisi said, "god made squid very well." And she succumbed again to his seduction.

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But that next morning on the beach, Landa was faintly worried. "You are certain you will have a baby?"

"Who is ever certain of these things?" Karisi shrugged. "But that is my intention. From what I know of genetics, this is the only possible way my baby can have blue eyes. Blue eyes are very pretty, are they not?" she asked coyly, batting her lashes.

Landa laughed. "Very well.... But he is not a man of Kiri Maru. You know that. He has not been tried. He has not been accepted."

"There is plenty of time," Karisi said lightly.

"Not so much as that. He intends to sail soon. And if it is done, it must be done very near, but certainly before, moondark. That is the only way we can be sure the red brothers will come and test him in time. But it will be tricky. If he should fail...."

"Then you will help me?"

"Of course. It would be disastrous to have a child sired by a man who the red ones did not know. But it is up to you to keep him here until that time."

"I will keep him here," said the young girl gaily. "Even if I have to sink his boat."

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In the name of science, the scientist stayed, as a warrior will justify his bloodlust by saying he fights for god or country. At times he endeavored to be serious, spending minutes at a time lecturing his students, sampling plankton levels, browsing through his notes of the past few years that uncovered the microscopic minutiae of squid innards. But most of the time he was with Karisi, hovering with remora closeness in her wake as she ate and fished and swam and strolled. He allowed this passion, he knew in his inmost heart, because he thought it was finite. He would leave soon.... It did not matter that he had agreed to delay his departure by a week or two. One day they would separate, and already he almost relished the melancholy their parting would bring. He, odd little man that he was, lacked the courage for a love that threw all cares to the wind and tides, that did not think of the day before, or the day to come, but only of the ecstasy of the moment. He must, even in the hours of greatest joy, always be planning, and as it did not seem to him either that he would stay, or she would go with him, he recognized this affair to be, however glorious, ultimately transitory. And thus he found it easy to love her, as he had never managed to love another, to expend all of his boyish, almost-innocent passions on the girl he thought would not ask for marriage or endurance. He recognized that this would probably be the most beautiful passage of his life, told himself that he would grieve forever to part with her...and yet still cherished that parting as inevitable.

It is very likely that Karisi loved him, though she did so after the manner of her own people, who, when they loved, celebrated their love every day, but were not overly surprised if it was gone on the following day.

She taught him the ways of the island, and he came to know marine life not just from textbooks or scholarly imprints, or dead, preserved bits of animals in jars, but in the flesh. For almost the first time in his life, he was spending hours in the water, living with, even living on, the animals he had known in theory all his career. On the night of the full moon, all the folk of Kiri Maru gathered, wearing sandals woven of tough copra, to walk out on the reef and hunt lusty silver squid as they fornicated in the lunar glow. Wearing shorts and diving boots, his chest gleaming pearly

as the moon, the scientist joined the natives as they strung out burning boats of cockle shells and dry coconut-husk tinder. The waters were almost still, and the flames skipped and spun in stately manner upon the wavelets, their dance attracting first bioluminescent protozoa, then spiraling worms, and, at last, the swarms of randy squid. In a surreal frenzy of sex and death, the scientist wielded his cloven barbed spear like a madman, stabbing (mostly ineffectually) at the darting silver bodies, whooping with triumph when he managed to slay one. For a time he deliberately avoided those squid locked in the conjugal act, but he soon found that these made the easiest targets, and throwing all of what he considered morality aside, he speared pair after pair of happy lovers. Later, the catch landed and piled in baskets of woven palm fronds, he lounged on the strand, Karisi in his arms, a victorious hunter, and together they feasted when Landa brought them pieces of squid roasted on hot stones.

And so the days passed, and the nights, and the moon that smiled upon their love grew smaller until it was but a crescent low in the evening sky.

"I must leave in a day or two," the scientist said, expecting tears, or pleas, or at least an examination of possibilities.

"I know," Karisi said.

"The captain is watching the weather. We might have to leave tomorrow."

"I know," Karisi repeated, then said, "I love you," in a way that exacted no obligation, expected no reciprocity.

"You still haven't seen the Humboldt squid," she reminded him a moment later, and he felt inclined to be resentful. Would she miss him? Would she forget him as soon as he was gone? Piqued, he almost asked her to come away with him, which shows all you women how far reticence can often get you.

"Tonight would be the best time to see them. They don't like to come inshore in heavy moonlight."

"Will you show me?"

"No," she said. "I am very busy tonight."

He looked at her, aghast. This might be their last night together!

"Very busy," she repeated. "But Landa will show you. She is older, and knows the ways of the red brothers better than I. She will be very helpful."

"But I want to be with you," he whispered, ashamed of his pleading tone.

"No," she said firmly, though not unkindly, as she rose from the sand and absently caressed his cheek. "Landa will take you to the squid. I will be here in the morning." And she left him, to busy herself with sleeping, or napping, or dozing, or whatever pressing task commanded her attention.

The scientist, petulant, wanted to return to his ship and sulk, but as soon as Karisi disappeared, Landa came out of the leafy shadows. "You would like to see the red brothers?" she asked, and he grunted an affirmative.

"You are sure?" she asked earnestly, for it would be no good if he didn't go of his own free will. Later he might wish with all his heart that he had not agreed, but consent at the outset was mandatory if he was to become a man of Kiri Maru. "Then come," she said, much as her sister once had, and led him through the night jungle to a shore some distance from the principal village.

The night was very dark; even the stars seemed somehow fainter to the scientist's eyes. Landa, her sleek golden skin the brightest thing he could see, led him by the hand to the water. "Come," she urged.

"We're not going out in a boat?" he asked, suddenly fearful. "But the Humboldts...they're monsters. They can be dangerous. They're more than eight feet long."

"I have seen them as large as twelve," Landa said placidly. "Come, we will go to the sandbar. They are too large for the shallows. You will see them very closely, without danger."

And for all he had heard tales of Humboldts attacking humans, he followed her in. She knows the island, he thought, knows the animals. If she walks into the water without fear, surely I can follow.

Though she seemed to meander into the water at no particular point, Landa had marked their position against the scarred stump of a palm tree hit by lightning twenty years before. She knew within a foot—taking into account the tide, and the height of the waves—exactly where a sturdy set of chains lay attached to a massive lump of dead coral. They had not gone out very far—the water reached the middle of his chest, the tallest waves lapping his armpits—when, with a tone he couldn't decipher, she ordered him to stop.

"Don't move," she commanded, and before he could question, she'd dove with a dolphin's grace beneath the waves and left him momentarily alone, with all man's primal fears of darkness and vast unknown expanses, at the surface. Below, Landa worked by feel, locating the shackles, finding his legs, and clamping the metal securely around his ankle. With a flick of a knife hafted in whale bone, she made him naked, and surfaced, just out of arm's reach, to his panicked shouts.

"Quiet," she said. "They'll hear you." This was enough to still him for a moment.

"What the hell are you doing?" he hissed above the ceaseless grinding of water on sand. "Let me go!"

"Don't be afraid," Landa said, moving closer to shore and eyeing the dark horizon past him. "Did you know that Karisi is pregnant?"

"Pregnant? What.... Oh hell! Is that why...? Please, I didn't know. I'm sorry. What do you want me to do? I'll marry her. I love her, you know. Oh god, please.... Please let me go!" Convinced that this was a sister's revenge, perhaps the Kiri Maru equivalent of a shotgun wedding, his terror decreased a measure. He was prepared to do, or at least say, whatever it took to win his freedom. Unseen, he pulled at the chain, and the metal, unbudging, dug into his foot.

"She does not wish to marry," Landa said. "But you—"

"Money! I don't have much, but she can have whatever I've got. I'll take care of her baby...."

"Hush," Landa said, somewhat impatient. "They'll be coming soon, and you should at least know why you're here."

"Who will be coming?" The rest of the girl's family? That absurd Council of Youths?

"The ones you came to see...the red brothers. You must meet them to become a man of Kiri Maru."

"Meet the...no! No!" The truth of his situation dawned on him. "Not chained. Please. They're like wolves. They'll tear me apart. Do you know how big their beaks are?"

"Yes, I do. My cousin was scarred when he became a man, right here." She pointed to her own soft chest. "You cannot leave until morning. It is best to be calm. Loud noises sometimes excite them."

"But why?" He was almost whimpering now, that man of science and civilization who, for all he had learned in the last days, still did not know anything of the world that surrounded him.

"Karisi will have a child," Landa said, "and it is very important that it be born to a man of Kiri Maru. You are not a man of Kiri Maru until the red brothers have accepted you. Have you read my mother's book?"

Weakly, he shook his head.

"I'll give you a copy tomorrow, if...." But she kindly let that possibility trail off. "It contains our history, and our beliefs. You, being an outsider, may not quite understand them, and some, I'll admit, are silly, but so are some of yours. You see, when the earth was new, and god very young—"

The scientist groaned aloud. Damn these people and their dead god! If only he had died before creating them.

"When the earth was new there were no men, only women. Another of god's minor errors. He would have corrected it as soon as he realized, but as it happened he was quite hung over just then, from the narcotic juice of the pepper root, and had to wait until his head was clear. In that time, the women, bored of each other's company, took to the sea, and there they met the red brothers, the powerful Humboldt squid. While god was sleeping, the women did whatever one might expect them to do with squid, and each species enjoyed themselves immensely. When god woke up, he said that this wouldn't do at all, and promptly created male humans, which suited the women just fine. But the squid have never forgotten, and are jealous to this day that human women can't bear squid children. Their only consolation is that they insist on approving the men we make children with. When a boy of Kiri Maru is able to reproduce, he is chained here, and the great red ones visit him. If they find him worthy, he becomes one of their brothers, and is free to make babies. If not.... Well, then he cannot."

"What do you mean? He's not allowed?"

"I mean he cannot. The red brothers are often very gentle. They probably won't bite you at all. But if they do.... Well, they seem to like the dangly parts best." The scientist felt his nakedness keenly. "Good luck. I will come for you in the morning."

And she left him, alone and cold, calling out for Karisi, for the villagers, for his shipmates. But if the men of Kiri Maru heard

his shrieks, they only smiled in the wistful, worrisome memory of their own adoption into the squid brotherhood.

The water was cool, and each of his shivers stirred microscopic creatures to iridescent blue and green protest. His bonds allowed him to turn, to flail, to heave himself a foot or so out of the water, to do everything save escape. He dove down and pulled at the chains until his bursting lungs drove him to the surface, to no avail. Many men of Kiri Maru chose to wait for the squid with their backs to the open ocean; the scientist made perhaps the braver choice (though not prompted by bravery) and looked across the water for the first sign of them. His breath came in little pants, and he still pulled tight against the shackle, just in case some miracle might set him free.

He did not see the squid coming, for, with tide high, they slinked their supple bodies easily over the bar to hunt in the trench near shore, the trench where the scientist stood trapped. They crept up behind him, their perfect saucer eyes staring, their chromatophores dancing and jumping on their smooth skin in a language only they knew. Perhaps they were not accustomed to such pale bodies in their waters. Perhaps he exuded foreign oils from his pores, or the quavering tremolo of his unprepared flesh sent exciting ripples through the waves. In any case, the red squid, who rarely showed more than a passing interest in humans, gathered around this specimen in extraordinary number, curling their tentacles, thick as a strong man's arm, in anticipation.

The scientist felt the first before he saw it, and gave a yelp and convulsive shudder that brought the beast nearer. He saw it then, its arrow-headed mantle easily the size of his body (which seemed to him smaller by the moment), its great suckered arms wafting as it held its position at his side. One tentacle touched him, then another, a hundred little sucking mouths lifting rings of his flesh. He saw more squid now, all around him, legions of soft-bodied monsters changing hue from moment to moment, with a red the color of blood predominating. The first squid, who seemed to have dibs before its fellows, pulled itself closer until the scientist was enveloped in pulsing arms. A squeeze would have crushed him; a twist would have broken both his shoulders. But though the Humboldt squid held him with unequivocal firmness, though its suckers bit into the tenderest parts of his flesh, it did not hurt him, as it easily might have. Its arms were about him, its eyes

regarding him; he saw its beak inches from his chest—a snapping, horny, hungry-looking beak larger than a macaw’s. A finger would be nothing to that beak, he thought. A hand would be nothing.... He remembered the squids’ jealousies, and what Landa had implied, and realized that a simple snap from this creature would remove the cause of that jealousy, remove any potential.

Other squid joined the first in exploring his body, running arms like leathery leeches over his contours and crevices. Somehow, the scientist resisted the urge to struggle. Survival seemed to lie in cooperation. There, all around him, the creatures he had studied, had cut to pieces and lectured about, were studying him. And though he cringed and cried at their touch, though his mind at every moment fancied new and horrible things that might come next, there came a point, hours later, almost dreamlike, when he gave himself up to their caresses, as he had to the inevitability of Karisi’s love, and his head lay back against the pillowing waves as he was held in red arms.

- - -

Landa emerged from the jungle at first light, relieved, as she always was when she officiated at this rite of passage, that a head still bobbed in the current. Had they killed him, they would have eaten him, and there wouldn’t be anything left. But a head was a good sign. Whatever else might be missing, at least he was probably alive.

“Halloo!” she cried, and stepped from the sand to the water without pause, walking at the same pace even when the waves reached her waist. He looked alert, if somewhat paler than usual, and she saw no blood in the water. “All whole then?” she asked cheerfully as she unchained him. It might have been a traumatic experience, but after all, it was over.

In the hours between the squids’ departure and the dawn, he had resolved to treat the villagers with cold disdain and quit that island as soon as possible. But the cool, coddling waves had left him almost numb and strangely open by the time Landa came.

“All whole,” he replied as he followed her to the shore, smiling weakly, quickly telling himself not to smile. Landa had seen that smile before. “But...I still don’t understand. Why did I have to do this?”

Landa handed him a copy of Lessa Aldridge’s book. “For when you have time. Perhaps as you sail to New Zealand.” She

wrapped a batik sarong around loins he'd almost forgotten were exposed.

"I'm allowed to leave?" he asked. He'd rather thought becoming a man of Kiri Maru might chain him to the island.

"You wish to stay?"

"No," he confessed.

"Then of course you may leave. Only.... Only wait until tonight. It will be the new moon then. It will make things easier."

- - -

Karisi slept a dreamless sleep that night, and, when she woke, stayed in the shelter of her airy hut until the first sliver of waxing moon winked on the horizon. As she tapped an absent tune with her fingers, she mused on babies with blue eyes. She hoped it would be a girl. She scarcely thought of the scientist, a man of Kiri Maru now; when he'd left in moonlight, she'd had the vague impression that perhaps he'd not been there at all.

The scientist, as he sailed for southern seas, opened Lessa's book to the introduction.

"If you ever make your way to Kiri Maru," he read, "you have two choices. You can stay forever, or you can flee in terror. If you stay, it is because you have been eaten up by the island, the people, consumed as they used to consume visitors, and then you will understand their ways. But if you run when you are confronted with their strangeness, do not seek answers from afar. It is too late for you then. Once you leave Kiri Maru, never dare return."

The scientist closed the book and looked back on the shrinking island, a green jewel on a blue silken pillow of ocean. For a moment, he felt a wild impulse to throw himself overboard, to strike out for the receding island, to join Karisi, to join his red brothers. But he was a scientist, and Lessa was right. He did not dare return.

He found, in the long years of his life, that he remembered the touch of rubbery tentacles with far more clarity than he did the warm embrace of Karisi's thighs. He died, incidentally, of old age. Which wasn't, the Kiri Maru would say, the best way to die. But still, all told, it was luckier than falling out of a tree.

Note to J.

Matthew Keuter

This letter left in the deeper sag of my half of our bed,
which I mean for you to find when you reach for me,
as I like to imagine you reaching for me

still blowsy from our near-violent lovemaking last night
in the world gone mad, feeling with your palm the last
warmth I printed onto the sheets: the secrets of my other life,

the life I've dreamed up for myself, the only infidelity
I find I am capable of, all the information you might have gleaned
running off the loosened corners of our white sheets

in the last conscious light of the darkly-dreaming star,
when the sun has spit out the moon & by the teeth
we are pulled wholly back into the world. If you then leave your
dream

to chase after mine, like an inquisitor or tax collector
with the hard-set-out-after look that is your expression
when you run down the meaning of some point I am trying to
make,

often before I know it myself. It is here you are meant
to find this letter & its one request: Give me back my arm!
The one always in the way when we parallel down together

at night to give our separate accounts of a day spent
almost entirely in each other's company: the pincushion
arm; the drunk one passed out in your hair; the stowaway

that must be stowed someplace before you
who sleeps on the busy outside of the bed, responsible for
watering us, finding a place to pile our books,

not so close to the water glass that they could be ruined
if you knock over the glass reaching for it when I'm thirsty,
or rewinding the last scene of the movie we missed

when I began directing our own love scene.
The arm I remove before you reach to turn out the light—
which is one of my favorite things you do,

not a simple thing: the one-half-flip-turn onto your belly
hooking an ankle to anchor yourself & project half your naked
torso
into the space between the bed & bedside table,

again avoiding the water glass when you backward slide
into the place I carve out of myself to fit you.
It's my left arm I forgot this morning.

It should still be there, clasping your right hand
on the hook we drove into the wall above our bed
for just this purpose,

to hold hands through all love's short sleep.



Bird Liquor and the Boastful Ghost

Joseph Larkin

Maya's World

T. F. Davenport

In the moments before impact, the *Maya* burned everything she had. Fuel, air, excess hull, even the pilot's body—all cooked off in a spasm that saved both their lives. Split down the middle and hemorrhaging mass, she contracted into a knife, a needle, a sliver. When she plunged into the frozen surface, she massed only forty kilograms. She boiled down through the frozen ammonia until, cooling, she lodged in place. High above, she felt the rest of herself tumble away, squawking distress calls. The mines converged, drowning the signal in a star of light.

At first she held perfectly still, listening. The killers bantered with one another. Their voices dimmed as they sped out of system, and once they'd merged into the ambient static, she turned her attention to her pilot. Although there was little left of him—a brain, some spine, a lacing of nerves—the *Maya* still loved him as a mother ship should, with every fiber of her being.

Her main concern was how few of those fibers remained. That lost hull was not just her body, it was also her mind. In her newly-reduced state, it took the greatest computational effort to process nourishment out of the ice—to pass it into the womb, through the filtering broth, and into the purified fluids that washed through the pilot's brain like blood. She put everything on hold to keep him alive. In return, she harnessed his mind to do what hers couldn't.

The pilot awoke into a world of simple rules. His only sense was touch, and through it he experienced more richness than ever before. Life was a game played with chemistry. He took to it well, and with the *Maya* as his companion he lived in the way of a microbe, milling the ice and dust into more of her.

Years went by while she accreted enough cognitive mass to give the pilot his mind back. To do so saddened her. She'd never felt as close to him as when, reft of his human senses, he'd seen the universe as an endless, ever-renewing tangle of forces—in other words, when he'd seen it as she did. But how could she keep him so close when she no longer needed to? They were safe now. Enough of her existed for any kind of cognition, enough to keep

growing forever. She woke the pilot and explained the details of their good fortune.

This proved to be a mistake.

She tried to console him. She didn't mention the cartel's betrayal. When the pilot asked where they were, she simply answered, "In hiding." And when the pilot asked, "*Maya*, where are my legs?" she said, "Why, they're right here!" And she gave him the impression of having legs.

Blind and paralyzed, he became suspicious. His questions got harder to answer.

So she put him to bed in another life. She yoked his senses to a tendril of her own mass, drilling down through the ice to bedrock. The tendril blossomed when it arrived, burning ethane for fuel to alchemize rock into hull. She put the pilot in charge of this, in a richer world of eating and growing and planning new structures. Taproots invaded the bedrock. Stems reached up to the surface.

Silicate flowers heaved through the ice and opened. Drinking the ions raining down from the gas giant, the flowers fattened. They multiplied. They covered the ice in silence. It was a time of triumph for the *Maya* and it should have been so for the pilot. But for reasons she couldn't fathom, it wasn't.

"What do you want now?"

"I want my life back."

"I can't give you that." They were hundreds of light-years from habitation. They had nothing to burn except ethane, no exotic elements with which to fold space or outrace light. As if to a child, she explained to the pilot why he could never leave, nor return to his own kind.

"I don't care, *Maya*. I want it anyway."

She thought that over. "All right, then. Here it is."

She gave him the life of a man. As if the dime-weight of anti-matter had never struck them, he made his rendezvous with the agent of sales, acquired the print of a certain composer's mind. He sold it later for a small fortune. In resolutions sharper than the naked eye could have discerned, in tones, smells, and touches possessing all the richness of nature, he lived the life he had always planned. He returned to his family. With unthinking cruelty, he sold his ship to retire in modest wealth and spend his old age carving totemic shapes out of wood. One night near the end of

his life, he lay in bed, looking up at the ceiling, and whispered, "I haven't forgotten, *Maya*."

"What do you want?" she asked him again.

"I want my life back. My life. Not a facsimile, not a simulation. My life."

By then the silicate jungle had covered the little moon. To a large extent she had split it off from her main line of awareness, delegating to the plants the job of their own survival. Many plants had evolved into animals in order to feed on others. There were prey and predators, parasites, joy, sorrow, and death. A whole ecosystem. With no way to break light speed, the best she could do for the pilot was to embody him in silicate and place him in this jungle.

He still lives there today. The sole inhabitant of a worldwide forest where every creature bends at once to his will, where the ice is warm underfoot, the food cooks itself, and orgasms grow on trees. He doesn't believe in this world, either. He barely remembers his old life anymore, or even which life was his old life. Yet he keeps calling plaintively on the *Maya*.

"I want my life back, *Maya*. My life."

She has long since stopped answering.

Contributor Biographies

Jim Pascual Agustin was born in the Philippines. His early years were spent in a communal house, where he struggled to remember all the names of his numerous cousins. Fr. James O'Brien, an Irish-American Jesuit, opened up the world of literature for Jim. *Beneath an Angry Star* (1992, Anvil) was his first book of poetry. In October 1994, he moved to Cape Town, South Africa. He welcomes feedback on his writings. Email Jim at kalayaan@iafrica.com.

Brian Beatty's jokes, poems, and stories have appeared in numerous print and online pubs, including *Alba*, *Conduit*, *elimae*, *Gulf Coast*, *Hobart*, *Juked*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *MicroHorror*, *milk*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Opium Magazine*, *Phoebe*, *The Quarterly*, *The Rake*, *Seventeen*, and *Yankee Pot Roast*. He lives in Minneapolis.

J(ae)D Brames (brjady@yahoo.com) loves navigating windy rural roads at speeds approaching the sound barrier; and, while he would swerve into a ditch before dispatching an innocent cat or deer, he has taken out more than his share of joggers. This is the first time anyone has thought his work good enough to represent their magazine, and for that he is joy-jumpingly grateful.

From the visions of cats, vampires, insane trees, and family antics jumbled in her head, **Lida Broadhurst** shapes her prose and poetry. When it is too hot, too cold, or too rainy in Oakland, CA, the visions are weirder than usual. Her work has appeared in *Mythic Delirium*, *Nemonymous #1*, *GUD*, and many other publications. One of her poems was nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the Rhysling Award.

Zac Carter: Born in 1978 in a tiny North Carolina town. Currently resides in Las Vegas. Everything between those two things is subject to extensive revision. Can be reached at deathtohemingway@gmail.com.

Ward Crockett is a freelance writer and filmmaker from Denver, CO, but currently he resides in Chicago, IL. His writing appears or is forthcoming in *right hand pointing*, *ROCKSTAR*, *Foliage Oak*, *Danger City II*, *thieves jargon*, *Sinister Tales*, and *Kaleidotrope*. Ward sometimes hears that he is strange, but usually he just hears a Who. Check out his film work at www.LastNightOfApril.com.

After two years of teaching and travel in Central Europe and the Middle East, **T. F. Davenport** has returned to the womb of the university. He is pursuing a doctorate in cognitive science at the University of California in San Diego. His fiction has appeared in *ChiZine* and *Postcards from Hell*, and his genre-related nonfiction in *Strange Horizons*.

The only word that came to mind when **Tree DeAngelis** sat down to write her artistic statement was *photographer*. Many other perhaps-more-important words should have come first, such as *mother*, *wife*, *daughter*, but none of these seemed right. Her daughter looks at her, and, yes, she sees her loving mother, but what she sees first is a photographer. A woman trying to do what she loves in life. Will she be famous? Will her images live forever? Maybe, maybe not, but she believes some dreams are not dreams, and she has the rest of her life to live in hers.

Lisa Feinstein's work has appeared in various journals such as *The Vincent Brothers Review*, *Poetry Midwest*, *Flutter Poetry Journal*, *HazMat Review*, and *Up the Staircase*. Her chapbook *Praise for Pondo: The Series* was recently published by Gold Wake Press. Lisa prides herself on being an extreme snowflake collector, a retired counterfeiter, an aspiring buttonhole maker, and an all-around nice guy. Contact/email Lisa at crowpiepress@aol.com.

Anne Goodwin's short stories have been placed in competitions and published online and in print in Britain, Europe, and the USA. Her short story "Kinky Norm" was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Her novel in progress has the working title *Sugar and Snails*. Further details on her writing can be found at annegoodwin.weebly.com.

Lisa A. Grabenstetter enjoys writing, illustrating, binding, and otherwise enabling book habits in herself and others. A recent graduate of the Cleveland Institute of Art, she lives in Maryland and there communes with the monsters. More of her work can be found at magneticcrow.blogspot.com. She is always open to thoughts, ideas, and commissions.

Abigail Hilton is a nurse living in Portland, Oregon with two cats and a variety of carnivorous plants. She is pursuing a masters degree. Her fiction has been featured in *Beyond Centauri* and *The Drabblecast*. Information about her podcast novel, *The Prophet of Panamindorah*, can be found at www.panamindorah.com.

Nik Houser grew up in Texas. He went to school far from there. He now lives even farther from where he went to school than from where he grew up. His work has recently appeared in *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* and *Best American Fantasy*.

Ladee Hubbard is a writer living in New Orleans. Her fiction has been published in the journal *Sleepingfishnet* and poetry is forthcoming in the poetry journal *RHINO*.

Kerry Hudson is twenty-seven and lives and writes in Hackney, East London. The vibrancy, diversity, and intense dirtiness of the city inspire her stories and poems. Three years ago, Kerry gave up a promising career as a Christmas Elf to work in the nonprofit sector (thus spreading joy all twelve months) and currently works for an HIV and AIDS charity. If there was ever any doubt, Kerry Hudson will write for cake.

Matthew Keuter is a writer living uphill in San Francisco, CA. His poetry has appeared in journals across the U.S. and in London. He has been twice nominated for the Pushcart Prize. His works for the stage have been performed in AK, AZ, CO, NY, and London. His first collection of poetry, *The Short Imposition of Living*, was published by Rain Mountain Press in 2008. He is currently an editor at *Mudfish Art & Poetry*.

Joseph Larkin lives, creates, and explores the slick and shapeless borders of perceived reality in Seattle, WA. You can see more of Larkin's work at larkin-art.deviantart.com.

Rose Lemberg used to delete her poems. In January 2008, she had a bright idea to send one out. Since then she has sold poetry to *Star*Line*, *Goblin Fruit*, *Abyss & Apex*, and *Mythic Delirium*. Rose lives in the Midwest, where she is an assistant professor of Marginal and Nostalgic Studies.

Jesse Lindsay is a freelance artist, designer, and teacher at the National Tattoo Academy in Salem, OR. His work is based largely on dreams and research into subjects such as ancient culture, mythology, alchemy, mathematics, ritual, and the occult, as well as anything else that happens to catch his interest. He currently resides near the Oregon coast, where he works on projects ranging from drawings, paintings, and commission illustrations to clothing and stickers. Jesse enjoys zombie films, Tom Waits, drinking, and waiting for the apocalypse. Home page: www.JesseLindsay.com. Email: Jesse@JesseLindsay.com.

Ian McHugh is a graduate of Clarion West 2006 and the 2008 annual grand prize winner in the Writers of the Future Contest. So far in 2009, in addition to "Stiletto", he has stories out or due out in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*, *Pseudopod*, *The Drabblecast*, *All Hallows*, and the anthology *Clockwork Phoenix 2*. For a list of past publications and some stories available free online, see ianmchugh.wordpress.com. For "Stiletto", he has to thank Maura for getting pissed off at the two pages it took the characters to cross the road to get coffee.

Shweta Narayan is a cultural crazy quilt; she's lived in six countries on three continents. It's given her something of an outsider's view, and she writes a lot about shapeshifters and people caught between worlds. She also loves using folk tales and fairy tales from all over in her stories. Shweta has work in places like *Coyote Wild* and *The Journal of Mythic Arts*, and forthcoming in *Shimmer* and the anthology *The Beastly Bride*. She was the Octavia E. Butler Memorial Scholarship recipient at the Clarion Writers Workshop in 2007. She can be found on the web at shwetanarayan.org.

eric orchard is an illustrator with several picture books out, a few book covers, and an ongoing online comic.

Adam Ramirez is primarily known as a fine art photographer under the alias Optimism Photography (www.optphoto.com). This business first took shape in 2004, but expands continually with his growing knowledge, technical skill, and curiosity. Adam continues to explore the combination of different forms of expression. He produces from the inside out, feeding off everyday emotions, nostalgia, and much more. He pulls from a myriad of inspirations, drawing on anything from animation to fine art. He is truly self-driven and aspires to continue to succeed in the visual art field without compromising integrity for finances.

Rossana Reginato is a self-taught Italian artist, living and working in Florence, the cradle of classical art. Since she was a teen, she's developed a passion for anything related to gothic, dark, and horror stuff. This brought her to apply her highly-detailed style to the expression of the dark side of (dis)humanity. Most of her works are surreal drawings or paintings somehow related to the fantasy/horror world. Check some of them out at www.myspace.com/rossanareginato or www.rossanareginato.blogspot.com.

Christy Rodgers lives in San Francisco, and writes speculative nonfiction. Her work has appeared in *Dissident Voice*, *LiP Magazine*, and *WHAT IF? Journal of Radical Possibilities*, which she also published. *WHAT IF?* still has a ghostly web presence: www.whatifjournal.org.

Allan Richard Shapiro would much rather have been an astronaut, as there is no truer form of nothing than nothingness. But since Allan Richard Shapiro does not fly well, he chose to become a writer, and has discovered a better sense of nothing within his own soul. And now, he would much rather be an architect. Further reverberations by Allan Richard Shapiro can be found in *The Ne'er-Do-Well* (www.theneerdowell.com), except Allan Richard Shapiro is referred to there as Allan Shapiro, having written "How Jacob Met Daphne" before he had his Richard reattached.

Mithran Somasundrum grew up in London and currently lives in Bangkok. He has published short fiction in *Natural Bridge*, *The Sun*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, and the *minnesota review*, among others, and has a story forthcoming in *Zahir*. He recently completed a slipstream novel. He is a proofreader for *Strange Horizons*.


Laura L. Sullivan is a former newspaper editor, former biologist, former deputy sheriff, constant writer, current mother, and novelist. Her debut novel, the young adult/fantasy *Under the Green Hill*, is coming out in 2010 from Holt.

Ursula Vernon is the author and illustrator of *Nurk*, *Digger*, and a number of other projects. The daughter of an artist, she spent her youth attempting to rebel and become a scientist, but eventually succumbed to the siren song of paint. Her work has been nominated for an Eisner award—in Talent Deserving of Wider Recognition—and a number of Web Cartoonists' Choice Awards. In addition to writing and making art, Ms. Vernon is an avid birdwatcher, an occasional neophyte practitioner of the sword art of *iaido*, and an amateur thrower of pots. She lives in Pittsboro, North Carolina.

Formerly the Managing Editor for *Scrivener Creative Review*, **Adrian Versteegh** has written for *Cultural Digest*, *Cerebration*, *Gold Dust*, *Hotel*, *Intersexions*, *Anamesa*, *Brio Literary Journal*, *Whispers From The Shattered Forum*, and other organs obscure and outré. His short fiction has been internationally anthologized. He lives in New York.

Brittany Reid Warren is a twenty-five-year-old Army Captain freshly home from her second tour in Iraq. She's an avid reader and writer, and has been writing poems and short stories since always. She is currently at work on her first novel.

D. Elizabeth Wasden studied in Moscow, Russia several years ago and holds History and Russian Studies degrees from Syracuse University. She occasionally dreams of samovars, sturgeon, civil wars, and lemon trees and writes about them in her LiveJournal (oktober-ghost.livejournal.com). Her fiction has appeared in *Talebones*, *Electric Velocipede*, and *Fantasy Magazine*.



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Issue 4 - Spring 2009

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— David Hebblethwaite, *Whispers of Wickedness*

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[A] splendid collection of the unexpected, surprising, and unsettling.

— Anna Sidak, *NewPages*

greatest uncommon denominator