

FICTION ART POETRY ESSAYS FICTION ART POETRY ESSAYS FICTION ART POETRY ESSAYS

# G U O

great common denominator



Issue 7 • Spring 2016  
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# GUD

greatest uncommon denominator

This issue opened to submissions in August 2009. Due to a number of setbacks, it was seven years in the making. We hope you love the writing and art gathered here as much as we do.

Issue 7

Spring 2016

# Greatest Uncommon Denominator Magazine

## Issue 7

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Danzante I

Fernando Martí

Based on a photograph by Glenn Caley Bachmann of Keith Hennessy's performance *Saliva* (1989).

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# le streghe [witches' dance]:::.....

Joseph A. W. Quintela

:123:223:323:423:523:623:723:823:923:023:123:223:323:  
:.....there are four strings:  
:E:ven tremulously voiced:she billows:spindled bones:  
:A:nd atrophied lungs:pierced by the whirling skeins:  
:D:esperately coiling:uncoiling as the brood is sewn:  
:G:rowling wildly:at the farro hair of the moon:bent:  
:.....there are three strings:  
:A:ndromeda dreams of Cetus:dreams of devoured flesh:  
:D:elights in imagining:torn skin and bloodied chain:  
:G:asping on the edge of death:wed to stone:unwinged:  
:.....there are two strings:  
:D:rowned in gowns:until the skin sags at the weight:  
:G:rown haggard:exchanged ribbon for broom:and spell:  
:.....there is one string:  
:G:uttural voices:yet they dance:and dance:and dance:  
:.....there are no strings:  
:1234:2234:3234:4234:5234:6234:7234:8234:9234:0234:1:





1/25 EN

*Sueño con Serpientes*

*Fernando Martí*

Sueño con Serpientes

Fernando Martí

# Tío Checo and the Baby Jesus

Okasha Skat'si

Tío Checo became a saint on January 6, 1996. That year, he was working as a custodian at one of the two-hundred-dollar-a-night hotels down on the Riverwalk, picking up plastic highball glasses around the swimming pool and piloting a yellow mop bucket across the floor of the bar when it shut down at midnight. Not rocket science, and not anything that needed a driver's license. The year before, he had been a fry cook at Lonchería Las Palomitas, and the year before that, he had had steady work as a tag-team driver, picking up Mexican trailers at Customs in Laredo and long-hauling the electronics or auto parts or whatever up to Dallas and beyond. But then he and his long-term companion Jim Beam had a close encounter of the sir-please-blow-into-this-mouthpiece kind just outside Buda, and his driving career came to an end.

So it was Tío's day off, and my mom and her sisters and sisters-in-law had been deep in *tamalada* madness for two days. There were pork and beef *tamales*, deer meat from a buck one of my cousins had shot just before Christmas, huge bowls of *arroz* and *frijoles borrachos* and *atole*. The women all sat around the kitchen table drinking warm Coke or *limonada* while the washtub-sized steamer hissed and rattled, the home-sweet-home fragrance of *chile ancho* and *comino* mingling with the spray-on pine scent from the fake Christmas tree in the living room. The guys all hung out around the barbecue barrel in the backyard, hunched over it for warmth as cold trickled under our jacket collars and we puffed our Marlboro Lights and chugged Tecate. Tío Checo chugged right along with the rest of us, foam clinging to his Pancho Villa mustache. At the fourth beer, right on schedule, he reached the autobiographical stage. Ten minutes into it, we arrived at Vietnam, Tet, and the bar girls in Saigon. "Man, I tell you—" he held his hands cupped in front of him, a cigarette in one and a tall can in the other—"a French girl with tits this big. *Como melones*."

We had heard it all before, of course. Another beer and the boobs would inflate to *sandía* proportions. And then would come the part about how he came home and his wife and kids had left him—"Swear to God, man, I never hit her, *never*."—and

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he borrowed money and the business failed and the second wife took off and so on and on and on to wind up in La Mansión's bar after hours, mopping up other men's ten-dollar-a-shot whiskey.

Tío Braulio and my dad exchanged a look through the blue smoke—the same look they'd been exchanging for a year and a half now—and then my dad just stared down at the beer in his own hand, not meeting Tío Braulio's eyes again. *We need to do something*, that look said. Dad, though, hadn't been able to face the idea of committing his oldest brother to a rehab facility, and there wasn't a chance in hell that Tío Checo would go voluntarily. Not yet, anyway.

So Tío Braulio sighed like a gust of the norther that was rattling the pecan branches overhead and started in on his own sorrows. There were two: my cousin Nellie, who was getting married after she finished her Master's the next year, and her little sister Crystal, who was going to be fifteen a few months after that. Now, what's sad about that? *Dinero, amigo*—money. "It's gonna cost me a *chingada* fortune to get her married off in the style she wants," he mourned. "The gown. The bridesmaids. The band. The reception—all so we don't look like *pobres* to this *gringo* lawyer's family."

It would take another pile of cash to throw a *quinceañera* that would turn pudgy little Crystal with the zits marching across her chin into a Princess-Diana-eat-my-dust glamor queen. So of course we all volunteered to chip in as *padrinos: de lazo, de arras, de cojines*—that's rosary, coins, and cushions—for Nellie, and Tío Manny *de limo* for Crystal and her *damas* when the time came. Tío Braulio's bake shop would furnish the cakes. He reached for another can, muttering something about a second mortgage to take care of the rest.

For his turn, my dad put his arm around my shoulders and announced that I had survived the fall semester at San Antonio College with a 3.54 and was looking at UTSA for next September. "Marketing," he said. "Carlitos is gonna study how to sell things to people who don't need 'em." He gave me that half hug, half shake guys do instead of a real *abrazo*. For a horrible second I thought he was going to pull my head down and give me a noogie, but Tía Rosie saved me. She leaned out the back door and yelled at us to come wash our hands and help set up the extra table for the kids.

We drifted in by ones and twos, taking time to put out cigarettes in the barbecue barrel and drain the last of our beers. Then everybody stuffed themselves, with Mom passing around thirds and fourths of everything. The piles of empty corn shucks got higher and higher. The CD player ran through the late, great Selena and Little Joe y la Familia and then got seriously into the *conjuntos*. Everybody sobered up a little, too, with only lemonade and *jamaica* on the table. Conversation turned to *las Mónicas*—Lewinsky and the mayor of Nuevo Laredo—and their adventures. "I hope Hillary makes him sleep on the couch for a year," said Nellie. "Bryan better never even *think* of fooling around on me."

Tío Checo shrugged. He had made a trip to the refrigerator, to return with another can of beer. "It's what men do, *mijita*. Always have, always will." He sat back down with a thud and popped the top. "A good woman looks the other way and counts her blessings—and her husband's money."

Some hard looks went around the table, Rosie at her husband Manny, and Braulio and my mom at Checo. "If he has any," Mom said bitterly. She and Checo's first ex had been best friends all through school. "If he hasn't drunk it all."

The proverbial awkward silence came crashing down like the meteor that wiped out the dinosaurs. Checo spluttered, not quite sure whether he should attempt to defend himself, and clutched his beer can to his chest like a shield. Abuelita stepped into the gap. "Carlitos," she snapped. "Get the *rosca*."

The *rosca de reyes* is a ring of sweetbread especially baked for Three Kings Day. This one was Tío Braulio's finest, stuffed with pecans, raisins, and dried apples. Still warm, it smelled like Christmas, of cinnamon and cloves. Baked somewhere into the *rosca* there was a small figurine of the Baby Jesus. Whoever got the piece with the Baby had to give a party for *el día de la Candelaria* on the second of February. It was a prize nobody wanted.

I set the *rosca* in front of Buelita and fetched her the bread knife. There were twenty-two of us at the party that day, and we all sat or stood around the table while she carefully probed the pastry before she cut. It wouldn't do to saw through Baby Jesus. We all proceeded with equal caution, making sure we weren't the unlucky winners before biting into the sweetbread. All except Tío Checo, who downed his slice of *rosca* the same way he downed his

beer. He coughed, set his hand to his throat for a second, then washed the *pan dulce* down with a riptide of Tecate.

"So who's got it?" Crystal asked, brushing crumbs off her fingers and looking around the dining room. She held her own hands out to show she didn't.

"Not me," I said.

"Yo, no." That was Braulio.

"Ni yo tampoco," added Rosie.

"¿Quién lo tiene?" demanded Abuelita. "Who has the Baby?" Silence.

"Oh, come on, whoever," said Tío Braulio. "It's just a *carne asada*, not a wedding. It won't break you."

It was a day for silences. Another one struck. Nellie gave it a few seconds to get really awkward, then pushed back her chair, threw her napkin into her plate, and stalked out of the room. Crystal, not to be outdone, sniffed, "That was, like, *so low*, Daddy, like I just can't believe you said that," and followed her sister out. Braulio leaned his elbows on the table, put his head in his hands, and moaned.

The party broke up soon after. Everybody assumed that the Baby Jesus had left in somebody's pocket, somebody too tight to spring for the *Candelaria*. Each of us had a favorite suspect, in most cases the same suspect. No surprises there.

So a month went by, and we had a party on February second anyway. Nellie brought her fiancé to that one, daring us all not to like him. He turned out to be a regular guy after all. He even spoke a bit of Spanish because he did legal work for some of the *maquilas* in Tamaulipas and Nuevo León. Other changes occurred. I moved into an apartment close to the UTSA campus and got a part-time job waiting tables at L'Etoile. Abuelita began to forget things. Not just the grocery list but things like my mother's name and her grandkids'. Tío Checo managed to hold onto his job at La Mansión through Easter, then he went to work the late shift at Braulio's bakery, mopping up and emptying the rat traps.

6 Then one day Tío Braulio opened the shop to find his brother hunched up in a chair in the office, his face white as *bolillo* dough. For once he wasn't drunk. The emergency-room doctors suspected diverticulitis and sent him to lab and X-ray. It took them the better part of a day, but they finally gave in and admitted him to an eight-man ward upstairs even without the magic Blue Cross card. He

was clearly in no shape to take care of himself. Besides, Tío Braulio was about to become father-in-law to a cutthroat lawyer and had no hesitation about threatening to take the hospital to court for everything from disability discrimination to (God forbid it should come to that) negligent homicide.

So they wheeled him up to his corner by the third-floor window and tucked him in. There were only two other patients in the ward. One was post-op and doped up most of the time. The other spent his afternoons playing cards with an old geezer down the hall, his portable IV stand trailing after him like a faithful pooch. The chaplain came and went, leaving holy cards with prayers to St. Jude and the *Santo Niño de Atocha*, who specialize in hard cases. As he later told it, Tío Checo said the prayer to the *Santo Niño* over and over because he had come to realize that he was a sinful man in need of salvation. More likely it was because he had come to realize he was in deep shit, and if it got much deeper his family wouldn't be able to fish him out. He might need a rescuer with more clout than my dad the cop or his prospective nephew-in-law the lawyer.

*O Miraculous Infant of Atocha! he prayed (or later said he did). Cast Thy merciful look upon my troubled heart, so inclined to pity. Be softened by my prayer, and grant me these favors which I ardently implore of Thee. (Mention requests.) Here Checo mentioned a bunch, all liquid assets. Take from me all affliction and despair, all trials and misfortunes with which I am laden. For Thy Sacred Infancy's sake, send me now the consolation and aid and grace that I may praise Thee with the Father and Holy Ghost, forever and ever. Amen. O Divine Child of Atocha, hear my prayer and grant my petition.*

The first hint he had that El Santo Niño might be paying attention came when the radiologist showed up carrying film under his arm. There weren't any perforations or adhesions in Tío Checo's gut, but there was a strange little encapsulated cyst-like thing right in the angle of his colon. The doctor held the picture up to the window so Checo could see. "It's really odd," he said. "It's almost like there's a hard core of some kind in there that your intestine has tried to seal off. Maybe an inch long or a little more."

Naturally, he recommended a biopsy. Checo didn't like knives. He said no.

Now, maybe you've got it figured out at this point. Tío Checo didn't have a clue, though. Not till later that night, when he had The Vision.

Unless you're seriously sick or in pain, hospitals are the most boring places on earth. After the radiologist left, Tío Checo ate his supper of broiled, unsalted fish, served with unsalted mashed potatoes and starched Jell-O cubes. All of it tasted like disinfectant. The hospital offered limited TV channels, and he fell asleep to a National Geographic special about sea turtles and kelp forests. When he woke, or thought he did, the ward was dark except for the light from the hallway. Someone had turned off his TV and pulled his blanket up over his bare legs. And someone, probably not the same someone, was calling his name.

Okay, here's where you're expecting a burst of white light, choruses of angels all going, "Ah-ah-ah-ah-aaaaah," with violins in the background and their graceful wings wafting. Forget it. Didn't happen that way.

Oh, it started off conventionally enough. There at the foot of the bed, shining softly, stood *el Santo Niño de Atocha* in his long blue robe and shoulder cape, his basket in one hand and his pilgrim's staff and water bottle in the other. He wore the usual wide-brimmed hat with ostrich feather over long, corkscrew curls. "Hey, Checo," he said, poking Tío in the gut with his staff. "You awake?"

"Ay *chingado*," growled Checo, with his hand over his eyes. "Turn off the fuckin' light, would you? It's, what, *las dos de la mañana*?"

"Man," said El Santo Niño, "you got no respect. You were making a big deal out of praying to me, and here you don't know me from Juan García." He shook his head. "Okay. Let's try this."

There was a flash of white light and a waft of ozone, but still no angels. No Santo Niño, either. He'd been replaced by El Santo Teenager, with a baseball cap worn backwards on his head, gang-banger jeans, and a muscle shirt. His untied shoelaces trailed behind him as he slouched over to the bed next to Checo's and perched on the side. When he reached into his pocket for a suspiciously short cigarette with twisted ends, Checo got a good look at his tats, a big red heart on each bicep. One said, *Mom*. A banner outlined in flowers curled across the other, with *Magdalena* in fancy script. He flicked a finger over the end of the joint, which began to smolder,

smoke curling up in the faint light. El Santo Teenager took a long, slow toke and said, "Oye, Checo. You've fucked up. Big time."

"Jesus fuckin' Christ," exclaimed Tío Checo, scrambling back as far as he could against his pillows and fumbling behind him for the nurse's buzzer.

"Nah," said El Santo Teenager, breathing the blue smoke out in a cloud that made Checo's head spin. "Just call me Chuy."

"Chuy who?"

El Santo Teenager rolled his eyes. "Can we not make this into a fuckin' knock-knock joke? You got problems, Checo. You said, 'Come take away my afflictions,' and shit like that. So here I am. Your move."

"So, are you going to?"

"Going to what?"

"Take away my afflictions. My gut hurts. I need a drink. I got no money. If I don't make the rent, that fleabag hotel's gonna toss me out, and I'll be living in a refrigerator carton on the sidewalk."

"You know why you got a bellyache, Checo? Huh?" Chuy took another long drag on the joint, and Checo inched his way forward till he was sitting on the edge of the bed, trying to get a whiff. "You remember what you did on *el día de los Reyes Magos*?"

Checo thought long and hard—maybe for ten seconds. He hung his head and talked to his feet where they dangled over the cold tile floor. "I think I pissed Nellie off. Maybe some of the others."

"How 'bout me, huh? You ever think you might've pissed me off?"

"Yeah, well...." Checo let it trail off. "You're just a dream. Something I ate."

"Look at me."

Checo kept his eyes fixed on the rail of his bed and the vinyl flooring.

"*Mírame, vato*. I said, look at me."

Checo couldn't help himself. He looked up.

"Okay," said Chuy. "*Los Reyes Magos*. You're damn right I'm something you ate. Because you were too stinkin' drunk not to just gobble down your piece of *rosca*. And now you've got me—*el Baby*—stuck up there in your gut. What're you gonna do about it, huh?"



Checo's mental wheels ground some more. Slow, like tires in sand. "You mean that's what's on the X-ray? Hey, man, I don't want nobody cuttin' on me. Screw that." Then the wheels made another half turn, and he brightened. "Is that why you're here? You're gonna do a miracle and heal me?"

"Oh, no." El Santo Teenager smiled a slow, dangerous smile. "I'm not gonna heal you. You're gonna do the healing. Starting now."

"What the fuck...?"

Chuy licked his fingertips and pinched out the joint, dropping the butt in his cargo pocket as he stood up. "There's a lady three doors down the hall in Room 349. She's been in a coma in a nursing home for almost twenty years. She got hit on the head in a car accident, and now she's got bone cancer all through her. Stupid fucks never noticed. Now get your butt down there before they get her test results back and find out she's terminal. You wouldn't be able to get into ICU." Chuy grinned. "Unless I give you a relapse, that is."

"You wouldn't."

"Don't bet on it, Checo. Don't bet on it."

White light began to shine around El Santo Teenager. There was the faintest hint of voices sliding up and down the scale and wings flapping like pigeons taking off. "*Hasta la vista, baby*," he said, and then he wasn't there anymore, just the vacant bed next to Checo's and the cold hospital air that smelled like rubbing alcohol.

Now, the official bio says that Tío Checo girded his loins, marched straight down to the *vieja's* room, and did the job. That's not the version I heard, though. The truth is, he pulled the sheet up over his head and tried to pretend that he'd just had a dream. And maybe he had. What got him up and moving were the spasms in his upper-left abdomen, right about the place where El Santo Niño had burrowed in. Baby Jesus was kicking him.

He slid out of bed, fishing under it for his shoes. He didn't have anything to gird up his loins with, just his too-short hospital gown that left him bare-assed and within an inch of being indecently exposed. He thought about wrapping up in his sheet but discarded the idea. It would only trip him if he had to run.

So he crept past his snoring roommates, cracking the door to the hall open an inch. The hospital had gotten energy conscious and dimmed the lights in the corridors; the only bright spot was the nurses' station five or six rooms to the left. Checo glanced up

at the number on the next door in that direction: 341. His ward was 343. He stood there for what seemed like half the night, thinking about going back to bed and sleeping off whatever weird drug they'd given him. Thinking about what excuse he could give if he ran into a nurse. Thinking about asking to see a psychiatrist. Then *el Baby* kicked him again, hard.

"Ay voy, I'm going," he muttered. "*Tenga paciencia, por favor.*"

Checo counted off the rooms as he sneaked down the corridor. When he got to 349, he pushed the door open and scuttled inside, leaning against it and breathing hard as it sighed shut. The room wasn't quite dark. It faced the parking lot, and the glare from the security lights showed him a thin shape under the blanket, plastic tubes snaking up from both arms to IV stands with bags of clear fluid hanging from the hooks. Oxygen hissed though another line that let into the wall. That was when he realized he had no idea what to do next.

Tío Checo had been to a revival meeting once when he was a kid, dragged along as juvenile chaperone by Abuelita's sister, who had been flirting with a pilot from Lackland Air Force Base. She had also flirted with his Baptist religion for a month or two before deciding she liked her men homegrown and Catholic. The preacher had gone on and on for a couple of hours about hell and the wages of sin and how the only way to avoid them was to invite Jesus into your heart—he hadn't said anything at all about what to do if you found him in your gut—and then he'd gotten down to making the blind see and the lame walk.

Theoretically, at any rate. He'd waved his arms in the air, sweated, grunted, mopped his brow a couple of times, and brought his hands down on the head of one of his flock like an owl swooping out of the sky on a rabbit. His thumbs had dug into the guy's forehead so hard they made white spots, and the Reverend had shaken and sweated and grunted some more while he yelled, "Be healed! Be HEALED, I SAY, in the name of JEEZUSS! Be...HEALED!"

And the victim—er, patient—had gotten up, waving his arms and sweating and praising Jesus and hallelujahing, et cetera, et cetera, and emptying his pockets into the collection plate.

It had seemed to work. The trouble was, it was way too noisy for somebody creeping around a hospital with his butt flapping in the breeze and no reasonable explanation at all for what he was doing in some lady's room in the middle of the night.

El Santo Teenager told me to come heal the lady.

The Baby Jesus kicked me.

Sure. Have a nice little blue pill, sir, and please slip your arms into this jacket with the long, long sleeves.

Tío Checo inched his way along the wall till he found the bathroom door. He flicked on the light, which at least let him see the room well enough that he wouldn't go barrelling into the furniture. It let him see his prospective patient, too. Her cheeks and lips had collapsed against the bones of her jaw like the earth over a grave, sketching a web of lines on her skin that reminded Checo of drought-parched clay. The whites of her eyes glinted at him from under half-closed lids. That didn't bother him the way it might have; he had seen way too many open-eyed corpses and near corpses in the Mekong Delta—saw some still, sitting in the sun on the patio, whenever he ventured into the VA clinic. Leaning over the raised bed rails, he gave the woman's shoulder a tentative poke with one finger. No response. Out for the count.

Okay, smart-ass. Now what?

Very gently, Tío Checo laid one hand on her head. She didn't move. Even more gently, he laid the second hand beside the first. Still nothing. Maybe the yelling and grunting were necessary, but he really didn't want to bring the nurses running. That would land him in trouble for sure. "Okay, Chuy," he said. "Santo Niño de Whatever. Do your thing."

Then *el Baby* kicked him again, hard, and a jolt went through him like he'd grabbed a downed live wire, the kind of wrist-thick cable that twists and flops along the ground with the power running through it. The force flung him back against the wall under the window, arms and legs headed in four different directions—but all of them headed for the floor. He reached out to steady himself and grabbed one of those little wood-and-metal school-desk chairs they put in hospital rooms to make visitors uncomfortable. It slipped and came clattering down on top of him, its legs playing the metal bed frame like a marimba on the way.

12 Checo yelled, "*¡Chinga tu madre, cabrona!*" at the chair, and Mrs. Ida Collier sat straight up in bed and screamed, "Help! Help! There's a man in my room!"

"*¡Cabrona!*" yelled Checo again, this time not referring to the chair.

"Rapist!" screeched Mrs. Collier, who had found the light switch and gotten a good look at Tío's *dishabille*.

She uncoupled the urinal from the bed, still screaming, and potted him right between the eyes with it. The bedpan followed. More clatter as they skittered off across the tile floor.

Then Tío Checo heard feet pounding in the corridor, and the door crashed open. A couple of Hulk-sized orderlies crashed into the room right behind it, followed by a nurse, her stethoscope bouncing on her shoulder and a pair of defibrillator paddles in her hand. The flat voice of the PA system announced, "Code Blue on 3-A. Code Blue on 3-A. All designated personnel to Room 349, stat."

"All designated personnel" turned out to be house security, complete with badges and Sig Sauers strapped to their belts. Tío Checo, crammed into the three-foot space between the bed and the wall, tangled up in the silly-ass little chair with his hospital gown up around his waist and his hairy knees on either side of his ears, surrendered peacefully. He knew he was fucked.

Fortunately, nobody really thought he'd meant to hurt Mrs. Collier, much less rape her. They just figured he'd gotten muzzy-headed from the painkillers and the residual alcohol in his system and gone *vagando* around the neighborhood. He also smelled faintly of a Schedule I controlled substance, but they couldn't find any weed when they searched his belongings. In the end, he got a private room out of the deal. It just happened to be on the top floor behind a steel gate and also just happened to lock from the outside. He spent the rest of his convalescence there, watching *telenovelas* and begging Mom and Tía Rosie to bring him some real food. There had to be an investigation, though. Dad wound up calling in fifteen years' worth of favors at the precinct and the DA's office to get him sprung.

So Tío Checo came home to stay in my old room for a while, just until he could make other arrangements. Strange things began to happen around the house. He hugged Buelita when he arrived, and she stopped forgetting things. The old spark came back into her eyes. She went back to her crocheting and to walking down to the Ortiz Grocery on the corner of the next block with just her little *carrito* and no list. Mom's hot flashes disappeared. The old scar from a bullet Dad took in his rookie year stopped aching.

Then one Sunday, when we were having a *carne asada* over at Braulio's to get to know the prospective in-law better, Crystal's little cat ran out of the house and into the street. Some asshole going fifty in the residential zone hit her so hard it threw her ten feet onto the concrete sidewalk. Crystal, with tears running down her face, carried her into the back yard all limp. Checo felt the kick in his gut he was beginning to know well by now. He set his Corona down and gently took Muñeca into his arms, stroking her and murmuring, "It's okay, *querida*. Muñequita's okay. She's going to be all right."

Now, Muñeca was dead. Dead, or the nearest thing to it. Tía Rosie and I had both rushed over from where we were setting up the buffet to put our arms around Crystal, and I was no more than a couple feet away from Checo. I could see that the cat wasn't breathing. But after Checo had held her for half a minute or so, she started to purr. The sound was thready at first, then gathered strength, till Muñeca was rumbling like Tío's own personal thunderstorm. She began to knead the front of his shirt, and her head butted into the crook of his elbow. With her arms outstretched and a little cry like a mewling kitten herself, Crystal reached for her pet.

That's when Muñeca opened her eyes, looked up, and saw who was holding her. Checo had never liked cats. Cats had never liked Checo. Muñeca in particular had never liked Checo. She took one look at him, hissed, and landed all five claws of her right paw smack in the middle of his mustache. Just for good measure, she scratched him again as she hurled herself, yowling, at her mistress. Checo yowled too, blood running down his chin, and tottered into the house to shave and bind up his wounds. At least he didn't fall down this time. He was getting used to being semi-electrocuted.

Later that evening, when the neighbors had all gone home and Nellie had hauled Bryan off to North Star Mall to check on their bridal/groomal registries, Abuelita sat Checo down in Braulio's living room with Dad and Mom and all the rest of the uncles and aunts and cousins. Muñeca glared at him out of baleful green eyes from her perch on the back of the sofa just behind Crystal. Buelita rummaged in her basket by the recliner, picked out a nearly finished pale-blue sweater, and began to crochet shell trim around the neck. "Mijo," she said, looking straight at him as her hands

hooked and pulled the yarn almost as if they had a life of their own. "Mijo, you have something to tell us."

Checo shrugged and spread his hands. "No, Mama. *Nada*."

"*Mira mis manos*, Checo. Look at my hands. No more arthritis. I don't forget things anymore."

"*Gracias a Dios*, mamá. I'm glad, but—"

"But nothing." Tío Manny slapped a copy of the *Express-News* down on the coffee table. The Saturday religion section lay on top, with a photograph of Mrs. Ida Collier sitting on a bench in a garden with a younger woman who looked a lot like her and a bunch of little blond kids in little white dresses and little white suits with knee pants. The headline read, *Miracle Cure?*

*Today, Ida Collier is a healthy fifty-nine-year-old woman who says the best of life is yet to be. It was twenty years ago last month that a speeding motorist sideswiped her car on Vance Jackson Road, sending it into a triple rollover that threw her free of the vehicle but left her brain-damaged and in a coma. In June of this year, her caregivers at a local nursing home became concerned about her condition, and she was hospitalized. Tests showed widespread bone cancer. Doctors gave her no chance of recovery.*

*But something happened to her on the night of June 23.*

*She suddenly regained consciousness, and today there is no sign of the bone cancer that had ravaged her body and doomed her to certain death. Family members attribute her unprecedented recovery to Jesus Christ and their unwavering faith that miracles are possible. "We never stopped praying," her daughter Wanda says. "Not for a moment."*

"That's the lady whose room they found you in, isn't it? She was dying, and now she's well." Tío Manny rapped out the words almost like an accusation. Of course, with Checo, there usually was an accusation. It had gotten to be a habit. "Our mom is better than she's been in ten years. She was coming down with Alzheimer's. People don't get better from that, *hermano*. They don't."

"And Muñequita," Crystal said softly, looking at her uncle like he was God. "She was dead. I know she was."

Dad stood up and loomed over his brother like a mountain. He was tall and broad-shouldered to begin with, but when he went into cop mode he seemed to grow half a foot. He turned a goose-neck lamp so it shone full on Tío Checo's face. "Spill it," he said.

So the whole story came out. Most of it, anyway. Checo neglected to mention some of the details. Buelita was old-school

Catholic, not the folk-Mass and "relevant" variety, and El Santo Teenager's tats and the joint would have pushed her limits. There was more white light and flapping wings and even some *Ah-ah-aaahhhhhing* with violin accompaniment.

When he finished, Buelita laid down her handwork to cross the rug and kiss him on the cheek. "You have a gift, *mijo*. You must ask God to show you how to use it. *Gracias a Dios*," she breathed fervently. "He has blessed you greatly."

*Gracias a Dios*, everyone else thought silently. Maybe *nuestro borrego negro*—our black sheep—is about to get a bleach job. Manny still looked like he didn't quite believe it, though, and there was an old bitterness in Tía Rosie's eyes.

The next afternoon, which was Monday, two of Crystal's friends came home with her after school for a Coke and a look at the miracle cat. Tuesday morning, three more dropped in on their way to class, bearing offerings of tuna and catnip mice. By noon, one of the girls' mothers had shown up. A couple hours later there was a delegation in front of Mom's and Dad's house, trampling the petunias and demanding to see Tío Checo. About half were the neighborhood *chismosas*, out for gossip. The other half carried rosaries and prayer cards, and some of those sported crutches. Old Mr. Mancillas from two streets over, his Ace-bandaged legs ravaged by diabetes, arrived in a wheelchair.

Tío Checo cracked the blinds in his front window half an inch, took one look, and popped the lock on his bedroom door. He pulled it quietly shut behind him, then slipped down the stairs and out of the kitchen door, making for the bus stop. By the time Mom sprang the doorknob with one of Buelita's crochet hooks, he was long gone.

Which was just as well, considering the state of Mom's temper even without the hot flashes. "He's not here," she told the crowd. "*Por favor*, please, please just go away."

They did, but reluctantly, one or two of them muttering, "*Fraude*," under their breath. A lesser woman would have collapsed in tears. Mom set off for the hardware store and returned with foot-tall edging for her flowerbeds. She knew the neighbors would be back.

When he escaped from his would-be patients—or disciples, or whatever you want to call them—Tío Checo headed for the one place no one would have expected him to go. For maybe the second

time since Braulio hired him, Checo arrived at work less than ten minutes late. Arrived, what's more, without his usual haze of *eau de Tecate*. The ladies behind the counters whispered as he squeeged the glass-topped pastry cases and the front window, careful not to drip Windex on the four-tiered cardboard-and-fossilized-icing wedding cake on display. The *chisme* followed him to the kitchen, where he polished the washtub-sized mixing bowls till *la Blancanieves'* wicked stepmother could have played Jeopardy with them. One or two of the ladies made the sign of the cross when he passed. One or two others made the horns against the *mal ojo*. Checo tried to ignore them. When a cake decorator turned to find him scrubbing the table behind her, she gave a little squeak like a mouse and swagged him from chin to receding hairline with pink buttercream. After that, he shut himself in the men's room till he heard the women punch out. He emerged just in time to see Braulio turn the key in the lock and cross the parking lot to the bakery's delivery truck, the bank bag in his hand and a frown on his face. He did not look like a happy camper.

Understand: There are no secrets in the *barrio*. Somebody's *primo's* mother-in-law's sister's *comadre* had heard about Muñeca's resurrection, and now the story was all over South San Antonio. Alamo Heights and the country-club set in the Dominion would know about it tomorrow. By the end of next week, it would be old news in Matamoros and Juarez. Braulio needed business, not notoriety. And he definitely did not need his experienced help quitting on him because they thought his brother was possessed. Tío Checo had a flash of precognition, and what he saw in his future was another pink slip. ("Checo Cárdenas," says the mirror-bright mixing bowl. "Who's about to get his butt fired again?" responds the wicked Queen for two thousand dollars. And who's the unfairiest of them all just doesn't come into it.)

So it wasn't surprising that Checo made a strategic stop at the 7-Eleven after he let himself out the back door just before nine. When he'd emptied the bottle, he circled back for seconds, clutching his brown bag with its two quarts of Lone Star under his jacket as he boarded the last bus home. Probably the driver shouldn't have let him on, but Checo could still walk upright and wasn't anywhere near the loud stage yet. So he rode the couple of miles in silence, thinking about where he could go when Braulio



finally fired him and what he could do to find a job. The cardboard condo on the sidewalk was becoming likelier by the second.

The bus pulled up to the bench by the neighborhood park, squealing as the driver lowered the front end so that the last step was almost level with the curb. Checo muttered, "*Nas noches*," at the guy, who muttered, "*Ten cuidado*," back, and started down the block toward home.

He had just turned the corner when *el Baby* nailed a thirty-yard field goal right in his gut.

The pain of it bent him double; he snatched reflexively at the brown bag as it began to slip. When he could breathe again, he looked around him at the quiet houses. A light still burned in a window here and there, and from a block or two away came the faint sound of an accordion wheezing out a polka. No ladies in comas, no sisters-in-law with hot flashes. Checo looked again, just to be sure, tottering through a full three hundred and sixty degrees and staring up at the sky. Still nothing. No flashes of white light. No wings flapping. No Santo Teenager. "Wha' th' fuck? Nobody here but *yo mismo*, 'bout to get fuckin' fired again. Fuckin' *desempleado*. You wanna fix somethin' how 'bout you fix that, huh? Santo Baby."

He gave a snort at the empty street and unscrewed the cap on one of the Lone Stars. A quarter of it went down his gullet in one long swallow.

*El Baby* kicked him again, harder, and he choked on the beer. When the coughing stopped and the haze started to clear the second time, though, he heard tires gritting along the pavement. A wheelchair passed under the streetlight: old Mr. Mancillas barreling down the sidewalk straight for him, like a Nascar Mustang. Checo flattened himself against a hurricane fence to let the *viejito* pass, but the chair came to a skidding halt right in front of him. Checo could have sworn little spurts of gravel sprayed up from the tires. "*Chingado*," said Mr. Mancillas, staring up at him in the half-light. "What the hell took you so long? I been waitin' for you for three hours, man."

18 "Wor-work," said Checo carefully. "*Tengo trabajo*. Got a job. Honest job." He pushed away from the fence and stepped around the wheelchair. "*Noches*."

Mr. Mancillas caught at his jacket sleeve. "*Espérate*. Wait a minute. What about my legs, huh? I went to your brother's

house earlier, but you weren't there. Or your sister-in-law said you weren't."

Checo felt the slightest flex in his gut, like somebody swinging a leg back to land the winning two points. "Wait!" He clutched at his belly. "Wait, s'okay. S'okay. *Lo hago*. I'll fuckin' do 'im, goddammit."

Very carefully, Tío Checo set down his beers, the one in his hand and the one still in the sack. He still wasn't sure about the drill—hands on head worked, but so did a hug or a tickle under a cat's chin. Horacio Mancillas had been a roofer before diabetes had sidelined him; he still had powerful shoulders and hands the size of asphalt shovels. He'd also been a rodeo cowboy and an outlaw biker. Hugging him probably wasn't a good idea. Probably a chin scratch wasn't, either. "Okay," he said again, and reached out to lay his hands on the man's head.

"Hey, just a minute." *El viejo* grabbed Checo's wrist before he could make contact. "Aren't you supposed to pray or something?"

"Pray? Nah, doesn't work that way."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure." Checo leaned in against the old man's grip. "Come on, let's get this over with."

"No shit? You don't pray? That's not the way it's done on TV."

There was another twitch in Tío's gut. "Look, you want up outta that chair or not? You wan' somebody to pray, pray."

Checo let him get through the sign of the cross and the *Padre nuestro* up to the bit about Kingdom Come. With his quarry's head bowed and his hands safely folded, Checo swooped down on him from behind like the Baptist preacher from the tent revival, one hand and then the other latching onto the guy's head like it was a bowling ball. "Yow!" yelled Don Horacio, and, "¡Ayyyyy!" yelled Tío Checo, as the current went through him hard enough to rock the chair onto its back wheels.

Don Horacio rocked with it, his arms flying up into the air and his legs spraddled out in front of him like a bull rider's just before he hits the sand. "Yow!" he yelled again, and, "Yahoooooooooooo! Fuckin' A!"

And he bounced up out of the chair, did a little line-dance step, twirled his chair around a couple of times, and grabbed Checo in a bear hug that threatened to rupture his diaphragm.

It was probably just as well. Checo would have fallen down otherwise.

They made a ceremony of tossing Don Horacio's Ace bandages into a trash can by the curb, along with the sterile dressings that had covered his open sores. They would have burned them, but Tío's Bic wouldn't flick. Instead, they found a spot in the park behind the maintenance shed and had the rest of the Lone Star to celebrate. Then they had a few more from an all-night drive-through half a dozen blocks up the street where the clerk was willing to make an off-the-register sale after midnight, for a small consideration. After that, they had a little weed that an old biker buddy had shared with Don Horacio. Strictly for its painkilling properties, of course. Somewhere along the way they got to feeling musical, running through half a dozen *corridos* and some revolutionary songs before seriously fucking up a few of El Puma's romantic ballads.

And so it was that Tío Checo finally arrived home at four-o'-dark-thirty in the morning, slouched in the wheelchair while Don Horacio pushed, both of them more sheets to the wind than a Holiday Inn on wash day. "*Pavo volando vago*," they warbled at the top of their lungs. Checo, draped sideways across the chair, flapped his arms as they sang.

Dad met them at the door. He was not amused. "Where the hell have you been?" he growled. "I was just about to get the precinct out after you."

Checo looked up at him blearily, wondering why his *hermanito* had suddenly become triplets. Maybe it was another miracle. "Ffffwww...." he said, bubbling beer foam. "Ffffwww. *Fué....* It wash *el Baby*."

Dad took in Grandpa Mancillas, leaning over the back of his erstwhile wheelchair and grinning like an idiot. "It wash." Don Horacio nodded his grey head sagely. "*Esh verda*". I shwear on *el honor de mi madre*."

Dad was a moderately religious man, not one to dismiss a miracle right on his own front step. But lights were starting to come on in the houses on either side, and somebody had stepped out onto the Fernandezes' porch across the street. "Yeah, right." He grabbed Checo's arm and propelled him into the front hall. "Get your wandering peacock ass in here."

Then he slammed the door and slapped the porch light off, leaving Don Horacio to deal with the neighborhood.

Well, that tore it. Four hours later Mom's petunias were collateral damage, and her little vinyl picket fences along with them. Worse, someone had called the media. A Univision truck and another from KENS were pulled up in front of the Fernandezes'. A cameraman was setting up his tripod and lights while a blonde woman with a microphone in her hand went through what looked like a dry run with the oldest son. A suit with a CBS lapel pin and another microphone elbowed his way through the crowd of neighbors and up the front steps to ring the bell. Before his finger could touch the button, Dad pulled the door open and stepped onto the porch. "Out!" he bellowed. "Get off this property or I'll arrest you for trespassing!"

Gotten up in his full watch-commander rig, with his badge and his stripes and a .357 Magnum strapped to his waist, he looked like God's brother-in-law. It didn't faze the reporters one bit.

"Sergeant Cárdenas," said the suit, jamming the mic into Dad's chin. "What can you tell us about your brother's claim to heal the sick and raise the dead?" The guy snickered. "Dead cats, anyway?"

If Dad had been a few shades lighter, he would have turned red in the face. "My brother," he said carefully, "doesn't claim anything. Nothing. *Nada*. It's you assholes that are making claims. Now, get the hell out of my yard or your next interview's gonna be with your lawyer." He unclipped the cuffs from his belt and dangled them in front of the reporter's nose. "*¿Comprende?*"

In the end, they pulled back to the sidewalk. The blonde from Univision got her segment with the Fernandez kid into the can, including an imitation of Checo doing his wandering-peacock act. Around noon, Don Horacio turned up, still a bit hung over but happy to show the *periodistas* the Polaroids from his medical records. The pictures probably spoiled more than one lunch with their bleeding ulcers two and three inches across, raw meat in the center with rotten black skin at the spreading edge. Then, grinning, he hiked up his pants legs to show them his shins less than twenty-four hours later, hairy but otherwise pristine. A small riot broke out, with flashes popping and cameramen shouldering rival stations out of the way. Upstairs, Tío Checo snored through it all.

The next week was more of the same, only worse. The national media arrived. So did the tabloids. Half a dozen of

Dad's *compadres* from the precinct took turns as security guards, keeping the reporters and the neighbors at bay. Braulio called in the prospective lawyer-in-law and got restraining orders all around, reinforced by a new six-foot hurricane fence. Mom, who had never liked dogs bigger than her yappy little Chihuahuas, went to the pound one afternoon and came back with a German shepherd almost the size of the Budweiser horses. She unplugged the TV, unscrewed the cable, and tossed the newspaper into the trash can every morning still in its plastic tube. She couldn't unplug the phone because Dad was pretty much permanently on call, but she got one of those little plug-in ID things. If it wasn't the precinct or one of the family, it didn't get answered. Checo invoked his Miranda rights and wouldn't talk to anybody.

The siege broke after a week and a half. A rich, blond Alamo Heights doctor got busted for offing his richer, blonder wife, and a local Republican honcho got caught in a sleazy motel bed with an eighteen-year-old. He might've gotten off with a nasty divorce and a wink and a nudge from his golfing buddies, except that the eighteen-year-old was African American and professional. Also male. The press went after him like *el cán de los Baskervilles*, and peace returned to the *barrio*.

A few days after the press decamped, the sick and injured from the neighborhood began to show up again, this time in ones and twos. Some went away healed; some didn't. It all depended on *el Baby*. One day Mrs. Ida Collier drove up in her Porsche two-seater, and she and Checo had a long talk out under the pecan tree. Then the two of them had an even longer talk with the lawyer-in-law-to-be, a substantial check changed hands, and Tío moved from the house to a small apartment over a storefront. He used some of Mrs. Collier's gift to set up a *yerbería* selling candles and medicinal herbs, incense and statues. With his Social Security disability now in question, Grandpa Mancillas appointed himself Checo's assistant. He opened the shop, minded the counter as necessary, and endlessly hiked up his pants legs to show off his miraculously healed shins. Between Tío's lightning bolts and Don Horacio's testimony, a steady stream of patients passed under the *ojo de Dios* over the shop door, each one leaving with a new bit of gossip to pass on to the neighborhood *chismosos*. The statue of *el Santo Niño de Atocha*—*el Baby's* official, respectable portrait—was never shy of two or three dozen candles, each of them with

a petition or a *milagrito* tied with a ribbon around it. When he danced with Nellie at her wedding and Crystal at her *quinceañera*, Checo could take his place among his brothers as a moderately successful small businessman. If the flashy gold anchor crucifix and bracelet didn't quite go with his tux, nobody criticized his fashion statement. And if he parked himself at the open bar for most of the evening, nobody criticized that, either.

In any case, booze turned out to be the least of his sins. Tío Checo's store was really a front for *el Baby*. People who followed Checo into the back room when *el Baby* did his thing were going in sick or crippled and coming out well. And they weren't just buying candles and saying prayers; many of them left cash offerings too. Sometimes a *viejita*'s prodigal son came by with a wad of bills to give thanks that his *mamá* could see again, and nobody asked where the money came from. But when respectable San Antonians—make that respectable *Anglo* San Antonians with fat wallets—stood up in their respectable *Anglo* hands-in-the-air, praise-the-Lord, speaking-in-Tagalog churches and testified that *el Baby* and a permanently *semi-borracho* (occasionally stoned) *mexicano* had healed them, the competition sat up and took notice.

It showed up a week before Easter, on a Monday. Mondays the *yerbería* opened late, to allow for Checo's fluid schedule on weekends. Better and more expensive fluid as the shop took off and began to make a profit; Checo still kept a six-pack of Tecate in the fridge for old times' sake, but these days his taste ran more to Jim Beam and Johnny Walker. He'd been enjoying his reunion with his old buddy Jim the night before, so at first he wasn't sure whether the pounding was in his head or on the apartment door. He cracked one eye just long enough to cringe at the sun pouring through the bare glass above the window unit. He pulled the pillow over his head to block out the glare. He figured he had another hour or so. Maybe the headache wouldn't be so bad if he slept till noon, and a nice big bowl of Buelita's *menudo* would take care of the rest.

More pounding, like the Kentucky Derby thundering into the stretch. "Checo! Goddammit, Checo! Open the *chingada* door, will you?"

Checo raised the pillow and frowned at the racket. El Santo Teenager yelled at him sometimes, but he didn't do it from the landing outside the kitchen door. There also seemed to be voices

coming from the living room, two people speaking quietly in English. Joint by joint, groaning, Checo levered himself up and fumbled for his pants, abandoned on the rug beside the bed the night before. "Ay voy," he muttered. "*Ay con el ruido, cabrón, ay voy, ay voy.*"

On his way through the living room, he switched off some talking head interviewing the Governor. Checo flipped him the finger as he shrank to a pinpoint of light on the screen and winked out.

The hammering on the door stopped abruptly as Checo shot back the deadbolt and peered out at Don Horacio across the flimsy brass chain that was all that stood between him and Jehovah's Witnesses on Saturday mornings. "Wha—"

"Let me in, goddammit! Have you looked out your window?"

It occurred to Checo that he could still hear somebody speaking English, only it wasn't coming from the TV. He couldn't make out the words, but they had a rhythm to them that sounded like a speech. Which was strange, because it wasn't an election year, and *gringo* politicians didn't tend to come down to this part of the *barrio* anyway. Not without a lot of arrangement-making up front to make sure they had a friendly audience. Not without an attempt to stammer out a few phrases in Spanish to prove they were culturally sensitive *buena gente*.

Checo slipped the chain off the hook and let Don Horacio in. "*¿Qué onda?*" he asked, already knowing he wasn't going to like the answer.

Don Horacio grabbed him by the elbow and hauled him over to the pair of windows that looked down on the sidewalk in front of the shop. Checo reached out to pull one of Abuelita's lace curtains out of the way, but Don Horacio slapped his hand down. "Just look, dammit. Don't let him know you see him."

"Him" was a pudgy white guy in a white suit. Checo squinted at him as he paced up and down the sidewalk in front of the store, one hand waving in the air, the other holding an open book with a soft black cover and gold on the page edges. A Bible. Sweat ran down his face from his half-moon hairline and dripped off his double chin. Behind him along the curb stood half a dozen women, also white on white, also with their hands in the air. Every couple of seconds they shouted out an "Amen!" or "Hallelujah!" People stepped out into the street to avoid them, looking back over their shoulders as they passed. One or two made the horns against the

*mal ojo*. Abruptly the guy turned on his heel and flung himself down onto his knees on the sidewalk. He raised the Bible up over his head with one hand and beat the other against his meaty thigh. His volume went up ten or twenty decibels. "Oh Lord Jesus Christ!" he yelled. "We curse, yes, we CURSE the spirit of unrighteousness and deception that has led so many of your PRECIOUS LITTLE LAMBS—including your precious little brown lambs—away from you and into this DEN OF SATAN." ("Hallelujah!" sang the ladies' auxiliary.) "We rebuke, Lord Jeeezusss, oh, Lord Jeeezusssss, we REBUKE the devil in YOUR NAME, and we put HIM and ALL HIS WORKS under your DOMINION." ("Amen!" warbled the chorus.) "They AND ALL WHO TRUST IN THEM will be cast at the end of days into the FIRE THAT IS NOT QUENCHED and will BURN FOREVER AND EVER!" The guy had gone red in the face, with his eyes screwed up and his whole body shaking as if he were about to have a seizure. The ladies had gone all stiff, with their heads thrown back, their mouths open. They looked like they were about to have a spasm, too, just a different kind.

"Fuck," said Checo, unnecessarily. "Who is he?"

"Some come-to-Jesus freak." Don Horacio pointed to the side of a van parked in front of the shop. The door sported a gold cross, with *Dominion Full-Gospel Church* arched over it in fancy letters, also gold. "Some rich, gated-community, come-to-Jesus freak."

Tío Checo scrubbed a hand across his forehead and searched his memory. The Dominion had been San Antonio's first fence-out-the-middle-class-and-peons subdivision; money that had still been damp from the printing press when the developer opened it up called itself old money now. Though the Dominion Full-Gospel Church wasn't one of those bring-back-the-Ten-Commandments-and-repeal-the-Constitution outfits. Not the kind with the death penalty for adultery and enslavement for snorting a few lines of coke in the ladies' room. Nope. This guy was into name-it-and-claim-it prosperity gospel, all the way. No giving away all his worldly goods to the poor and following a barefoot *paisano* carpenter for him. "Farkus," Checo remembered suddenly. "Billy Bob Farkus. He was on the news the other night. Something about Clinton and demons."

"*La Mónica*," Don Horacio said, nodding sagely. "Out to dry up a man's precious bodily fluids."



"Nah, *los árabes*, out to dry up our precious oil supply. Jeez, never mind that. What are we gonna do about this *pendejo* out on the sidewalk?"

What they did, in the end, was ignore him. It wasn't easy, but when Checo opened the shop an hour later, business was as good as ever. Customers came and went, carrying home their Santo Niño and Seven African Powers candles and their Lucky Money spray with barely a glance at *el loco* and his holy calisthenics. The few who did seem to notice gave the travelling salvation show a wide berth and the occasional bird. Nobody stopped to be saved or to argue. Around five, the Rev and his little chorus packed it in and drove off, no doubt for a happy hour of Bible study and a few margaritas on the way back to the north side. By the time he zipped up the bank bag and turned the key in the lock around midnight, Checo could go upstairs to his frozen dinner and a late *telenovela* a contented man.

Farkus and his ladies were back the next day, though. And the day after that. Checo called Dad down at the station, and an officer came to investigate the complaint. Unfortunately, there was nothing he could do; the sidewalk was public property. Farkus & Co. weren't actually obstructing traffic or blocking access to the shop. (And oye, *hombre*, the Mayor'll be on our butts if we actually haul in a bunch of debutantes' mamas just before *Fiesta*, with all the big parties and the parade coming up. *¿Comprende?*)

Checo understood, all right. Money talks, and in San Antonio, northside money talks loudest.

Thursday the mamas and their papa-in-God left early to polish the collection plates for the twice-a-year crowd and get in some choir rehearsal between trips to the hair and nail salons. Checo toasted their departure with Johnny Walker Black and allowed himself to breathe a sigh of relief. Not that the cash register had suffered. Business at the *yerbería* had turned brisker than usual at the beginning of Holy Week despite the vaudeville number on the sidewalk. There was a sudden run on Sorrowful Heart of Mary and Stations of the Cross candles. Ditto Santa Verónica and Holy Shroud. *Spray de lotto* fell off, but prayer cards picked up. Folks who went in for the *Santería* stuff for most of the year suddenly turned into good Catholics. *La familia Cárdenas* went to confession on Friday, barbequed on Saturday, and held an Easter-egg hunt for the kids after Mass on Sunday. Mrs. Ida Collier came, and Crystal

swore she saw Checo and Mrs. Ida holding hands. Others had apparently seen them too. The gossip started to buzz like the *chicharras* on a hot summer night—first a click or two, followed by a rattle, and then the ear-splitting chorus as every bug in the neighborhood gets into it. Mom and Dad exchanged I-told-you-so glances, and Buelita drank her *limonada* and rocked gently back and forth in the porch swing looking smug. Poor Jim Beam was lonely that night.

Then came Monday, and Farkus was back in front of the store. This time a TV-production crew, complete with satellite truck, followed him.

They showed up around two, just about the time the three-frozen-piña-colada luncheons for the Fiesta queen and her court would be breaking up. The Rev. Billy Bob went into his act for the camera, waving his Bible and yelling, with the ladies doing their genteel "Hallelujahs" in the background. They'd brought a male chorus with them, too, all blond and blue eyed and buzz cut, with six-pack abs rippling under their polo shirts and veins that corded their biceps under their Tahoe (or maybe tanning-bed) brown skin. They sure hadn't gotten that *bien dorado* glow from *mestizo* genes. They all looked like yacht-club Ivy Leaguers on their way to MBAs and seventy-five-thousand-dollar entry-level appointments in investment firms.

"FORNICATION, I say. YES, FORNICATION," shouted the Reverend Billy Bob, grimacing at the camera. Today, he wasn't playing to the street. "The Lord God of Israel says, 'You shall NOT GO AFTER OTHER GODS TO SERVE THEM, or BOW DOWN TO THEM.' And THIS, my little lambs, is SPIRITUAL! FOR! NI! CA! TION!" (Here he waved one of the African Powers candles around.) "And THIS! THIS!" ("This" was a bright red statue of *la Santa Muerte*, Holy Death, with her scythe and monk's robe over her bare bones.) He yelled louder as the low throb of a stereo bass speaker from somewhere two or three blocks away insinuated a counter-rhythm under his voice. "THIS is the OLD SERPENT HIMSELF! What we have here is DEVIL WORSHIP! Outright SATANIC DEVIL WORSHIP!"

Farkus paused to wipe at the sweat that was beading on his bare scalp. His belly heaved and quivered in time with his second and third chins. Checo and Don Horacio pretended not to pay attention while they stocked the shelves with the herbal teas UPS

had dropped off earlier. But they could hear every word—hell, they could probably hear every word in downtown Dallas—and old man Mancillas muttered, "*Hombre*, I think this is gonna get ugly."

Just then, Farkus got his second wind, and bellowed, "'You shall NOT SUFFER A WITCH TO LIVE!' says the Lord God."

"It's already ugly," said Checo, eyeing the flower-of-Nordic-manhood contingent, and reached for the phone to call the cops.

Farkus' last few words had barely been audible. From the side street, the bass was thumping louder. The glass in the shop windows began to vibrate and buzz gently. "*Bamba, bamba*," floated out into the intersection. "*Bailar bamba*." The Reverend Billy Bob inhaled like a Hoover and fumbled at his lapel for the Sunday mic that wasn't there. Still, he managed to up the volume, even if the effort did turn his face a nasty shade of plum. "ANYONE who HEALS except by the POWER OF GOD is DEALING WITH DEMONS! Demons like THIS!" (Here Farkus brandished *la Santa Muerte* again.) "It's ABOMINATION! ANATHEMA!" Spit bubbled and ran down his second chin. "REPENT! REPENT! REPENT!"

But the music throbbed relentlessly, getting closer and louder by the second. The bass separated itself into drum and bull fiddle, with electric guitar and voice carrying the melody, and lyrics Ritchie Valens never sang:

*Para bailar conmigo  
Se necesita una poca de gracia,  
Una poca de gracia  
Y poca cosita  
De marijuanita.*

The car was at the intersection now, the song echoing between the shop fronts and drowning out the ladies' auxiliary. Their mouths made dark, soundless Os in their faces. The blond dudes all widened their stance a bit and crossed their arms over their chests, trying for the hired-gun look. Farkus raised his Bible high above his head.

"God loves a repentant sinner—"

*Yo no soy santonito*

"—but GOD HATES SIN, my brothers—"

*Por ti seré,*

"—and sisters, yes, GOD HATES—"

*Por ti seré.*

The Rev probably had a good long list of what GOD HATES—or at least, what B. B. Farkus spent his spare time daydreaming about. But the music finally drowned him out as the car turned the corner. Now, there were some real classics in the *barrio* fifteen years ago, but nobody had ever seen anything like the ride that bobbed its way up the street, its hydraulics humping in rhythm to the music.

It was a slab-sided 1964 Lincoln with suicide doors and a continental tire case riding the back bumper. Its cherry red metallic paint job shimmered with the gold glitter in the final varnish. Airbrushed flames swept up from the front wheel cover on the driver's side to become the red hair of a sultry-eyed beauty with a high-arched nose and a mouth that would turn a man's knees to water. Below her bare shoulders, just where things should start to get interesting, *Magdalena* coiled across the back fender in fancy script. The covers of the spoke wheels spun against the motion of the tires, throwing off bursts of light like fireworks on the Fourth of July. Checo's jaw dropped. Then he bolted out onto the sidewalk to stare, Don Horacio on his heels. Tío's gut gave a faint, familiar ripple. The sinking feeling that went with it and his life flashing before his eyes were just free *gratis* extra.

Out in the middle of the street, the car danced, its hydraulics raising first one wheel, then another, off the pavement. The spokes and hubcaps spun. Windows began to slide open up and down the block, people hanging out to get a better look. Others ran out into the street to gawk. Somebody let out a *grito*. "*¡Anda, anda!*" yelled someone else. "*¡Que vivan los lowriders!*"

And all the while the stereo kept up the music:

*Se necesita una poca de gracia,*

*Y poca cosita*

*De la yerbita,*

*Y arriba y arriba.*

On cue, the rear end of the car rose up into the air. And kept rising, up and up, until the chassis made a forty-five-degree angle with the street.

"Holy fuck!" the videographer shouted, loud enough to be heard over the stereo, and swiveled his camera around to focus on the car. The Latina reporter smoothed her hair and pulled out her compact to do a quick refresh on her lipstick. The Rev. Billy Bob's mouth opened and closed like a guppy's as he gesticulated

with his Bible. The church ladies covered their ears with their beautifully manicured hands. And the blond-bimbo dudes, being bimbos, stepped out onto the asphalt and headed for the car.

No one ever found out just what they meant to do, because that's when the Lincoln began to walk on its two front tires, swinging along and wagging each wheel as it came up off the pavement. While traffic piled up behind and in front, it danced its way into the parking space just ahead of the Reverend's van, did a couple of waltz steps back and forth, then slowly settled down into place. The last strains of the music faded. The engine hummed a minute longer and fell silent.

The audience from across the street stood frozen for perhaps three or four seconds. Mama Yoli of Yoli's Tortillas dashed back inside her shop and out again with a camera in her hand. Then they all spilled out into the frozen traffic jam, the stopped drivers with them, and came crashing up to the front of the *yerbería* like one of the big breakers off Mustang Island. The cameraman pulled his tripod back and began panning the crowd. Mama Yoli took up her stance in front of the Lincoln's driver's door, aimed the camera, and waited.

Checo could see motion behind the dark glass of the window, but not much else. A light flared and went out in a swirl of white smoke. Then the door opened.

El Santo Teenager had gone classic. Two sizes too big, the legs of his pinstriped trousers pooled over their tight cuffs and around the tops of his wingtips. A matching double-breasted jacket squared his shoulders and set off a purple shirt and gold lamé tie. Several yards of gold chain hung in loops from his belt down past his knees. A fedora with a purple band tilted low over his mirror-shades. In one white-gloved hand, he held a short cigarette with twisted ends. Checo's heart skipped a beat, then steadied as he caught the aroma of Bull Durham. Straight-up tobacco, no herbal undertones. El Santo Teenager stood for a moment with the door open behind him while three or four more zoot-suited *vatos* piled out of the ride. Mama Yoli's camera flashed. The TV reporter slinked out from behind the Rev. Farkus and made bedroom eyes at *el Teenager*. Farkus himself and his entourage stood like their shoes had been glued to the sidewalk, making incoherent little vowel sounds.

Then Chuy slammed the car door behind him and said, "Oye, Checo, you gonna let this *santón* talk to you like that? This big-shot hypocrite with one hand in the collection plate and the other up his secretary's skirt?"

A gasp went up from the church ladies, and a gargling noise from the Rev. It occurred to Checo that the guy just might have a stroke—or at least a heat stroke—and that maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing. The other lowrider *vatos* got themselves between the soldier-of-fortune types and the rest of the crowd. Under their tans, the wannabe mercs turned a tasteful shade of *mal-de-mer*. The possibility of a major story in the offing cancelled out the estrogen surge, and the reporter pivoted on her stiletto heels and shoved her mic right up under Billy Bob's multiple chins. "That's a serious charge, Reverend," she said. "Do you have an answer—"

One of the church ladies lunged for the Reverend, shoving the reporter aside and grabbing Farkus by the front of his shirt. "Is that true?" Her voice slid up the scale to a glass-shattering shriek. "Are you fucking that little slut behind my back? You two-timing, son-of-a-bitching, long-tailed rat!" She shook him two or three times, twisting his collar while she was at it, just to make sure she had his undivided attention.

Farkus aimed a sickly smile at the camera, the crowd, and the church lady. "Betty Lou, please. Not here. The camera—"

"Fuck the camera!" screeched Betty Lou, and landed a slap across his mouth that cracked like a gunshot. "And fuck you, too, you bastard!" She half-ran back to the church van, climbed in, and slammed the door behind her.

The sickly smile remained plastered to the Reverend's face, two shades of red now between the heat and the outline of four elegantly manicured fingers. He tugged at his collar, rubbing his throat where she'd half-throttled him with it. "Poor lady. She's not well. I've been doing the Lord's work, counseling her about a little habit she has, you know how women seem to fall into these little weaknesses, and she seems to think—well, you know how it is, women get emotionally involved and think there's more to a relationship than there is...." He pulled out his handkerchief and mopped at the sweat running down into his eyes and along the side of his nose. "Uh, say, you're gonna edit that tape, aren't you?"

Don Horacio gave Checo a little nudge in the ribs. "Hey, that ain't Mrs. Farkus, is it?" But Checo just said, "Shhhh," and poked him back, shaking his head.

"Mrs. Farkus," the Reverend echoed. "Now, Miss, I don't want to have to call my lawyer. It'll just be real simple if you let me have that tape." He wagged his eyebrows. "There'll be a little something in it for you, if you know what I mean." And he let his hand stray south.

"Shut your filthy yap, *cabrón*," snarled Don Horacio. "Don't you go talking to a nice lady like that."

The Rev. Mr. Farkus brought his hand up sharply and jerked at his disarranged collar. He glared at Don Horacio, then gave himself a little shake, like somebody coming out of a bad dream. He muttered something about "rebuking the demon" and "casting out." Then he raised his arm, waving his Bible again, and pointed it straight at Checo. He shifted a little to give the camera his best profile.

"WOLF!" he bellowed. His voice vaulted up the decibel scale. "WOLF, I say! Trafficker in DEMONISM AND NECROMANCY! A friend to criminals! Look at that man!" He swiveled around and aimed the Bible at Chuy, who inhaled deeply and began to blow smoke rings. "Look at that man and his gang and tell me he's not a DRUG DEALER or WORSE! Bearin' FALSE WITNESS about me, who have been a servant at the FEET OF THE LORD, just like the prophet Samuel, since I was a tiny little child! Since I was A SUCKLING CHILD, I SAY! I CURSE that man in the name of the Lord! And I curse you for your SORCERIES AND IDOLATRIES and leading the people of this city astray!"

Farkus' voice fell again, and he shook his head sorrowfully. "Especially one woman, the terribly, terribly deceived and misguided woman who laid her worldly goods at your feet instead of at the Lord's. Repent, sinner! REPENT, I SAY!" He stepped up close, close enough for Checo to see every whisker stub of the five-o'clock shadow on his quivering jowls. Checo would swear for years afterward that Farkus' eyes turned red and that he could see flames behind them. "Come on, you lousy greaser," he whispered so low even Checo could barely hear him, "get down on your knees and get me out of this. Think about the lady's good name if her Order of the Alamo friends knew she'd been humping a filthy *pilao* like you."

Checo never even thought about it. His arm cocked back on its own, aiming his fist straight at the bridge of Farkus' nose. Then, deep in his gut, Checo felt the backswing that preceded one of *el Baby's* field goals. He sent a frantic glance over the heads of the crowd at Chuy, who smiled, shrugged, and went on blowing smoke rings. A rumble began to spread through the crowd. One of the Nordic types tried to push past one of *El Santo Teenager's* buddies and suddenly folded over double, clutching the family jewels. From somewhere down the street came the wail of a siren, then a second, and a third. The cops weren't going to be on time, though.

"*Chingate*," Checo muttered to the universe in general, and his arm swung forward. The punch never landed. At the last second his hand opened and clamped down on Farkus's face, squeezing his mouth into a figure-eight pucker. "*Chingate*, you motherfucker, you got you a sick, nasty tongue like a snake. You don't say one more fuckin' word, you asshole."

The current went through him then like something straight off Old Sparky, the antique electric chair they still show off in Huntsville. It cramped up every muscle in his body and pinned the Reverend where he stood, fingers twitching. The Bible flopped onto the sidewalk, and his arms and legs went stiff. Then Tío's hand fell. He sagged back against Don Horacio, his eyes half rolled up into his head. Don Horacio grabbed him around the waist and stepped back, letting Checo slide down gently till he sat on the sidewalk, breathing hard.

Farkus stood like the lady in the Bible who got turned to a pillar of salt, clawing at his throat while his mouth moved without making a sound, and his eyes got wilder and wilder. Sweat plastered his shirt to his chest. Suddenly his knees gave way, dropping him onto all fours on the concrete. He twisted his head back like Linda Blair in *The Exorcist* and snarled at Chuy.

*El Teenager* just shrugged again, dropped his cigarette butt on the pavement, and stepped on it. He flashed the peace sign at the Rev, then turned to open the Lincoln's front door. He and his *vatos* piled in, the engine purred, and the car nudged its way through the crowd to vanish around the corner. One of the neighborhood kids swore later that it really did vanish once it got into the cross street, but nobody was paying much attention. They were all staring at Checo, still flat on his butt on the sidewalk with his legs spraddled at a forty-five-degree angle. Also at the Reverend Mr. Farkus, still



on all fours and making choking sounds from somewhere deep in his gut, like Muñeca trying to yack up a hairball.

And it was all on tape. Every second of it.

The sirens got louder. Apparently it occurred to the TV crew that the cops and a whole army of attorneys would want to get their hands on their tape; the cameraman suddenly collapsed his tripod, slung it over his shoulder with the camcorder still on the head, and sprinted for the station's truck. The reporter hiked up her skirt and tore off behind him like Daughter of Secretariat. The Rev's people bundled him into the church van, while Don Horacio got Checo inside the shop. Then he called the lawyer-in-law and Dad, in that order. Only the neighbors were left out on the sidewalk by the time the black-and-whites finally skidded up. When Bryan arrived, he refused to allow his client to make a statement. Dad pulled in behind the other two squad cars a few minutes later and sent the cops back to the station.

Then they all went back to Mom's and Dad's and put the German shepherd out into the yard. They locked the doors and waited for the inevitable.

The tape aired that night from an undisclosed location, to avoid Farkus' attorneys and their restraining orders. Abuelita crocheted her way calmly through the broadcast, while Dad, Don Horacio, and Checo downed a bottle of Oso Blanco. This time it was the lawyer-in-law who put his head down in his hands and moaned, muttering about slander, assault and battery, and multi-million-dollar damages. "It can't be as bad as last time," Mom murmured. "It can't possibly."

It wasn't as bad as last time. It was worse. Much, much worse.

Halfway through, the phone began to ring. By the time the reporter signed off, there was a crowd outside the gate. Oprah called next morning. So did *The Tonight Show*, *Good Morning America*, the Archdiocesan office, every television station in town except Univision—they were already camped out in front of the shop—the *Express-News*, the *Houston Chronicle*.... You get the picture. Tío Checo was a celebrity. Bryan made a lightning transition from corporate legal to personal agent. By suppertime, he had Checo booked onto half a dozen shows and had lined up a ghostwriter. By lunch the next day, he had sold the film rights to the unwritten book to HBO. He had also suggested to the Reverend Billy Bob's

lawyer a few inventive uses for a twelve-inch length of rebar and two feet of barbed wire.

So Checo made the rounds of the talk shows with Bryan and Nellie both half an inch behind him to make sure he got onto the right planes in the right places. They got him tatted up in Bill Blass and Red for Men. No more *eau de Tecate*. No more Tecate, for that matter. The two of them manhandled him onto the wagon, strapped him down, and sat on him. The soberer he got, the more conventional The Vision became, complete with a burst of white light and choruses of angels all going, "Ah-ah-ah-ah-aaaaah," with violins in the background and their graceful wings wafting. They sat Checo down with me to tape his story for the ghostwriter as soon as they got home, then red-pencilled the manuscript into respectability. They left in just enough of the weed and the booze to make it look like he'd been "saved." Chuy got a makeover, too: no joint, no tats, no *anglosajón* monosyllables.

And it sold like Ninja Turtles.

Somewhere on the red-eye between LA and New York, Bryan got the papers drawn up, and Checo became CheCard Associates, Inc. I got hired on as business manager, with my BBA clutched in one hand and my shiny new mobile phone in the other. Checo could have franchised or done revival-style tours, but he refused to move his base of operations out of the original *barrio* store. CheCard's first corporate HQ was the living room of the upstairs apartment. We shipped the first Tío Checo Herbal Teas from a warehouse down the street, along with Tío Checo Lucky 7 Spray, Tío Checo Lucky in Love Patchouli Soap, *ojos de venado* to ward off the evil eye, Santo Baby pendants, bracelets, holy cards. Anybody who wanted to be healed, though, had to come to the shop. Nothing changed, there. Sometimes *el Baby* did the job, and sometimes he didn't.

Checo was closing up one night a few months after the confrontation on the sidewalk when a black SUV with smoked windows and no visible license plates pulled up to the curb. A stocky guy got out, pulling his baseball cap down till the brim met his sunglasses. At 11:45 *de la medianoche*. Checo reached for the phone and dialed 9.

He hung up before he got to the 11 part. Down in his gut, he could feel *el Baby* winding up. Besides, he thought he recognized the visitor. Just to be sure, he turned the bright green neon

Yerbería Santo Niño sign back on. The guy outside shook his head, looking back over his shoulder and both ways down the street and waving his hands frantically in front of him. His mouth made little round, silent noises. The Rev. Billy Bob was back.

Only this time there were no Nordic-hero types and no choir bunnies. No Bible, either. He ducked through the door and stood looking around him at the shelves full of *Santa Muertes*, candles, Saint Judes, the aforementioned teas and sprays, and the shrine to El Santo Niño that took up one whole corner of the shop, with maybe twenty or thirty candles burning in front of it. Farkus shuddered and wiped off his sleeve where it had brushed against a statue of the Archangel Michael with the dragon dead at his feet. With another glance to both sides, he pulled a little spiral notebook out of his jacket pocket and slapped it down on the glass counter in front of Checo. The cover was turned back to a page with two words in block print on it. The Rev stabbed a finger at it, glaring at Checo. *FIX ME*, it said.

Checo took his time inspecting his patient. Farkus had taken a leave of absence from his church, his wife had taken a leave of absence with the assistant pastor, and he'd been booted off half a dozen boards of directors. It had all made headlines in the *Express-News* and on the local television stations. Now his skin looked pasty grey, the color of a mushroom starting to go bad. His blood-shot eyes blinked when he took his shades off. His double chin had tightened up to one and a half. Drifting just under the Armani, Checo caught a whiff of bourbon. The scowl hadn't improved since their last meeting, either.

Checo reached under the counter for a ballpoint and laid it down beside the notebook. "Ask nice," he said. "Say please."

Farkus' knuckles turned white where he clutched at the edge of the glass. The diminished chins quivered. Checo made no claim to being able to read lips, but the words the Rev mouthed silently looked a whole lot like "Fuck you."

Checo shrugged. He could still feel *el Baby's* backswing, but he wasn't going to let the bastard off easy, not even if it landed him back in the hospital with another bout of pseudodiverticulitis. He reached for the light switch again. "Your choice. Do it or haul ass. I gotta close up."

The Rev hesitated a minute or two longer. Then he snarled, snatched up the pen, and scrawled, *Please*, across the page. He

shoved them both at Checo, hard. The pen shot across the glass, became airborne, and ricocheted off the wall, narrowly missing Billy Bob on the rebound. It buried itself in a fat yellow candle on the shelf behind him. The ribbon wound around it said, *Regrese a mi*.

"Temper, temper." Checo wagged a finger—not the middle one—at his would-be client. "For bad attitude you get extra." He rummaged in a drawer for another pen, turned the notebook to a clean page, and wrote. "Sign," he said.

Farkus glared at the page, and again his mouth made the shape of "Fuck you." Checo put his hand in his pocket and rattled his keys.

Billy Bob signed.

Checo read the paper carefully, then tucked the little notebook into his jacket. He planted a finger—it was the middle one this time—on Billy Bob's sternum, right about the fourth ribs. "Now, you gotta understand something, Rev. You don't keep your promise, your little problem comes back, and maybe one or two more to keep it company. El Santo Baby, he don't take no shit off you. You got that?"

Farkus' head jerked forward. It might have been a nod.

"Okay, here goes." Checo reached over the counter and planted both hands on the crown of Billy Bob's Spurs hat. This time the current that went through Checo barely made his fingers tingle, just a low-voltage buzz. Farkus was getting the marked-down clearance-sale version.

When it stopped, the Rev stood staring at Checo for a moment with a puzzled expression on his face. He coughed. "Wh— Ah— Aakkkh— Th— Ts— That's it? That's all?" His eyes went wide, and he grabbed his neck. "Oh my God, it worked! I can talk! Thank you Jeezuss! Thank! You! Jeeezuss!"

And he bolted for the door—straight into the arms of a skinny kid in gangbanger jeans and a muscle shirt. They danced a little two-step while the kid's hands did interesting things. Then the Rev shoved him aside and kept going. From the street came the sound of a door slamming and a V-8 engine gunning. Tires squealed, leaving shredded rubber on the street where he peeled away.

El Santo Teenager made a rude gesture in that general direction, then tossed Farkus' wallet onto the counter. "*Por los pobres*," he said. "Asshole didn't even leave a dollar in the plate." He grinned, flashed a peace sign, and vanished, leaving a faint scent of sinsemilla behind. No *Ahh-ahh-ahhhing*, no violins, no graceful wings wafting.

So the Rev. Billy Bob went on TV and made a blubbering praise-Jeezus confession that owned up to adultery and fornication and a little embezzlement on the side. He kept his promise to apologize to the folks in the *barrio*, too, and especially to the ladies he'd insulted. He eventually got another church and wrote a book. He called it *My Road to Damascus*. Go figure.

Tío Checo moved out of the apartment over the shop and into a condo, and Mrs. Ida's Porsche spent the night in his garage more often than not. They never married, mainly because Checo didn't want to cause her money trouble with her kids. It didn't seem to matter much. Over the years Mrs. Ida became everybody's Tía Aida. Bryan and Nellie asked her to be godmother to both of their girls, and she sat with the family at Crystal's wedding.

She and Checo had had nearly ten years together when he just didn't wake up one morning. No surprise—he'd been smoking and drinking since his voice broke, more since Vietnam, and he'd never really stopped. Tía Aida rode in the funeral-home limo with Abuelita, Tía Rosie, and my mom, with the black veil over her face like any other widow. When the honor guard folded the flag from the coffin and handed it to Abuelita, very frail now, she held it close for a moment and kissed it. Then she set it quietly in Tía Aida's lap. They hugged each other and cried, and so did all the rest of us.

After he was gone, folks began to pray to him as well as *el Baby*, asking him to put in a good word for them. Nothing official, you understand; the Archbishop gets hives even thinking about it. We don't do relics, or anything like that. But folks know who's on their side, you know? So the company's adapted.

We've got a whole line of new products. Santo Checo candles in your choice of five colors, nice little prayer on the back. Santo Checo holy cards with his picture, the one that famous lady photographer took for the back of his book. Colored it up in Photoshop, added the halo. Same prayer as on the candle; works great if you're out of a job or trying to kick the bottle.

We have Santo Teenager candles and cards, of course. Jeans on these, zoot suit on those. The ones with the red Lincoln cost a bit more, but guys seem to relate.

38 So. That's how Tío Checo became a saint.

Sometimes I wonder what Checo would think of that. But the answer's easy. He'd be laughing his ass off. Laughing his holy ass off and passing the joint and the bottle around with Don Horacio and Chuy—right under the *No Smoking* sign on the Pearly Gates.



Woman's Hand With Cigarette

Jon Radlett

# The Navigators

Dara Weinberg

To the man in yesterday's shirt and blazer  
asking for the nearest 101 on-ramp  
at the Starbucks counter on Coldwater Canyon  
at 9:55 on a Saturday morning:  
I think you know how to find the freeway.  
It's the Ventura Freeway, we're on the corner  
of Ventura Boulevard, and anyone native enough to the city

to have mudflap sideburns and a Mad Men hat  
knows, as my mother would say, were she here,  
"near enough as makes no never-mind,"  
how to find the one, having found the other.  
You're not really lost. You must have intended  
for the pretty barrista to notice the marks  
at your collar. You wanted for all of us gathered

at this morning's Starbucks—the teenage actress  
in her *Once Upon A Mattress* T-shirt,  
drowsy swim-team children in warm-up jackets,  
the man slumped behind his newspaper curtain—  
to hear you ask, and draw our conclusions  
like pressurized steam through a thin metal spout:  
*This man has just had sex, or something like it.*

"Does anyone," the woman with the pack of swimmers  
asks her kids, "want some of this muffin?"  
"Not me," says the youngest. He thumbs the buttons  
of his hand-held computer game with the care  
of a man landing an airplane in a body of water  
and heads out after his damp-haired sisters,  
keeping his eyes on the screen while he walks.

You can tell he doesn't care one way or another  
who got laid last night, how many times,  
off what freeway exit, in whose car or apartment,  
or how they're all going to get themselves home  
the next morning. He doesn't need directions,  
he's not hungry, and he's still just young enough  
to be playing the game for himself alone.



# The Hawthorn Bush

Zdravka Evtimova

The first thing that struck me about Anna was her voice.

One day I heard a woman singing, one of those simple songs that the peasants in the mountain villages hum to keep awake in the long evenings. The song was about a young lass who wanted her boyfriend to buy her a belt with a silver clasp. I knew that song and could say I'd never particularly liked it. But what a voice it was—it had all the silver of all the silver clasps in the world in it, and it was bigger than the wind, and it had the strength of a thousand belts in it. I'd never heard a voice like that.

I was a keg-maker and a barrel-maker, but my heart wasn't in the hoops that held together the staves, nor was it in the wine that the barrels held. I made taps that whistled when the wine passed through them, and I loved it when I caught the sounds of the summer and of the wind in my gadgets. I made pen whistles and shepherd's whistles for fun, and I could listen for hours to their shrill, piercing voices. A good voice singing a silly song could stop me in my tracks. I wanted to capture the voice in my wine taps and make them sing.

My barrels and kegs were known everywhere in Bulgaria between the ridges of Vitosha Mountain and the Rila Mountains, and that was saying a lot—the men from Vitosha Mountain drank like eels on weekdays and like dragons on Sundays. And that was a pity, because the brandy ruined their voices. Their voices were deeper than the deepest lakes in the Rila Mountains, transparent like the water, and harder than the crags on the shores. All of those guys appreciated good brandy in a good keg and good wine in an old, strong barrel of mine. I, however, had reached the point where I wanted an ordinary song more than a barrel. A song could turn the hot noon into a mountain peak for me, and a song could make the wind as tame as a newborn puppy.

I looked around. I wanted to find out who the singer was. But the only person I saw was a dark-haired girl no taller than a keg for weak hawthorn beer, like I made when I was drunk, or when I was in no mood to carve one of the magnificent barrels I was famous for. Well, I couldn't believe what I was hearing as this

little thing went on trilling about the belt with the silver clasp. I was dumbfounded. Her voice was twice as big as her. I wondered where she produced it from, she seemed so meagre and thin. The voice was like a hill with a hundred whirlwinds thrashing it, and at the top of that hill there was a strong July sun that made the wind and the land pure gold. I listened and listened, and I said to myself, This can't be true.

I was terribly sorry when the lass in the tune got her belt with a silver clasp and the song ended abruptly. The voice that was bigger than all the lakes in the Rila Mountains vanished into thin air, and the wind died.

"Hey," I said, but the girl didn't turn towards me. "Hey! Can you sing something else for me? I'll pay you."

She looked at me, her eyes the colour of gunpowder about to explode any minute. "Nobody calls me 'Hey', Mister. Let another 'Hey' sing for you," she said. "I'd remember that if I were you."

"I'm sorry, Madame," I said.

There must have been a bite in my voice, for the young woman snapped, "I'll sing for no brazen-faced barrel-maker, even if he gave me all his filthy whistling casks."

"Oh!" I said. "Nobody has ever referred to me as a brazen-faced barrel-maker."

"You are one," she said.

Then she was gone. I caught glimpses of her narrow back bouncing and jerking and of her hair, curly and thick like a pile of thistles, bigger and heavier than the girl herself. She took her voice with her, and suddenly I realized I'd lost something I could never replace. I wanted to put her song in my barrels, so when the guys drank their plum brandy they'd have the mountain that her voice had given a tune, and they'd have the big July sun and the bottomless, dark lakes.

"Wait! Wait!" I called after her. "I'll give you my horse if you sing for me."

Everybody in those parts knew my horse Dorcho. He was red like the flames of one million candles, and every hair shone a different shade of fire on his back. He galloped faster than an Opel car along the winding mountain roads, and he had cost me four summers of barrel-making, eighteen hours of hammering and scooping and chiselling every single day. Those were happy summers, though. I made majestic vats and barrels that built a

name for me no one could shake or steal. If a guy was looking for "the barrel-maker", it went without saying he meant me, Ivan the Master of the Singing Casks.

I'd hoped that runt of a girl would be arrested in her tracks, enthralled just by hearing the name of my whirlwind Dorcho.

"Ha!" she scoffed. "I wouldn't waste my spit for a horse that's no better than a rag."

"What!"

"A rag," she said, her heap of wild hair bobbing as she vanished again like an owl that was chasing a rat amongst the beeches.

I went into a black rage. I'd have no slandering mouths spitting and spewing lies about my thunderbolt Dorcho. "Listen, Hey!" I shouted at the top of my lungs—which were the very strong lungs of a barrel-maker. "The mayor's daughter would be flattered I talked to her. Do you know what I'll do if I meet you again? I'll put you in front of my workshop to polish my clients' shoes!"

She must have heard me, for after a minute she was again in front of me, looking me in the eye. "And do you know what I'll do if I meet you again?" There was that smouldering gunpowder in her eyes that I was turning out to like.

"I'd very much like to know," I said, waiting for her gunpowder to explode.

"I'll put you in front of the door of my room in place of the doormat. First I'll wipe my shoes on you, then maybe I'll talk to you."

"What!" The leaves of the beeches rang like church bells.

It was summer, a good time to make a keg from a dry walnut trunk for grape brandy. The grapes and the walnut made good tunes in the whistles I put on the kegs. If the weather was windy, the tunes sounded sad, and the guys who drank the brandy thought they were in store for a fight. But if the sun had stayed long enough with the wood and the grapes, it was the beech kegs that sang the best. They remembered the roots of the trees, the branches, and the hill where the beech forest grew. My whistles rejoiced. That was what the sun was to my kegs.

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I had made kegs for many girls. I remembered a big keg I'd made for the mayor's daughter, and a small, narrow one for the priest's daughter, and a low, squat one for the daughter of the district police chief. I often found a forgotten petticoat or a pair of stockings under my bed. The girls were all pretty, and each one

of them deserved the barrel I made and the tune I put in it for her. No woman so far had said I was her doormat.

"A flea is bigger than you!" I shouted, the summer and the leaves of the trees still ringing like dull church bells in my head.

She walked away, and her back, narrow as a cuckoo's nest, sank into the bushes. I thought about running after her.

Then I remembered I had again found a petticoat under my bed that morning. The girl was the mayor's daughter, and, as usual, I'd promised I'd make a barrel with a nice tune for her. Was it possible, I asked myself, to find the petticoat of one and the same girl every day and make barrels with good tunes for her? No, I'd be bored stiff! There had to be different girls if I wanted new tunes and new barrels. I was sure of that.

The girl whose name I didn't know stopped and shouted at me, "You goat!"

"It's time you settled down," my mother would say. "It's time I had grandchildren and not forgotten petticoats in our house." Then she'd heave a sigh as deep as the sky before a storm and add sadly, "Your father was.... Well, I hate to speak about that," and she'd heave another sigh.

"I will not have anybody call me a goat!" I shouted back.

My mother was a gentle, quiet woman. She sang to me when I was a boy, and she sang to my father when he was laid up after he'd fought with other guys. I believed her songs made him strong again. He drank so much he ruined his voice, which had been powerful like a sledgehammer and sharp as a chisel. He was a brawler, and sometimes he screamed at my mother, but he was quiet when she sang to him. I think that was why she sang to him, to keep him quiet. His eyes were as quiet as a room where little children slept, and she sang, the softness in her voice making me guess my father had done something wrong. She didn't say anything, but I was somehow sure she didn't like it at all.

The girl walked along the path, all the light of the summer in her hair and all the blue of the sky in her long, thick dress.

"Your dress is a rag," I told her. "Your shoes look even worse." She didn't say a word.

My mother never complained. My father was notorious far and wide in the valley of the Struma River, and the old wives wondered how she put up with his numerous women "friends". I

knew she had often found petticoats, and other things like lipstick or bottles of make-up that didn't belong to her.

"Hey," I shouted after the minx of a girl with a storm and sun in her hair. "If you don't want to sing for me, maybe you will do something else with me. I've got a villa, and I'll give you a golden necklace after that."

"Oh, will you?" she said, turning around. "Could you wait a minute, please?"

"Yes, I could. But why should I wait?"

"Because I need a second to pick up a stone to hit your thick head with," she said, and before I had time to wink, she hurled the basket she was carrying at me. Then she walked away as calm as a hill all covered with snow, and as cold. I wondered how it was that the big mountain was suddenly quiet under her feet and the grass she stepped on seemed to sparkle.

"Wait," I said, but she strode purposefully across the meadow, a mushroom that had suddenly learned to strut. "Hey, Molehill, I'll break your basket," I called after her, brandishing the thing like a sword.

"Ha!" she sneered.

That was all I saw of that young lady that day. When I arrived at home, I asked my mother about her.

"Well," my mother said. "I don't know which girl you mean. But if she's the one I think she is, then you should be careful, son. She's got two brothers."

I passed many times by that stream where I'd met her, but Molehill had vanished into thin air. I asked the shop assistant in the clothes department about her, and I asked the mayor's daughter. Molehill was on my mind all the time I worked on a small keg from the trunk of a cherry tree I had gotten in exchange for three big bottles of my father's brandy. I worked and I looked at the basket she had thrown at me.

And then one day I saw a herd of goats. The beasts looked as meagre as cats. They must have been very hungry, the poor things, for the meadow looked as if a razor had shaved the grass to the roots in their wake. The meadow was steep and there were crags jutting out of it, and there were big thistles and thornbushes all over the place. Above the meadow, the mountain soared abruptly to the sky, sharp, brown, and huge. I saw snakes and lizards basking in the sun on the boulders. The clouds were flat and hot, and it was

a most ordinary and dull day—I could make nothing but a pitiable barrel for the miserable brandy the men in those parts made from half-rotten tomatoes. We drank such swill only when one of my friends got divorced, or when his wife ran away on him, or when his donkey died in the middle of the road. It was a day for a barrel to keep such rotgut in.

Then suddenly that big voice erupted amidst the goats. This was no ordinary song. It had no words; it was just a huge endless voice that thrashed through the crags, beat the heat, and ran over the line where the hill ended and the horizon began. I couldn't tell where her voice went or why the sky was suddenly in my hands. Her song glittered, big and deep and long like a path to the place I had wanted to be all my life. It felt like suddenly it was winter with deep snow, and at the same time it was autumn and the trees were golden, and it was summer, too. There were church bells in her voice, and there were hills and grains of wheat. I stood transfixed. I listened and listened. The mountain became small. I had never heard so many winters, with kids skating on icy lakes, in a human voice. I had never imagined a tune could hold a mountain, a summer, and a herd of goats in it. My whole life was in that melody.

The song stopped abruptly. "You again!" the angelic voice shouted. "Go away!"

The sky was flat, the winter was gone, and the herd of goats was attacking the steep meadow. It was the girl, and this time her hair looked wilder, if that was possible at all. I stared as she turned her back to me, shooin' her goats along.

"Hey!" I shouted. "Hey, marry me. Don't run away. Stay and marry me!"

She stopped. "What?" she said. Her voice was small and her eyes were the most ordinary brown eyes as she stood in front of me. Then suddenly I saw her eyes were bigger than her, bigger than my whole life.

"I don't know your name, but it doesn't matter," I said. "Marry me!"

Her most-ordinary brown eyes measured me, and I knew they didn't believe me.

"I mean it!" I shouted.

"Ha," she said, and drove her goats on up through the thorns and thistles in the meadow. I followed her.

"Be at Bitter Crossroads tomorrow at five p.m.," she said over her shoulder. "Don't forget to take an axe and a pickax with you."

"Bitter Crossroads?" I exclaimed. "You are out of your mind! There's only thistles, sloe-thorns, and hawthorns there."

"I mean it," she said.

"What? What do you mean?" I asked her, but she drove her goats on, disciplining them with her thin stick. She paid no more attention to me.

Bitter Crossroads was a lousy spring that ran dry in summer, and in the autumn spewed muddy water and sleet that tasted bitter in your mouth if you were crazy enough to try it. In winter, the thing turned into a shield of ice that covered the whole hill. The place was thickly overgrown with hawthorn shrubs and sloe-thorns, and the path that squirmed its way to the spring seemed as narrow as the eye of a needle to me. It was hot, and the axe and the pickax I was carrying weighed a ton each. I had tied my horse Dorcho a mile away from the woods, and all the way to Bitter Crossroads, nettles, thorns, and prickles clawed at me and tore at my shirt. It was half past four—I'd come too early—but I was listening hard. Perhaps Molehill was nearby? If I was lucky, I would hear her footsteps.

Well, I thought, if the guys who buy my kegs saw me up here at the back of beyond, they'd make fun of me until the day I died. And they'd have been perfectly right. I was waiting for a mushroom, I didn't know her name, and I'd told her I wanted to marry her. To make matters worse, I'd thrown hints a number of times in the presence of the mayor's daughter and wife that it was about time I settled down.

I'd been climbing two hours to get to Bitter Crossroads in the scorching heat, dragging a pickax and an axe, goddammit. Did I have a screw loose? It was ten past five and no Molehill was in sight. I fidgeted, sweated, and cursed under my breath. What a fool I was, what an idiot! I stared at the endless thorny shrubs, at the hole that wasn't even spewing brown mud, and I chewed my lip. It was twenty minutes to six. The axe and the pickax lay useless at my feet.

"Hey, barrel-maker!"

Well, that startled me! I looked around and saw nothing, no Molehill, no Mushroom, nothing. "Where are you?"

Then I saw her. She was in amidst the thickest bushes, her old, long, long dress showing nothing of her legs.

"I was here all the time, barrel-maker."

"No!" I said. "I was listening and I was watching."

"Didn't I hear somebody mutter he was a damned fool and an idiot?" she said, her most-ordinary brown eyes on my face. Suddenly they were the most extraordinary eyes I'd ever seen.

Then I was angry. "You sneaked up on me like a snake," I said, seething.

"You said you wanted to marry me," she said.

"Yes," I admitted. "So what?"

She said nothing. She ran deeper into the wood and grabbed a big hawthorn shrub, her arms pushing up through the branches, her old, long dress sticking to the leaves, her wild hair mixing with the barbs and prickles of the damned thing.

"If you want to marry me," she said, "you'll have to wrench me from this bush first."

"Oh, come on," I said. "I won't put up with bullshit like this."

"It's your choice," she said, plunging her fingers deeper into the thick, sharp leaves amidst the prickles.

I took a step towards the hawthorn and a couple of nettles stung my bare legs. I retreated rapidly towards the dead spring.

"You are not much of a man, barrel-maker," the girl scoffed amidst the hawthorn branches.

I advanced back to the shrub, ignoring the nettles, but the barbed twigs and leaves scraped my cheeks.

"I told you to bring an axe and a pickax," she said.

I grabbed her long dress and pulled. The garment came apart at the seams and a piece of the rough cloth remained in my fists, but Molehill clung to the hawthorn bush like a horseshoe to Dorcho's hoof. It was hot, and the prickles of the small tree stuck into my hands. I could see her little face. It appeared as calm as twenty-year-old brandy sleeping in my best barrel. She waited unperturbed, reserved and remote as if I weren't sweating to get to her.

"You are not even beautiful!" I shouted.

Her face remained aloof, and I knew the brandy in her eyes wasn't meant for me. Well, Molehill, you don't know me, I thought to myself. I reached out, caught hold of her arm, and pulled hard. The minute I thought I'd got the better of her, she bit me. Her teeth were sharp as chisels, and sharper! I let go of her arm.

"Use the axe and the pickax," she said, her voice quite dry and matter-of-fact.



I lifted the axe and tried to cut off some branches, but I cut my damned leg instead. Then the thought crossed my mind that if I felled the tree, I could drag Molehill away with it, leaves, thorns, and all. I chopped at the branches, beat at the trunk, sweated, and thrashed about, then finally saw it would be easier if I uprooted the damned shrub. I started digging a big ditch under the thing while Molehill clung to the thorny branches, her hair entangled with the twigs. I dug the hole and then started whacking and clobbering the base of the trunk. It was a spindly bush, nothing strong or sturdy, so it came out in no time.

"It would've been easier if you'd simply asked me to climb down," she said.

I didn't answer. I didn't care that the prickles had scratched and scraped my nose. There were splinters in my toes and my fingers tingled, but I could live with that. I clutched the hawthorn bush and Molehill, who still clung to it, then I shouldered the bundle of thorny branches, torn dress, and wild hair.

"Now you can ask me to walk you home," she said, and smiled. I thought that it was the first time she'd smiled for me. Her smile was big like the sky and the wind in it.

"You and the bush are not heavy at all," I said. "I can carry you both to the top of the mountain."

Her smile was gone and there was no more sky above my head.

"Sing to me, please. Sing to me."

There was that big smile on her face again, half-hidden behind her endless hair.

She sang. The mountain under my feet went still. The wind listened. It was a very simple song, the one about the girl and her old belt. It was a great song. Her voice was a thousand times richer than all my singing barrels. My whole workshop was dust compared to the old belt in Molehill's song.

Then suddenly she stopped singing and I didn't know where I was. I saw her smile waiting for me. The old belt in her song loved me. The mountaintop was my brother and was waiting for me, too.

"I can't live without you," I whispered. "I simply can't. I wouldn't for all the barrels I've made."

"I know," she said.

She tried to kiss me, but her enormous hair was all over the place, entangled with the branches of the hawthorn bush I'd just

uprooted. I kissed her. There were some thorns that were in the way, but I thought I could live with them. Except, in fact, I couldn't. I couldn't kiss her big and long the way I wanted.

"Here he is! Here! This way!" I heard men's voices shouting. "What is he doing to her?"

Her two brothers, not very tall, but stout and sturdy, were rushing towards me, very dangerous with their axe and cudgel, their eyes burning like branding irons.

"We'll kill you like a pig!" the bigger one shouted. "Anni, did he do anything to you?"

"I'll cut his ears off, I'll cook them, and I'll make him eat them!" the smaller one yelled, brandishing his axe in a very bloodthirsty way. "Come here, Anni, come on!" he urged her.

"Quick," the bigger brother chimed in. "Let us save you first. We'll kill him later."

Molehill suddenly ran away from me and I thought, It's over. She's gone.

Everything became grey. The world was a dark place, and I didn't care if they beat me black and blue, or if they cooked my ears and made me eat them. Then suddenly Molehill grabbed another hawthorn bush, a smaller one this time. She clung to the stem, clasping it; her fingers caught hold of the spiny branches and her dress stuck to the thick leaves. Her hair was all over the place, bushier than the hawthorn bush.

"Come here or I'll break your head!" her smaller brother thundered.

"Break it if you can," she said calmly.

"Let's kill him first, and then save her," the other brother suggested as the two of them stared at me.

It was suddenly very hot. The sky reeled, the mountain shook, and the only thing I saw was the bigger brother's cudgel and the smaller one's axe.

"I'll stay with him!" Molehill said. Her brothers froze in their tracks. I froze too, but then the air was suddenly so wonderful, and the sky was my friend. The wind was my brother and the mountain peaks loved me. The magnificent summer waited in my hands.

"What!" the bigger brother screamed.

"What!" the more bloodthirsty one bawled.

"You'll have to extract me from the tree if you want to take me home," Molehill told them. "Or you can tear it up by the roots."

"You are off your rocker," the more thickset brother muttered, trying to seize her hand. "Ouch!"

"Ouch!" the second brother yelled, trying to pull a thorn out of his thumb.

"Tell them you love me." Molehill turned to me. "Tell them you can't make your barrels without me."

"Shut up!" the brothers roared in unison.

"He's after the mayor's daughter!" shouted the one.

"And you are just dirt under his shoes!" thundered the other.

"I love her!" I thundered back. "I don't want to live without her. I don't want to breathe without her.... I can't walk without—"

I'd forgotten the younger brother's cudgel. It hit my head as the axe of the bigger one bit my shoulder. I'd forgotten everything, but then their fists went to work.

"If you hit him one more time," Molehill shouted, "I'll tie both of you up while you're sleeping, I'll drag you to the river, and I'll drown you in the pool!"

All of a sudden her brothers stopped beating me.

"She sure will do that," the elder one ventured. "You know her."

"Yeah," the younger one said. "I know her. Hey, idiot!" he barked at me. "Get out of here before I kill you."

I could have hit him in the face. I knew that after such a blow his face would be a heap of broken bones, smashed nose, and tattered skin. But I didn't clobber him; after all, he was Molehill's brother.

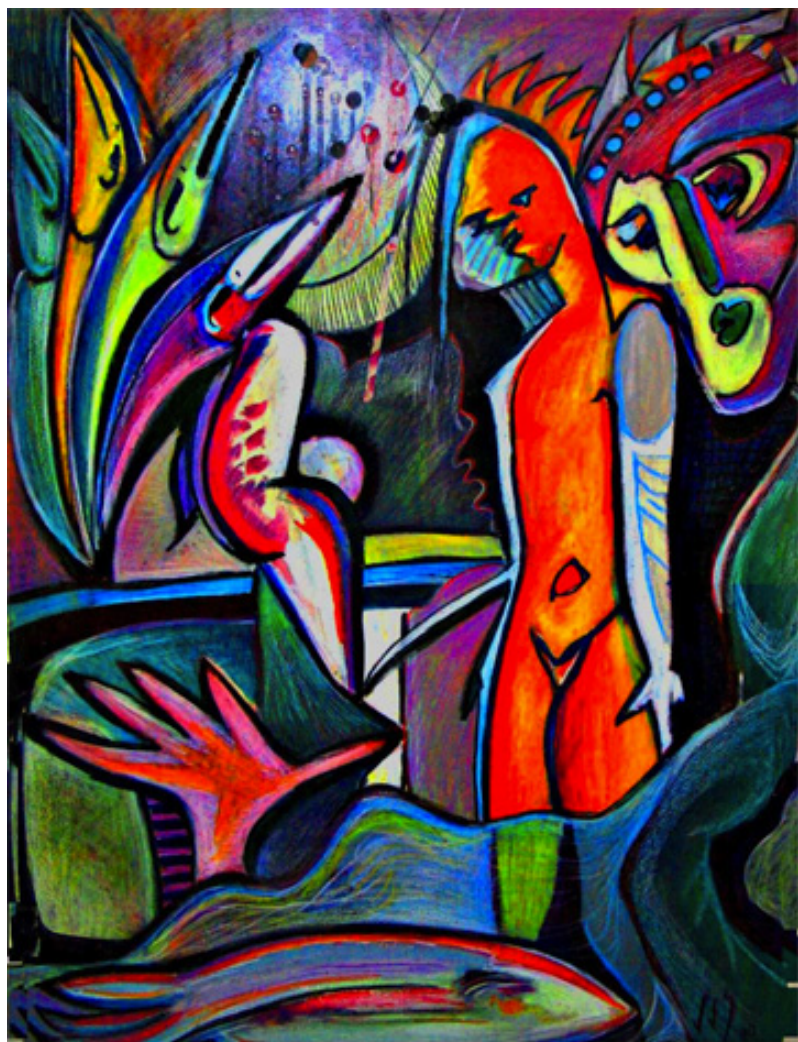
The air was still wonderful and the mountain peaks were still my brothers. Molehill was there smiling, her black eyes full of summer, her smile a light, happy breeze in my heart. "I love you, Molehill!" I cried.

Her brothers stood staring at me, the cudgel and the axe idle in their hands.

"I love the tunes you put in your barrels, Ivan," she said.

It was the first time she'd pronounced my name, and it stopped me in my tracks. "I love your songs. They are so beautiful."

The mountain was a song, the hawthorn bush was a song, and Molehill's hand felt magnificent on my arm. And she was beautiful, so beautiful I could hardly say another word.



Howdy Stranger

V. V. Saichek

# Adrenaline Inc.

## Mithran Somasundrum

It was an autumn evening the first time a man with an axe ran at Richard Biddle. He was on the long, often-melancholy walk home from Watford tube station, the streets glistening from recent rain and completely empty. The only sound was the echo of his own footsteps, and then faintly, from behind him, came a second pair, running. Richard Biddle walked on, aware of the noise in the unheeding way you take in the rumble of distant traffic.

The sound grew louder. Richard Biddle turned back, but could see nothing. He'd just come through the dense shadow of the underpass, and on this side, the first few streetlights were out, extending the shadow along the road towards him.

A scream began. It preceded the man out of the shadows like the howl of a train rushing from a tunnel, and then he thundered into the sodium light, the frozen grin of a Mickey Mouse mask over his face, an axe held high above his head—and, after a heart-stop moment of incomprehension, Richard Biddle ran for his life.

He sprinted down the street with the scream and the footsteps bearing down, and the whole thing was so insane that, even as he fled, he had to look back. That slowing of pace brought the axe-man a couple of steps closer. Richard saw the man's arms jerk back for the downswing. He surged in sheer panic, pushing his overweight body harder than he would ever have thought possible. In Richard's last desperate sprint, the axe-man fell back. Behind the Mickey Mouse mask, he howled in frustration. Richard Biddle ran on, down one street and then another, and then another, to collapse finally into a drift of wet leaves, convinced he was having a heart attack.

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By the time he reached his front door, his legs were trembling and a red centre of pain was burning in his chest. There were wet leaves stuck to his raincoat and even his hair. He turned the key in the lock and collapsed into the hallway. The sound brought his wife out of the kitchen. Jackie (or rather, 'Jacqui', as he now had

to think of her) looked him over and said, "Darling," in a way that managed to sound both shocked and reproachful.

Her slim little body folded as she knelt on the carpet and lifted his head onto her lap. And even through the pain, the adrenaline wash, and the waves of receding terror, Richard Biddle couldn't help being struck all over again by how constantly graceful she was.

"Attacked," he gasped at her. "Man...axe...police."

Jacqui stroked his cheek with the tips of her fingers. "Darling," she said again, and absently plucked a wet leaf from his hair.

Richard pushed himself up on his elbows. "We have to call the police," he said.

Jacqui stroked his chest. "After you've rested."

"There's a nutter out there. With an axe."

She cupped his face in her hands and said, "I'll always love you."

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Later that evening, lying back in a bath Jacqui had run and filled with her cucumber-and-jasmine bath essence, Richard reflected on how his wife's reaction had been as odd, unheeding, and, ultimately, intuitively brilliant as ever. Because the thing was, in a world where a madman could come at you out of the night for no reason, being loved by Jacqui was the most reassuring thing he could think of.

She was only five years younger than him—twenty-five to his thirty—but it always seemed like much more. Partly this was down to her size, for she was a girlish five foot two, and slim. Possessed of elfin good looks and a poise that spoke of childhood ballet lessons, she viewed the world with a direct hazel stare that took in either everything or nothing at all. Richard was never quite sure which.

Neither, if he was honest, was he quite sure where her love came from, or what exactly she saw in him. He worried sometimes that it was an aspect of her myopic otherworldliness—that she was actually in love with something to one side of him.

And yet, at other times, she understood him well enough to know exactly what he wanted before he knew it himself. For instance, as he was lying in the hot bath, feeling muscles he rarely used gradually untighten, she pushed open the door and came in carrying a shot glass filled with a generous helping of Bushmills. "Nightcap," she said.

Richard really had meant to talk to her about calling the police, but when she came into the bathroom she was wrapped in a tiny pink towel and, as far as he could tell, nothing else.

"Join me," he said, splashing his hand in the soapy water.

After the whiskey and the bath and Jacqui, he collapsed into sleep as though under anaesthetic.

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The next morning, awake early, refreshed, and ravenously hungry, he already knew he would tell no one at work about the attack. And as he swayed into central London on a Met-line tube train an hour and a half later, Richard Biddle decided his visit to the police station had only confirmed his instincts. It had taken less time than he'd expected, so he was going into work early. Not that anyone would notice; he was always the first to arrive in any case. That was part of why they hated him. Or perhaps hate wasn't the right word, Richard mulled as grey commuter-land rocked past. Perhaps they didn't hate him *as such*. But he knew they were looking for a weakness. They wanted him as an object of fun.

It hadn't always been this way. Once, as a Clerical Officer amongst other Clerical Officers, he'd been a Good Bloke. A little dull, maybe, a little housebound and unspectacular, not someone to regale the office with a wild tale of his Saturday night. But because of that very dullness, their camaraderie had easily encompassed him. As a Clerical Officer, he could have said, "I was chased down the street by a madman with an axe yesterday," and they would have sympathised.

The change had begun less than a year ago, at the Christmas do. Through a mixture of competent management and amazing good luck, Mather & Co Accountancy Services had prospered, and so instead of the usual office party with sad tinsel and room-temperature white wine, the partners decided to host a Christmas dinner at the Sheraton. The tickets were fifteen pounds a head, which, as everyone agreed, was bloody good value for a free bar. Richard had arrived in his one passably formal suit with Jacqui on his arm. She'd worn a strapless midnight-blue evening dress that clung to her like a dense, gravity-defying liquid. With her hair piled up and a black-velvet choker fastened at her throat by a tiny diamond, she should by rights have been stepping out of a limousine onto

a red carpet. She received the wide-eyed stares of the Sheraton ballroom like a film star receiving the flashbulbs of the paparazzi.

And that was when things had altered. Richard saw in his coworkers not so much envy as resentment at having been misled. In his eight-person team, the other five men were all single. Only one had a steady girlfriend, while the other four went into and out of relationships with greater or lesser success (and, in the case of Stu, it seemed, no success at all). They had known Richard was married, of course, but were friendly enough to include him in their mystified-by-womankind general good-blokedom, their endless discussions of Scarlett Johansson and Jessica Alba and the women in the pages of *Maxim*. He wasn't supposed to have been married to a woman from the pages of *Maxim*. For that's how Jacqui had appeared to them. At one point in the evening, Stu swayed up to Richard, fogged by alcohol, and asked, "So, like, she's a model, yeah?"

"Actually, she's a cataloguer for Christie's. Rare books."

"Yeah...? Fuck." Stu swayed back and digested this. "So where'd you meet her?"

"At a bus stop in Camden. She didn't have the right change."

Stu blinked. "You chatted her up at a bus stop." He listed away across the room, burdened by this unhappy knowledge.

The next day at work, everything was different. It was as though he'd won a Nobel Prize without telling anyone. Who was Richard Biddle really?

Even then, Richard felt, things might have normalised in time. But a week later, fate had struck him a pitiless blow. Their boss Bryant moved to J.P. Morgan, and Richard was promoted. "You're well liked in this office," Bryant's boss, Jostein, told him.

*I'm liked because I'm one of them*, Richard wanted to explain. But it was too late. He was shifted out of the open-plan area and into Bryant's office with its expensive waxy cacti and reproduction Monets, and behind him, the door had closed forever on good humour and shared concern. For it now seemed like Richard Biddle had deceived them all. Under cover of Ordinairiness, he'd been working furiously to get promoted and have a beautiful wife (who worked at Christie's!). He knew they were now primed for some flaw or oddness to manifest itself. If he was revealed as the kind of person who got chased down the street by an axe-man in a Mickey Mouse mask, his authority would never recover.

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Meanwhile, his experience at the police station had only raised the oddness quotient further. For it seemed that, instead of being a lone victim, he was part of a mystifyingly large group: men chased with axes. The information had been given reluctantly. It was almost as though the police suspected *him* of having done something wrong—a suspicion that seemed to derive from his delay in reporting the attack. "Last night?" the desk sergeant had snapped. "This happened last night and you're telling me now?"

The police station—the only one Richard had ever visited—was an awful place: institutional paint and fluorescent light mooning on scuffed lino. The building's single-minded functionality seemed to position you immediately as the one in the wrong. *Otherwise*, it asked, *why should you be here?*

"I was shattered," said Richard. "I crashed out."

"Are you telling me, sir, that directly you got home, you fell asleep?"

"Well, not directly. I mean, I had a hot bath first, and my wife brought me a whiskey."

The desk sergeant was nodding in the manner of someone whose patience has already been stretched to breaking. "I see. I see. So you come home, have a bath, have a whiskey, and go to bed. And the next morning you stroll in to see us. At which point the perpetrator could be...anywhere at all, couldn't he?"

"That's true, but it's just that at the time, after the initial shock, you sort of come down...."

"Colin, I've got another one for you," the sergeant called over his shoulder.

A man in a brown suit joined him at the counter. He had brown hair and a brown moustache and small, hostile brown eyes. "You'd better come through," he said.

The man led Richard to an interview room and sat him on the other side of a Formica table scarred by very many coffee cups and very many cigarette butts. He introduced himself as Detective Sergeant Clench. "Colin Clench," he added, leaning forwards, daring Richard to find his name amusing.

Richard Biddle laid his own name down like a peace offer, but it wasn't taken up. Detective Sergeant Clench remained irritated throughout the interview. It quickly became apparent his irritation was about the offence itself—for Richard Biddle wasn't the first.

Sporadically, scattered across London, reports had been coming in of men being chased by other men with axes.

"We haven't had a Mickey Mouse before," said Clench, "but we've had two Bart Simpsons. What do you think that means, sir?"

They had no facts to go on, and, like the desk sergeant, Clench took Richard's whiskey and bath personally. "We're undermanned as it is. We don't have enough squad cars. There's terrorism going on. And you decide to wait till the next day before coming in."

"Have these axe-men caught up with anyone?" Richard wanted to know, but Clench avoided the question.

He went back repeatedly to the attack, only to have Richard stuck for details. The man had worn a jumper or possibly a jacket, dark jeans or possibly slacks. Richard's only true and concrete memory was of the axe itself—seeing it raised for the downswing, clinically sharp under the sodium light. "Someone's been caught, haven't they?" he asked, suddenly knowing it to be true, knowing the attack had been kept out of the papers for some reason. He saw himself pooled in blood. "Someone's been axed."

"Sir, if this happens again, could you phone us *before* taking a bath?"

"Are you telling me it happens more than once?"

Brooding through his working day and over his canteen lunch, Richard Biddle became convinced this was what Clench had been hinting at. He could expect a second attack. And would a squad car be patrolling his section of Watford? Again, Clench's reply had been evasive. They had terrorism going on.

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Richard rode the tube home that evening pleading for company. If only, he thought, he didn't live at the end of the Met line. With a sense of despair, he watched the train empty as it jolted through its stops in the dark. Finally there was only a large West Indian woman left in the carriage, hands clasped somberly under the ledge of her bosom. Her rock-like silence gave her a reassuring quality—she was something eternal on the Earth, too massive to be threatened. Richard found himself willing her to accompany him, but, with a sigh, she heaved herself up at Moor Park.

At Watford, the doors hissed open, and then, with a shudder, the current switched off. "This train terminates here," came the announcement.

What a hideous phrase, Richard thought. He set off from the station in a state of hair-trigger readiness, moving on the balls of his feet. By the time he reached the underpass he was full-out jogging. Back at his front door, he was almost as exhausted as on the day of the chase. His *recti femoris* were straining already.

Securely inside his house (locked, chained, Chubb-locked, secure!), he called out for Jacqui before realising that, of course, it was Thursday, and so he was alone. He decided he could leave the bath till later, but was in definite need of a Bushmills. With a full glass in hand, he meandered from room to room, feeling the desolate melancholy of an empty house. It was, he realised, the same melancholy that affected him when he walked home from work. In both cases the cause was the same: a Jacquiless universe. For whenever she was gone, he lost the belief she'd reenter his life.

Today, the absence was down to her Life-Coaching lesson. Richard had never been quite sure what it was a Life Coach did, and Jacqui herself could be mystifyingly vague. "Like yoga," she'd told him, "but more rounded. It's about making you the you you want to be."

As far as Richard could tell, the only concrete alteration to her life so far had been the name change. She'd come home one evening and told him, "I want you to think of me as 'Jacqui' from now on."

"But that is how I think of you," Richard had protested.

"No, I mean 'Jacqui' instead of 'Jackie'." Seeing him looking puzzled, she took a lavender notebook out of her handbag and wrote the two names down.

"But they're homonyms," said Richard, laughing. "Love, they sound the same."

"That's not the point, is it? It's the way I am in your mind. It's about you seeing the I I want to be."

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Richard pulled her down onto his lap. "In my eyes, you're already perfect."

Jacqui frowned. "We shouldn't settle for the way we are." Lightly, she began to trace her fingers across his face. It was something she did often and with great seriousness, reading him like

Braille but remaining quiet on what she discovered. He kissed her fingertips, and she said, "I mean you, too."

Richard sighed. He knew what was coming. Jacqui's engagements with the world were untraceably random. A stray fact would slip into her consciousness and have the power to terrorise her. A month ago, she'd seen a documentary on junk food and become convinced Richard was going to have a heart attack. She wanted him to exercise. "I'm just not the gym type," he told her, slapping his solid belly. "I mean, can you see me in spandex?"

"Then come to Life Coaching," she'd replied. "It's not just yoga. They're very creative. Artistic, even."

So far, Richard had resisted all such invitations, even if, as Jacqui put it, "One of them used to be a theoretical anthropologist."

Now he sipped at the whiskey and pondered. He was sunk into an armchair in the living room, a single standard lamp pooling amber light around him while the rest of the house lay deep in autumn darkness. He reflected that it wasn't Life Coaching he needed. He was married to a woman who loved him, he had his promotion, his good salary; his life ought to be an object of envy, and indeed, he knew for a fact that it was. What I need, he thought, is Life Protection.

A car pulled up outside the house and a door slammed. It would be Jacqui being dropped off by Clarissa. Richard wondered idly what Clarissa had been called before she became the I she wanted to be. Then he remembered the chain was up and went to unlock the door. With a thick coat belted over her leotard, Jacqui looked spruce and cheerful on the doorstep.

"I've got bad news," he said. "About the axe thing."

"It happened again?"

"God, why would you think that?"

"I don't know. It just seems so...doable."

"Well, it is, it is, love. That's the problem." Richard led her into the living room and described his police-station visit.

"All over London," Jacqui mused, unbelting the coat and bestowing the gift of her body on the room.

"It's only been men chased so far, but we shouldn't take any risks." Richard unfolded a sheet of paper from his pocket. In the leotard, she looked sturdy and yet terribly menaceable. "I don't want you walking home anymore. You can phone for a minicab from the station. I've written the numbers down."

Jacqui smiled and lightly read his face. "It's not me you have to worry about."

Richard took her small hands in his. "Of course it is. Who else would I worry about?"

"All over London," she said. "Can you imagine?"

Richard kept on about the minicabs for the rest of the evening, until Jacqui finally relented and keyed the numbers into her mobile. And would he do the same? she wanted to know.

"We'll see," he said.

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In fact, each evening that week, as the tube train lurched on from Moor Park, the idea crossed his mind. To be ferried home in the back of some purring Ford Sierra was a tempting vision of safety. And yet, were Richard to do so, he knew he would arrive feeling humiliated. An unknown madman would have made him a creature of fear. Instead, walking back down the hushed, lonely streets (on the balls of his feet, admittedly, breaking into a jog occasionally) past warm lights behind drawn curtains, he felt brave and unbowed. It made him think of the stoicism of the Blitz: *If it's got your number on it....* Listening to the echo of his footsteps, he felt a silent communion with all of the city's past braveries.

And then, on Wednesday of the following week, while he was being brave and stoical, he heard a second set of footsteps. Running.

"Oh God," said Richard. At first the sound was distant, barely audible, and he wanted to believe it had nothing to do with him. In a state of denial, he began to jog. The noise amped up. "Oh Christ oh Christ."

He ran without looking back; feet thundered behind him. Even though he was sprinting flat-out, the sound was closing. He looked back and saw the same nightmare: Mickey Mouse under the sodium light, axe in one hand. His glance seemed to enrage the man further; he screamed behind his mask.

Ohgodchristpleasegodno. Richard knew the axe was coming down, knew it for an instant, and then his desperation took him away. The axe-man had shot his load; he fell back. He was still howling.

"Again?" asked Jacqui as Richard crashed into the hallway and collapsed.

In reply, he pointed up at the phone. His heart was thumping too hard for him to speak. I don't have anything left, he thought. The next time he's going to get me.

Two uniformed police officers came to take his statement. They were young, serious, and, unlike Clench, wholly on his side. The one with the notebook nodded when Richard could give no description. It didn't matter, they only needed his route. "Someone will have seen something. They will have looked out."

Listening to their squad car wail away into the night, Richard found the sound hugely comforting. A powerful organisation had roused itself on his behalf and was now hunting his enemy. He pulled his feet up, stretching out along the sofa. Jacqui came over and knelt by his side. "Whiskey?" she asked, reaching her arms around his chest.

"Let's have one in the bath. But not just yet." He was still too tired to contemplate moving. He sighed and put his head back against the armrest.

"How do you feel?" Jacqui asked.

"Knackered."

"If you took up jogging, you could feel like this all the time."

"That's not much of a...whatever." Richard closed his eyes.

"And anyway, I couldn't be jogging with that nutter out there."

"Not right now perhaps, but in time."

"I bet the police pick up a lead. What with him screaming down the road. Someone must have gone to their window."

"They seem to think so," said Jacqui, doubtfully.

Richard opened his eyes. "And you don't?"

She rested her head on his stomach. "It's amazing what people will ignore once they're in front of their televisions."

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Her statement turned out to be prophetic, but that wasn't the worst of it. The bigger problem was that the axe-man followed him to work, so to speak. Richard came back from lunch the next day to find the open-plan area in a state of suppressed hilarity. People eyed him and then looked away. Finally, Stu sauntered over. He glanced back at the others and then said, "There are two men in your office." He stuck his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels before delivering the punchline. "From Special Branch."

"Fine," said Richard, as though this was perfectly normal. "Good."

The Special Branch men introduced themselves as Davis and Carter. In dark-blue suits, pink and clean-shaven, both had a smoothed-over quality. They were as bland and forgettable as their names. When Richard had reentered the office, Davis (or was it Carter?) had been lifting a Monet print—*Near Honfleur, Snow*—away from the wall and examining the back of the frame, while Carter (or was it Davis?) was poking in one of the drawers of Richard's desk.

"Can I help you?" Richard had asked.

Both men were unashamed of their prying. After the introductions had been made, Carter/Davis responded, "We would like to think you can help us, sir." He came round from behind the desk without bothering to close the drawer. Davis/Carter rehung the picture, apparently satisfied with whatever he'd found.

"Looking for bugs?" asked Richard, trying to sound jocular but finding the question came out more aggressively than he'd intended.

"Would I find any, sir?" asked Davis/Carter. "Why don't you take a seat at your nice desk?"

Richard did so, and slammed the drawer shut. It occurred to him he should ask for their warrants. But then such a question might seem overly defensive, and, after all, he had done nothing wrong.

"I expect you know why we're here, sir?" asked Carter/Davis, pulling up a chair. Davis/Carter remained on the prowl around the cluttered office, giving the impression of being completely uninterested in the interview.

"About the axe-man, I presume?"

"Mickey Mouse," said Carter/Davis. "Is that right?" There was a scrape of metal as Davis/Carter jerked open a filing cabinet.

"Yes, that's.... What is he doing?"

"I have no idea," said Carter/Davis unperturbedly. He peered at Richard Biddle's desk. "That's an interesting contraption."

"It's a Stirling engine," said Richard, following the man's gaze. "My wife gave it to me." He placed his hand on the upper steel base plate and the tiny upright brass wheel began to spin. "It runs on the heat difference between the two plates."

"Now isn't that fascinating?"

For a while the hum of the miniature engine was the only sound in the room, and then, feeling self-conscious, Richard took his hand away. "So, what have you found out...about the axe-man?"

"That will rather depend, sir, on what you can tell us."

Richard went through the story of the axe attacks again, starting from the beginning, his words falling against the brick wall of Carter/Davis's silence. Meanwhile, Davis/Carter continued to prowl. He examined the magnetic disks on Richard's year planner; he opened a ring binder and began leafing through. Richard finished his description. He trailed off and the silence became impregnable. Then Davis/Carter jerked open another filing-cabinet drawer.

"Sir, are you an athletics fan?" asked Carter/Davis finally. "Do you watch the hundred-metres sprint at all?"

"I suppose I've seen it on occasion."

"And have you noticed anything about the athletes at all, sir? Have you noticed whether they run down to the tape screaming their heads off? Because it seems to me that, by and large, they don't."

"Well, no, I suppose not. I mean, if you're saying these men with axes.... Actually, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that all over London, no one has actually been axed."

Richard Biddle felt his spirit lighten. "That's good, isn't it? That's something."

"Is it, sir?" Carter/Davis remained noncommittal, in his smoothed-over way. "That largely depends on your perspective. What we have here is a lot of reports of possible attacks and a lot of man-hours spent investigating them. Do you see what I'm getting at?"

"I don't think I do."

"This is a difficult time for law enforcement. Afghan heroin production has reached German levels of efficiency, the Russian mafia have discovered the West End, and we have terrorism going on. Frankly, we're understaffed as it is. And now these reports of axe-men start coming in. If you wanted to tie up police time with wild goose chases—or should that be geese chases?—you couldn't come up with anything better. Could you?"

"You mean this is some sort of decoy?"

"It might interest you to know that not one axe attack has been corroborated by an independent witness. Not one."



"Bloody hell, if you're suggesting I'm making this up, I think that's outrageous. I was actually chased down the street by this maniac. I could have been killed."

"And yet you waited till the next day to report it."

"I crashed out. Look, I don't know why they haven't been seen. I suppose you hear a lot of street noise these days that you just ignore, and when the telly's on...."

Carter/Davis had put up the wall of his silence again. Davis/Carter rattled out another drawer and then slammed it shut. Christ, thought Richard Biddle, who are they to treat me like this?

"Let's just say, sir, that you and your complaints have been noted. We'll leave it at that." Carter/Davis reached over and placed his palm on the Stirling engine's base. The brass wheel hummed to life. "Ingenious little thing, isn't it?"

After the Special Branch men had left, Richard Biddle found himself too agitated to work. *Your complaint*, he thought angrily, as though he'd gone to them about a noisy neighbour, or someone's dog fouling the driveway.

And furthermore, they'd left hilarity in their wake. When he stepped out into the open-plan area to query some of Julie's figures, he smelt it. Finally Stu asked, "They're not arresting you, then?"

"They were just making enquiries," Richard said, and heard a giggle behind him (Janice!). "Someone was attacked near my house. With an axe. They're looking for witnesses."

The seriousness of this momentarily held them at bay. He could see them all taking it in. And then, just as he was about to go, Stu asked, "Special Branch? Why not the regular police?"

"Because it's very dangerous. Some kind of serial thing," said Richard, quivering away to his office.

Safely behind his desk, he reflected that he hadn't really escaped. He knew with a glum certainty that he was going to spend the next couple of weeks being referred to as 'Axe-man Biddle'. With his elbows on the desk, staring at the closed door and picturing the open-plan area beyond, he could sense the first crack in his defences.

During the next week, he was constantly aware of that breach, and aware that it was widening. He sensed smirking faces at the edge of his vision; he'd enter a room and feel that laughter

had stopped the moment before. And his authority appeared to be waning. He could ask someone to email him a spreadsheet, and then ten minutes later, he'd have to come out and ask a second time.

And he couldn't explain any of this to Jacqui. When he tried to put into words what was wrong, he came off sounding small-minded and paranoid, even to himself.

Worse still, his fear seemed to have spread out from his mind and infected the world at large. On the politics page of *The Guardian*, a Martin Rowson cartoon showed David Cameron chasing Gordon Brown with an axe labelled "Iraq". On a TV advert, a blob of Domestos morphed into a tiny axe-wielding human and went running over the sink top killing germs. One day, riding home on the tube, Richard found a discarded copy of *GQ* and, leafing through the glossy pages, came to a fashion shoot that stopped him cold. Armani-clad models were shown stylishly fleeing down suburban lanes, briefcases in hand, under the header "Beating the Rat-Race This Autumn". And then the next day on Radio 4's *Woman's Hour*, Jenni Murray asked, with all seriousness, "What is it men are afraid of?" Germaine Greer talked about redefined masculinity and Ann Widdecombe complained about the lack of positive role models for the young, and yet all the while Richard Biddle had a sense that everyone in the studio was edging their way around a very public secret that no one would admit to knowing.

His frustration at these hints of unmentionable danger was the only explanation for what happened next. It was the following Wednesday, and he'd had a week of it. A week of smirks and "Axe-man Biddle" and, at one point, Jeffrey, who wasn't even on a tea break, pushing his chair back and putting his feet up on his desk.

Richard was walking home from the station, wrapped up in his thoughts to the point of deafness, when gradually the sound of running feet broke through. Goddammit, thought Richard Biddle.

The sound was closing; it was zeroing in. The man appeared as a bulky silhouette at the top of the road. He stopped, raised the axe high above his head, and then charged through the sodium light, screaming all the while. Richard Biddle held his ground. He meant to run eventually; he just wasn't going to run yet. The man hammered down the long street, disappearing and reappearing as he powered through the shadows cast by the birch trees. Mickey Mouse under a wash of dull orange. No one has yet been axed, thought Richard Biddle, taking strength from the fact.

And then the man stopped. With fifty yards between them, he came to a dead halt. He lowered his axe. Well, come on then, thought Richard Biddle.

The man tried out another scream, but it had an experimental, tentative quality. The two men faced each other and, for a heartbeat, nothing happened.

Richard attacked.

He was running at the axe-man before he knew what he was doing. The suddenness caught the man flat-footed, and then he turned and fled. This time it was a real chase, executed with silent determination. At first Richard thought he was closing, but, liberated from the need to scream, to hold his arms up, the axe-man's greater fitness told. He steadily pulled away, and then he was gone into the night, knees high, arms pumping.

Richard Biddle stopped and bent over, taking breaths that seared his chest. He coughed up a long string of phlegm and then straightened. That's you dealt with, he thought, running a hand across his mouth, feeling shattered and yet unvanquished. That's you seen off.

He strode back down the street, thinking of the victory he would describe to Jacqui, and it occurred to him that over the last couple of weeks he'd actually become fitter. His panic sprints and quick-walking semijogs had left him able to run without collapsing.

And then he noticed a white card lying on the pavement ahead of him. The size of a coaster, spotless under a streetlight, it lay neatly in the middle of a flagstone in a way that made it seem deliberately positioned. Richard Biddle stooped to pick it up. Turning it over, he found:

**ADRENALINE INC.**

*Is a loved one putting on the pounds?*

*Doesn't want to exercise?*

*Won't go to the gym?*

*For creative jogging solutions call **Adrenaline Inc.***

*Our self-image depends on your self-image.*

*Tel: (020) 454 4699*

And there, unforgivably, under the phone number, was a logo with two crossed axes.

You've got to be joking, he thought. It was like fumbling your way through a room in the dark and then having the lights go up. *Surprise!* everyone shouts in their idiotic paper hats, filling the air with the din of party squealers and the braying laughter of people who want your company for just as long as you are the guaranteed butt of their jokes.

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"Again?" asked Jacqui as he burst in wheezing. He wasn't as fit as he'd thought. He stood in their small hallway taking deep, gulping breaths. It felt as though he was trying to swallow fire. He began to struggle with his coat. One arm got trapped behind him as he attempted to fling it off. Jacqui reached out to help and he pushed past her into the living room.

"Darling!"

With the coat finally off, thrown down on the floor, Richard looked around as though seeing his house for the first time: the mahogany standard lamp spilling cosy amber light onto the brown hemp sofa they'd picked out together, the jade and marble chess set he'd bought with the money from his raise. Each item a carefully constructed deception. The house resonated with strangers' laughter.

Jacqui followed him in. "Darling, what is the matter with you?" She was wearing a knee-length flared green skirt and a tight black top, and had her hair tied back with a ribbon in the skirt's olive-green shade. He found himself enraged by everything—by her slim body and her poise and her eternal, enduring bloody dress sense.

"The matter, for God's sake, is this." He fumbled the card out and shoved it at her. "Tell me you didn't phone this number. Just tell me you didn't."

She frowned at the card and then shook her head. "No, you can't get through on that one. Not anymore."

"You tried, though?"

"To cancel! Darling, I phoned them to cancel. After you were so upset the first time, I thought, No. But you just get this hum now. Like it doesn't exist."

"And you didn't think to say one word to me?"

"But it was doing you so much good. After you started jogging back, I just thought—"

"Christ, I've been living in terror for the past two weeks."

"That's the whole idea. They explained it to me. When someone exercises while being terrified, that makes it even more aerobic. 'Continuum aerobics', they call it."

"That is the stupidest bloody thing I have ever heard. For two whole weeks I've been living in fear. Do you have any conception?"

"But you were supposed to, don't you see? Their people explained it. The fear means you have an elevated heart rate and respiration. So even when you're doing normal things, like sitting on a tube train, you get the benefit. It's aerobic."

"You stupid bitch, will you stop using that word."

Jacqui's mouth opened soundlessly and she wrapped her arms around her body as though she'd taken a punch to the stomach.

Deep inside his anger, Richard now became angry that she should be hurt. "Do you have any idea what you've put me through? Not to mention calling the police, who now think I'm some kind of bloody terrorist decoy."

Jacqui's eyes began to fill with tears. "I was trying to help you." She wasn't facing him anymore; she was whispering to the wall. It was the whisper of someone who'd been winded. Her nose reddened and two tears streaked down it.

"Help me? You almost bloody killed me. I could have had a heart attack. Why can't you act like a normal person?"

She ran a hand across her eyes. In her pain she was ugly, her face reddened and scrunched up. She stumbled to the doorway, then looked back at him. "Oh, Richard."

And at that moment, Richard knew that, with the accuracy of an archer hitting a bull's-eye, in all this time she had loved exactly him. It hadn't been to one side or the other. She had loved him precisely. For he couldn't have hurt her so otherwise; he couldn't have otherwise written so much regret into two words.

There came the muffled thumps of her stumbling upstairs. He sighed and followed her up to the bedroom. She was like a small wounded animal gone to ground; she was crouching by the wardrobe, turned away from him.

"You can't possibly expect me to be happy about this," he said. "You can't possibly expect it."

Later, he would come to understand what had destroyed her. *Why can't you act like a normal person?* With that, he'd slammed the door on the only room she wanted to enter: normality. The opportunity to swim up from her past and live a normal life. It was,

finally, all that she'd asked of him. There was no mystery about his being unspectacular; she'd needed unspectacular, and steadiness, and love. But these were insights that only came after he was alone.

For now, he was simply righteous and unappreciated. Still ugly with pain, she began flinging random clothes into a small holdall. She whispered something that ended in "...going."

"Going where?" Richard wanted to know, but she brushed past him, looking down.

He wanted to stop her from leaving, but he couldn't manhandle her. She tripped on the bottom stair and then regained her balance. She was dialling up a number on her mobile.

"Well, this is bloody clever, isn't it?" said Richard.

She opened the door and stumbled, sniffing, out into the autumn evening, ridiculously weighed down by the holdall. She was burbling into the mobile and obviously not making herself understood, for she had to repeat herself, and then a third time.

"Careful," he shouted after her. "There's an axe-man out there."

He went back into the living room. "Christ," he said, and sat down on the sofa. A chill swept into the house. He realised she'd left the door open, and went to close it, but instead followed her out.

Unquestioningly, Richard assumed she'd gone in the direction of the station, and he walked and walked before realising his mistake. He doubled back and finally saw her ahead of him. As he approached, a minicab pulled up. "Jacqui!" he shouted, and started to run. She climbed in, and the car purred away into the darkness.

Richard went back up to the bedroom. With the wardrobe doors open, drawers jerked out, and clothes flung onto the bed, there was an awful feeling of destruction. It was like a murder scene without the body. And yet, in spite of the mess she'd made, she hadn't packed much. Surely, he thought, having taken so little, she would be back soon. He sat on the corner of the bed and put his face in his hands. He thought about chasing the axe-man down the street. It seemed unreal to him that he had so recently been in possession of victory.

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With each day that passed, Richard became willing to shoulder a greater part of the blame in his eventual apology. But

it was a moot point, with only her clothes there to listen. Christie's phoned repeatedly, enquiring about progress on "the Berne edition" in tones of increasing panic. At first, Richard tried to put them off with tales of food poisoning, but eventually had to admit he had no idea where she was.

He phoned Jacqui's father in Finchley, expecting her to have gone there, but instead learnt that she was in Paris. Richard had known that Jacqui's French mother walked out when Jacqui was eleven, and so Jacqui had grown up under her father's wayward guidance. (She'd once told Richard, "We lived on macaroni and vitamin pills until I could cook.") But apparently she now wanted to rediscover her French roots—and, in fact, hadn't that been the point of 'Jackie' to 'Jacqui'?

He tried to explain their breakup to her father, but it wasn't easy. There was some kind of party going on, and the man's voice faded in and out under the sound of modern jazz. In the background a woman said, "If you don't know what it's for by now, dearie...." and then went off into raucous laughter.

"She's left," Richard repeated, not sure if he was being understood.

"Tell you what, old man, why don't you come over?" said Jacqui's father. "Bring some vino and toddle across." Richard put the phone down.

At work, he barricaded himself in his office and, instead of cross-checking everyone's progress, sat with his palm pressed to the base plate of the Stirling engine, as though the spinning brass wheel, like a rubbed lamp, could summon her back.

He took to drinking nightcaps in the evening, but stayed away from Bushmills; that connection was still too painful. Instead, he bought supermarket vodka and administered it neat, in throat-burning sips. One evening, already in his cups, he fished out the card from Adrenaline Inc. and dialled. He'd expected a disconnected hum, but instead it started ringing.

On the sixth ring, someone picked up. "Richard Biddle, I take it?" asked a cheerful voice.

"Yes, that's.... How could you...?"

"We have caller ID. I suppose you'd like an explanation? You'd like to know what's going on? We'll meet, shall we?"

"She left me," said Richard.

"Of course you want to meet, they all do."

"She's in Paris," said Richard.

"We'll say Saturday morning, shall we? Ten a.m., Hyde Park, the bridge over the Serpentine, Temple Gate bank. Don't worry about finding us, we know what you look like."

"Look, how can you...."

"Don't worry, all in a day's work. So glad you phoned." The line went dead.

Richard stared dumbly at the phone and then dropped it on the sofa and stumped upstairs to bed.

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The next day, the conversation seemed like a vodka-ridden dream. Richard toyed with the Adrenaline Inc. card and considered phoning again, but he didn't want the dream confirmed. And at the same time, he pondered, it would be worse to find out he was having phone chats with his imagination.

And so Richard never did phone a second time. But, on Saturday morning, he took a tube train to South Kensington, and from there walked up Exhibition Road to Hyde Park. It was a bright, cold day, the sky a hard, flawless blue, and by the time Richard reached the broad stone bridge, his eyes were watering from the biting wind.

His dream-memory of the conversation told him that he would be recognised, but instead it was the other way around. He immediately spotted the man who was supposed to be meeting him. Coatless and apparently immune to the cold, the man wore a tight-fitting grey suit with a bright-red tie that flapped out like a pennant in the wind. However, it was less his clothing than his manner that marked him out. Bouncing on the balls of his feet, smiling at each passerby as though ready and eager to participate in their lives, he was like a cup overfilled with good cheer—some of it had slopped down the sides. Richard wondered briefly if his own happiness had looked like this. He suspected not. There'd always been the shadow in his mind of Jacqui leaving. As she had done.

He stepped up and said, "I'm Richard Biddle."

The man spun round. "There you are. Excellent. Good man. Well played." He clasped Richard's hand in both of his. "Derrick. Derrick Driver. We'll go and get out of this wind, shall we? We'll go and get a coffee." He marched off towards the glass-walled Dell Cafe, on the far side of the bridge, looking out over the glassy-green



river. Over his shoulder, he said, "You're over the difficult bit, you know. What comes next is marvellous, life-changing. In many ways I could say I envy you. And that's me, Derrick Driver, telling you that." He raised his pale eyebrows to emphasise the importance of Derrick Driver telling someone that.

Richard followed the man in silence. He wanted to have all the facts assembled before he reacted, and as it was, he felt confusingly behind events.

In the snugly overheated cafe, Driver settled Richard at a table by the glass wall and then, without asking what he wanted, went over to the counter and returned with two cappuccinos, liberally sprinkled with chocolate.

"Now here we are; you've found the card, you've given us a call." Driver's raw, earnest face was still pink from the wind off the Serpentine. He made a chopping motion with his hands and then slurped up some coffee. "You're asking yourself, What comes next?"

"No, actually, I'm asking myself, What the hell were you thinking of? Chasing people with axes as a way of getting them fit? It's insane."

Driver was nodding along like one of those chummy teachers who wants to encourage you. "There we are, keep going. You're on the right track."

"I could call the police, you know. There's a man called Clench who'd like to have words."

"And do you think he'll believe you?" Driver spread out his hands. "That's the marvellous thing. As you said, it's insane. But go on, don't stop."

Richard was nonplussed. "I.... With what?"

Driver leaned in. "Now, that man chasing you. You think he's one of our employees, right? How would you feel if I was to say he was a member of the public? Someone just like you, Richard Biddle."

"God, that's even worse. It's bloody unsafe."

Driver might have not heard him. "Someone like you, getting the benefit. Doing something that you yourself have, in your heart of hearts, dreamed of doing. *Chasing someone with an axe.*"

"I haven't dreamed of any such thing."

But it was no good. Driver was like the Stirling engine; a heat differential had been applied, and gears had now clicked into

motion. "Because these are the lives we live, aren't they? We're hemmed in, trapped. We go to work and we come home again, and it's happening all around us—bird flu and Bin Laden and Ebola and SARS. We're menaced by these things. Powerless."

For the first time, through the fog, Richard began to see the glimmer of a rationale. "And this is your answer, is it? Your answer to fear? Become the stuff of someone else's nightmare?"

"Well, if you want to put it like that, yes. And we don't just offer ourselves to anyone, you know. We go to the people who need us."

"Like me? You're sure of that?"

"Of course we are. There's no *ad hoc* where Derrick Driver's concerned. We employ Listeners, trained people. One of our operatives overheard your staff in the pub. Talking about your wife, 'Can you believe he's giving her one?' that kind of thing."

"Christ."

"That's how we knew. You should have heard the envy, the contempt. D'you want to listen? It's all on tape."

Richard put a hand to his temple. He could feel a migraine developing.

"Imagine waking up one day and finding you're an emperor. A god, even. Because that's how it feels. Imagine charging down the street as the little people flee in terror. Think of the release, the power—the vindication. You'd like to scream now, wouldn't you?"

"Bloody hell!" said Richard.

"You see? You see?"

"And what about the poor bastard who's running for his life? What about the effect on his psyche?"

"That's the whole beauty. We pick someone who could himself benefit from our help. This is how we bring them to us. You didn't find that card by accident, you know."

Christ, thought Richard. It's like climbing Escher steps. You go up and up, and around and around, and never reach the summit.

"So where did Jacqui come into all this?"

"We like to have someone on the inside. It cuts down on the surveillance cost. They don't get the whole story, of course, just the cover. Adrenaline Inc. was one such. Not that it's always possible, mind you. People are often resistant to new ideas." Driver's good cheer momentarily dimmed, and then he brightened again. "Wasn't the case with your wife, though. She was great."

And of course she was associating with the right people, which helps enormously."

"Let me guess, Life Coaching?"

"Exactly. Very approachable. I used to be a Life Coach myself, as it happens. And you know, we find this really improves relationships. There are initial speed bumps, it's true, but, in the end, when someone learns of all the trouble their spouse has gone to—"

"It might interest you to know that she's left me."

Driver paused. "Has she? Well, that one's new. That's different. We'll drop that one into the mix." He leaned in, pushing his cooling cappuccino to one side. "I'm telling you, the experience is seminal. It changes your whole outlook. There's one of our clients, he used to work for the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, keeping the records. Glorified file clerk, basically. Well, you know where he is now? He's in Ecuador, up in the Andes."

"And what's he doing up there?"

Driver blinked. "I've no idea. But the point is, he did it. He made the break."

Richard sighed. "Look, I daresay you're right to some extent. People do feel hemmed in. Perhaps I used to, I can't remember. And perhaps we are all scared of things we can't see, SARS and bird flu and whatnot. But this, chasing people with axes.... I mean, you're just adding to the sum total of madness in the world. Can you not see that?"

Driver beamed at him. "We're thinking outside the box."

"I was happy before all this, despite what your Listeners might think. And now look. My wife's disappeared into Paris somewhere, Special Branch think I'm part of a city-wide conspiracy, and every day at work my authority becomes a little bit less."

Driver was nodding encouragement. "That's it exactly. We're just what you need." Built on the logic of the true believer, the Escher steps continued upwards.

Richard tried a different tack. "You can't carry on like this forever, surely. The police will catch someone in the end. They're already suspicious."

Driver tapped the side of his nose. "A good business knows when to diversify."

"Into what?"

Driver gave him a hungry smile. "Belief, that's the key. You bring people something you genuinely believe in."

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Autumn gave up early and London limped into winter. Richard Biddle came to terms with having seen his greatest anxiety come true, with understanding that Jacqui would not come back. Now that it had come to pass, the anxiety was lifted. He lived on without fear or expectation.

He went to work and came home again and pictured her bouncing down a cold Parisian boulevard in some chic little outfit, still trustingly not seeing the world for what it was. For what Richard Biddle knew it was now becoming.

They have to be stopped, he thought, as he watched the dim figure ahead of him recede further into the dark. It was an icy evening, and the streets glittered with frost. Derrick Driver was on the long, reflective walk home from Golders Green tube station. Alone now, with his public face switched off, the vigour and jollity seemed to have gone. Head down, he walked on with a steady, ticking stride. Nursing his package, Richard Biddle set off on rubber-soled training shoes, quietly closing the distance. He had a vision of London as a sum of tenuous human connections, fraying and beginning to snap. What would come next? A gun? A bomb? He thought of people charging through the city, inflicting their false anger on others. And all excused under the banner of personal salvation. What is happening to us? he wondered.

Driver turned into Sandringham Road and disappeared into the thick shadows of the oak trees. Richard Biddle felt the heat of cities around him, he felt the comforts of progress. He was standing in the light cast by reasonable men. He took a deep breath and lowered Goofy down over his face. He unwrapped the package. I will do this only once, Richard Biddle thought, and knew it would have to be true.

# Two Reasons

Christine Schrum

I

Because I thought the cage of my ribs  
restrained a mad, flapping raven  
until your quiet hands  
slipped through the rungs and pulled free  
a bewildered raccoon.

II

For letting it bumble away,  
still blinking,  
in search of animals more like itself.



Dance and Doubts

Jon Radlett

# Five Women, Five Stories

Ross Hickerson

1

The woman across from me is as appropriate  
as a cut throat in a Sunday-School class.  
Who in their godfucking right mind talks  
about this business of bleeding  
over dinner?

She gurgles,  
"I don't see why you should even get an opinion,  
it's not like it will ever be your body," and she is bloody,  
but she's right. I cannot make choices  
about a life I will never carry.

Still, the meat on the table between us glistens wet  
in the light and I bleed her a story:

2

The smell of bleach still makes a fist in my ribcage.  
There are no rituals for this.  
You can only sing the details:  
bone-white bathtub tiles toilet bone-white sink  
blood and the thick way it seeps from her  
the fingerbone skitter of a coat hanger  
dragging through wet mess  
the smell I can taste like a mouthful of nickels  
semen smell of bleach the way she laughed with her hands  
smashed together at the wrist twisting and never touching  
telephones her trip to the hospital my fingernails bloodblack  
bleachblood running pink the possibility my hands left behind  
in my hair the smell of bleach

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3

I say, all whiskeybubble giggles,  
"I think it's sad that, in zombie movies,  
no one has ever addressed the issue  
of what happens at an abortion clinic."

She has already seen their teeth set  
jewel-hard and shining in the stainless-steel  
morning, protesters, a crowd of mouths moaning, "Life,"  
surrounding and devouring supporting actresses.

Her hand is flat against her belly,  
palm-pressed bridge from ribs to pelvis.

"No," she says, "it's not sad," and her voice,  
her voice is terrible and soft.

4

We are all crying, today.

The front door will always be thirty feet tall  
when I remember it, later. A single protester  
looks so understanding that I hate her  
with the immediate frenzy of a jackal.  
I'm not sure what I am trying to protect us from.

"Just open the door," my partner says.  
After, when we walk thirty laps in the clinic hallway,  
I will hear the woman out front every time the door opens,  
repeating the same simple truth:

5

"You don't have to do this," I tell her.  
She looks at me, but she's seeing empty bottles,  
cigarette butts, the littered coffee table  
that is my life. I want to say more, but the certainty that  
I will always be dirty dishes in a tiny apartment  
has jammed itself in my throat.  
Her eyes catwalk from the cigarette  
burning in my mouth to the question mark I'm wearing  
just above my eyes.

"No," she says, "I don't."

81



# With the Blue Heart People

Patricia Russo

With the Blue Heart people, there was always trouble.

She'd heard it was because they were so literal-minded. Big Cyn realized that was a stereotype, but it was hard to shake the notion, bound up as it was with her memories of the man who'd first said those words to her. He was of the No Water people, and they were in a bar one night, and he was laughing. *Look at them, he said. They call their city City. Have you ever been to City? There's a restaurant there, by the north gate, with green walls. Good food, by the way, but the drinks are weak. Guess what it's called. Yah. Green Wall Restaurant. Those people have no imaginations.*

*They have good doctors,* Big Cyn said, staring into her glass. It was something to say. It was something everybody said.

*It's all talk,* the No Water man said. He was pretty well lubricated, and too loud for the small bar. The bartender kept glancing over. She'd only been sitting with him for twenty minutes or so, and already her heart was cold.

The No Water man knocked his elbow against the bar and swore. *Those Blue Hearts, he said, they love being sick, is all it is. Forever thinking there's something wrong with their bodies. You ever been to City in the summer? That's when everybody has their operations. Every other person, kiddies and olders and elders, with casts on, or bandages, slings, every which thing. There's so many convalescents they run special streetcars for them. In the summertime. Can you believe it?*

*I've never been to City,* Big Cyn said, and she hadn't, then. Hadn't even been over the mountains, and City was far off in the plains, the sort of place you saw on posters in travel agencies. And though her heart was cold, she took the No Water man home with her that night. This had consequences, but then, everything did.

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82

Feet. What was it with feet? Every third or fourth person, it seemed like, was wearing a thick blue padded walking cast on one foot or the other and assisting their locomotion with a cane, or a crutch, or two crutches. Then there were the ones in the wheeled chairs, with both feet swathed in white, the chairs

pushed by attendants. It seemed this summer's craze was podiatric surgery. Big Cyn found this odd, given that the trouble had started over viscera.

With the Blue Heart people, there was always trouble.

This was not the first time she'd been to City; the first time had been maybe eight years ago now. She couldn't remember the name of the No Water man who'd told her about Green Wall Restaurant, but she'd made sure to go have a look at it that first time, though she hadn't had the money to eat there. She noted Sugar Bakery, too, and The Ten-Bed Hostel, along with its cousins the Twelve-Bed, Eight-Bed, Seventeen-Bed, etc. places. Not that she'd patronized any of those establishments, either. She'd slept in Small Southeast Park, washed in Summer Fountain. (She figured they called it Summer Fountain because they turned the water off in wintertime, but she'd never gone to eyeball it in winter to see if her guess was correct.)

Awkward about not remembering that No Water man's name, as Barrat was at the age now where he was asking every other damn week, seemed like.

Green Wall Restaurant was bustling, doing good business; since her last trip, it had added a covered deck to the front of the place that held a dozen tables for the semioutdoor dining experience. Big Cyn had taken one of those tables. She poked at her fish and boiled roots with one of the weirdly narrow two-pronged forks the Blue Heart people used, and looked around. The deck had a green roof and green pillars; she wondered if the place was going to change its name to the Green Wall, Roof, and Pillar Restaurant.

Hospital bracelets. That struck her too, after how many people had casts or bandages or bandages-and-braces on their feet. Some of the bracelets were brand-new and shiny, others old and ragged; some people sported one on each wrist, or three or four climbing an arm. Fashion statement. Big Cyn shook her head.

That was strange, but the viscera thing was much stranger. At home they all thought it was a joke, but in City she'd picked up a few discarded newsheets, checked the running image screens in Great Square, listened to a street preacher ranting. It wasn't a joke to the Blue Hearts. A whole begging lot of them were worked up over livers flying off in the night, gall bladders taking trips to visit the moon, spleens hitching off on their own travels.

Wandering organs. It was idiotic, but then most of what people—any people, all people—believed was idiotic.

Big Cyn had come to City to sell toys. She'd made a bad call—speaking of idiotic—and gotten stuck with a double-hand of crates crammed with year-before-last's fad item, animated feathers, in all conceivable colors and sizes, five or six different sorts of packaging too, and cutesy brand names—QuikPlumes, Hopping Feathers, Birds in the Hand, Fancy Tickles (My, my, she'd thought, glimpsing that one). Barrat had loved his at first, played with the couple she'd given him for hours on end. The feathers were all meant to have the same features, do the same things, regardless of color or shape, but she'd noticed that some of them danced more, some wriggled more, some bent and sprang, some mostly just moved side to side—and then, of course, there were the duds, which just shivered and lay still. She supposed that the top-of-the-line models probably did all the things claimed on the box, but her crates of knockoffs were basically one-trick goodies. Which was why she'd gotten them so cheap, she supposed. That, and the fact that the market back home for QuikPlumes and Fancy Tickles was just about saturated—something she hadn't discovered until cash had changed hands.

She'd figured her best bet to unload the inventory was with the Blue Heart people, given their penchant for fads and trends, and the best place to do that was City. Might be the big merchants hadn't bothered to flog their goods way out and gone in the middle of the plains; it was a long trek there and back. Even if they had, well, everything old came new again, and nowhere faster than among the Blue Hearts.

But things had been peculiar right from the beginning. Not the feet. The feet was just Blue Heart people being Blue Heart people. Same with the hospital bracelets. Big Cyn had been keeping her eyes on that nonsense to keep her mind off the crawly feeling between her shoulder blades.

She'd been to City half a dozen times, and never before had the Blue Heart people looked at her the way they looked at her now. She'd had doings and dealings with a good chunk of the merchants in the place; she'd made friends from the north edge of the city to the south, from bartenders to street sweepers to civil guards and municipal patrollers. She dressed neutrally, she never talked politics or history, and, most of the time, most folks

condescended to act as if they hadn't noticed that she wasn't a Blue Heart. This trip, that had changed.

It had taken her brisk, brusque server half an hour to make his way to her table to get her order; it had taken nearly an hour for the food to come. The storage guy she always dealt with hadn't uttered more than a couple of grunts, just took her money and tossed her the keys, never met her eyes. The first hotel she went to—not a hostel; she stayed in hotels now—had no rooms. She'd gone to three more before finding one that would rent her what had to have originally been a cleaning-supply closet. The office where you went to get your market ticket, vendor's license, badge, seals, and everything else you had to have to shift merchandise in City kept her waiting until closing time and then told her to come back tomorrow. And she knew every clerk there; she knew the names of their children.

I'm never going to dump those damned toys, Big Cyn thought.

It was the street preacher who had put the worst itch and squirm into her. Him, and the way the Blue Heart people looked at folks who weren't Blue Hearts, and weren't her.

Big Cyn poked at her fish. She wondered how many people had spit into her plate before it reached her table. She'd come to Green Wall Restaurant for a good meal to raise her spirits, but her spirits refused to budge. Another mistake, she thought. Should've saved my money.

Big Cyn didn't believe people's intestines could go wandering around their bodies, looping around the heart, say, to strangle it, or that kidneys could dislodge themselves from their assigned positions to scramble up someone's spinal cord, but she did recognize pain when she saw it, and she saw it everywhere. Clenched faces with frightened eyes. Wasted faces atop stooped bodies. A scattering of silent, passive children. A parade of angry, scared adults.

*The witches have come again. The witches have returned, to eat us from the inside out. They have infiltrated our streets, our homes, our bodies. The enemy is among us, consuming us. The enemy is with us and within us.*

That, to Big Cyn's way of thinking, was not literal-minded (though she imagined the long-gone No Water man would argue that since the Blue Heart people believed in witches, and believed that such witches could cause organs to leave their bodies, or wander around inside them, then all of this was just another

instance of the Blue Hearts having no imaginations). To Big Cyn's way of thinking, it was pure craziness. That street preacher, with his *infiltrating* and *consuming*, his pumping arms and his cracking voice, had scared her. The crowd around him had scared her more.

Time to cut my losses and go, Big Cyn thought. That's what a smart person would do. When the Blue Heart people exploded, they burst fast, but the firestorm usually burned out quickly too. This time next year, they probably would have forgotten all about witches and loose viscera and gone back to comparing surgical scars.

Big Cyn had left Barrat with a neighbor, a woman who had three kids of her own, and who had taken care of Barrat before. She hadn't paid the woman; told her she'd give her the money when she returned from City. The woman hadn't been too happy about that. Shit, Big Cyn thought. Storage fees, shipping fees, permit fees.... She was going to get back home deeper in the hole than when she started out. She'd promised Barrat a scooter. He needed clothes for school. Shoes. Winter was coming, and she needed to buy fuel.

Shit, shit, shit.

On the street in front of Green Wall Restaurant, across the street from Green Wall Restaurant, Blue Heart people walked, grim-faced and tense. Big Cyn saw a woman of the Clear Glass edging through them, keeping to the side, keeping away from people walking together in groups, keeping away from everyone, even the bent old man with the newsheet under his arm. The Clear Glass woman had been shopping; she was carrying her purchases in two string bags. She kept her head down, but her eyes moved constantly, seeking out a safe path through the Blue Hearts. Big Cyn heard the mutters rise, saw the Blue Hearts sidestep to block her way, saw a man push her in the back, saw a woman spit at her as she began to hurry. Other Blue Hearts, on the deck of the restaurant, watching this as if it was a show, began to slap their hands on their tables.

86 Don't run, Big Cyn thought. Please don't run.

She didn't see if the Clear Glass woman panicked and tried to flee; she passed out of view, still with her head down.

Big Cyn found that she was gripping her fork very tightly. She found in her heart a gigantic desire to take that fork and stab

its narrow prongs into the face of a Blue Heart. Any Blue Heart. All the Blue Hearts.

But when she glanced back at the street, she met the eyes of a young man whose shoulders were hunched like those of an ancient, who walked with his arms hugging his stomach, whose eyes were pits of pain. She couldn't hate him.

Big Cyn was smart. Sometimes she did stupid things, sometimes she made mistakes, sometimes she didn't exercise her judgment as fully or as competently as she was capable of, but Big Cyn was smart. Big Cyn was also, when it came right down to it, very, very stubborn. Her mother used to say her stubbornness would be the death of her. Sometimes the death Big Cyn's mother had meant was Big Cyn's, and sometimes she meant her own. The woman always had had a streak of the dramatic in her. Anyway, neither one of them had died yet; the last Big Cyn had heard, her mother had clasped hands with a Pigeon High fellow, way up in the highlands somewhere. She'd gotten a postcard from her just a month ago.

They're not going to beat me, she thought, standing up from her table, her meal unfinished. I'll be damned, she thought, if I let these crazy Blue Heart bastards win.

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The Permit, License, Tag, Badge, and Sticker Office accepted her paperwork and told her it would take a week to process. The forms had never taken a week to be processed before, but Big Cyn knew it wouldn't do her any good to mention that.

All right, then, she thought.

She went to the storage place, propelled by a calm fury. The sharp glances, the muttered words tossed at her by the Blue Hearts barely registered. She'd stopped taking notice of bandaged feet and wheeled chairs, as well. She did mark the fact that there were very few out-clanners on the streets.

The storage facility rented dollies and hand trucks for use on the premises. Big Cyn didn't bother sliding the required coins under the grate of the little window, and since the Blue Heart man in the booth overseeing the equipment had turned his head away when she approached, he couldn't say a word when she just grabbed a hand truck and rolled it off. Well, he could have, but more than nearly anything else, Blue Heart people hated looking

stupid. Or perhaps he'd rather let an out-clanner get away with filching a hand truck than risk contamination, risk a witch attack, by speaking to her.

Big Cyn trundled the thing straight to her storage unit, loaded a crate onto it, and trundled it right out of the place. Nobody tried to stop her; it seemed that everyone was too occupied with not looking at her. She pried off the top of the crate and tossed it toward a mound of trash waiting for the sweep-carts.

She couldn't set up in any of the official market areas, not without tickets and tags, badges and stickers, and a license to show every civil guard and municipal patroller that stopped by. "Feathers, living feathers," she called, pushing the hand truck toward City's northern commercial district—office buildings and stores, lots of street traffic on a warm summer morning with clear, cloudless skies. "Buy one for your kiddies, buy one for your grandkiddies. Quick plumes, hopping jennies, fancy tickles! Big ones, small ones, purple ones, and orange ones! Living feathers! Free to try, ma'am, free to try. Nontoxic and environmentally friendly. One hundred percent biodegradable. Living feathers, ladies and gentlemen, get them right here. Green ones, silver ones, red ones, and rainbow ones!"

People looked. People muttered. Big Cyn kept a wide smile on her face, the cheerful sales pitch going, and the hand truck moving. There was no way she was going to sell any of the things unless she stopped and began exchanging goods for cash, but if she stopped she was afraid the Blue Hearts, these office workers and professionals, these morning shoppers with servants pacing behind them to carry their bags, would turn on her. The street was different from a restaurant, different from a storage facility. The street was public, and the street was where mobs formed.

A man with his foot in a walking cast, carrying a gold-tipped cane, glared at her. A nanny shepherding two small children glanced at the feathers in the crate, but she was not Blue Heart—she might have been Pigeon High or Soft Rock—and she hurried her charges along before they had the chance to approach.

88

It isn't too late to give all this up and make a run for the train station, Big Cyn thought. Her calm fury was fraying around the edges. In the newssheet she'd fished out of a bin that morning, there had been four separate items about attacks by 'persons unknown' on what the sheet termed 'visiting workers'.

So be it, she thought. If these bastards come at me, they come at me.

She parked the hand truck under a tree—at least she'd have something behind her, though she'd rather have had a wall—a few paces from the intersection of a broad avenue and the narrow street she'd been rolling on. Fine. Good enough. Let it be here.

"Living feathers! Buy one for your kiddie, buy one for your grandkiddie! Entertaining and educational! Free to try, ladies and gentlemen, free to try!"

A Blue Heart woman paused, glanced at her, glanced at the merchandise in the crate, and spat. Big Cyn kept her smile on her face, and her eyes locked on the Blue Heart woman's eyes, until the woman walked on.

"What do they do?"

It was a soft voice, a tremulous voice, and it came from below eye level.

Big Cyn turned, casually, still smiling, and looked down. It was a woman, another Blue Heart woman, but this one sat in a wheeled chair. Her feet weren't bandaged or in casts. She wasn't wearing hospital bracelets as jewelry. She had an attendant, but it wasn't any out-clanner or visiting worker. It was a Blue Heart man, young, tense, his face similar enough to the woman's to be a nephew or a son.

The woman in the chair was a sufferer. Big Cyn recognized the signs—the haggard face, the arms laid protectively over the belly, the dark fear behind the pain in her eyes. What part or parts of her the woman believed had taken to traveling, Big Cyn couldn't guess. How fallacies and superstitions could cause so much misery and hurt, she couldn't begin to understand. The pain was real, though. That she'd understood from the very beginning.

"They're toys," she said to the woman in the chair, ignoring the young man behind her, ignoring the other Blue Hearts who were slowing now, drifting over, coming to see the start of something, coming to join in what was about to happen. "Animated feathers. They dance and wriggle. You can make them jump from one hand to another, and if you've got a couple or a few, you can race them across the floor. Kids like them."

The woman in the chair had a gray face and thin, trembling fingers. "Can I touch one?"

The young man behind the chair said, "Let's go."



"Absolutely, ma'am. Free to try." Big Cyn plucked a large silver feather from the crate, stripped off the packaging, and placed the feather in the woman's hand. Three seconds flat. The boy behind the chair didn't have a chance to protest. The crowd that had begun to form didn't have a chance to do anything but watch.

Please, let it not be a dud, Big Cyn thought. That would ice everything real damn good.

The Blue Heart woman's hands shook; she had to support her left hand with her right in order to hold the feather. The feather, as they all did just after being released from their molded-plastic packages, lay still. Big Cyn held her breath. Then the silver feather quivered, arched itself, and then sprang erect. It was a swayer, this one, moving from side to side, skipping lightly on the Blue Heart woman's palm. It was a bobber, too, dipping and wriggling as it swayed. Good. It was a good one.

The Blue Heart woman bent her head, and let the tip of the silver feather tap her chin. The boy let out a cry, immediately picked up and echoed and built on by the coalescing crowd—dismay, alarm, disgust—all the cries wordless, all the cries fraught with fear and suspicion.

The Blue Heart woman laughed. She put the silver feather on her lap, and laughed again as it bobbed and hopped a bit on her thigh. "It's wonderful," she said.

"Grandmother?" the boy said, scared, uncertain.

"Nontoxic and environmentally friendly," Big Cyn said. "Entertaining and educational, one hundred percent biodegradable." Grandmother. Huh. Off by a generation. You couldn't judge by appearances. "Fun for all ages," she added.

The crowd, too, had turned uncertain, no longer coming together as one, no longer shaping up into a pack. Among the looks of anger and distrust, Big Cyn caught expressions of curiosity, a couple of thoughtful glances.

"It's wonderful," the Blue Heart woman said again, and again she laughed.

Her grandson said, "She hasn't laughed.... This is the first time since...." He met Big Cyn's eyes briefly, then averted his gaze again.

The feather took an inchworm leap and landed on the Blue Heart woman's sunken belly; it swayed and bobbed, and the Blue Heart woman smiled as a child would smile, with delight unstained by past or future, or even by the present.

"Take it," Big Cyn said, to her, to the grandson. "No charge."

The Blue Heart woman brought her left hand up, trembling fingers gentle, to stroke the silver feather. "It soothes my thoughts," she said softly.

"Keep it," Big Cyn said. "My pleasure, ma'am." Tell your friends, she almost said, but on second thought figured it was better not to push her luck.

The crowd, now, were all looking at her. Everyone in the crowd was looking at her.

The grandson muttered something that might have been an expression of thanks, or might not have. The Blue Heart woman sat back in her chair, in a way that was almost relaxed, and stroked the swaying feather as the boy pushed her away, on to wherever they had been heading.

The crowd did not disperse.

The crowd still stared at her.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Big Cyn said (Am I in the shit now, or what? she thought. Yah, I think I'm in the shit, and deep, too, but if I'm going down, it won't be quietly.), "gentlemen and ladies, living feathers! Just the thing to ease your troubles, to raise your spirits, to bring a smile to the face and a lift to the heart. The perfect gift for invalids, the best get-well present for the ill! My brothers and sisters of the Blue Heart people—for we are all brothers and sisters, are we not, after all?—my brothers and sisters, today and today only, a special, one-time offer." Big Cyn reached into the crate and pulled out two great handfuls of packaged feathers. "Free samples."

For a long moment, she didn't think they were going to go for it. For the longest moment, Big Cyn was sure that she was going to figure in one of those small items on the inside pages of tomorrow's newssheet. Then the Blue Heart people, first one, then another, and then more, then most of them, stretched out their own hands, not eagerly, but not angrily; cautiously, the Blue Heart people took the feathers she doled out. Some of them even nodded at her before they walked away.

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She wasn't going to see a big profit on this. Two crates had gone as free samples, and there was no way she could stick enough of a markup on the rest to make up for that, not without pissing

off the customers. If they thought she was gouging them, she was done. So much for scooters and shoes. Winter fuel was going to be difficult to manage. As for child-minding fees.... That was going to be embarrassing. But then, embarrassment never killed anybody.

"Living feathers here, right here. Big ones, small ones, scarlet ones, and golden ones!"

No tickets, no tags, no stickers, no license; all of those were still being held up at the permits office. The civil guards and the municipal patrollers turned a blind eye; the parade of sufferers shielded her. When Big Cyn turned away a customer with a cast on his foot, those waiting their turn to buy feathers applauded. At Green Wall Restaurant, the manager came over personally with her count, then pocketed the slip of paper and gave her a tiny, almost surreptitious bow.

Goodwill was everything.

"Skipping quills, leapers and prancers, hours of distraction in one small box!"

The magic secret, the secret magic: distraction. Of course the Blue Heart people were already making up another story, endowing the animated feathers with apotropaic forces, healing powers, and all other sorts of nonsense. Big Cyn could live with nonsense. A little nonsense never killed anybody either.

Fads spread fast among the Blue Heart people. She had to turn away a lot of clearly healthy folks whose stories of an uncle with a wandering appendix or a mother with a missing lung or two didn't smell right. She could live with that, too; she could certainly live with pissing off a few trendsters in order to make sure the feathers got to where they could do the most good.

"A green one, ma'am? Right you are, here you go. And an azure stripe for the gentleman. Sorry, no, one to a customer, one to a customer, brothers and sisters."

In the crowd that formed around her hand truck and crates just before dawn and never broke up until the last feather was gone, Big Cyn marked each out-clanner face. Many of them even looked back at her.

"Thank you," each Blue Heart customer said, accepting her or his feather as if receiving a spark from the fire of the Queen Under the Sea. They all believed in magic, these people, but Big Cyn felt no urge to laugh at them. Their pain was genuine, and pain had

never been something she could laugh at. "Thank you," the Blue Heart people said, and some of them even said, "Thank you, sister."

She glanced around the crowd, as she always did when she was in City, just in case a certain No Water man might be among the gawkers and hangers-about, but she didn't spot him. Not that she had expected to. She'd never seen him again after that one night, though she had looked, had made inquiries. *That guy? Yeah, I think I know who you mean. Left town. Got into a bit of trouble. Maybe he got locked up; I'm not sure. I might be thinking of somebody else.*

"Ticklers and squiggles, comfort keepers, one to a customer, one to a customer!"

She'd be able to pay for her ticket home; she'd be able to get in her winter fuel, or at least a part of it; she might even be able to pay the neighbor woman something. Not so much to show for her trouble, when it came down to it.

They hadn't beaten her, though, these crazy Blue Heart people.

Big Cyn placed a spring-green feather in the hands of a stooped young man, taking it out of the packaging for him. As soon as he touched the feather, the young man let out a long sigh. He had an attendant with him, a small woman in a uniform, who had hold of his arm and seemed to be more than half keeping him upright. She was not Blue Heart. She sighed a long sigh of relief as well.

"Health to you," Big Cyn said, and the young man nodded, though she was looking at the out-clanner woman.

This is a victory, she thought, as the attendant helped the young man to his car and another customer stepped up. A sad victory, but a victory all the same.

"Big ones, small ones, thin ones, and thick ones! Yellow ones, peach ones, pink ones, and swirled ones! Here you go, sir, here you go, ma'am, one to a customer, brothers and sisters, one each, one each, my brother, my sister. Health to you."

"Health to you, sister," said a Blue Heart woman.

"Health to you, sister," said a Blue Heart man.

"Health to you, sister," whispered a Pigeon High woman, edging by, hurrying along with her head down, but less down than the day before, and with her pace less rushed than it had been in recent weeks.



Wrapped in Morning Glory

Lezli Rubin-Kunda

# Just War

David Gullen

Day 100

Mitchell and Kosygyn are arguing again, and as before it is essentially over nothing. This endless, mind-numbing train journey has caused us to bond more like a dysfunctional family than the disciplined unit our superiors intended.

'Enough,' I say. 'Kit inspection is at 1500 hours, weapons at 1520. You'd better get moving.'

The two break off, giving me resentful looks, united now in their dislike for my order. Medium build and height, spiky dark hair and brown eyes: Mitchell and Kosygyn could easily pass for brothers.

'Very well, Corporal,' Mitchell says, turning to Kosygyn. 'Go and find Laumberg and Montana.'

'Sir, yes sir!' Kosygyn snaps to attention, presenting Mitchell with an arm-quivering salute before slouching to the front of our open carriage.

I'm sitting at the tiny desk and chair in the corner of the carriage, what we jokingly call the office. I pulled the chair well back before I sat down, not wanting to squeeze my knees under the low desk, which I am sure has been designed to make me look ridiculous rather than to enhance what little dignity the rank of Corporal brings.

Meanwhile Mitchell has gone to the back of the carriage, where Rolf is resting on his bunk. 'Come on,' I hear him say. 'Pedersen wants another drill.'

Just at that moment both connecting doors bang open, warm, damp wind swirling at the few papers on my desk. From the engine end, a junior subaltern breezes through, stamps to attention in front of my desk, and hands me a manila envelope with one hand while saluting with the other. He can't be more than fifteen.

From the other end, Elsa Montana and Suzi Laumberg appear, swinging across the gap between the carriages. Kosygyn trails behind, eyeing their backsides.

'I've located your privates, sir!' Kosygyn barks.

'We were on our way back,' Elsa says. 'We hadn't forgotten.'

'Get your eyes off her arse, Kosygyn,' Suzi says.

The two women in my unit are very different, physically and intellectually. Elsa is tall, broad-shouldered, and dark-haired. Like Kosygyn, she was sullen to begin with, both of them sensitive about their peasant background in the reunited south. Suzi, slender and hazel-eyed, is the confident intellectual from the city *elysée*.

Kosygyn deliberately blocks the exit for the subaltern, and they dodge from side to side, with Kosygyn effusively apologising before he lets the red-faced young man through.

Later, as I look at my soldiers standing beside their bedrolls, their kit and spare clothing meticulously laid out on the freshly swept floor, I wonder exactly how the strangely casual discipline we have all struggled to preserve on this seemingly interminable journey will hold for the remaining month until we reach the front line.

I hold up the brown envelope. 'Today I have an all-units dispatch from General Chimerofsky. It says, "Field Marshal Yu-Ang announces that Army Groups 4, 8, 11, and 15 continue to advance into disputed territory against light resistance with negligible casualties."'

Everyone visibly relaxes. Assigned as a support unit to Hagen-dorf's 772 in Army Group 8, we have been anxious for any news of them, even the self-censored quasi-propaganda from HQ. There is only one phrase in the report we care about: 'Negligible casualties.'

Mitchell and Kosygyn break out the heavy, long-barrelled Banlite recoilless rifle, while the others, led by Suzi, set up, load, and deploy the MG240.

Standing there with my stopwatch, I look out the window at the endless landscape of plains and farmland, rolling hills, woodlands, and snow-capped mountains we have been travelling through for nearly three months—all territory captured following the spectacularly successful amphibious assaults just over two years ago.

Four hours ahead of us another supply train rolls on towards the Uganyika railhead; four hours behind us comes another. It is the same all the way to Uganyika, and all the way back to the vast series of depots and marshalling yards beside the annexed coastal ports of Malzibar.

'Ready.' Suzi and her unit come to attention.

'Ready.' Mitchell and Kosygyn are moments behind.

I click the stopwatch. Eighteen seconds, two seconds under the official perfect time. My unit stands with quiet smiles on their faces, and I feel a certain pride. As I congratulate them, a train clangs and rumbles past on the other track, loaded with veterans and plunder returning to Malzibar, the first staging post for their return trip to our motherland.

## Day 133

We arrive at Lake Uganyika three days late, the wheels of the train piping and fluting across the complex points. Three days during which we fretted and sweltered in the motionless train a few miles from the railhead, and I near as dammit put Rolf on charge for fighting over a card game. Rolf! So calm, so controlled, Rolf the aesthete, the university cynic who life's petty inconveniences cannot touch. We have all devised ways to cope with the journey. Kosygin has his pointless arguments, Elsa and Suzi have their friendship, and I at least have the distraction and responsibility of my duties. But Rolf and Mitchell have more solitary tactics. For Mitchell, callisthenics and free weights seem enough; he works on them for hours each day, alternating workouts with shaving his head. All Rolf does is withdraw, read his few books, make notes, and sleep.

'What was it like?' I asked him once. 'In university.'

Rolf looked up from his writing and sighed. 'Quiet.'

'That's "Quiet, sir!"' Mitchell said, leaping to attention. One of his dumbbells rolled across the floor, bumping against Rolf's foot. 'Sorry,' Mitchell said, but Rolf had already retreated back onto his bunk.

Then, this morning before dawn, with a bang and a lurch, we were off, never to discover the reason for the delay. But we do not care, for by midmorning we arrive at the huge Uganyika railhead, detraining en masse onto the dusty, weed-strewn ground between rusting tracks, under a blazing tropical sun.

Immediately there are new orders, new equipment. Mosquito nets and quinine, along with instructions that any platoon with a malarial soldier will be put on charge. 'Collective punishment is alive and well,' Rolf grumbles as we trudge through the marshalling yards.

Lugging the Banlite and MG240, we pass silent ranks of tracked armour and mobile artillery, all roasting in the heat. 'Pity the poor sods who have to fight in those,' Mitchell says, spitting



onto the armour of an Mk XI Kodiak, his saliva hissing on the burning metal.

Around us move masses of local men, tall and black, singing as they work, troops of silent Eastern coolies, and swaggering stevedores from our own coasts, already half-drunk on the dark porter they insist they cannot labour without.

We were all looking forward to a few days' exploration, but it is not to be. The front line has leaped forward; it's now days away, across the lake and far beyond the sweltering bamboo and teak forests of the far shore. We are not even to spend a single night in this churning maelstrom of military activity. Instead we join a column of infantry marching along the edge of the road to the lakeside port, ordered to embark on the paddle steamer *Tireless* by twilight. Supply trucks roll past nonstop, coating us in gritty ochre dust. Dispatch bikes weave back and forth between them, horns beeping, engines revving. Occasionally we come across a broken-down vehicle pushed off the road. All these wrecks are empty, looted or unloaded, packing cases splintered and smashed open.

And once, in the road, a dead soldier, desiccated, mummified, folded down into the ruts by ten thousand rolling wheels.

Then the lake itself, and the stink of diesel and coal dust, and more chaos—milling masses of infantry, sappers, engineers, all in olive drab. Foulmouthed longshoremen in dirty brown dungarees shove the floating pontoons along, with creaking derricks swinging bale nets overhead while high above them vast solar airships drone across the lake, hurrying bulk cargo towards the far, invisible shore.

Night falls like a dark curtain and, finally, starving and filthy beneath the light of a low, sallow moon, we find our berths, food, water, and rest. And most welcome of all, letters. Letters from home!

We open them eagerly, reading quickly, then again more slowly. My father has been called out of retirement and is back to work in the warehouse, mother is well, the austerity measures are harsh, the new couple at Number Eleven have a boy, and so on. Suzi is outraged at her news: Compulsory education has been reduced to age fourteen and her younger brother's class has been sent to work in munitions factories.

'Then they'll get paid,' Mitchell says. His young sister is pregnant by a cavalryman. Scandalous! He joins in our laughter, but he's upset, returning to his weights and press-ups until lights-out.

Two days across Lake Uganyika and then we dock at a sprawling, ramshackle mass of floating pontoons and walkways along a low, flat, reedy shore. We crowd along the rail as the steamer manoeuvres into dock, and one of the passing sailors wonders at our enthusiasm to land. I explain that it's our desire to catch the mail packet so we can post our own letters back home.

The sailor, a short, muscular man with pale eyes and cropped hair, dressed in black bellbottoms and a pale blue sweater, stares at me. 'Where are you from?'

It turns out not only are we from the same city, but the same canton too. Amazing. The rest of my squad crowds round and introductions are made. I can tell the sailor, whose name is Bron, is taken with Suzi. 'Give me your letters,' he says. 'We're heading straight back.'

Bron raises his eyes at the size of the parcel Rolf hands him. 'How many letters are you writing? It's like a book.'

'It is a book,' Rolf says, self-consciously. 'I have written it.'

During the voyage we soldiers had orders not to fraternise with crew; in the past, there were fights. Now, so close to shore, it feels like that order no longer applies. Opening our packs, we hand over our letters, then indulge in every soldier's favourite social activity: barter. We swap our cigarettes for his rum, his fresh potatoes for our dried rations—something he seems particularly pleased about.

Shouldering our kit, we make our way down the steel gang-plank, assaulted by heat, the stink of dead fish, spilt kerosene, wood smoke, the roar of trucks and armoured cars, and the whistles of the military police.

A row of trestles has been deployed on the dry mud above the shore. Above them a series of banners displays group names. I report to one of the sergeants under the signs for Army Group 8.

'Corporal Pedersen reporting with Machine-Gun Unit 1176 assigned to Hagendorf's 772,' I say.

He glares at me, looks down at his clipboard, flips a sheet, then another, and scowls. 'You're late.'

'Sorry, sir. The train was stopped outside the railhead for three days.'

The sergeant grunts, then says, 'I'm not a sir, I'm a bloody sergeant. I work for my living, same as you.'

'Yes, Sergeant.'

'And don't give me bloody excuses.' He scribbles on a pad of pink, blue, white, and yellow multipart forms. Tearing free the pink and blue slips, he flourishes them at me. 'Hagendorf's gone; you're redeployed, Sunshine. Gardiner's pulling out in an hour. If you run, you'll catch him.'

## Day 136

Brigade-Leader Osman Gardiner is tall, slim, dapper, and energetic. The crispness of his uniform makes me feel shabby in my combat fatigues. The rest of my unit stands to attention, uncomfortable under the gaze of his grey eyes.

Gardiner benignly waves a hand. 'At ease.'

Feeling the need to make an impression, I bark, 'Squad. At. Ease,' and give him my best parade-ground salute.

'Walk with me, Pedersen,' Gardiner says, flipping open his cigarette case. 'Smoke?'

'Thank you, sir.'

'You've done well to keep discipline, Corporal.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Gardiner laughs at my formality, and all at once I understand the loyalty towards him we have encountered since joining his brigade.

'I like to meet every new unit, see how they will fit in. Anyone can soldier, but to campaign you need a certain style.' Then he stops walking. 'Seen much action?'

'No, sir. None.'

'You'll be fine, don't worry. And so will your boys and girls.'

'They're a good team, sir.'

'I can see that, Corporal.' Pausing to light our smokes, Gardiner flicks his lighter open and shut, snick, snap, then slips it into his breast pocket with practiced precision. He draws on his cigarette. 'This place,' he says, 'this ridiculous continent, Corporal, the outrageous scale of it! It takes nearly six months for a bullet to travel from the factories to my soldiers' guns. A journey that crosses two continents and an ocean! What are we doing here?'

His intimate tone makes me feel I am a member of his inner circle, but I am unused to being asked my opinion by officers and fall back on propaganda. 'Bringing civilisation, sir.'

Gardiner's grey eyes twinkle. 'That's what they say, but how can we achieve that at the point of a gun?'

I say nothing.

'They're right, of course. It's lies and propaganda, and all propaganda is lies, but this time those grey little bureaucrats in their bleak little offices have fibbed their way to the truth.' Seeing my expression, Gardiner grins and claps his arm round my shoulder. 'Don't worry, Pedersen, there are eight hundred men in my brigade, and sixteen hundred opinions, two for each of us: one drunk and one sober.'

Dusk is falling; early stars gleam above. Smoke from cooking fires drifts up into the savannah air.

'What a waste this place is, Pedersen.' Gardiner's gesture takes in the dusty grassland, the distant jungle, the mountain peaks jutting up beyond the horizon. 'Minerals, water, game, all untapped resources. It's not the people we need to tame, it's the land. We can win any war with our superiority. Superior guns, training, equipment, discipline. Yes, and men and women too. But after the wars are won, that's the real battle, taming the land.' He takes a final pull on his cigarette and grinds the stub under the toe of his immaculate boot. 'That's the fight we have to win, Pedersen, or else we'll sink into this infinite landscape and disappear.'

## Day 151

We are moving through dense, humid jungle. The bamboo forests proved no obstacle to Gardiner's heavy armour and self-propelled guns, but the jungle beyond, with its enormous teak, swamp cypress, and ironwood, hanging lianas, and strangle-vines, is a real problem. We are reduced to less than five miles a day. The trail is churned to deep mud and we are part of the unit sent back to the bamboo forest to fetch bamboo and saplings to lay what the sappers call a corduroy road.

Yesterday we lost two trucks to breakdown, a third irretrievably stuck in metre-deep mud. Today we were forced to cannibalise another to repair one of the armoured cars. Orders

now are that supply trucks carry supplies only, to save weight and fuel. Soldiers walk.

Desertions have dropped to zero. The first few nights after we left Uganyika, one or two men or women disappeared, despite perimeter patrols. Then a platoon absconded with a supply truck. Gardiner immediately began a seventy-two-hour run, pausing only to refuel. After a six-hour break, we set off again for another three days. Now, deep in the steaming, emerald gloom of the jungle, assailed by heat, sweat bees, the cries of howler monkeys by day, frogs and cicadas all night, we are reluctant to stray from the armoured column. There is nowhere else to go.

## Day 162

Free of the jungle at last, we break out onto high savannah and wait while the scouts locate the supply drop from the cargo airship. We spend the time cleaning our guns. You can roll the MG240 in sand and it will fire, but the Banlite, though a decisive weapon, is more delicate.

All supplies are low: food, fuel, spares. After nearly three weeks in the jungle, our uniforms have begun to rot, but nobody is ill from anything worse than what Mitchell calls Montezuma's Revenge. Gardiner's order that anyone with malaria will simply be left behind has ensured we all take our quinine.

## Day 182

Today we passed across a great boneyard, the human wreckage of an infantry action fought many months ago. Lodged among the broken skeletons in the long grass are bullet-riddled skin shields, leaf-bladed assegais, and knobkerries with human teeth impacted into their ironwood heads.

Rolf and Suzi show me the buttons from some scraps of uniform they have found. The insignia are not from a unit we recognise, the badly-rusted rifles unfamiliar models.

102

That night, some hyenas slink into the column, eyes flaring in the firelight. We scare the ugly beasts off with a few shots over their heads, but their weird, gibbering laughter haunts us through the night.

'Are you awake?' I hear Rolf whisper.

'It's those animals.'

'I've been calculating. That battle we saw today, it was fought before our front passed here.'

## Day 183

We have been travelling for exactly six months. Elsa and Suzi want to celebrate. I am not sure why, but agree. In order to conserve supplies, we have taken to hunting for bush meat. This slows the column down but means we can go further between supply drops. The solar airships take over a week to reach us from the Uganyika depot. The dockyards are an ancient memory, the preceding train ride the relic of a fading dream.

As the afternoon heat ebbs, Mitchell and Kosygyn trot out into the grasslands, bare-chested, rifles in hand. Two miles away a huge herd of eland, kudu, and Thomson's gazelle grazes.

In the evening they return, dried blood caking their arms to the elbows, each with a gutted gazelle carcass across their shoulders.

Kosygyn grins at Elsa. 'We saw lions. We ran.'

We roast the gazelles, trading meat with the surrounding units for root vegetables and lungfish dug from the mud of drying pools.

I notice Mitchell has removed the horn tips. He and Kosygyn wear them round their necks, but later I see Kosygyn has given his to Elsa.

## Day 190

The scouts have failed to locate the latest supply drop and our tankers are near empty. At least we have risen out of the heat of the plains, up into a broad range of high, grassy hills. Gardiner halts the column in a wide, sheltered valley while the scouts fan out in all directions. After two days waiting, with rumours that the fuel cache never arrived, Gardiner orders the artillery balloon broken out. I am surprised he waited so long, but everyone has been changing in our interminable journey towards the front line. The immense landscapes have altered our internal perspectives, making them longer, slower.

High overhead, giant silver and grey airships slide through the sky, laden with cargo and fuel for supply dumps far ahead. We

watch them helplessly; these lords of the upper skies have orders not to respond to ground communications. Enemy forces may have been obliterated here, but reactionary guerrilla groups could still be operating.

Rolf and I are ordered into the balloon; Mitchell operates the winch. As we rise, the gas burner roaring above us, the landscape spreads out below us. Blue-grey jungle fades to the horizon, the gigantic expanse of Lake Uganyika hidden by sheer distance. Spread across the green and gold savannah, several large herds are moving north, where silver-grey curtains of rain drape the air between the ground and lightning-lit storm clouds. Between us and the storms, a rising trail of dust shows one of the light scout cars heading back towards us. Ahead, beyond the grassy hills, is another plain, green and lush, cut by a vast river, beyond which lies a range of snow-capped mountains.

'Another big storm,' Rolf says, pointing towards the base of the mountain range.

Dark clouds, split by sullen red flashes, cling to the base of the mountains along a wide front. As we watch the silent, flickering light, a small yellow-and-green bird appears on the rim of the basket, chirrup once, then hops back out into the sky.

'That's not a storm,' I say. 'That's the front line.'

## Day 191

The scouts have located the supply airship. The blackened, collapsed airframe reminds me more of a giant ruined greenhouse than something that once flew. Melted aluminium forms cold, gleaming puddles where the crew nacelles were. Stacks of heat-warped silicon-gallium solar panels lie inside the ruined skeleton.

There is no clear evidence of what happened. The airframe sits in a huge oval of burnt grass and scrub. The engines, fallen from their mounts, lie on the ground, propellers folded back against the cowlings.

'Sabotage, do you think?' Gardiner asks me.

'Or a simple accident, sir. The fire was so hot it melted part of the airframe. There's no sign of supplies or crew.'

'Fifth columnists?' A muscle ticks in the corner of the brigadier's eye.

I find his theories hard to believe. I am sure it was an accident.

'Go, go.' Gardiner waves me away, shielding his eyes with his hand. He looks exhausted.

Late in the afternoon, Mitchell and Kosygyn try their hand at foraging again, jogging shirtless into the bush with homemade bows they claim will save rifle ammunition. The rest of us are convinced we will all go hungry.

Half an hour later, a scout car races at right angles away from the column. Shots ring out. For a moment we freeze, then I order the MG240 deployed. Rolf and Elsa sprint towards the rear of the truck, where Suzi is already dropping the tailgate.

As I scramble onto the bonnet with my field glasses, there is a flat boom from one of the self-propelled guns. The shell lands near the scout car, which flips over and begins to burn.

Rumours fly, and I wonder if Gardiner was right after all. Then the truth emerges: Another platoon had shot a dozen eland. The scout car was hurrying to bring them back before hyenas and lions caught the scent. The two men in the car are dead, our first casualties.

Later, Mitchell and Kosygyn return with a pair of armadillos and a new type of dwarf kudu, with four long, spiralling horns. We roast the armadillos in their shells and they are delicious.

## Day 197

A week after finding the wrecked airship, having abandoned the trucks, siphoning out the fuel and loading the tanks, self-propelled artillery, and armoured cars with all the ammunition and supplies they can carry, Gardiner brings the remnant of our column to the river bridgehead.

The crossing is a chaos of dust, confusion, and queues. Armour and infantry are piling up, with more pouring in each day. At least supplies are plentiful, with airship flotillas arriving continuously; several of the great machines float tethered to pylons engineers have erected a mile back from the riverbank. At night, the northern horizon flickers silently, clouds lit by ghostlight from the distant artillery barrages.

Finally, refuelled and equipped with new trucks, it is our turn. The marshals wave us forward onto the pontoon bridge, which has been in continuous use for weeks. Hawesers are strained, tether bolts and clamping plates fatigued, the whole structure bowed



downstream by the current. For haste, trucks are going across two abreast. There is barely room, and we are exhausted; in the dark, two of them lock fenders, and Kosygyn is nearly killed, climbing down into the gap between them with a crowbar. The pontoon shifts in the current, the trucks bang together, rock apart. Crushed, Kosygyn falls soundlessly between them.

We pull him up, white-faced, wheezing in pain. We bind his ribs, but he refuses morphine, whispering that if he is awake the pain will keep him alive. Then he coughs violently, retches up a gob of black blood, and passes out.

## Day 200

We can hear the guns. It is dark, and we huddle, shivering in our sleeping bags, listening to the nightly barrage. North of the river, the plain is dry and rocky. Good tank ground, but temperatures have been falling every night.

Kosygyn is little improved, in constant pain, exhausted and unable to sleep. We are going forward; there can be no evacuation. The wounded must come with us as we race to reinforce the front line. Earlier today, I persuaded him to take a shot of morphine, and he managed a few hours' fitful rest. Now he's awake, sitting up and drinking some soup.

'You're better for the sleep,' Elsa says. She's been nursing him with dedication, feeding and even cleaning him.

Kosygyn smiles at her. 'I can't even wipe my own arse,' he tells me. 'She should get a medal.'

Elsa squeezes his hand. 'You'll be better soon.'

## Day 201

I think I have gone deaf. We were deployed on the flanks of one of the artillery units, a dozen ten-inch guns, and they have been firing all night. Their crews have ear defenders, but we were simply advised to keep our mouths open. Gardiner is a mile behind the lines in the command tent with three generals. We have been told nothing.

It is freezing cold. Our clothing is completely inadequate; I am wearing three pairs of socks, two undershirts, two pairs of trousers, my field shirt, and my combat jacket, and am still cold.

Mitchell crouches behind the MG240, hands wrapped in rags, Elsa beside him ready to feed the band, Suzi the spotter.

'Come on, you buggers,' Mitchell grumbles. 'Show us some action.'

There is a lull. One of the gun crew calls us over for cocoa, brewed up in an old jerry can over a kerosene fire. It is thick and sweet, tainted by fuel fumes and hot, hot, hot. We take it in turns to come over and gulp it down, scorching our mouths trying to drink it as hot as possible, wrapping our fingers round the enamelled-metal mugs, steam streaming from our mouths.

Far off to the right, an enemy salvo straddles the line, then shells scream over our heads, impacting a quarter mile behind us.

'Incoming!' I hear Mitchell cry over by the guns. He opens up with the MG240, laying down a standard thousand-yard suppression pattern, each brief silence in the rapid barking of the gun filled by the tinkle of empty cases onto the ground.

'They've found our range!' the gun captain cries. 'Return fire.'

I grab his sleeve. 'Who are they? Where are they from?' He stares at me, wild-eyed, pointing at the mountains. The barrage opens up and I cannot hear his reply.

## Day 250

Another night attack. In the morning we see frozen corpses with blackened hands like claws. Suzi and Rolf slip out of our warm, deep dugout to scavenge for heavy boots, woollens, and fleece jackets. The enemy's clothing is better than ours, warmer and waterproofed.

Today is a special day for two reasons. First, we have hot food for the first time in a week, a hash of ham, peas, potatoes, and lentils. Second, it has started to snow.

'This is good!' Kosygyn says through a mouth full of food, eyes bright in his gaunt face. Recovered from nine broken ribs and a punctured lung, he seems to have discovered the ability to be positive about everything.

'It's crap, but it's hot,' Elsa says.

Kosygyn laughs and rubs her bristled scalp. We have all taken to shaving our heads, even the women. It's that or lice.

Then new orders are posted. Holding the line has allowed us to stockpile materiel. Tomorrow at 0430, a general assault into the mountains will begin along the entire front.

## Day 272

The mountains are a curtain wall concealing a high land of frozen lakes and snowbound forests of fir, pine, larch, and birch. The enemy retreats in disarray as we drive four armoured columns through mountain passes into this new territory.

Gardiner, ebullient, his arm in a sling, calls us together and gives a speech from the top of his armoured half-track.

'The foe is gone, the mountain his last redoubt. The war is not won, but today the field is ours. This empty land is a treasure trove. Wood, fur, minerals. Tungsten, cobalt. At the moment it is cold and hard. So are we. We can live here. Caribou, musk ox, fish in the lakes. Airships cannot cross the mountains, so we are establishing a forward aerodrome south of the range. The sappers will build roads, corduroy at first, then metalled.'

'So we can go home, then?' Kosygyn asks, back in our bunker. The stove is hot and we are in our shirtsleeves.

'Fuck that, I fancy some hunting and fishing,' Mitchell says.

'I'd like a hot bath,' Elsa says.

'You need one. I've been meaning to say.'

'Pig.'

'Smelly cow.'

Elsa jumps Mitchell, pushing him onto his bunk. Mitchell is big, strong, but Elsa, tall and muscular, pins his shoulders, and he has to exert himself.

'Stop it, for God's sake,' Rolf says. 'Save it for the nighttime, when we don't have to watch.'

## Day 281

Rolf is dead, Suzi and Mitchell badly wounded.

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The attack came out of nowhere, smashing our line, overwhelming the artillery, driving deep into our centre before we could rally.

In the shocked aftermath, Elsa, Kosygyn, and I huddle under some blankets behind the MG240. They are all we were able to

salvage from our bunker. The Banlite sits a few yards away on the rim of a shell hole. Rolf and Mitchell managed a single shot, then their position was shelled heavily.

Snow is falling again, settling on the pines, covering our blankets. We have not eaten or slept for over thirty hours.

'We're done here,' Kosygyn says. 'There's no fucking line to hold.'

It's hard not to agree. Two-thirds of the armour is gone, along with all the artillery and God knows how many casualties. Many officers have been lost, including Gardiner, killed leading an abortive counterattack. Suzi and Mitchell are in a field hospital back in the woods, but there is no medicine, and most of the doctors are dead.

'I want them to come back,' Elsa says. She does not seem to be tired at all. Under the blankets, her uniform is saturated with Mitchell's blood. She grips the stock of the MG240 and peers deep into the snow flurries between the black pine trunks. 'I want those fuckers to come back.'

## Day 286

We are advancing. Incredibly, we have been reinforced, re-equipped, and resupplied within less than a week. Suzi rejoins us, cheerful but wincing as stitches pull on the shrapnel wounds in her legs and stomach, her face still bandaged from flash burns.

As soon as the orderly leaves, Suzi strips off the bandages. Her face is bright pink, shiny, soft with new skin. She has one eyebrow. She gives Elsa a hug. Mitchell lost both legs, one above the knee, one below. He is going home.

The four of us can still man the guns but lack rifle defence, so we are reassigned again, this time to support an infantry unit, freshly arrived, all with snow camouflage, skis, and winter equipment. We scrounge fresh clothing and join the briefing late.

The officer, broad-shouldered, lean, with windburnt skin, glances at us and carries on talking. 'We have no idea who they are. Intelligence now believes they didn't know we were here either. Our forward units were on their flank; they hit us and kept on going. Ships in the night, ladies and gentlemen.'

Suzi and I exchange glances.

'This is the plan: At 0500 hours we move due north, push straight across their line of advance, then turn east and cut their supply route.'

We all stare at him.

'We've got the materiel, we've got the manpower. Let's do it.'

'Here we go, bringing civilisation again,' Suzi mutters.

## Day 327

We are laying siege to a convoy from out of the west. It is the third one we have destroyed in as many weeks. Felled trees block the trail; explosives and antitank rockets chop the column up into isolated pockets. The Banlites are in their element, firing with their characteristic flat slap-crack sound from prepared positions, dominating a mile of the broad, snow-covered trail.

This is a different army than the one that so casually battered us over a month ago. The troops are tall, sallow-skinned, with dark, oriental eyes. Under their winter camo they wear midnight-blue silk underclothing, padded and quilted. It is light, warm, and breathable. Suzi says this is aspirational clothing, and soon we all have some.

Life has become comfortable. Light patrols rove a hundred square miles of boreal forest, locating the slow-moving columns. Then we move ahead of them, travelling fast on skis, pulling home-made toboggans. Like most of the other men, Kosygin and I have grown full beards. It is now too cold for lice.

Sometimes Kosygin and Elsa go hunting. Mainly we live off what we capture: food, clothing, medical supplies, and weapons. The infantry major, Lenzl-Wington, has a free brief, able to conduct operations in any way and for as long as he sees fit. We are dozens of miles behind what we think of as enemy lines, far to the north of the mountains, though in truth the war here is an east-west one, fought between two armies we never knew existed until we blundered into them. Now we feast on them.

Lenzl-Wington is charismatic like Gardiner, but has no ideology. 'War is hell,' he told me once, 'but the Gods help me, I love it.'

His reference to the old Gods made me see him in a new light: a modern-day warrior, a barbarian king leading his men to glorious death, or victory and riches. He takes care of us. The dead are retrieved from battles, burnt on great pyres deep in the gloomy

pine heartlands while we toast them with raw spirits. We have not one base, but several; the largest even have saunas. Nothing is better than that dark, sweat-slick heat after three or four sleepless days of slush, snow, and hunger.

## Day 328

Yesterday we reduced all but two of the defensive pockets formed by the broken convoy. Last night the remaining troops tried to break out, bravely charging from their cordon of burnt trucks and immobilised armour, throwing their grenades and firing small arms as they came.

Now they lie where they fell. It is snowing again, the only sound the creak of our boots on the snow. The world is colourless, grey trunks fading into the gloom all around, smoke drifting low and flat across the trail. The blood of the fallen is freeze-dried, turning the snow solid, hanging in black icicles from the corpses draped half-out of vehicles and across crude barricades.

'Over here,' Elsa says. She's standing beside a group of four well-dressed corpses sprawled on the icy ridges of the churned trail.

One is a high-ranking middle-aged officer, medals and ribbons on his chest, an empty pistol still gripped in his mottled hand. Suzi searches him for papers. His clothes are rigid with frozen blood, the fibres splitting as she breaks open his pockets.

The other three are young women, secretaries from his administrative corps, their long, glossy dark hair pinned in smart regulation buns. Under expensive, fur-lined white leather coats they are wearing dress uniform: knee-length skirts, white blouses, and tight, double-breasted tailored jackets with brass buttons and braid lapels. I imagine them trying to run through the snow under fire, bullets buzzing around and through them as they bravely lift their heavy, unfamiliar rifles, working the cold bolts with manicured hands.

All the girls are barefoot. Their low-heeled footwear, better suited to city life, forms a trail behind them in the snow, one shoe here, another there, one pair oddly, neatly, side by side.

'This one's carelessly lost her foot too,' Elsa says, pulling the white coat off the corpse.

Hand on hip, Kosygyn minces across the snow. 'Imagine trying to run in those shoes.'

We all fall about.

## Day 365

Everyone is laughing again, but not at Kosygyn's antics. Two days ago the seam of my boot split while I was out on patrol. Snow got in, melted, and refroze. By the time I got back I could not feel my toes.

Elsa and Kosygyn helped me, soaking my foot in iced water, massaging it, rubbing my calf, old peasant remedies to get the blood flowing. Frostbite is a court-martial offence, losing a foot or a thumb too easy a way home, too cheap a price to pay. The agony of returning circulation, like splinters of glass under my skin, was a kind of relief, and by yesterday morning I was limping up and down in the medical tent in front of the surgeons.

In the afternoon they amputated two of my toes.

Today I'm back on duty, light guard work for three days, then out on patrol.

'Two toes isn't much,' Kosygyn says. 'You'll still be able to do the bossa nova.'

And he's right. It could be worse. Some people have lost all the toes on both feet, fingers, ears, even noses.

'Now this,' Kosygyn says, holding up his middle finger, which is missing the top joint, 'this is a tragedy, for I can never play the violin again.' It is one of his old jokes; we all know he lost his fingertip in a childhood accident.

'Worse if you're a lonely woman,' Elsa says.

Something hard hits me in the chest: a boot, thick-soled, calf-height, in good condition.

'Catch,' Suzi says, throwing the other boot at my head.

## Days 385-405

Now we do have cause to celebrate. We are being sent back behind the mountains for leave. All of us, for fourteen days.

We are issued assault rifles and sidearms, and leave the MG240 and Banlite behind to escort a column of walking wounded and stretcher-bearers back to one of the corduroy roads, now two lanes wide. The trees have been clear-felled for a hundred metres each side of the road.

We ride back through the forest and across the mountains in a troop truck with a dozen other soldiers. It is a strange, silent journey, interspersed with muttered swearing and outbursts of temper. None of us have any interest in the other troops, nor they in us. Get to know them, they are killed, and what then? I realise I am being closed-minded, but I already have a group of people I depend on.

The airship flight evokes other feelings. We ride in a new model, larger and faster, capable of lofting huge payloads. Watching the endless landscape slide below us, we become excited and gabble to each other, pointing out features we trekked across in Gardiner's column months ago.

The next day, far below, we see an enormous armoured convoy winding across the grasslands, hundreds of vehicles—self-propelled artillery, tanks, fuel tankers, trucks—and at least five thousand infantry. After ten minutes it has dwindled to a speck, then to nothing.

The drone of the airship's engines is all-pervasive. At night, the sky blazes with stars, the veldt below grey in the moonlight. It feels as if we are not moving.

The depot at Uganyika has grown vastly; it is no longer simply a marshalling yard. Shops, cinemas, and theatres have been built, along with the more usual tonics for soldiers: taverns and brothels.

I find myself doing what is expected of me. I go out with Kosygyn, Elsa, and Suzi and we all drink heavily, get into fights, run from the military police, and spend our back pay in the usual unimaginative ways.

Along the shore are huge stacks of lumber—mahogany, teak, ironwood—bleached by the sun, now drenched by the near-continuous rain. Great fungal bracts grow out of the log ends; some are white, others an unsettling orange, and a third type looks like wet, rancid meat, the livid red of a flayed wound. Further along are heaps of ivory, mangy, listless caged lions, and crate upon crate of food: melons, bananas, guavas, all neatly packed and labelled, all slowly rotting in the monsoon heat.

After four days of rain, I buy two bottles of vodka and take them to my room. I stop shaving, stop eating, and drink the vodka in a solitary forty-eight-hour bender.

Suzi kicks in my door when I'm in the bath. I've fallen asleep, the water tepid, my fingers wrinkled.



'What the fuck do you think you're doing?' Suzi says, pulling out the plug.

'Counting my toes,' I say. 'I keep coming up short.'

Two days later, I wake up in a cell with Kosygyn. I have no idea what we have been doing.

Elsa bails us out, and we go to fetch Suzi from the women's cells. She has a black eye and two broken fingers. We also all have matching tattoos on our left biceps, an MG240 wreathed in rose briars.

Back in Kosygyn's room, we start drinking again. Elsa produces a letter and reads it out to us. It is from Mitchell. He writes how he is doing well, working as a shoemaker in the motherland, making soldiers' boots.

'I can't imagine it,' I say.

'Me neither,' Elsa says, refolding the letter.

We pass the bottle round. As I drink, I realise it's not just an inability to imagine Mitchell in his new life. I can no longer easily visualise civilian existence at all: the city I was born in, my street, my father's face. The few images I can recall are like postcards someone else has sent me. When I shut my eyes, what I see is snow, black trees, grey-on-grey armour. Snow creaks under my boots, the rutted ground is frozen, stars glitter in the freezing air. Beside me the barrel of the MG240 is cooling, the metal contracting, tick-tick-tick, the smell of hot machine oil in my nostrils. It is a weapon perfectly suited to winter warfare, the low air temperature meaning the barrel seldom needs changing despite its enormous rate of fire. But the belt is empty. Looking round, I realise I am alone. Something is covering my face. I jerk upright.

When I open my eyes, it is dark. Elsa and Kosygyn are under the blankets of his bed, asleep, bare arms and feet protruding. Suzi sits against the far wall. Seeing me wake, she crawls over, a three-quarters-empty bottle in her hand, and hits me in the chest with it, her eyes accusing. I take a drink; the neat spirit, near tasteless, falls burning into my empty stomach. She's been crying. Suddenly I feel like it too and we crawl into each other's arms.

'I want to go home,' Suzi says.

'We will. Tomorrow,' I say.

Our return journey to the front is a happy one.

We are reassigned again.

While we were away, Lenzi-Wington was killed. Blown up by a tripwire mine while storming another convoy. His replacement is a youthful, round-faced brigadier called Belhaven. I immediately take a liking to him, both amused by the round frames of his spectacles, floppy blond hair, and overlong trench coat and impressed by the Vermillion Thistle on his breast.

Noticing my gaze, he laughs, his hand rising self-consciously to cover the medal. 'Orders are to wear decorations to inspire the troops. Many soldiers deserve medals; few get them. I was lucky.' He grimaces. 'Perhaps unlucky.'

'I am sure the men and women understand that, sir.'

'Thank you, er....'

'Corporal Pedersen, sir. Machine-Gun Unit 1176.'

Belhaven glances down at his papers and frowns. 'It says Sergeant Pedersen here. Congratulations. I suppose this means you are owed some more back pay.'

'Yes, sir, thank you, sir.'

'I'm sure you deserve it, Sergeant.'

There have been other changes too. Veterans are now dressed in a ragtag mix of uniforms, captured clothing, and animal furs. Most of the infantry have discarded their standard-issue assault rifles for the enemy version. Although it is only a semiauto, it is more accurate, and uses grease that does not freeze overnight.

Back with my crew, I give them our new orders, and find that we have been reinforced to full strength by a man and a woman, both very young, both hungry-looking. The man, Euan Uffman, is a redhead, tall and gangly. The woman is big-boned but lacking meat. When she salutes, I notice the fingers on her broad hands are square, the nails chewed.

'Private Mina Kernow,' she says.

'Where have you been, Kernow?' I ask.

'Sir?'

'Experience. Where have you fought?'

Behind them, Suzi and Elsa roll their eyes upwards. Stuffing his hands in his pockets, Kosygyn kicks at the snow. I realise they have already had this conversation.

I read out our orders: embarkation at 1600 for an overnight convoy to Forward Oil Well Seventeen, where we will form part of the defensive perimeter.

'This is a vital role,' I explain, repeating Belhaven's briefing. 'The oil wells are a crucial part of the effort to reduce dependency on supply while we build up reserves for the spring push.'

As we prepare to embark, Kosygyn and Elsa come up to me. I assume they are going to bitch about the new recruits, and to be honest I am less than happy with them myself. They are liabilities. But I am wrong; they are upset about our orders.

'Defence?' Kosygyn says.

'What the fuck is that about?' Elsa says.

## Day 447

The days of luxury with evenings spent in the saunas are long gone. I am sure Kernow and Uffman think we are mocking them with our tales, but despite their inexperience they are careful and quick soldiers, and we tolerate them.

'They make me think of Rolf and Mitchell,' Suzi mutters, peering along the sights of our new MG241.

Forward Oil Well Seventeen consists of two fifteen-tonne rocker pumps, a flare tower, four empty oil-storage units for use when the pipeline is down, a pumping house, a reinforced-concrete barracks with basement armoury, six engineers, and one hundred and twenty infantry. We have six MG241s, two Banlites, and anti-tank rockets in the armoury. Although most of the defences form an arc facing north, we maintain a full perimeter. The one luxury is that the gas flare has been rerouted to provide heating.

Four shell craters form a line about two hundred metres from the barracks. I order one covered with felled trees, lined and floored with logs.

Uffman is upset when he realises we will not be sleeping in the warm barracks. 'The barracks are safe. The walls are one point eight metres of ferroconcrete.'

'I don't care about what can't get in,' I say. 'I don't want to be somewhere we can't get out.'

Kosygyn walks Uffman and Kernow round the barracks, pointing out how six hostiles with light weapons could pin down the entire garrison. Two of the engineers tag behind, then talk to

Belhaven. Soon there are several other units copying our design for an insulated, concealed outpost.

'This is an excellent idea,' Belhaven says when he comes to inspect our prototype.

'It's self-interest, really,' I say.

'I agree, what's good for you is good for us all. Speaking of which, I want you to conduct a review of our defences.'

I am shocked; Belhaven has given me an order better suited to an officer. He is smiling.

'Jump to it, Lieutenant.'

I stare at him open-mouthed, then salute. 'Yes, sir.'

'It's field status only. Later on, we'll see.'

'Sir, I'll need my squad. They'll need some authority.'

'Your discretion, Lieutenant.'

I call the others together, tell them our brief, then copy Belhaven's manner. 'We have twelve hours to make a report. Sergeant Laumberg, Private Uffman, you will accompany me. Private Kernow, you will assist Corporals Montana and Kosygyn.'

It's all I can do not to laugh at their astonished faces, so I salute and walk away. Behind me I hear hurried words, then a pair of footsteps running after me. Suzi touches my shoulder. 'Look,' she says, pointing across the snowy ground to where my two new corporals are marching towards a group of soldiers idling beside a Banlite. Kosygyn is shouting at them, gesticulating.

'You've made them proud,' she says.

## Day 449

The temperature has been falling all day. Freezing fog riming every surface, reducing visibility to less than twenty metres. It's not until 1500 that a low, watery sun breaks through the mist and clouds, and by then the temperature is dropping again.

Uffman and I are one of the eight two-person patrols I have sent out around the perimeter. We are standing behind a birch tree when Uffman says, 'Did you hear that?'

'Be quiet.'

It feels like we are in a bowl, the chill fog forming a wall around us. Each direction is the same as any other, but we have taken care to learn the terrain well.

Soon I hear it, a distant crunch of breaking undergrowth. Then, under that, a low rumble.

Uffman looks at me, still listening intently. He opens his mouth, frost caking the ginger stubble of moustache and beard. I hold up a finger and he shuts it.

There it is! A coughing growl, far ahead, but closing, the sound coming clear through the dense mists, an engine revving as the driver changes gear.

'Armour,' I whisper. 'They've been waiting for the weather.'

Uffman grabs my shoulder, pulling me to the left. I see it: a ponderous bulk in the failing light, heavy and primeval.

I turn on my field radio, switch to transmit, click send three times, then three more, and turn it off.

We slip back towards our lines.

## Day 451

The enemy commit the same tactical mistake again and again. This is the only reason we are alive. Each time they attack, their armour pushes forward, then mills aimlessly in front of us as it waits for the infantry to advance.

Meanwhile we attack with the Banlites and armour-piercing rockets. The tanks take losses and fall back, exposing their infantry, which we destroy with the MG241s.

The attacks have been coming ever since Uffman and I returned. Moments after, the first white-painted tanks crawled into view, machine guns chattering, main armaments depressed to fire down into our foxholes and entrenchments.

Kosygyn and Uffman man a Banlite; Suzi is on the MG241 with Elsa as feeder. Armed with assault rifles, Kernow and I are the spotters and defence. Back to full strength, we are an effective unit. Kosygyn soon has a tank brewing up. Hatches clang open, the crew bail out, and we kill them as they run. Kernow is an excellent shot.

The next attack is the same, and the next. Our casualties are trivial, one killed, eleven wounded, none serious.

Belhaven and I tour the perimeter during a lull.

'At this rate we can hold out indefinitely. The armoury is fully stocked; we have over one thousand armour-piercing shells, nearly a million rounds of MG241, and grenades and spare barrels.'

'When can we expect relief?' I ask.

'It's too soon to say. The whole front is being probed in strength.'

I would like to lay out mines, but they are one thing we don't have. I assign squads to set out tripwire grenades, others to restuff machine-gun belts and set up ammunition and grenade caches around the perimeter.

I hear shouts, small-arms fire, then a flat bang and a whooshing noise. A giant hand grabs me and tosses me through the trees.

## Day 451 + X

'He's awake.'

I hear Kernow's voice, then fully come to. It is dark; I'm hot; I can't move.

A candle flickers, gutters briefly, then throws yellow light across a low space. I'm in one of the shell-hole dugouts, strapped into a stretcher on the floor beside a small stove. Everyone in my unit is there, crouching round me, dirty, hollow-cheeked, eyes wolf-yellow in the candlelit shadows.

My head aches abominably; my tongue is thick as a sock. 'Water,' I croak, and Elsa takes down a tin can full of melted snow from the stove.

'How do you feel?' she says.

The water is tepid, stale, and blissful. 'What happened?'

During the last attack, an enemy sabotage unit crept close and lay low. While we were rearming, they fired a rifle grenade through the barracks door, exploding a case of shells a soldier was carrying through the room, which then detonated the armoury. Forty dead, including all the engineers, and eighteen wounded.

Belhaven took over my squad, organised the care of the wounded, split the defences into two strongholds around the Banlites, and, under half-strength, threw back the next attack.

My left hip bone is fractured, I have blurred vision and cracked ribs, and I have been unconscious for several days.

Uffman has made me a birchwood crutch. He and Suzi help me out of the dugout into a chill, sunlit morning of blue sky and bitter winds.

The barracks is gone, the roof broken in two, one section flat on the ground, the other leaning against the remaining end wall.

The gap underneath is our hospital. Inside the perimeter are two wrecked tanks, the high-water mark of the assaults that went on while I was unconscious.

Belhaven walks towards me from behind the tanks, too-long coat flapping round his ankles, a smile on his young, round face.

'The more they attack, the more debris we have to shelter behind,' he says cheerfully, and shakes my hand. 'It's good to see you up and about.' Then he turns his head aside and coughs. 'We've retained both Banlites and four MG24Is, but ammunition is short. Twenty rounds apiece for the Banlites, about three thousand for the machine guns. We're only using two at a time.'

Defence is concentrated round the barracks, the burnt-out tanks, and the flanking foxholes—a small enclave less than three hundred metres across.

Belhaven and I look across the snowy landscape. Small clusters of men and women huddle beside equipment; a few others are gathered around a fire. The ground is too hard to dig. Our dead lie in rows at the back of the compound, shrouded by snow. Behind us, amazingly, one of the oil pumps still rocks serenely, indifferent to our struggles, pumping crude oil into an ever-deepening glistening black pool. The other pump lies on its side, beside the crumpled flare tower. Beyond them the empty storage tanks are punctured, lidless, riddled by shellfire.

'It's been quiet so far today,' Belhaven says, coughing again. 'That will mean they'll come late afternoon.'

'How many do we have?' I ask.

'They have flame tanks now.'

'How many?'

'Sixty-one.'

'Sixty-one and a half,' I say, and Belhaven looks away into the distance and quietly laughs.

## A Day Later

Uffman is a hero. After he and Kosygyn knock out a tank with the last shell of the Banlite, Kosygyn orders him back. Just then another tank surges through the smoke of its burning companion, spraying a jet of fire towards the two men. Throwing themselves flat, they watch the tank destroy the Banlite, then swing its barrel towards them, small-arms fire spanging from its heavy front armour.

'Run!' Kosygyn shouts, flinging himself away to the left.

Uffman runs, but towards the tank, which unleashes another gout of flame. Kosygyn, watching in amazement, sees Uffman raise his arm, shielding his face with his coat, and dash through the fire stream and along the side of the tank. Spare tracks and heavy tools are strapped to the tank's rear. Uffman wrenches off a crowbar and levers the tank track free of the wheels. The tank's own momentum spools the track out onto the ground.

Gears whining, engine roaring, the tank slews to a halt.

Standing behind it, Uffman calmly shoots the crew as they emerge.

We cannot believe it, but, during the next attack, he does it again. Only semimobile, I am helping guard the MG241, and see him from there. Kosygyn copies him. We all start to carry crowbars from wrecked tanks. One Banlite is not enough, but now we have another weapon.

There are forty-five of us.

## The Next Day

Belhaven's cough has turned into a dreadful hack. Thinking warm food will do us all good, I order cookfires lit. My mending leg aches abominably, though my double vision is clearing. After several days of clear, cold sun, almost impossibly, it feels a little warmer. I mention it to Kosygyn.

'A little less cold, you mean.'

'No, look here.' There is a series of small icicles hanging from the bare branches of a larch, refrozen meltwater, crystal clear and beginning to melt again. A few drops fall, dimpling the snow below.

'A thaw,' Kosygyn mutters, looking around, then grabs my arm. 'Fuck me, Pedersen, look at that.'

At the base of an old birch trunk, now a shell-struck, splintered ruin a metre above our heads, a few white flowers have pushed up through the snow. Kosygyn brushes the snow away and reveals the tips of green, spear-like leaves just breaking free of the soil.

'They're snowdrops, just like in the woods near home,' Kosygyn says.



I see several more clusters when I tour our defences with Belhaven. He is enchanted, but starts coughing again, and can't stop until Elsa brings him some hot water.

The temperature plummets in the night, a damp cold that pinches at my ears and makes my damaged hip ache more intensely. I lie in my bag shivering, unable to sleep, listening to the others around me breathing. Someone shifts restlessly, shuffles across the floor, wriggles up close to me. It is Suzi.

'I can't sleep. It's too cold,' she says.

'It's the thaw, the wet in the cold.'

'Warm me up.'

We unzip our bags, mine underneath, hers on top. Our thermals, designed to be worn for days and weeks at a time, open at convenient places. Suzi's cheek is like silk; her breath smells of acetone; her flanks are chill and ridged with shrapnel scars. Her mouth is softer than I imagined.

We warm each other up nicely, moving together. Soon her teeth start to rattle. I hold her tight, stroke her head, start to shiver uncontrollably. She squeezes me and I stifle a groan of pain from my ribs. I smack her bottom. We have a fit of giggles.

Lying with Suzi in our sweaty, stained, smelly thermals, hips pressed together, inhaling each other's stale breath, my hand on her buttock, hers wrapped around me, I am suddenly wider awake than I have been for a thousand years. When we kiss again it is with gentleness, and we take each other more like old friends than new lovers. I feel delirious, moving in her, living for the moment, tomorrow forgotten. It's fucking marvellous. We are both fulfilled, first her, then me.

Suzi rides down on me, slides herself free, bites my ear, growling happily. I feel her relax as she exhales.

'Warmer now?' I say, but she is already asleep.

## And the Next

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Uffman dies in the snow, eyes panicky, choking and spitting blood, struggling for breath, two small holes in his back, two bigger ones in front.

Kosygyn crouches behind him, propping him up. 'It's all right, son,' he says, but we know it isn't.

The roar of the withdrawing tanks fades into the distance. In this latest attack Uffman disabled three, Kosygyn, myself, and Elsa one apiece. Only Uffman and Kosygyn had the nerve to take on the flamethrowers head on. A dash into the fire, a roll in the snow, and up again, against the tank, levering the treads free. The rest of us lacked the courage, choosing to lie in wait until the machines rolled past.

Now Euan Uffman is sitting in the snow, red-mouthed, spindly legs kicking, spitting mouthfuls of bright blood as he tries to speak. He looks at us with imploring, desperate eyes, but he can't make the words come.

I lean on my crutch in front of him, Belhaven beside me. It doesn't take long.

Belhaven unpins his Vermillion Thistle and lays it on Uffman's blood-soaked chest. 'You, more than anyone,' he says.

The rest of our brigade has gathered around Uffman's body: twenty-three men, eleven women. The ground churned by the battle is muddy; elsewhere snow is turning to slush, and all around is the constant drip, drip of water falling from the trees. Both oil pumps are destroyed; the engine room is a wreck, the pipeline a fractured ruin.

'What are we doing?' Kernow shouts. 'Why are we still here?'

## The Last Days of Winter

It's been about a week since we left Forward Oil Well Seventeen. We built sledges and made snowshoes, then loaded up with all the supplies and spare kit we could carry. Before we moved out, we slid our dead into the oil pond. Belhaven fired a flare into the oil and we turned away. Nobody said anything. Unable to walk far, I rode on a sledge. Behind us, the oil burned in thick, roiling clouds cut with orange fire. A black snow began to fall.

The weather is deteriorating, the thaw a false spring. Freezing fog and cold mists wrap us for days on end. Belhaven's cough has turned into a persistent dry bark. He's losing weight. We reach the end of the pine forests, travelling open ground for an hour before we realise we are crossing frozen water. There are old vehicle tracks running southwest, so we know the ice will bear us. At night we camp on the far shore. Elsa and Kosygyn decide to

try for fish, walking out a hundred yards and breaking holes with ice axes. They're back in half an hour.

'No luck?' I ask.

'I'll show you,' Kosygyn says, and I limp out onto the lake beside him.

Away from the shore, the ice is glassy. Kosygyn scrapes snow away with his boot and shines his torch into the ice to show me the frozen corpses, white like candle wax, entombed.

'We tried a few places. It's the same everywhere. Fish is off.'

Overnight the fog lifts. A few of us head out to hunt game. We are tracking a new kind of deer, one with shovel-like antlers, when Suzi presses down hard on my shoulder and I go flat.

Away in the chill gloom, a great shape is moving silently through the firs. Behind it others emerge, their young among them. We huddle in the snow to watch them pass, ivory tusks brushing the ground and hairy trunks swaying, a rich, rank musk reaching us from their woolly flanks and high, domed foreheads.

Excited by the sight, we kiss and tumble for a while. They are heading north. In the morning, we decide, we will hunt them.

## Spring

Kosygyn, Suzi, and I are in a group of ten hunting mammoth across an endless meadow of waving grass. Fat bumblebees yaw and hum through stands of loosestrife and purple and white clover. Overhead, the sky is full of fleecy clouds. We've been away from camp for six days, tracking a small herd we have yet to close with. When we do, we will try to kill one beast without guns. Our weapons are running low on ammunition, and we are learning to rely on bows and spears for hunting.

The weather is improving, the nights are warmer, and Belhaven is getting better. The fat has melted off him, but he no longer coughs. We are all lean to the point of gauntness. Up ahead, the trackers have crested a rise; they turn back, waiting for us to catch up. We hurry on, hoping to see the herd, but it is something stranger, an image from our past.

Stretching to the horizon, the field is littered with the wreckage of a vast conflict. Rusting tanks trailing broken treads, turrets sagging, bodies ripped open, sprawl everywhere, the skeletons of their crews already half-submerged in the quick-growing

grasses, bedstraws, and yellow asphodels. Lizards bask on the turrets while birds flutter around the open hatches, darting in and out of these new nesting sites.

'Smoke,' Kosygyn says, pointing into the middle distance.

One of the other groups wandering the plains has already found the battleground and set up a forge. I decide to go back and tell Belhaven. Kosygyn and Suzi will make contact with the strangers while the others continue the hunt.

## Late Spring

Suzi rouses me before dawn, crawling naked on top of me under the furs we still need to keep us warm, easing herself down onto what she calls my Morning Glory before I am fully awake.

The shrapnel scars on her stomach and legs have faded, but still show white. As with myself and many others, tattoos now adorn her shoulders and calves.

A few minutes pass.

'Come on,' she says, 'time to get up.'

Slinging rifles over our shoulders, we take up our spears and bows before crawling out of our skin tent.

Elsa and Kernow are bringing the fire back to life. Neither of them will be accompanying us today; both are due to give birth in just a few weeks.

'Kosygyn won't know what hits him,' Suzi says, taking my hand.

The rest of us have gathered, over one hundred and sixty men and women of the united tribes, dressed in furs and old camo, painted with ochre and cochineal, our long hair decorated with feathers and small bones. Our weapons are equally varied. Kosygyn carries one of the shotguns and a bow, Belhaven an assault rifle and three throwing spears. Some have heavy knives forged from the leaf springs of trucks. Others wield axes, rifles, handguns, even a few precious grenades—the latter now mainly used for trade and favour, as a kind of currency.

The predawn sky is brightening. Butterflies flutter and glide among dog roses and blackberry along the woodland's edge. Birds are singing, skylarks already on the wing. We form up and trot into the north, heading towards the cornfields on the borders of a strange new civilisation, loping towards the twinkling lights of the pale cities beyond.



Old Train

Jon Radlett

# Categories, Genres, and Labels, Oh My....

Thoughts on Art and Categorization From a Cognitive Linguist

Eve Sweetser

## **1. Facing up to the problems with pigeonholing—in general, as well as in art.**

Literary categories are strange beasts, to put things mildly. It would be quite depressing to seriously consider the number of trees killed, and the quantity of ink chemicals dispersed, in order to publish writings on topics such as "What was really the first novel" or "What Romanticism [or Modernism, or....] really is." The authors of such writings normally seem to proceed by (1) presenting their new and different definition of the category in question (*the Novel, modernism*) and then (2) showing that— Surprise!—with this new definition, there's a new answer to the question of whether some crucial work is modernist, or a Novel.

Explanations of what makes their definition more profitable than others seem to be optional, but, even if they are present, they don't change the basic circularity of this kind of argument. (How can you "disprove" someone else's claim that X is a modernist work when you admit that you're not using the same definition?) But the oddest part of these debates is that they continue as if the participants are sure there is a yes-or-no answer to such categorization questions. They never seem to stop and wonder whether the problem lies in the fact that some entities may not fit the repertoire of standard categories very well.

In general, humans are oddly rigid—and oddly flexible too—about categorization. In some respects, the rigidity makes sense; after all, physical objects like books and CDs can only be on one physical shelf at once. And it's not a great deal of help in finding one to be told that there's a huge "unclassified" shelf area; category labels do help shorten search time. For this kind of purpose, I need to decide whether X is "really" a science-fiction novel or

a mystery, a romance novel or a "legit" historical-fiction novel, if those are the available categories. On the other hand, digital databases can readily search directly by author or title without any intermediary genre information, or access a given work via multiple genres, if desired—as long as humans are flexible enough to tell them to. The problem lies not in our tools, but in ourselves.

I'm neither a fiction writer nor a literary scholar. I'm a linguist, specializing currently in the relationship between language and cognition. My daily bread includes current scholarship on human categorization, which goes a long way toward explaining how categories are formed, how they change, and why people are rigid about them (and sometimes flexible instead).

Before I get into summarizing some of this categorization research, let me add that my professional empathy is entirely with the interstitial-arts movement. Academics can be worse about boxes than nonacademic editors (IMHO, as they say!). I happen to work for the Linguistics Department, the Cognitive Science Program, and the Celtic Studies Program at the University of California-Berkeley. I'm lucky to be at Berkeley, where all these things can actually happen, but you try getting anyone to claim Celtic studies as theirs. And most linguistics departments don't teach courses on metaphor at all (though I do so regularly). To make matters worse, I also work on language-accompanying gesture, which nobody thinks is inside their box. My Celtic work has largely been on early Welsh poetic texts, but at last count, I was the only person on the large Berkeley campus who was bothered by the scheduling conflict between the Medieval Studies Lunch and the Cognitive Science Colloquium talks. As I once said to one of my students, we ought to start the interstitial-science movement.

The views I'll be presenting here are not just mine, but they are controversial in the scholarly community. They belong to a school of scholarship that treats cognition as essentially embodied. That is to say, our body's neural system and dynamic perceptual interface with the world are essential in shaping not just emotion, aesthetics, and other subjective aspects of cognition, but also rationality, logic, mathematics, and the rest of the supposedly objective aspects of cognition. In such a worldview, imagination and reason, or art and everyday life, are not opposing categories, but are deeply interwoven with each other. Metaphor is seen as a major building block of human thought. Yes, this is really different

from most objectivist science. But it is mainstream, even if it's controversial; over the last twenty years, it has become a major school of thought, distributed worldwide, though the Berkeley and San Diego cognitive-science communities remain major centers for such work.

(Note: I will be restricting myself to the subject of categorization, and I will not be giving footnotes and references as I go. But interested readers can find a brief list of potentially interesting works from the embodied-cognition school at the end of this essay, and those works contain thousands of references.)

## **2. Putting the "human" back into our understanding of human categories: It's not just in art that objectivist category theory has been wrong.**

When I say "human categories," I mean categories as they actually exist in the minds of real humans, as opposed to most of what gets talked about in Western philosophy, math, computer science, law, and so on. Scholars across various schools (not just embodied-cognition folks) agree that the human neural system is a categorization system. It has evolved to take in stimuli and group them according to similarities and differences that have proven useful to human animals and their ancestors. If we didn't constantly categorize new stimuli relative to our extant category system, we'd be stuck in the condition of a newborn—most things would be brand-new every time, and we'd have to start over with identifying every new entity we encountered. It's categorization—by which I mean routinized, established, unconscious categorization—that lets us know that a chair is a chair, a floor is a floor, or a book is a book, so that we can get on with life instead of needing to grab (and, probably, lick) every new object to see what it's like.

The same is true of art and literature. If I didn't have genre expectations—and general expectations—based on previously encountered texts, I would not be a sophisticated reader, able to notice intertextuality, enjoy creativity, differentiate expected from unexpected elements, and helpfully fill in background from genre tropes. Caroline Stevermer once told me that male readers of her novel *Sorcery and Cecelia* (cowritten with Patricia Wrede) expressed enjoyment of the book's wit and humor, but puzzlement over the fact that the authors made it so obvious so soon who



was going to marry whom. For female readers, more familiar with the romance genre, the obviousness of Wrede and Stevermer's heroes as matches for the heroines was understood as part of the spoof on that genre. When you see the tall, dark, fascinating-but-arrogant guy, and sparks flying between him and the heroine, the ending should be predictable. If we didn't have entrenched categories, we'd have nothing to play with, nothing to play off of. It would be all starting over again, every time.

So entrenched categories are good. The problem comes when they don't deal well with new input. The human system can—here's the good news—be flexible enough to change when that happens.

Real human categories have fuzzy boundaries, and better and worse members. Most of us who were educated in the New Math days know that set membership is a yes-or-no thing; any entity must be a member of either set A or the complement set not-A. You can't be more or less a member of A; all members are equal. But all the evidence from cognitive psychology, linguistics, and social science in general says that that's not what most human categories are like.

Let's take an example. Is it the case that the world is divided into red objects and nonred objects, and all we have to do is categorize an entity as one or the other? Well, nobody really thinks that maroon is as red as fire-engine red, but everyone thinks maroon is redder than, say, lime green—and even that it's redder than royal purple. When do we stop saying something is red and start saying it's purple? People who know both words can fight about that—recognizing full well that that color range is both reddish and purplish, but also that maroon is not the best possible example of either category. This is a normal, not a weird, situation in human cognitive categorization.

Or how about the category *pet*? Is an ant as good an example of a pet as a cat or dog? People do keep ant farms. But most people would agree that if a motel said, "Pets allowed," they might still not let you bring your ant farm, or your goat, your python, or your chimpanzee; they might even object to your duck or your chicken. They were thinking of dogs, cats, gerbils, and parrots—possibly iguanas at a stretch. Unlike Boolean sets, human categories quite normally have central and less central members. *Art* is a clear example of a fuzzy category. Ballet is art; is folk dancing?

Are ballet classes art? A Faulkner novel is art; is a mystery story art? And so on. *Literature* is another such fuzzy category; I'll return to that later.

Categories can overlap and/or include each other; boundaries don't need to be exclusive. Something can be blue and red at once (in fact, that's what purple is, a combination of visual response in the red and blue neural patterns). This is an area where humans often seem to be particularly persistent in denial, though. If something is a member of one category, people don't like to call it simultaneously a member of another contrasting category. *Shirt* and *jacket*, or *cup* and *bowl*, are examples of cases where one object may sometimes be used as a member of either of two normally contrasting categories. Drawing an immediate parallel with art and literature, it should be obvious that there are plenty of cases where an entity belongs to multiple artistic genres simultaneously.

It's okay to give two labels if the categories are not contrasting; for example, *human* is not in contrast with *mammal* at a single level of categorization, but *mammal* is rather a superordinate category of which *human* is a subclass. So nobody has trouble saying that she's both a human and a mammal, or both a human and a woman. This brings up other questions, though; I wouldn't call myself a mammal, a human, and a woman under exactly the same circumstances. Levels of categorization are important to construal; when I say, "I'm a mammal," you know I'm comparing myself not with (let's say) male humans, but with fish or lizards.

It can also be okay if the categories are simply orthogonal to each other; for example, saying I'm a professor, an amateur painter, and a woman. All of these categorizations may say things about me, but what they say is largely independent, though all are subcategorizations of humanity. Of course, orthogonality of categorization is as culture-dependent as the categories themselves; if women couldn't be professors, then professors would just be a subclass of men, rather than of humans.

Returning to art, and specifically to literature within art, there are, of course, literary categories with serious potential for contrast and conflict; some of them have quite fuzzy boundaries. *Comedy* and *tragedy*, for example; we're sure that the central examples are very different, but clearly there's fuzzy ground in between (and plenty of ink has been spent on that, too—is *Measure*

for *Measure* a comedy or a tragedy?). In the literary and artistic world, as we know, it can even be a problem for a work to fit into two relatively orthogonal categories. There's no obvious problem in a work fulfilling the usual demands of category membership in both *mystery* and *science fiction* simultaneously. Isaac Asimov—who pretty much set out to prove that science fiction is compatible with nearly every other genre—made early sci-fi history with Terran detective Lije Bailey and his robot partner R. Daneel Olivaw, and others have followed. But should a mystery set in an imagined world be marketed as a mystery, or as a science fiction or fantasy novel? You might think the answer would be, simply, "Yes." But of course, the answer in fact depends on questions like whether the author has previously written mysteries, or science fiction; on which genre her editor can market best; and so on.

That is to say, although the literary categories *mystery* and *science fiction*, or *romance* and *fantasy*, may be (for the author) as compatible and noncompeting as the categories *woman* and *teacher*, the corresponding marketing categories, reader-community categories, library categories, and literary-review categories are complementary. Did Lije Bailey and R. Daneel Olivaw mysteries reach those mystery shelves? Not very often, I imagine. And, for better or worse, I haven't seen *Sorcery and Cecelia* on romance shelves, though I admit I don't track those as carefully as the fantasy shelves. It's kind of like a culture that has declared women can't be teachers; there's category complementarity imposed by causes other than the internal category structure itself. And it's not simple; if women can't be teachers, women won't get educated, so there will be no women qualified to be teachers, so it will be correct to say that the teacher-candidate pool is men. If two separate communities with different reading experiences and preferences have been formed for mystery and science fiction, those communities aren't instantly unified by a book that happens to belong to both genres. And yes, in academia, I've been asked whether I wanted a book to reach a linguistics audience or a cognitive-science audience, and when, as an interdisciplinary author, I simply answer, "Yes," it is still not easy to get the right response.

Of course, it's my opinion that we shouldn't give up in these situations; editors and publishers are often too accepting of such boundaries. There's frequently more community overlap than they're willing to admit; mystery readers may be a community

nonidentical to the fantasy/sci-fi-reading community, but they're by no means complementary. The same is true of linguistics and cognitive science.

### **3. Prototypes and membership criteria: Why you can't just list necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in the category *art*.**

Real human categories are formed around prototypes. Boundaries are important to human categorization, but much of the real cognitive action is at the center. Judgments about membership are often based as much on perceived similarity to some idea of what a really good member of the set is like as on careful consideration of precise boundaries. Consider the *pet* example. Cats and dogs are so central to the American experience of pets that, if you want to get your exotic pet into a motel with you, it would be really useful to tell the motel owner something about how it resembles them. ("My iguana is no bigger than a cat, and likes to sleep all day on a hot rock.")

Some prototypes are based on actual individual salient instances of the category; for example, if you were brought up with a pet iguana, iguanas might well be more central to your *pet* category than to some other people's—though you'd probably still be aware that that's not true for everyone. Frequently, prototypes are based on information about a range of clear central instances of the category. For example, your prototype of *car* might include the average size of the central members of the category you've encountered. That might differ significantly depending on whether you're American or European, on what generation you belong to (and therefore when you formed this category), and all kinds of other things.

The prototype of the category *art*, for many Americans, seems centered on painting and sculpture (not pottery, which would rate high in East Asia or in some Native American communities), music (but classical, not folk or pop), and literature (well, the prototypical literature—i.e., poetry and "artistically written" prose fiction). Note that we don't seem to have just one single prototype of *art*—although if we had to pick the most salient one, it might be the painting one. But it's generally true that there are some central examples we all strongly agree on, the center(s) of

the category *art* being a lot easier to get consensus on than the boundaries.

A category doesn't need to have some single invariant set of membership criteria. When you take American college students and ask them (as I often do, in my Cognitive Linguistics class) what the definition of *art* is, they come up with completely nonintersecting sets of criteria. Some of them hold hard to the view that aesthetic value is crucial; some are more interested in whether the impulse of the creator was personal expression; others are viewer-response theorists, and say art happens only if a response is intended (or even only if a response actually happens) in the experiencer. Other relevant criteria include nonfunctionality (Americans see prototypical art as being nonfunctional, "just" aesthetic—so pottery and architecture aren't core examples of art), special skills being needed for the creation or performance (folk dance is considered less artistic than ballet because it's the kind of thing anyone can do), and of course particular traditional media (painting, music, dance, the written or spoken word, and so on) and culturally valued settings (museums, concert halls) that are traditional places for experiencer interaction with art. Linked to the special-skills requirement, uniqueness or rarity—and direct connection to the person with the special skills—is also important; mass-made objects, even if designed by a really good designer, don't count as being art. A handmade original by the same designer might.

We might add things like elite status; museums seem to be more full of painted and woven objects made by elite creators for elite classes than they are of painted and woven objects made by folk for their own everyday use. Some might even add spiritual or cultural value—if not moral value—as a criterion; others would vigorously deny this. And nonprofit status seems to help some, too; the better someone sells, the less pure we seem to feel their artistic motivation is. (Sure, we are happy to know that cellist Yo-Yo Ma is not starving, and we think he's a truly great artist; but even here, it does help that we know he doesn't make the kind of money that the most successful pop-music stars do.) This is probably related to the nonfunctionality criterion mentioned above; art should be done "just" because it's creative, or beautiful, or thought-provoking, or culturally relevant, not because the artist

is being paid or because the experiencer or consumer is getting something useful like a building, a blanket, or teapots and cups.

A categorization theorist would say that none of these definitions is wrong. And in fact, the students usually know that they all agree more on the best examples of the category *art* than on the boundaries of the category, as mentioned above. The Anglo-American prototype of *art*, one might say, has all (or most of) the features the students bring up; where they vary is in the importance they attach to certain of those features, in the absence of others, in establishing category membership at the periphery. Art theorists have been pushing at this category forever in ways that look predictable to a category theorist; *objets trouvés*, especially that famous Duchamp urinal, were put forward precisely to argue for the view that "beauty" and specially skilled creation were not the essence of art; rather, art was making people think and react (in this case, making them think about their definition of *art*). The twentieth century was a period of huge rethinking of this category, both on its own and in relation to other categories like *craft* and *design*.

Categories are not just feature-based; they're strongly interaction-based. Even at what seems like the most basic level of human categorization, categorizing physical objects, human interactional affordances are central to how we divide up the world. Someone who didn't know a beanbag chair is meant to be sat on would not categorize it with chairs. Linguists have found that people's use of labels like *cup* and *bowl* depend partly on shape and size, but also partly on what the dish in question is being used for (does it contain food or drink?). Calling something a *stool* or a *side-table* might depend similarly on whether it is being used for sitting or as a convenient surface for putting objects on. I noted above that this is true of *art* and *literature* as well. Things brought into museums and concert halls become art. Things taught in literature classes become literature. Experiencers, and cultural evaluation, are part of the frames of *art* and *literature*.

And here's another place to bring up the imposed complementarity of genres like romance and fantasy. Each of those genres has not only internal structure but external affordances for a reader/user community. If the communities are separate and socially differentiated (as they clearly are), then those external affordances and uses of the two genres are separate, no matter

how compatible the internal structures of the genre categories may be. This is equally true of physical objects. A bone-china saucer may make a great ashtray or cat-food dish—it has all the right purely physical affordances—but the owner may not want it to be used for those purposes. The same owner might be equally unwilling to use a cat-food dish as a tea saucer, even if it was shaped appropriately and had been safely through the dishwasher.

#### **4. "Essentially contested" concepts and categories—such as *art*—and how category structure affects reasoning about everyday life.**

Art is a classic example of another now-recognized phenomenon in category theory: As is clear from my students' discussions, it's a contested category. It is, in fact, an *essentially* contested category; that is, we live with the knowledge that speakers don't agree about this category in really basic ways.

We should be proud of this in one sense; essentially contested categories never happen in unimportant areas of cognition and culture. Contestation of the label *art* is a tribute to the cultural importance and status of the category. Cultural institutions reflect this; in the days when the U.S.'s National Endowment for the Arts had money to give, presumably you had to be doing something that counted as art to be funded. A piece of functional pottery that counts as "artistic" costs a lot more money (even in America!) than one that does not.

Categories are relative to context, not absolute. Just as the same person may be a liberal in Texas and a conservative in Berkeley—or (in my case) a flaming radical in Texas and a liberal in Berkeley—so a great many categories are constituted differently depending on context. Tell me that someone is a wife or a husband, and I'll want to know what culture that's in, and what their marriage customs are, before I really know what you mean, even though I'll know that *wife* and *husband* probably refer to monogamous, heterosexual\*, legally sanctioned sexual relationships. (Here we have a translation problem; there are

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\* Readers will note that at the time this essay was originally composed, same-sex marriage was not yet legal in the U.S. Another good example of changing cultural categories!

some terms, it seems, in nearly every culture that refer to such legally sanctioned relationships, and they get translated into English as *wife* and *husband*, even if the culture they're being translated from is polygamous, for example.)

Similarly, it's hard to imagine what it really meant to be a Romantic without having lived in the right part of the nineteenth century and rebelled against Rationalism. I recently saw a comic series called *Last Kiss Comics* that is produced by taking 1950s romantic comics (one series was called *First Kiss Comics*) and putting different words in the speech bubbles while preserving the pictures. While I know enough about the 1950s romance frame to enjoy the humor, the genre will obviously never mean quite the same thing to me that it does to someone who lived the 1950s as an adult, as my mother did.

Prototype structure of categories is important in reasoning. Experimental work has found that people reason from knowledge about central (prototypical) members of a category to infer things about more peripheral members, but not the other way round. Here's an example: For most urban Americans, a robin is pretty close to the prototype for the category *bird*. If you ask such people whether an ibis or ostrich is likely to catch a disease from a robin, they rate that as more likely than when you ask them whether a robin will catch a disease from an ibis or ostrich.

Tragically, this kind of reasoning probably played a role in keeping the American public from early response to the dangers of AIDS. If your prototype of *human* is white and heterosexual, then you subconsciously reason that diseases that afflict white heterosexuals could surely spread to gay people and to African or African-American people, but you don't as readily worry about "gay" or "African" diseases spreading to affect the straight white population. (I won't even go into whether inner-city intravenous drug users get counted as full human beings, or the assumed connections between race and drug abuse.) In short, the scarily wrong labeling of AIDS as a "gay" disease or an "African" disease came directly out of general human strategies of category-structure-based reasoning, in combination with some noxious construal of the category *human*.

Reasoning about art has similar problems. It's a normal situation for there to be community-specific genres of plastic arts, performing arts, literature, you name it. Tax money (predictably)



goes to genres supported by the more powerful subcommunities. Strangely, this support is sometimes given in the apparent belief that classical music (for example) is accessible and relevant to everyone, while bluegrass or Cajun music or punk rock belongs to a subgroup. I'm not trashing classical music here; I not only love it, I feel it's undersupported, like arts in general in the U.S. I'm just making some observations. The more we question the canon, the more difficult it is to say what it means to support culturally meaningful artistic endeavor.

## **5. Why this all matters: (Cross)Cultural understanding and meaning, in art and in life.**

We can't stop categorizing; stereotypes are therefore inevitable. My students are always eager to point out that a lot of the conventional category prototypes are "stereotypes." The uncomfortable moment in the classroom comes when I point out that you can't just ditch stereotypes, throwing out all the bad categories and somehow keeping the "good" ones. Just as harmful or unpleasant mutations (and cancer) are natural and inevitable aspects of the balance between flexibility and rigidity in cell reproduction, similarly it is inevitable that the constant, ongoing process of human categorization will result in some harmful categorizations—or old categorizations that were once helpful but are really unproductive in a new context. The best we can do is to make ourselves as aware as possible of our category structures, and notice when they are not working productively for us.

Categories are flexible as well as rigid. The fact that we are not making Boolean sets, but fuzzy-bounded, prototype-centered categories, means that mechanisms for change and variation in category structure are built right into our categorization processes. If you get different input (see different cars in your environment, e.g.) you will have a different prototype—and indeed, as the pool of cars you see changes over time, your prototype changes too. (Don't cars from thirty years ago look funny to you now, although, if you're old enough to remember, they didn't look funny then?) If we run into a newly invented kind of object, the fuzziness of the boundaries of old categories may permit us to debate whether it should be included in one of them.

This, of course, does not mean that humans can't be rigid and unproductive in their use of categories. I began by mentioning some salient cases of rigidity. The basic fact is that we need to categorize everything in order to deal with it. Feeling uncertain about classification, or disagreeing about it, are therefore often uncomfortable situations.

In many cases, there may not be only one "right" categorization in objective terms, but there are much more and less right ones in human terms. Sure, just as there's no single right reading of a work of art, there's not necessarily one right categorization either. But there are wrong ones, ones that don't resonate with any aspects of human experience. We'll never have access to objective criteria for categorization, but we do have common access to human neural structure, which is the same kind of neural structure that created the art we're experiencing and categorizing.

I once discussed this issue with a literature teacher who said she had recently been dealing with an intelligent student who claimed that (since modernism was over and postmodernism at hand) any reading was as valid as any other. The teacher felt that this attitude was getting in his way as a reader; he was facilely making up random readings from his own thoughts and interests, without carefully attending to what readings were more plausibly connected to the text. One day in class, she pointed out the window at the empty sky and said, "Look!! There's a big yellow blimp out there!" He replied dismissively, "No, there's not." She repeated her claim. He got it, and thereafter, he worked harder at his readings and listened better to her criticisms.

Literary readings are a lot less simple to judge than claims about whether or not a large yellow object is in direct view. But humans don't vary randomly and infinitely in their understanding of texts—though they do vary widely, both within and across cultures. And we should expect some shared ground, since humans make texts, and humans read them knowing (despite all theories about the Death of the Author) that they were made by humans. Martians, or Elves (for all I know), might have very different intentional and interpretive capacities.

I don't mean by this to minimize the importance of cultural variability, or even personal taste, as factors in artistic creation and response. I do mean that when two people A and B are taking part in the same cultural frame, it would simply be silly to ignore

the role of that common frame in interpreting what A's art means to B. A and B take it for granted. And on a crosscultural scale, it would be silly to ignore what we know about universals of human perception, interaction, etc. in examining the limits on variability in artistic response—just as silly as ignoring the role of cultural difference in bringing about variation in response.

How else does awareness of category structuring affect how we think about and respond to art? Well, I personally see artistic genres as fuzzy-edged, prototype-structured, and often-contested categories: in short, classic examples of human categorization. Knowing that's the case helps keep me from getting into those circular discussions about what really counts as a novel; that's at least some benefit. It also helps me to understand that even the folks involved in those discussions are—in their way—exploring problematic boundaries, even if I think they're wrong that a good solution has to necessarily find a single boundary.

Awareness of this situation also helps one comment on it, manipulate it, and explore it at the meta-level. Consider a piano composition consisting of opening the piano and sitting at it for a measured number of minutes without playing it (an actual, and highly controversial, John Cage piece). This composition may or may not be music; that depends on whose category of *music* we consult. Further—like the Duchamp urinal—it may or may not be art, depending again on whose category of *art* we consult; it might rate high in the opinion of those for whom art's most central characteristic is making people think and react in new ways, but low in the view of those who think that music in particular must involve sound, or that art in general should involve special skills like piano playing. At any rate, it certainly does explore the category *music* creatively at the meta-level. It toys with audience expectations, and what happens when they are not met. It makes us wonder what musical performance is for, and how much of it is constituted by the sound, as opposed to the context. It may bring musical memories or images to audience members' minds, thus creating musical experiences (perhaps different ones for different audience members) without making physical sounds. It creates social awareness of concert frames for musical performance and how they are constituted. It's clearly not just academic meta-analysis of music; perhaps it's more like music-based performance art? It's more interesting to notice all

this than to fight over whether it's "really" *music*, according to different warring definitions of *music*.

A raised consciousness about category structure, and the basis of human cognition in embodiment, may also be a help in some other standard artistic dilemmas. I can't count the times I've heard painters and musicians say that maybe literature can't transcend cultural boundaries (darn those different languages, and that translation problem!), but painting and sculpture and dance and music are pan-human. The last time I heard this claim, it was phrased as "When you paint, you paint in Human, not in English or in German." Of course, that claim is far too simplistic. It's not the case that, let's say, a Western European or American can look at a Native Australian painting and automatically get what it means to the culture that produced it (though they might indeed find beauty in it), any more than a Native Australian can look at the work in a contemporary New York or London gallery and fully get it without having learned something about the relevant artistic culture. In a sense, we can be deluded by the lack of an obvious language barrier into thinking that nonlinguistic art is much more universal than it is—especially if we're part of a dominant culture and the rest of the world is at least partially tuned to our wavelength (it was a British artist who said we paint in Human). But I know how much education it takes to understand a Van Eyck seriously, as a modern viewer; should we really assume that all present-day art is so much easier?

On the other hand, part of what that artist meant, in context, was that his own art specifically was intended to play with aspects of visual perception, some of which might well be construed as generalizable across cultures—though perhaps not quite as simply as he hoped. (The early perception of Impressionist art by critics may be a cautionary tale; if other contemporary Parisians couldn't "see" the things the Impressionists were doing, much of it based on the psychophysics of vision, we can't depend on vision-science-based art working cross-culturally in any instant, automatic way.) Vision science does seem to indicate that the way visual perception is structured and categorized is largely shared crossculturally, as it is based on humans' shared underlying neural structure. That kind of generalizability is a relief to think about, if you want to imagine that we can actually (by working at it) experience art coming from other cultures, other places, and other times—or

even, perhaps, just from other people in our own cultures who have very different points of view from our own. There may be aspects of our already entrenched category structure that we can successfully exploit, even while also having to learn a lot of new categories to understand a new cultural context.

Let's hope this is so, because cultural variation is a slippery slope in art. When August Wilson says that no actor should play a role of a different race than his or her own, we know there are excellent reasons to avoid more white Othellos in blackface, but there's also the troubling feeling that we could extend this ban further to keep ourselves from ever playing (or reading?) Shakespeare or Moliere at all, since we aren't members of those authors' cultures. So, awareness of both the generally human basis and the cultural bases for our categories may be a big help in understanding what our art is really doing, and where gaps in cultural understanding are likely to arise.

And ideally, of course, understanding categorization helps one let go of category expectations, or open oneself to a wider range of possibilities, both as a consumer and as a creator of art.

## **6. Suggestions of interesting reading on these subjects.**

The few works I present here are by some of the major figures writing on embodied cognition. They are chosen partly as being salient and central examples, and partly as being accessible. I've left out things that are intended for narrower, more specifically trained audiences, in favor of ones directed at broader interdisciplinary audiences. (References to the former works, including some of my own publications, are readily to be found in the latter, however.) I've also left out articles in favor of books; many of these books are readily available in paperback on Amazon. By and large, these folks write well; even the most academic prose on this list is straightforward and unstuffy, while the best is downright...artistic.

On categories as formed by "embodied minds," try the work of George Lakoff, one of the founders of cognitive linguistics and of what might be called embodied cognitive science. His *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Tell Us About the Mind* (University of Chicago Press, 1987) is not new, but not yet superseded, and it is far broader—also far more interesting reading—than some of the attempts at superseding it. It makes

some of the arguments I have not made here about why we can't reduce human categories to logical ones. And it covers the earlier literature on categorization in detail, so you'll find a flock of additional citations there. Among the literatures reviewed are the psychological literature on category processing, including Eleanor Rosch's influential work on prototypes and basic-level categories; the psychological and anthropological literature on color terms, including Brent Berlin and Paul Kay's *World Color Survey*; work on crosscultural variability (e.g., by Benjamin Whorf); and a range of philosophical and linguistic work at large.

Philosopher Mark Johnson's *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason* (U. of Chicago, 1987) tackles the ways in which humans' bodily experience of the world constitutes a basis for meaning, imagination, and rationality. There are some fascinating discussions of artistic examples (in particular, one of balance in sculpture).

On embodied cognition, imagination, culture, and creativity in general, check out Lakoff and Johnson's joint works *Metaphors We Live By* (U. of Chicago, 1980) and *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (Basic Books, 1999). The first is a highly readable work, which was just a beginning to the project it embodies; in a way, it's an extended essay. It has been hugely influential, and translated into a myriad of languages. The second is the major pull-their-work-together book they couldn't have written back in 1980—but, fat tome though it is, it is not written for a narrow scholarly audience in a technical discipline.

Mark Turner's work in general merits reading. Turner's a crossover figure, with a background in math and computer science before he took a PhD in English; he's now a Professor of both English and Cognitive Science at the University of Maryland. (He also happens to be married to fantasy author Megan Whalen Turner. And, incidentally, both Johnson and Lakoff are married to artists; there is definitely something going on here.) One of the uniting themes of Turner's work is the need for both literary analysts and cognitive scientists to see texts as among the most complex and interesting products of human cognition. You might try *Reading Minds: The Study of English in the Age of Cognitive Science* (Princeton University Press, 1991), *The Literary Mind* (Oxford University Press, 1996), or *Cognitive Dimensions of Social Science*

(Oxford, 2001). His early book *Death Is the Mother of Beauty* (U. of Chicago, 1987) is specifically on metaphor; the later ones are cognitive approaches to language, literature, and social science. Lakoff and Turner coauthored a delightful volume called *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (U. of Chicago, 1989) that is exactly what it claims to be. Very generally accessible as well as insightful.

Turner's book coauthored with Gilles Fauconnier is entitled *The Way We Think* (Basic Books, 2002). It's a highly readable work, intended for people who are not experts in some particular field because it's intended to reach a highly interdisciplinary audience. It's about strategies of conceptual integration (or blending) as the basis for human cognition, and as an explanation for how humans have art, language, and culture in a way that our closest nonhuman relatives don't. It's controversial, accessible, and still state-of-the-art.

For added fun in the interface between culture and cognition, check out the anthropology shelves and try Edwin Hutchins' *Cognition in the Wild* (MIT Press, 1995) or Bradd Shore's *Culture in Mind* (Oxford, 1996). As ever, real data turn out to be even wilder and cooler than nearly all fiction. These are the Margaret Meads of their generation, and their interest is cultural cognition in context.

For anyone interested in specific discussion of how mathematical cognition is based in bodily experience and in metaphor, try George Lakoff and Rafael Nuñez's *Where Mathematics Comes From: How the Embodied Mind Brings Mathematics Into Being* (Basic Books, 2000). Both Lakoff and Nuñez are polymaths, and Lakoff here returns to an early academic interest in math and logic.

And for those with interest in the neuroscience basis for this approach to cognition, try out Antonio R. Damasio's readable and fascinating *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (Harcourt Brace, 1999). Antonio Damasio and Hanna Damasio are leaders in the current neuroscience community, and here he eloquently explains his certainty that neuroscience does not let us separate rationality from emotion. Or try the fascinating reinterpretation of modern neuroscience in a Buddhist philosophical framework in Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch's *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (MIT, 1991). (Varela was a highly

regarded neuroscientist, and Rosch is both a top experimental cognitive psychologist and a practicing Buddhist.)

Works of interest that have been published since this article first came out include Jerome Feldman's *From Molecule to Metaphor* (MIT, 2006), which lays out some of the simulation-semantics modeling involved in the embodied-cognition movement. For those with an interest in multimodality, try Adam Kendon's *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance* (Cambridge University Press, 2004). And of particular interest, perhaps, is *The Artful Mind: Cognitive Science and the Riddle of Human Creativity* (Oxford, 2006), edited by Mark Turner.





Lovebirds

Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein

# I Love You More Than the Color Pink, Mirrorballface

Robert T. Jeschonek

I love you more than the color pink, Mirrorballface.  
Those were the last words he/she said, a poem just as lovely as  
every other word from her/his lips,  
And then I was truly alone, as alone as everyone had thought me  
to be all along  
Though he/she had been with me until then, until after those  
words.  
Daylight glinted from the ten thousand facets of my mirrored  
face as I looked all around for her/him,  
Flashing off the walls of the crystal city, ping-ponging off the  
polished facets of the million million  
Mirrorballfaced brothers and sisters around me, seeking,  
seeking.  
Our world is an ever-shifting web of light, tendrils crisscrossing  
in a shimmering network  
Of rainbow hues and laser intensity, none of it a zillionth as  
beautiful as the simple love poem  
He/she left me.

It was hard for her/him too, in his/her world;  
Much the same as in mine, no one else could see me in her/his  
world.  
We walked along or sat side by side, talking and laughing, falling  
in love,  
But no one else in his/her world could see or hear me  
And no one in my world could hear or see her/him.  
Each of us looked like we were talking for hours to no one, to  
the air itself or rays of light  
Or delusions from our own imaginations, visions of the dead or  
never-were  
Flickering like shadow puppets on gossamer screens overlaid on  
our respective realities.

I'm walking through the park, he/she told me. Birds are  
singing—  
Whatever birds are, whatever singing is—  
The trees dripping with pink and white blossoms—  
Whatever trees are, whatever blossoms are—but pink I knew,  
Pink was the color she/he wore every day.  
Pink jacket, pink shirt, pink pants, pink shoes, the color of a  
woman, he/she said,  
The clothes of a woman, though her/his body was not a  
woman's.  
His/her names were Jerry and later Susan but mostly Susan,  
dressed-in-pink Susan,  
And later still a pet name, a love name of mine, the sound  
*mmmm*,  
Meaning precious light outshining all others in a skyful of lights,  
because that's what she/he was.

Head turning slowly, casting glittering spots upon his/her face,  
I wanted only to ripple my liquid fingers through her/his floppy  
blond wig, flow them on down the  
Creases in his/her forehead, fill the wrinkles at the corners of  
eyes and mouth,  
Pool in the sunken hollows of her/his cheeks.  
If only I could have melted the wall between our worlds  
And merged the creaking bone-tree of his/her crooked haystick  
with my oceanic warmth,  
I could have washed away the broken glass that ill-reflected,  
ill-refracted her/his clouded beacon,  
Releasing the glory for both worlds to see; I would be jealous  
but willing to share  
The light the love of Jerry of Susan of *mmmm*.

So many times I wanted to reach across the boundary in anger,  
Reach for the ones who hurt him/her with words or worse as I  
watched—though I could see and hear  
Only the damage, only the marks they left and the way she/he  
wept—  
The ones who called him/her names and pushed her/him down

In the middle of our walks; one moment sweet nothings, tender  
ghostly kisses between us,  
Then a cornered look upon his/her face, talking to someone in  
her/his world,  
Please leave me alone, please I'm sorry just leave me alone,  
And then, as I watched helplessly, a change in the look on his/  
her face,  
A wide-eyed recognition of inevitable suffering that I could not  
stop, and then it began,  
Her/his body swinging sharply to one side then the other then  
spinning around, blood and spittle  
Flying from his/her pink-lipsticked mouth, skin puffing and  
splitting under blows I could not see,  
And finally dropping hard to the ground at my feet HOW I  
LONGED TO PASS dropping at my feet  
To lie twitching PASS BETWEEN THE WORLDS FOR JUST  
ONE twitching, curled in misery,  
Twisted in pain FOR JUST ONE INSTANT, SO I COULD I could  
not bear to watch  
SO I COULD KILL THEM bear to watch my beloved bleed and  
weep and retch and grunt,  
Such a light such a beauty such a lover such an *mmmm*.

I talk to her/him still, love him/her still,  
More every day though she/he's gone, though only his/her  
memory remains,  
A crystalline filigree of remembrance, but it's enough to bring to  
life,  
Enough to weave a lacy construct at my side, deep voice the  
same as hers/his,  
Craggy face bony body floppy wig gentle smile all the same or  
close enough  
To get me through the day, to tamp the ache, to let me fool  
myself that he/she has come back,  
And just the imagining of it is enough to turn my mirrorball  
faster, quicken my liquids,  
Deepen my drift from the world around me for real this time  
So the million million mirrorball people who called me crazy all  
along, said I talked to myself  
And saw things that weren't there,

They turn out to be right.

Not a day goes by that I don't wonder, even as I pass the time  
with my make-believe substitute,  
If it was her/his choice to leave,  
If he/she decided because of something I did or said that she/he  
didn't want me anymore,  
Didn't even want the tenuous immateriality that we shared, the  
purest love of spirit that ever was,  
Or if he/she had no choice in the matter, if the rift that brought  
us together simply closed  
As mysteriously as it had opened, for reasons we'll never  
comprehend,  
Or if death was to blame, its darkling shadow fallen over her/  
him at the height of his/her beauty,  
At the peak of her/his pink-clad joy, our joy, our passion,  
And mmmm is gone forever, leaving me to wander my world  
with only his/her phantom beside me  
For all my days, a pallid bride even more ephemeral than her/his  
intangible self,  
Saying nothing to surprise me, doing nothing to surprise me, as  
every word and deed streams  
Direct from my own imagination.

I like to think that he/she walks alone somewhere, on her/his  
world or death's own realm or elsewhere,  
With a me-shaped apparition filling the void at his/her side,  
twisting in her/his imagination  
With my ten thousand mirrored facets glinting in his/her  
memory, undimmed, beloved,  
Just as she/he dances in mine and will forever.  
Maybe, even now, unseen and unheard,  
We can say it together,  
And that must be gift enough,  
That bittersweet possible synchronization across the worlds,  
Three words revolving like pink flower petals in a universe all  
their own:

150

I  
love  
you.

# Field-Dressed

Lisa Kathleen Kang

Field-dressed  
doe, lolling tongue  
tree-hung torn  
belly like labia  
stretched wide  
for a speculum's  
cold metal click  
then pressure  
scraping deep  
inside a hot  
placental flood  
smothers spring's  
storm-smashed  
nestlings, mouths  
outthrust, pink  
in the wet grass.

# Coconut Pie

Joshua Ben-Noah Carlson

James always says a war cry shouldn't be pretty. And he has *that*; his makes you think of a pig when you hear it. But not a little pink one, a big brown pig that's rearing up to charge the fence. He does it in the movie during the big last battle. There's about a million bad guys there and James just pops on screen for a second and makes his noise and then he's gone and they all get killed. He says it's what got him into the movie, that he could make that noise. A lot of the other bad guys were big-deal martial artists and whatnot. James could make a noise like a pig.

I used to love it. The first time I saw him, in a park, he ran and then yelled while he jumped off a picnic table into a tree. Or when we moved into our house and he sat on the porch for the first time to drink a Guinness in *our house*, and I walked back to the kitchen to pour my hard cider and I heard it, loud like in the park, but now he was doing it because we had our house and were living here together.

The last time I made shepherd's pie he did his war cry twice. The first one, I was standing at the kitchen counter making a crust. I heard him plain all the way from his computer corner down in the basement, and I had to bite my cheeks to keep my head from going watery. My ears lifted like a dog's, without my permission, and my back prickled up and down all the sweat tracks, but I looked down at my hands full of dough that couldn't wipe my nose if I needed to, and I thought: I will *not* cry about a pig noise. He does that all the time when he plays computer. Mostly I ignore it, but sometimes, like then, it reminds me of the first time I saw him or our first day in the house. Or the movie, I guess. I bit my cheeks while it calmed down, and I started working the dough again, but then I noticed it was quiet down there and I thought: I gotta put my skirt on. Me standing there all sweaty in nothing but a shirt and an apron—he'd just laugh at me and probably slap my big butt.

My skirt was right nearby, up on the counter by the coffee pot, but my fingers were pasted together with dough, and my palms were shiny with butter. I listened for James' armor clinking or the chair rolling on the cement—if he made his noise for

beating a section of his computer game, he might come pounding up for a sandwich or something—but all I heard was some poor bird croaking out in the heat, probably looking at our crooked, empty bird feeder. Everything out there was hot and white. The neighbors' garage and their driveway and the fence all glared, and the grass was all curled over and tired-looking. Even the screen above the sink looked like it was melting, the mesh all ripply and dented from my thumbs pushing and twisting, trying to straighten it in the frame.

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I'd told my brother to come over and give James a job at the store and not bring his wife. I knew I was screwing it all up, telling him not to bring her, but it isn't *her* store, and I didn't want to have to try to talk to her while they talked about James' job. She and I never had much to say to each other, and since that last Christmas we hadn't said anything.

My brother's big, built like me, and the first dumb thing I said—this was before Christmas—was about that. His wife is tiny. She's thin and short and flat and her fingers are pointed. It was after the first time I met her, and my brother got proud of himself—we were drunk—and he said he never thought either of us would end up with someone little or beautiful like that. Then his face got even redder than the beer made it, and I said: Isn't it like fucking a trout? which didn't seem so bad—I was thinking how a freshly dead squirrel feels like pencils wrapped in warm velvet—but he got lock-jawed, staring mad, and later I made the cold-fish connection, and then a maybe-dyke connection to what *he* said.

So then there was Christmas. For Christmas she offered to bring lamb with mint jelly, which was very nice of her, and I said: What should I make? She said: Coconut pie. I'd never made coconut pie before; I'd never opened a coconut before. And not because it's not medieval, which is a dumb thing *she* said; I've just never thought of buying a coconut and opening it.

But I did. I bought it and got a crust in the fridge and had the recipe in my head, and there it sat, hairy and hard, on the cutting board. I whacked it with my kitchen knife and sawed at it with my bread knife. I'd have used a saw saw, but we didn't have one—or I'd have been able to make the screen fit. I hit it with a rolling pin and I think I cracked it, but the handle banged the



counter and the worst thing is rolling with a bent pin handle. I bent one once leaning into a cold dough, and after two or three more crusts, I just threw it away. It bounced my bad wrist and wouldn't roll smooth, and I punched myself in the chin trying to hold it between my legs and pull it straight.

Anyway, I picked the coconut up and hit it on the cutting board, then I did it with both hands. It still didn't break, and I thought I needed a pointy rock, like a bird breaking open a crab or an oyster or whatever. I looked at it, still happy and solid and round, the hair short and crispy like my brother's wife's. And I thought: If it was her head, I'd hit it with a really medieval axe.

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James was a bad guy in the movie, kind of a monster. We have a few swords and shields and such on the walls that are all ugly and dark-colored. The axe isn't one of those. It's silver and smooth and it fits my hand. It was made for a woman, one of the good guys, and he says you can see the scabbard strap in the scene where she's riding into the big battle. I found that out after I'd had it for a while. He was mad about something else—I don't even remember what—then all of a sudden he looked at that spot on the wall and said: Where's my axe? and I could tell I'd better know.

So I said: You don't even use it. It's in the kitchen.

I'd just sunk a nail inside under the sink that week for it to hang on, and I had to go show him where it was. He moved it to the wall in his computer corner, until he broke my cleaver throwing it at a wall with his friends. I heard it happen, the clatter and then them all falling around and laughing down there, and I went to see if any of them were cut. He caught me at the bottom of the stairs, and that's when my wrist got hurt. He just held it, but I pulled and it kind of twisted accidentally in his hand, and he said: I told you not to come down if I don't call you. I knew he'd told me that even before I went down when he had that phone call, and I said so and he let me go.

When his friends left, he got into bed and massaged my wrist and told me the axe was back under the sink and about the girl he got it from. He said nothing ever happened between them, which isn't my concern, but that she gave it to him on a walk on a ridge in New Zealand where he'd found a village. He said: No big deal. I could keep it.

He was kissing my wrist and my whole arm when he said that. He'd told me about that village a few other times when he was drunk. Sometimes he was by himself when he went there, sometimes he had a friend with him, that woman. He saw the village from far away and just walked there, but it got dark on the way. The buildings all looked so old and were up on rocks and almost a cliff; it could have been right out of the movie. But when it got dark there were headlights and streetlights, and he said: It looked like a glowing scab in a beautiful armpit, and he kissed me there.

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When I first saw James, he was running across a picnic area in Banner Park on the summer solstice. Some of the other people from the movie were there, all in kilts and flouncy dresses and such. He kind of hunched in the air while he was running, so his feet hit the top of a picnic table, and he took another step and straightened up and hopped so his hand could catch a branch. All really fast: He was running and he hunched up and onto the table and jumped up to the branch with his hand and swung up into the tree, and made his pig-noise war cry, and people yelled and clapped. Maybe he'd jumped into a tree like that in a scene that didn't make it into the movie.

Some of the other guys tried the same thing after he did. I watched him after he climbed down, and I saw the pouch on his kilt belt, and the different patterns of the kilts and the different kinds of dresses and all the antique-looking weapons, and it was like the first time I walked into the casino where I worked then, so many things that I knew I'd know someday. Later that afternoon he told me about some of the different tartans and the periods the weapons came from, and about being in the movie—more than two years gone, living basically in dorms, and then when you get done, with the exchange rate you realize you don't really have to work when you get back. That is what he said. The next day I called the casino from his place and quit my job. I'd already learned all there was to know about cocktails and waiting on people, and later about dealing different kinds of poker and blackjack and such.

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I remember I was worried that if I didn't get the shepherd's-pie crust in the fridge before too much of the butter melted, it

wouldn't flake. But my butt tingled, thinking about him coming up the stairs and the first thing he sees is me with nothing on from the waist down. I slid the skirt over with my elbow and ringed my fingers one by one with my other forefinger and thumb and squeezed off the dough. The clumps dropped in the bowl and the butter streaks in the lump were starting to shine and melt. I was almost done scraping my hands when I heard machine-gun fire from the basement, a few bursts. I let my wrists down on the edge of the bowl and straightened my neck. More sweat slid down the back of my neck and down my spine inside my blouse. The knot of my apron strings itched where it got up under my blouse, and the slack ends hung, one across one of my cheeks, the other between. I'd tried to fix that, but I couldn't do much good behind my back with the back of my wrist, and I wasn't going to use my fingers and get dough in my crack, not even a little.

The machine gun kept tapping and I quit worrying about the skirt. My eyebrows were thick like caterpillars with sweat and some of my bangs stuck at the corner of my eye. I wiped them back and my wrist slipped across my forehead and came down dripping. I rubbed it up my apron—the sweat slid down in big balls—and my arm hair stood up, spiked in all different directions with tiny flour-soaked drops. The backing of the apron was plastic and stuck to my leg. I bent my knee to unstick it but it warped into the crease of my thigh and scraped my bush. I felt the scrape and heard it through my whole body, and the hair on my head tingled. My body was strange even that early on. I felt the scrape of the plastic and my hips popped back and I yanked the apron out, but the air that came in behind it felt cool on my thighs, and as I let my hips forward again the one apron string skidded up between my cheeks, zing! My head dropped and my breath was thick. I gripped the counter hard. My body was going strange on me, and I didn't always mind—my drive was actually up—but the hollowing, open feeling happening between my legs this time just made me feel even more sweaty and big, and I chewed my cheeks again, to keep from getting wet. I kept thinking that if it was five months from now and this hot, I'd be dead.

The bird croaked again. It was a big crow or a raven, low and swinging its head, stepping in the neighbor's grass. My bangs fell back over my eye. Crows don't eat birdseed, they eat dead things. Then I realized, if I was hearing machine guns, he wouldn't

be wearing his armor—he only wore that for fantasy role-playing games—he'd just be in shorts and a sweaty tee-shirt. And on a day like that, the sweat rings would go all the way down his sides, the insides of his sleeves would stick to him, and drips would slide down to his elbows and drop on the arms of the chair.

I remember when I went down there when he had that phone call and there were drops along his hair and his shirt was soaked, and I thought: It makes it look like he's *doing* something. Just like he can sit in that chair and pig-yell about a stupid game the same way he yelled when we got our house to live in. I stood there while he didn't answer me and watched the sweat roll down and fall in little puddles on the chair arms, then I went up and just hung up the phone. I didn't think he even knew I was there.

I don't mind sweat when it comes from something. When I met James at the park, he shook my hand, and even after he wiped it on his kilt his palm was slippery—but I'd just seen him run and jump off a picnic table and swing up into a tree. And he's always slick under the arms when he lays me, and I love to get my arms up there around him and feel the wet. After it comes out under his arms and under his eyes, his hair starts to go glossy and curly. The sweat slicks my hands like butter and I rub it into his back; the hair scrapes my palms and I can't even reach his whole body, he's so big. I'm not a little woman, but he can get his arm behind my head and hold my shoulders down and work me—that's when I get my arms up under his and put my forehead into his wet chest, and I want to take a bite out of him or drown, and I bite my cheeks while it builds. I feel tiny then.

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I put my skirt back on. He was still firing away in the basement, but I had to get the apron plastic off my skin. I sucked the butter and the brown, papery-tasting dough off my finger and hooked the string out of my crack. I had all my vegetables washed and chopped and laid out like stacks of poker chips for his shepherd's pie, and the movie hand axe for chopping was lying on a towel, white powdery rings dried on the blade. The first shepherd's pie was hiding in the fridge waiting for the oven. James'd had breakfast and four sodas and hadn't spotted it.

My brother'd called back and said he could stay an hour; he wanted to talk to us anyway. I could hear his goatee against the

phone, and I hoped he didn't scrape that way when he talked to customers. Probably not, looking at the store: All new carpets and lights in there last year, this year new signs, and he started carrying new treadmills and ellipse machines, not just used. The goatee was this year too. The wife was in between, a while before Christmas. The first time I saw the goatee, he was on a new treadmill in a shirt and tie, just walking under the lights in the middle of all those machines and weights and clothes that were all his. Before the door even stopped jangling, I said: Thank you! to him for buying the house, and he stepped down off the machine and waved his hand and said: It's an investment. Thanks for paying the rent.

Then I noticed the goatee, kind of shiny, black, and short and crisp, and I knew that James could sell, even here in a shirt and tie. He'd *told* my brother he should grow his facial hair. And it was five minutes after we got our letter denying us credit that James was on the phone with my brother and telling him we'd rent this investment if he bought it. And then here he was, thanking us for it. Just like I got home that day and told James that my brother just walked on the machine all day waiting for customers, and James said: Was he sweating? No, he just heard you coming and went and got on one.

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When I had that coconut sitting there, I thought of chopping it with the axe, but I gave it one more try with my kitchen knife. The knife's pretty big. And the coconut was quite a bit smaller than my sister-in-law's actual head. I picked the knife up over my head with two hands and stabbed it straight down. The coconut rocked and yanked my wrist. I braced around the blade with my other hand and jerked it out. In a second, I felt hot on my thumb—I'd cut a flap loose. I clattered the knife down, stuck my thumb in my mouth, and went for the axe.

I'll say, coconut milk stings a little and feels kind of creamy in your eye. The shell broke into five pieces and the milk was everywhere, sprayed. I checked the recipe to make sure I wasn't supposed to reserve the milk, then I smiled around my thumb. I bet my teeth were pink with blood.

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So then Christmas dinner. James was telling another story I already knew, about going out with some of the other bad guys—they were driving through on their way to Christmas and one of them tried James' stunt on the picnic table and slipped and broke his wrist, so they ended up at the hospital in costume with all their weapons, and the cops showed up to question them about combat, but they ended up just signing autographs with their characters' names from the movie—and I took out the coconut pie. I put it on the table to cool and she said: It's beautiful! Where'd you get it?

And my brother said: I bet she made it.

I remember my face heated up and I ducked my head and smiled. She said: What kind of coconut did you use?

My face went back to normal and I said: I didn't know there were different kinds. I just bought a coconut.

She sat up and looked down; her fingers and thumbs made two Os in front of her. I'd had a few old-fashioneds and a lot of wine, but I didn't see what I wasn't following. See my thumb? I said. Then I didn't want to pull back the Band-Aid at the table, so I put my hand down. I said: I couldn't see it or stab it but then I thought it was like your head so I just got the axe and bam! Juice all over.

And I remember I was thinking: What's it like to have blood spray in your eye? But my brother was looking at the end of the table and she was still looking down at her Os. I realized I'd said her head was hard and crispy, so I said: It's not that you're *too* thin.

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While the shepherd's pies were in the oven I poured a beer down the sink and left the bottle out in sight, in case he'd notice I wasn't drinking. Then I sat down. My hand went to my belly, to the fat pad above my bush. Then I had a picture of what was in there and my hand jumped back like if you grabbed a dirty rag and felt a mouse in there. I stood back up and walked to the other side of the kitchen. The air was thick with veggies.

I was sweating less now that the pies were in, but the window still glared white, and the screen frame was warping more, it looked like. The corner sprang back out from every push and the mesh was soft and pokeable. I hooked my nails into the wood of the frame and the sides bent out with that groaning feeling of old wood. I remember I thought of flipping the whole thing around, but I knew the other side wouldn't be painted. Mostly I

just wanted to rip it out and either make it work or smash it up and hide it in the garbage.

The counter was clean. The gold flecks in the Formica shined like butter. In the corner of the counter was my beer bottle that I didn't even taste the beer.

I walked back across the room toward the fridge. My hand touched my skirt at every step, checking. Double down, I thought, and that made me smile. I took out another beer. It gave a nice long hiss when I opened it, breathing out cool air. It fogged and beaded and I tasted the sweat on my lips before I took a sip. The bubbles were tiny bites all over the inside of my mouth, then the big sugary taste like caramel, and the cold ran down my middle to my stomach. I hadn't eaten. The rest of the beer glugged into the clean sink, doubling up with foam and spreading brown around the drain.

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Standing there sober and hungry in a skirt, I felt like I was back at the casino. And, with nothing on under it, it felt like a high-roller night or a big promo, when we'd give away cars and such and I'd throw away my underwear. Our floor manager used to pull all of us dealers for the big nights into his office and go on and on about being sharp: Stay on your toes! We had to be good for the high rollers, but also the freaks would come in on the big nights, trying to count cards or just get free drinks. One guy tried to snatch a purse and they found aces all over him, every suit and every deck pattern we used.

Then Wes would say: Whatever you need to do to be on it, go do it now. And that's how he'd wrap up the meeting.

Of course he meant cigarettes or pot or speed or lots of coffee, but I didn't really do any of that, so after the first one of those meetings I went to, I threw out my underwear. Everyone at the meeting took off, to the kitchens, or out through the snow to their cars, or to the bathroom. I went to the bathroom. All the girls in there were standing at the sink, doing makeup or pinching speed up their noses. The bag rustled, and a couple girls turned so I couldn't see or get in with them. I went to a stall and sat down. The girls were talking quietly, and the bag rustled quietly, but their shoes clacked and clattered on the tile. I wore soft shoes, like moccasins. And a skirt. Most of those other girls

wore pants—we could wear either, as long as they were black and not frumpy or ratty, as Wes said. My skirt was kind of flouncy, black lacey layers that took the edge off my hips, and it was kind of short. One of the pairs of clacking shoes came toward my stall, and I looked out the crack and saw one of the girls standing out there kind of looking in the same crack, trying to see if I was listening or watching them do their speed.

My hands were on my thighs and my eyes were like fish eyes and my ears lifted, seeing how she could see in the crack when I had my little skirt up under my wrists to keep the back up and just the capital I of my underwear between my knees. She turned and went back to them. That'll keep me on it, I thought. I hooked the capital I in my thumbs and slid them down and stepped out of them. I balled them up in my hand as I came out of the stall, and before I walked out onto the floor, I leaned over by the girls and threw them away—I never carry a purse. I did it every time after that. I'd go from my frumpiest, rattiest panties to nothing, and walk out onto the floor in a little skirt. I was good that way.

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I yelled down into the basement: My brother's coming to dinner! It was quiet for a second, then his gun went, a big rocket or cannon or whatever. Did you hear me? I yelled.

Yeah, he said, then more shooting.

I remember I thought: I hate shepherd's pie.

But those two were perfect. Side by side on the stove, steaming out the vents, gold. My stomach sloshed and flipped. I still hadn't eaten. The fridge door was heavy with condiments and the hot air sucked in; I felt the cool air pool around my feet. There was more beer, soda, sandwich stuff. I let the door swing shut.

A while later the garage door started to open. I was glad James was still in the basement. Even with us not driving, he got riled that my brother just clicked the only clicker to drive on into our garage. It's not a bad neighborhood or anything. But it's technically his garage anyway. I was dealing plates onto the table and my brother gave his one loud knock and opened the door from the garage into the kitchen. He was in a white shirt with the creases still puffy from the cleaners, and a tie and that goatee.

I said: Hey, babe, and: Yeah, he's down in the basement, and he said: No thanks, to a beer, but I got him one anyway and he



drank it. He held it up and kind of smiled before he took the first sip, but other than that he looked like he was taking a return on the biggest machine in his store.

I knew we didn't have *that* much money—James was pretty strict about how much he'd transfer into checking when—but this is what happened when he came upstairs: I cut the pies and put one on each of their plates and they talked sports, then my brother tried to evict us.

James was saying: Do you know how long it will take you to find new renters?

And my brother said: I don't have renters now.

And then I started to follow. I didn't hear how many months we hadn't paid, but my brother said he could garnish James' wages for a few years to cover it, if that's how we wanted to go. I knew how James would take that, and I told my brother it was my fault James didn't have a job right then anyway, what with my hanging up on that call. James got another beer and told me to come down when my brother left, then he went back downstairs. I sat with my brother and I took a slice of James' pie. The crust flaked fine. I said to my brother: I hate shepherd's pie.

My brother's face was lock-jawed and his eyes set, like they were before so many things: The cat flies into the wall when we're kids and it scratches him, or he quits the basketball team in the middle of a game, or he just turns and walks away from me when I tell him I quit at the casino where he got me the job. I felt kind of crampy, which I think is normal for the first trimester. My head started to go watery. It's like my whole brain is melting, and my throat tight, and my nose fills, then my eyes. I hate it, that feeling. I bit my cheeks, and my brother saw and moved his plate over. It's good pie, he said, then looked over at the end of the table.

I held my cheeks in my teeth till he left, then I let it go for a while. During that, James made his war cry again, loud. I listened more, for that to mean he was charging up to punch me in the face or apologize, but I just heard the sounds of his game.

When I stood up I took the plates to scrape them into the garbage. I opened the door under the sink and hung the axe up and pulled out the can. There was my underwear. Kind of ratty, like all of it at that point. I started to cry again, but then I wiped my face on the folded-up towel and took out the underwear and put it back on. I scraped the plates and the pie tins.

Then I went to the phone and called my brother's house. His wife answered and said he was busy.

I said: Could you ask him if he could garnish *my* wages?

In a second, I heard the goatee scrape the phone and he said: Yes.

I sat a minute then got back up and called some doctors. I cancelled my one appointment for Monday and made a prenatal instead. Then I sat again. Then I went through the door out of the kitchen into the garage, to the circuit box on the wall. I had no idea what was what, which one was the basement, so I flipped them all, handfuls of switches. Then I went and sat and hid over by the big garbage can.



I grew this so you would visit

Lisa A Grabenstetter

# its the cradle and the home and the bumps in between

zac carter

the door opened quieter than it should. given the state of the place, the mismatched paintings, the spreads a few inches off of straight, the gold plated entry chain flaking on down to rust, you would have expected a shudder of some sort.

but it didnt, and then it was open just like that, the light from the exterior flood harsh against my eyes, used to the little fifty watters in the bathroom.

'hi,' you said, quietly, and i could discern what looked like the beginnings of a smile through my still straining corneas.

i replied with a small movement, back and to the left, my bulk leaving the frame in as obvious an invitation as i could manage.

i watched you come in, your jacket turned up against the cold, contemplated your earlobes with as much fascination as an art gallery, and then shut the door.

i was still there, in a plain white tee, shoulders leaned back against the door, blue jeans crossed out at the ankles in front of me, when you took the steps necessary to get you there.

i noticed you moved like an ocean does, all at once with subtleties, your legs going in one direction firmly, your hands coming up independently, your eyes closing right in that second before impact, and then your mouth, mirrored against mine.

the door bowed right above my kidneys, your movement pushing me back a little, threatening me to try and move. i slipped one hand under your jacket, found the bottom of your spine, the other one i tried to get to your jaw, found its tremors uncooperative, and had to settle for your hair.

'hi,' you said again, the syllable shorter, just the length of the inhale that preceded it. and again, a minute later, 'hi,' and this time, bad lighting or no, the smile was unmistakable.

'hi,' i said finally, opening my eyes to see yours, thinking that was better than a sunset any day.

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'where are you supposed to be?' i asked, flat on my back, every exhale off the cigarette cooling the sweat on my chest.

'conference,' you replied, taking the cigarette out of my mouth for a turn.

'hm.'

and another exhale, you launched the smoke like a geyser and we watched it mushroom, scatter, disappear. 'n you?'

'conference too,' i said, and you laughed like i always remembered.

- - -

the place didnt have a clock, unless you flipped to the news channel on the tv, and i didnt want to wake you, but it was way past dark and probably most of the way to morning when i woke up.

i managed to slip upright with nothing but my heels working, the smooth particle headboard giving me little resistance as i finally got sittid.

we had the air conditioner on like an industrial freezer, and i watched your rental car appear and disappear in the little breaks the flapping of the curtains gave. my left hand absently worked your hair like a cats cradle.

'i love you,' i said, whispering, the hoarseness deleting a few sounds, as i watched your shoulders roll up and off, up and off.

my fingers slipped to your crown, pulling the hair away gently like silk from shucked corn, the roughness of my fingertips causing you to stir just a little in sleep.

'i do,' i said, the hoarseness gone, watching you lie still again and dream.

it would be hours before you woke up, but i couldnt bring myself to sleep, just sat there with my fingers playing, smoking cigarettes quietly.

- - -

i knew the shower would wake you the way i couldnt, slowly and easily, and so i let it work its magic until i was pink, then toweled off and came back into the little room.

'morning,' you said thickly, your hand shielding your eyes from the little line of daylight scything the room.

i handed you the little coffee off the tv and you smiled.

'they got a pot going in the office all night,' i said in response to your raised eyebrows. 'ive had like four cups and its not good, but at least its hot.'

you sipped and grimaced, your nose pulling in even tighter.

'theres not much i could do to make it better, but i think i got the stuff in it like you like.'

you put it down and came up on your knees in one motion, the cover falling away like autumn as your arms went around my neck.

'its fine,' you whispered, your forehead pressed to mine, almost spilling my cup as you pulled me down with you, my lower lip locked between both of yours.

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'i have to go soon,' you said, just like that, breaking into the monotone of the air conditioning.

i squeezed your hand in reply, feeling your ring underneath my palm. 'i know,' i said, 'i know.'

'i would miss my flight if i didnt.'

'i know.'

we lay there in the last of the afternoon, side by side, staring at the ceiling.

you rolled then, head sinking into my shoulder, an arm and a leg splayed across me.

'ive missed you,' you said, eyes closed and quietly.

'and i you,' i said, my lips brushing against your eyebrows.

and then just the silence, our breathing lining up naturally.

'i love you,' you said.

and i closed my eyes even tighter and drank in the sound, memorizing the cadence for the wait ahead.



Hoboken

Tony Mangia

# Bum Canto 1

Rustin Larson

When he returned home from work,  
the day was just beginning.  
Sleep, and memory sleeps  
one hundred branches beyond.

He lugged the heavy frying pan up  
from the cabinet and clanked it on the stove.  
Winters; lawns turned monuments.  
Admission's free.

The egg spread over the hot grease  
like a map of the island.  
Sleep, and my arms enclose mountains.  
Sleep, and the world recovers.

He sat on the sofa to eat. Part of the cushion  
was chewed to ribbons. Was the dog losing  
its mind. Sleep and be alone forever.  
The vernacular? The America of Poets?

The headache didn't improve so he took  
Three more aspirin and a shot of Scotch.  
A microcosm of history?  
Sleep, and someone feeds the tiger with his body.

It could be this way. A graveyard shift.  
A basketball game on the TiVo.  
My dad was William Blake.  
I attended the University of Egg Salad.

The crazy could open the door  
and shoot the next student passing by  
on scholarship. Roommate of Ezra Pound.  
Sleep, and the thunder writes a poem.

He will sleep naked and alone,  
lost in the filthy mouth of East St. Louis, Ill.  
Great song in his heart, great song.  
Hasn't sung it. But, by Jesus, he will.

Rustin Larson

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# Monkey Bait

Polenth Blake

My line never fools the fish.  
I free the worms,  
replace them with banana,  
catch me a monkey.

The other fishers ignore us,  
intent on bobbing lures.

I take him home.  
He hides in the cupboard,  
steals tinfoil and scissors.  
Silver-scaled, he sleep talks  
of liver thieves and fish.

Water trails to the cupboard.  
Monkey gone, scales and all.

Reckon fish got him,  
or fishers maybe.  
Poor monkey.

I block the drains  
and watch for hooks.



Danzante 2

Fernando Martí

# Paper Trail

Sabrina Vourvoulias

Silvia was asleep when the plane hit the first tower, only rousing at the impact of the second plane because the low din of the television she always slept to had become a roar.

By the time the towers began to disintegrate, she was on her third cup of coffee, and the televisions were on in every room she might happen to transit through.

She couldn't get through to her brother in Brooklyn, but kept the cell phone in one hand while the other carried the coffee cup from her mouth to the table and back again. A motion repeated over and under, over and under again, lacing together moments as you might a shoe—or, more accurately, a boot, because the laces were drawn tight, high and hard.

When she finally reached Raul, he told her he was watching it rain paper. Corners of photos and words from memos and pieces of checks caught and carried by the wind and falling thickly around him. As far as he could tell, everyone in Brooklyn was caught in the same downpour.

God causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. The half-remembered biblical phrase popped into Silvia's head from nowhere. When she had said goodbye to God, she thought he had taken all his words with him.

Apparently not.

The image of Noah stranded on his ark wormed its way into her head and out of her mouth before she could censor it.

Her brother went silent.

"Send a dove before you disembark—to see if it's safe." She tried to make it into a joke.

"It would have to be a pigeon," he answered after a moment. "And what would it bring as a sign of safety?"

172 They were gentler and sweeter than usual when they signed off, reminded by the day that every substance is friable, no matter how solid it appears.

Late into the evening, she watched the images flickering on the television, a coffee cup still at hand.

She imagined flocks of pigeons released from points in every borough of New York. It wasn't until one of the birds managed to fly back into her mind with a piece of paper held intact in its beak that she went to bed.

## Watermarked

The paper trail was laid when Silvia was eight.

That was when the paramilitaries broke through the front door of their house.

Her parents didn't have time to hide the passports. They dropped them on the floor of her room, where they had been standing when they heard the crash. They hastened to the commotion, leaving Silvia without instructions on what to do next.

Raul snuck into her room moments later. "Quick," he said, scooping the passports up from where they had fallen. "We have to hide them."

Silvia ran to the console record player she was allowed to keep in her room because it was ancient and outmoded, though still functional. "Here," she said, lifting the veneer lid.

Raul shook his head.

"Or here." She pulled open the doors to the bottom half of the console, where she stored her albums.

"No good," he said. "It'll be the first place they look."

Under the bed, in the dresser or the closet—every one of her suggestions was met with a tight shake of his head.

They heard their father yell. A crack and a thud. Then their mother's cry.

The voices of the strangers got louder.

Raul's upper lip, with its darkening adolescent down, was beaded with sweat.

"Here," he said, shoving the passports into Silvia's hands. "Just find a place." He snuck back out. She heard him walk the few steps to his bedroom, and the soft click of his door closing.

Silvia looked at the four booklets in her hands, then around the room and back at her hands. There was nowhere to hide them that hadn't already been dismissed as inadequate by her brother.

As the voices edged closer, time took two routes: It lagged and yawned while she stood rooted, but leapfrogged with each footstep she heard.

Across from the console were the posters that brightened her small room. The face of her favorite boy singer smiled at her. She took a step forward.

She heard the door to Raul's room bang open. Voices. Raul answering some question, ruder and mouthier than usual.

With her next step, Silvia was close enough to slide one of the passports between the poster of the boy singer and the wall. She pushed it down near the tight corner tack so it wouldn't fall out.

A thud from Raul's room. Another cry.

One more step, and the next passport went behind the poster she had gotten as a pity gift from Raul—soccer star Pelé, caught by the camera airborne in a scissor kick.

Silvia needed to pee, but still held two passports in her hand.

She plucked at her underwear, then took a third step and shoved another document behind the paper version of the wrestler who lived next door to her grandmother—and who, without his mask, was just an ordinary man.

By the time the sound of the soldiers' footsteps changed from hard rubber on linoleum to muted thunks on the pile of her carpet, Silvia was on her knees in front of the record-player cubbies, with her back to the door.

The soldiers crossed to her in a few steps. One hauled her up by the back of her dress, roughly enough that she heard the fabric tear. Another forced her clenched hands open. When they saw she wasn't holding anything, they released her and turned to her room.

There were four of them—two of them not much older than her brother—dressed in olive drab and the heavy boots of those who march for a living. They all carried guns.

One of the soldiers stooped to pull the records from their cubbies, then ripped the slipcovers apart to see if anything had been hidden within. Another dumped out each of the drawers from her dresser, and a third went through her toy chest. The oldest one stood a little apart from the others, watching. Every so often he'd prod one or another of Silvia's family members with the butt of his rifle—not hurting them, but harrying.

She noticed the soldier at the toy chest slipping her Pretty Princess tiara that played a Disney song into one of the big pockets on the side of his pants leg. It had been a birthday gift, and Silvia wasn't tired of it yet. Her eyes filled with tears.

"I told you, there's nothing here," her father said quietly. He cradled his right arm against his body. His face was specked with blood, and red oozed down his shirt from somewhere beneath the injured arm.

Silvia's mother, face swollen and puffy, nodded.

Raul held his body stiff and straight, but didn't say anything and kept his eyes on the floor.

"Shut it," the older soldier growled. One of the younger soldiers—the one who had rifled through the dresser's contents—stepped closer to the poster of the boy singer.

"Puto," he said as he ripped it.

It tore on a diagonal, across the singer's face, from his hair to his shoulder, but the corner with the passport held. Silvia stared at the paper curling down, then shifted her gaze to the portion still up on the wall. The singer's left eye stared back at her.

It winked.

"There's nothing here," said the soldier who had destroyed her records.

The older one shrugged, then moved out of the room, trailed by the others. Except the one by the console.

He took a step toward Silvia, bent down, and grabbed her shoulders.

"I don't want to hurt you," he said, looking into her face. He had pretty eyes, brown with flashes of green. "If you tell me the truth, I won't hit you, you understand?"

"I've got to pee," Silvia whined.

"Later. Right now I want you to answer some questions. Did your parents hide something in your room?"

"No," she answered.

"Did they tell you to hide anything?"

"No."

"You sure?" He studied her face.

"I'm sure."

He released her shoulders, yanked her dress up over her head, then did the same with her undershirt. As he went to tug on her underwear, a stream of pee gushed onto his boots. It splashed his hands.

Silvia started crying.

He stood up, swearing. But he didn't touch her again. He looked, Silvia thought, as if he felt sorry for her.

On his way out of the room, he bumped hard against her father's injury. Silvia saw her father wince, then sway as if he might topple over.

"You brought this home with you. What kind of father are you?" the soldier hissed as he passed.

They left as they had entered, breaking what they could.

"We were lucky," said Silvia's father when he was certain they were gone.

"We were stupid," said her mother.

Raul didn't say anything, even when he found out the passport Silvia had hidden last—pee-soaked now in her underwear—was his.

## Wove

Silvia stole stamps from her parents.

She would rather have called her grandmother, but writing letters was easier to hide. No one was supposed to keep in touch.

Her mother didn't think they were beyond the secret police's reach, even several countries away. And her father worried that contact with home would jeopardize their application for refugee status.

This last was the worry that ruled their lives. They worked hard not to be noticed.

Silvia's father barely held back when her mother came home with a parking ticket. She had left the car in front of a sign she didn't understand, then run away when she saw the parking-authority three-wheeler pull up alongside it. If she had doubled back, Silvia's father argued, she might have been able to persuade the officer not to write the ticket.

"But he was wearing a uniform," Silvia's mother answered.

Her father's hand crept up as if preparing to slap, checked a second later with a grunt and a grimace.

Later, he sat them all down and tried to explain how, in this country, a person in uniform wasn't automatically a threat. They all nodded as if they understood.

But after that incident, her mother never drove anywhere.

All of this Silvia wrote about to her grandmother:

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*Dear Nana,*

*My parents lied when they said we were going on vacation. What vacation lasts this long?*

*And I have to go to school, which is no fun. The girls in my grade think I talk strange even though my English is pretty good. Mom won't speak it at all anymore, and she makes Raul and me talk for her when we go to the store. Dad thought he knew English fine when we lived at home, but even he has to repeat what he says so people can understand.*

*People here talk fast and a lot. And they say bad things about the country, right on TV. Dad says it is unbelievable.*

*You would love the stores. The cash registers have conveyor belts that pull the food right up to the person checking you out. There are candy bars and ice cream sandwiches for sale everywhere. Mom says I'm going to get fat eating so many, but I don't care, because they taste really good.*

*Raul got stopped by the police one time when Mom sent him out for bread. He says he wasn't doing anything wrong, just that the store owner doesn't like us. I thought Dad was going to hit him, but he didn't. Later I thought I saw Dad get sad, but Mom says I imagined it.*

*Last night, on TV, I saw that boy singer I like. Remember? He has his own music show here. I'd like to watch it every week, but if Raul is home when it starts he changes the channel right away, and calls him that word I'm not allowed to call boys.*

*But I know the boy singer is special. He saved our lives. He is pure magic.*

*I miss you,  
Silvia*

*She didn't get a letter back.*

*Four years later, an envelope came for her, but it wasn't from her grandmother. It bore a U.S. stamp and Silvia's name and address typed on a label.*

*Inside was a photo of the boy singer and a fan-club membership card with her name on it. She knew her grandmother must have enrolled her, and felt embarrassed by what it proved. She hadn't written to Nana in a long time. If she had, Nana would have known Silvia no longer liked the boy singer and never listened to his music anymore.*

*She shoved the photo and membership card in her backpack, and the next day at school, she showed them to her best friend Deb.*

*"Freaky," Deb said when she saw them. "Too bad it isn't Bon Jovi." She ran her fingers up and down the imagined chest of their current favorite.*



Silvia resolved to write to her grandmother, to tell her what life was like now that she dreamed in English. But like the card and photo she shoved back to the bottom of her pack, the thought was quickly forgotten.

Six months later, another letter came for her. This one was in an envelope with stamps from home. It was already open when her mother handed it to her.

"You've been sneaking letters to Nana," her mother accused before Silvia had a chance to look at the folded paper she drew from the envelope.

"Not in a long time. But I used to," Silvia admitted. "Especially when we first came here."

Her mother nodded. "A neighbor of hers saw your letter in its envelope on the nightstand and figured Nana must have family up here. He used to be a famous wrestler so the policemen were falling all over themselves to give him a tour of the crime scene."

"Crime scene?"

"She's dead. The police say it was a botched burglary. It's all in there." Her mother motioned to the letter.

"But you don't believe it was just a burglary."

"It never is. I hope the wrestler doesn't get in trouble for pocketing your letter. It was very brave and very decent of him."

Silvia sat at the table opposite her mother, wondering which of her letters had been on the nightstand. Her throat hurt when she imagined Nana rereading it, never getting a newer one to replace it.

She didn't look at the wrestler's letter, just stared at the envelope. The stamps from home were really much prettier than U.S. stamps. One was large and square, with a bright-green tree frog on a dark background; the diamond-shaped one bore a wide stone face etched in infinitesimally fine lines.

"Are you mad at me for writing to her?" Silvia asked.

"Everything carries consequences. But if you hadn't, we wouldn't have heard."

"Does Dad know?"

"Not yet. When he gets home from work, I'll tell him."

"What do you think he'll do?"

Silvia's mother shrugged. "What he wants."

"What about Raul?"

Since Raul had gotten his scholarship and gone to Fordham University, he seemed more a visitor than a member of the family.

"I left a message with his roommate," her mother answered.

They sat a long time in silence, the only sound in the room the rustle of paper worried between Silvia's fingers.

The moment her father learned the news, he started making plans to go home.

Silvia watched her mother's face turn stony. "The government meant to draw you back this way."

Her father laughed, but it was a sad sound. "I've been here almost five years, doing and saying nothing. They don't remember me. Even I don't remember me."

"Stay," her mother begged.

When he didn't answer, she added, "If you go, you go alone." He did.

He didn't come back.

Now it was Silvia's mother who broke their rules.

She called home. She contacted friends, and acquaintances, and strangers whose names and numbers she found in books at the public library. Letters went out and envelopes came back with the big stamps from home and even flashier stamps from Europe, where many of the human-rights organizations had their headquarters.

Silvia took the stamps when her mother tossed the envelopes. She glued them by fours and sixes on index cards, grouping them by color or theme. Then she tacked the cards on her wall.

The U.S. stamps continued to disappoint her. Many of the envelopes came with metered postage, and the ones that had real stamps mostly carried variations of the same images—the flag in a hundred different configurations.

One day, though, one of the stamps had the boy singer's face. "Remembering the '70s" was printed along one side of the stamp. The former star wasn't making music anymore—he had a daytime talk show instead—but was remembered with a fondness reserved for semitalented bygones.

Silvia moved the stamp back and forth, trying to get the boy singer's eye to wink at her again.

After a while, she gave up and glued the boy singer's stamp on an index card with a big stamp of the wrestler from home. Then she cut two photos down to stamp size, replicating the edge

perforations with really fine scissor-work. Her father's face and her grandmother's filled out the space.

She stuck that index card into the frame of her dresser's mirror. When she blew it a kiss, she couldn't tell which of the faces had prompted it.

A few days later—in an envelope with boring metered postage that Silvia ignored—the papers granting them refugee status finally came through.

## Bond

There were still a few stamps dribbling in from Europe, and once a month, a single envelope stamped from their homeland, but the rest of the envelopes were bills, which didn't carry real stamps.

Silvia wasn't sure how other teenagers met the mail, but she suspected it wasn't with her anxiety or clenched stomach.

They stopped using hot water so that the oil would last longer in the cold months.

They checked every piece of jewelry purchased in better days to see if it had a karat mark on it, so they could turn it into cash. That was instructive. Many of the gold items they owned had the right marks but failed the acid test the coin dealer insisted on performing.

There were so many collection calls that Silvia's mother stopped answering the phone. Every time it rang, Silvia's heart jumped. It rang a lot in the months when their phone bill had been paid.

One time Silvia's mother almost wasn't able to catch the bus to the house she cleaned because there wasn't so much as a dollar bill left in the money can. They searched the recesses of the house for change and found enough to fill two penny rolls. Just enough to get her mother to work so she could get paid afterward.

Raul was living at home and working two jobs—two shifts at Costco and one delivering the *Herald*. He was three credits shy of a college degree.

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He shrugged when Silvia tried to talk to him about their lives. "It is what it is" was a popular catchphrase in those days, and Raul repeated it all the time.

All the while, Silvia's father's insurance policy sat in the drawer of the kitchen table.

The six digits of it taunted them.

Her father was not officially dead, just "disappeared," a category the insurance company didn't recognize as equivalent. So the policy stayed in the drawer, as powerless to help them as the fake gold jewelry.

The boy singer had struck real gold with his talk show; it had the highest ratings of any daytime show.

Silvia watched it sometimes, when one of the local channels rebroadcast it late at night. The audience was all women older by fifteen or twenty years than Silvia. They responded to the earnest look on the host's face as he listened to his guests talking about divorce or eating disorders or remembered childhood sexual abuse. The guests always cried, and the singer would place an arm around their shoulders.

"You've saved my life," they'd say after he had brought in the experts who seemed to resolve their problems right on the air.

A paper version of the boy singer really had saved Silvia's life. She wondered if he'd be interested in hearing that story.

One night she even got out paper and pen to write to him about it.

Her mother walked into the kitchen and caught her watching the show, pen poised over blank paper as if she were jotting down notes. "What is this?" she asked.

After a few minutes, when Silvia didn't answer, her mother went on, "I wonder if they understand the danger in revealing so much."

"This is America, Mom. Nobody kills you for telling your story."

Her mother shook her head. "Some stories are meant to be held in the dark, close and quiet, where no one can take them from you. Sometimes, hope dies under bright lights."

"I'm sure they get money for appearing on the show and sharing their stories. And he promises to help them."

"Paper promises," her mother scoffed.

She stood a few more minutes with Silvia, watching the images flit across the screen, then kissed her daughter and went off to bed. She wasn't there to see the end of the show. The boy singer sang a chorus from his most popular song, then, as the camera zoomed in for a close-up, winked at the audience watching from home.

His eyes were surrounded by crow's feet and the eyelids drooped some, but it was the same wink that had once carried magic.

Maybe it wasn't only hope that died under bright lights, Silvia thought. Maybe magic died too. Her mother might be paranoid, but she was often right. Silvia put the pen and paper away.

When the kraft-paper envelope came, she didn't really look at it, just stacked it with the other ones bearing metered postage. She dumped her schoolbooks on the kitchen table and went outside to wait for Deb to drive her to their job at the Red Apple Mart.

She got back home at midnight. Raul was waiting for her in the kitchen.

"You're up late. Or early," Silvia said. "Or, aren't you going to work today?"

"No, I'm going in at three," he answered. His newspaper round started at four a.m., but it took him an hour to get to the delivery truck. "I wanted to make sure you heard," he said. "We got a letter from the consulate. Dad's body has finally been found. He was killed almost as soon as he got back there. We should be getting an official death certificate in a couple of months."

She sat down without saying anything.

"You know what that means?"

How could she not? The insurance policy was no more than two feet away from her, in its drawer.

"We can finally get out from under these bills," he said, running his hands through his hair. When he saw her face, he stopped. "Jesus, what's wrong? Why are you crying? This is a good thing."

It was. She knew it.

But in one of those stories you hold close and safe in the dark, Silvia had been telling herself that the monthly envelopes her mother received from home held letters from her father. Alive and working to improve the lot of his country, if not exactly his children.

Funny how when a weight shifts off your shoulders, it lands straight on your heart.

## Newsprint

For Silvia, the best thing about the city was the number of stands that carried the newspapers from back home.

She was taking courses at City College, but spent much of her time at coffee shops that offered free refills, smoking and

scouring the last four to eight pages of those papers, where families published photos of the disappeared. She still looked for her father's face, even though she knew it would no longer be there.

But it had been, in hundreds of issues.

His photo and the humanitarian plea that her mother had composed had been printed weekly in the home newspapers, from the time of his disappearance until the day Silvia's mother had a copy of his death certificate in her hand.

It was the only bill, Silvia discovered after the fact, that had always been paid in full and on time. The monthly receipt of payment had been sent, per Silvia's mother's instructions, in a plain white envelope with no identifying marks except for the exuberant homeland stamp.

Silvia clipped the photos and names of the disappeared from every newspaper she bought. She glued them onto index cards, as she had done with the stamps before them.

Since her roommates had forbidden her to tack the index cards up on the walls, she sewed them to each other, interspersing the lignin-tinted newsprint with the color punch of the stamps.

She rolled and unrolled the quilt to add each new piece.

After a while, she took to scouring newspapers from other countries that ran similar photos and humanitarian calls. She bought stamps from those countries, then clipped, and glued, and sewed more paper quilts.

Ephemera are ephemera, she figured. Memory on paper is memory on paper. Even if you can't understand the language it's written in.

## Palimpsest

Raul was there, dressed in his nice suit, a loving but puzzled expression on his face.

"I really don't get art," he said to her, after they had stood together for a while in front of the table with the cheese and crackers. He'd taken time off from the pressroom to come to her opening even though the *Herald* was laying off staff like crazy and not even someone who had worked there as long as he had was safe.

"So don't think of it as art," Silvia answered. "I don't."

He shook his head, looked at the paper quilts hanging in the reclaimed church turned art gallery. "This isn't a sanctified space anymore," he said. "You know that, right?"

She patted the hand in which he was holding his wine. "Different kind of sacred now."

"If you say so," he answered.

She put her arm in his and they walked around the space, looking at the pieces from farther back than everyone else.

The biggest crowd was gathered around the paper quilt with the faces of the victims of the 9/11 attacks.

"I can't look at them," Raul said. "I feel like I still carry their dust on my skin."

Silvia reached over and stroked his cheek.

A few onlookers who recognized her from the newspaper article announcing the opening interrupted them. They asked her some questions and moved on, but then the director of the gallery came over to introduce Silvia to a couple of patrons.

By the time she was freed up, she had to hunt for Raul. She found him sitting on a bench from which he could see three of the paper quilts at once.

"You ever go to church?" he asked, looking up at her.

She sat down next to him. "None but this one. You?"

"I didn't, for a long time. Now I do."

"Another kind of fallout from 9/11, I think," she said.

"Another kind of fallout from my life." He smiled. "You remember the litany prayers?"

"Vaguely."

"Lots of saints' names, followed by 'pray for us.' They're excruciating prayers to sit through. Repetitive. Unending. Still, there's something about them...." His voice trailed off.

"Are you saying my work's a litany?" She started laughing. "With all of those unflattering adjectives attached and intended?"

He grinned at her.

Silvia looked around. The crowd was already thinning out, and soon it would be just her and Raul, along with the gallery staff.

She leaned into her brother and rested her head on his shoulder. Both of them stared at the paper quilt hung on the wall across the room from them.

It was the one that had as its central piece an index card with the faces of a masked wrestler, a boy singer, and two of their

family members killed in a country neither Raul nor Silvia fully remembered but that had buried its litany in their pulse.

She broke the silence. "I guess I can live with each quilt being a petition. But what I wanted was magic."

"Shazaam," Raul said, waving his hands in imitation of a stage magician, "and you make the disappeared reappear, the dead come back to life?"

"Exactly," she said. "Only the catalyst would be a wink, not a word."

The gallery staff were turning off the track lights in each room to hurry the few stragglers out the door.

Raul and Silvia sat alone in the suddenly dim space, looking at the quilts now illuminated only by light leaking in from outside.

Nana's face, and their dad's, and the hundreds of other faces of the dead were animated and moving in the beams from passing traffic. Winking, in unison, with every flicker of light.



# Invitation

Alicia Hoffman

Tonight, let us ride the precarious wind,  
steamrolling its hulk of mass down

the alley like a humpback whale  
two oceans off—sounding like the steps

of a stranger echoed off a high brick  
wall where a lone puddle hangs on

yesterday's rain, shadows the recessed  
light of a life once lived. Tonight,

become the fantasy—along with the light,  
the footsteps, the precarious wind.

See, even the whale has sidled off  
on a steep bank masked by the sea.

What sounded like footsteps was only  
the nestling down of a large body

fit for sleep. The recessed light  
is me, and you are here, listening

to Billie Holiday. Or, you are  
the whale and I am the footstep

echoing what it is you are trying  
to say. Or, we are the water

and the whale is the wind, moving  
us now to wave and crest and break.

## Contributor Biographies

**Polenth Blake** lives in England with her pet cockroaches. She's had work published in *Nature*, *ChiZine*, and *Strange Horizons*. Her website lurks at [www.polenthblake.com](http://www.polenthblake.com).

**Joshua Ben-Noah Carlson** was born in Duluth, MN. He lives in Minneapolis, plays piano, builds boats, does yoga, and reads and writes.

**zac carter** is pretty goddamned something. [deathtohemingway@gmail.com](mailto:deathtohemingway@gmail.com).

**Zdravka Evtimova** was born in Bulgaria, where she lives; she works as a literary translator from English, French, and German. She has published the following collections: *Bitter Sky* (SKREV, 2003), *Somebody Else* (MAG, 2005), *Miss Daniella* (SKREV, 2007), *Good Figure Beautiful Voice* (Astemari, 2008), *Pale and Other Postmodern Bulgarian Stories* (Vox Humana, 2010), *Carts and Other Stories* (Fomite, 2012), *Time to Mow and Other Stories* (All Things That Matter, 2012), *Impossibly Blue* (SKREV, 2013), and *Endless July* (Paraxenes Meres, 2013). She has also published two novels: *God of Traitors* (Book for a Buck, 2007) and *Sinfonia Bulgarica* (Fomite, 2014).

**Lisa A. Grabenstetter:** Born in the nonstate of America, zie enjoys absorbing and creating anything (writing, images, material, binding) that might go into a book. More of hir work can be found at [magneticcrow.com](http://magneticcrow.com).

**David Gullen** was born in South Africa. Three years later King Neptune baptised him at the equator when his parents returned to England. His novel *Shopocalypse*, a near-future story of talking cars, shopping, and nuclear war, is available from Clarion Publishing (2013). His short fiction has appeared in various magazines and anthologies. One story was shortlisted for the James White Award; another won an Aeon Award. His collection *Open Waters* (theEXAGGERATEDpress) appeared in early 2014. He recently coedited the charity SF anthology *Mind Seed*. David lives with the fantasy writer Gaie Sebold. He is represented by the John Jarrold Agency.

**Ross Hickerson** is an EMS-helicopter dispatcher from Omaha, Nebraska. His work has previously appeared in *The Nervous Breakdown* and also *Paddlefish*. Ross once ate a sandwich with Amiri Baraka. If he was a guitar, Ross would be a Danelectro '56 single-cutaway with lipstick humbuckers. He can be reached at rhickerson7@gmail.com.

**Alicia Hoffman** lives, writes, and teaches in Rochester, New York. Author of *Like Stardust in the Peat Moss* (Aldrich Press, 2013), her poems have appeared in *Redactions: Poetry & Poetics*, *Poets/Artists*, *Camroc Press Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *A-Minor Magazine*, and elsewhere. She is currently completing her MFA in Poetry at the Rainier Writing Workshop at Pacific Lutheran University, where she is guest poetry editor for *A River & Sound Review*.

**Robert T. Jeschonek** is an award-winning writer whose fiction, comics, and poetry have been published around the world. His young-adult fantasy novel, *My Favorite Band Does Not Exist*, won the Forward National Literature Award and was named one of *Booklist's* Top 10 First Novels for Youth. His cross-genre science-fiction thriller, *Day 9*, is an International Book Award winner. Simon & Schuster, DAW Books, PS Publishing, and DC Comics have published his work. Visit him online at [www.thefictioneer.com](http://www.thefictioneer.com). You can also find him on Facebook and follow him as @TheFictioneer on Twitter.

**Lisa Haag Kang** is a poet and essayist whose work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Spillway*, *Third Wednesday*, *the Examined Life Journal*, and others. In June of 2013, her poetry chapbook *Recombinant Loves* was published as a runner-up in the Main Street Rag poetry-chapbook contest. Her poetry chapbook *A Benign Sort of Cannibalism* was the winning manuscript in the 2013 Clockwise poetry-chapbook competition and will be published later this year by Tebot Bach.

**Rustin Larson** is the author of *Crazy Star* (Loess Hills Books, 2005) and *The Wine-Dark House* (Blue Light Press, 2009). He is the host of the radio talk show "Irving Toast, Poetry Ghost": [kruufm.com](http://kruufm.com). Read his blog at *The Iowa Source* online: [www.iowasource.com/blog/73-rustin/](http://www.iowasource.com/blog/73-rustin/).

**Tony Mangia**. Reporter/photojournalist. NYC bar owner for twelve years. Boxer. Photo website: [mangiamedia.net](http://mangiamedia.net). Contributor to sports website: [yardbarker.com/tonymangia](http://yardbarker.com/tonymangia). Work published in *The New York Times Magazine*, the Associated Press, *The Boston Globe*, *New York Post*, and

*The Village Voice*. Just spent a month in Kenya with the Kenyan Defense Force, photographing the struggling tourist villages along the Somali border. Would like to return and photograph the Somali refugee camps.

**Fernando Martí** is an artist, community architect, and activist. He was born in Guayaquil, Ecuador, and since 1992 has made his home in San Francisco, where he has been deeply involved in and influenced by community struggles in the Mission and South of Market Districts. He practices community architecture and planning with Asian Neighborhood Design and the Council of Community Housing Organizations and creates political poster art with the JustSeeds Artists' Cooperative ([www.justseeds.org](http://www.justseeds.org)). His art explores the clash of the Third World in the heart of Empire and the tension between inhabiting place and the urge to build something transformative.

**Joseph A. W. Quintela** marshals words unto the battlefield with little regard for their souls. That is a lie. In fact, he cries each time a word is felled. In solitude. Where the tears cannot be mistaken for a waterfall. Beautiful. Innocent. He raises letters and tells them that a story is a lie that is necessary for their existence. He raises punctuation marks and tells them they are letters. When they all grow up to be morticians and serial killers, he feigns surprise, draws a knife across his supper, and says, "Nothing can be told without death." ([www.josephquintela.com](http://www.josephquintela.com).)

**Jon Radlett** has been taking photographs for about forty years, but has only relatively recently started doing table-top work with dolls. The attraction of using dolls, apart from subverting ideas of innocence, is the ability to explore the psychology of human interaction through nonverbal communication and to do things with inanimate objects that he would never want to do with real people. When not taking photographs, Jon is a psychologist and teacher.

**Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein** is an Oregonian printmaker from Hawai'i who uses the ancient craft of woodcutting to explore giant robots, things with claws, and the boundaries of the human. But mostly claws. Her website is [rhiannonrs.tumblr.com](http://rhiannonrs.tumblr.com).

**Lezli Rubin-Kunda** is a multidisciplinary artist who works in site-specific performance, installation, video, drawing, and photography, to explore her relationship with her environment. Through her own body, and using common, available natural or man-made materials, she carries out simple actions that connect her intimately with her locale and with the physical as well as the cultural, social, and metaphoric context of the site. She

has performed and exhibited in the United States, Canada, Israel, and Europe, and her performance videos have been shown at many different venues. [www.lezlrubinkunda.com](http://www.lezlrubinkunda.com).

**Patricia Russo** has had stories published in *Fantasy Magazine*, *ChiZine*, *Lone Star Stories*, *Talebones*, *Tales of the Unanticipated*, *Not One of Us*, *Electric Velocipede*, and many other places, online and off. Her stories have appeared in the anthologies *Corpse Blossoms*, *Zencore!*, *The Best of Not One of Us*, *52 Stitches*, and *The Best of Talebones*. Her novella *Hearts Starve* was published as an e-book by Eggplant Literary Productions, and her first collection of short stories, *Shiny Thing*, was recently released by Papaveria Press. She doesn't have a website, but the book does: [www.shiny-thing.com](http://www.shiny-thing.com).

**V. V. Saichek** writes stories that explore the flow of consciousness and how one's several inner personas battle for supremacy. Ms. Saichek utilizes this pull of inner conflict to develop characters and craft stories with strange, dream-bound resonance. Ms. Saichek's artwork explores the archetype of the Shadow and other mythical impulses, using flamboyant colors and disconnected imagery to draw the viewer into relating with "The Other".

**Christine Schrum**'s writing has appeared in *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *A Verse Map of Vancouver*, *Quills Canadian Poetry Magazine*, *The Writer*, and other publications. You can find her online at [www.christineschrum.com](http://www.christineschrum.com), and on Twitter: @Schrumza.

**Okasha Skat'si** is a writer/artist/photographer, ex-academic, and current art student whose work centers on environmental and mythic themes. She is Tsalagi by blood and was multicultural before there was a word for it—born in Mexico, spoke Spanish before English, lived most of her life on the Texas/Mexico border. She writes about the history and environment of the border region under the byline Penelope Warren. As Okasha Skat'si, she is coauthor of *The Growing*, an SF novel that made the 2007 Gaylactic Spectrum Best Novel shortlist.

**Mithran Somasundrum** was born in Colombo, grew up in London, and currently lives in Bangkok, where he works in an electrochemistry lab. His recent short stories have appeared in *GUD Magazine Issue 4*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *The Sun Magazine*, and the *minnesota review*, among others. He is currently working on a novel.

**Eve Sweetser** lives in Berkeley and teaches in the Linguistics Department, the Cognitive Science Program, and the Celtic Studies Program at UC-Berkeley. She's interested in metaphor, categories, frames, language-accompanying gesture, and the meanings of words and grammatical constructions—also medieval Welsh poetry and Breton satirical novels. She's looking, among other things, for ways to connect understandings of culture, cognition, and language with understandings of literary style. Her major hope for this project lies in the younger generation, whose categories are less entrenched.

**Sabrina Vourvoulias** is the author of *Ink* (Crossed Genres, 2012), a speculative novel that draws on her memories of Guatemala's armed internal conflict and of the Latin@ experience in the United States. It was named to *Latinidad's* Best Books of 2012. Her short stories have appeared in *Strange Horizons*, in *Crossed Genres*, and in a number of anthologies, including *Long Hidden: Speculative Fiction from the Margins of History*, forthcoming in May. Follow her on twitter @followthelede.

**Dara Weinberg** is from Los Angeles and lives in Kraków, Poland. She writes poems and texts for performance. Her opera libretto *PENNY*, with music by Douglas Pew, premieres at the Washington National Opera in 2015. Website: [darastrata.com](http://darastrata.com).

*Our contributors have done many wonderful things since we collected these biographies. See [www.gudmagazine.com](http://www.gudmagazine.com) for updates!*

# G U D

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## Critics on GUD

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Eve Sweetser

Sabrina Vourvoulias

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—Frank Dutkiewicz, *Rise Reviews*

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