



Grim Corps
a literary magazine

Volume II

Fiction & Poetry by Sam Verrall * John S. Barker * Thomas Kearnes
Lara Donnelly * Star Spider * David Elsensohn * Andrew Hogan
Cate Englehart * Ian Kappos * Addison Clift * Canth? Decided
James Leach * Michael Wehunt * Artwork by Stacy Schonhardt



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A LITERARY MAGAZINE

VOLUME II: OCTOBER 2013

EDITED & PUBLISHED BY
CHARLES PATRICK BROWNSON

Established in 2012
grimcorps.com

PDF Version
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FEATURED ARTIST: STACY SCHONHARDT

In this volume I would like to introduce you to Stacy Schonhardt, a visual artist who works primarily in acrylics and oil paint, photography, and ceramic sculpture. She graduated from the University of Minnesota, Duluth with a BFA in studio art and art history, as well as a BA in philosophy, and has shown in venues ranging from galleries to local cafés to science-fiction/fantasy conventions.

Since 1999, she's lived and created in Seattle, WA, and continues to show her work in local venues as well as various magazine and film projects. Her art can also be seen online at www.stacyschonhardt.com.

For the cover artwork I have selected the photograph titled “Don't Put It Down” from the series *Circles and Squares*. Other photographs from this series appear within the pages ahead. Here's what Stacy had to say about her work within this series:

“These photos are primarily close ups of different mixed drinks from a local nightclub. They are not retouched in any way. I am fascinated by the way light plays on melting ice. Sometimes it seems to form almost-identifiable shapes, other times it simply creates rich, abstract colors. It can't be planned, it can only be enjoyed—and even then, only for a few minutes before it's gone.”

SPECIAL FEATURES

SAM VERRALL

THE BOOTH WAS DARK and cool, a welcome respite from the heat. Carli mumbled a greeting to the fat man behind the glass and took a seat at one of the microphones. She checked her watch, her phone, her watch again, and cursed under her breath.

She turned to the glass. "Is this thing recording? It's not recording, right?"

The fat man shook his head. "Not yet," he said, the glass almost audible in his voice.

She cursed again and checked her phone. Guys like that were behind the scenes of everything in the industry. Pudgy, balding dwarves who stole from catering and leered at the girls between scenes. This one was worse than that; he reminded her of Donny. So out of sync with the sea green walls, with the cupboards of honey birch.

"She's coming in now," he said. She repressed a shudder at the sound of his voice.

A minute later, Nina burst into the room and launched into a breathless account of the movie that just changed her life, some arthouse cryfest with a bunch of hip, underfed Norwegians. "Carli Hill!" she said, almost smiling, "looking positively *radiant*. Are the mansions of heaven really so full?"

The fat man lifted a cup of coffee and drained half in a single swig. "Ready when you are ladies."

* * *

"Hi. I'm Carli Hill. You're listening to the audio commentary for *The Thorn Room*."

"You're supposed to tell them who you play dearie."

"Oh, uh, I play Helena in the movie."

"And I'm Nina Prescott and I play a terrible *bitch*."

"You are a terrible bitch."

"And that's Aaron Sharpville playing John LaVay, chopping up some slags with a machete. There were lots of knives out on set. George Lucas gives you fucking *Yoda* boxer shorts and Marc Pierce gets the knives out. Had you done much horror before?"

"No, never. My brothers were big fans though, so it was always on in our house."

"I love horror. It's like punk or Motorhead or something. That kind of stupid self-destruction that comes with having a lad ignore you in the canteen. Speaking of totty, here comes Joseph Walton-Adams, who you'll be seeing more of later. I have a good Joe story actually. We'd all been out drinking and he was sitting around with this broom pole that he'd found, and there was this intern—Michelle I think she was called—and she walked up to him like, "I'm a naughty girl, I could do with a spanking." And she bent over, but instead of tapping her lightly, he lost it and just *flattened* her like a pancake. It was the funniest thing I'd seen in ages."

"Oh my god. Was she okay?"

"I think so. I don't know. At least it was appropriate to the genre. You know when you just can't look away?"

"*Jesus*. I mean it's funny, but..."

"And here I am, looking like a drag queen, watching the buxom Carli Hill move gracefully around the set like the mad old bag I am. The contrast, as ever, is appalling."

"Sorry Nina."

"That's L.A for you. The vegan nibbles, the fair-trade wine, the stink of youth like a pall in every corner. You're not worth the shit I eat Blake Lively!"

"It's really tough."

"The pains of the process are nothing compared to the tectonic shudder of gossip. Speaking of, you're about to go method by almost carving off my eyebrow."

"Too sharp for a prop knife."

"Too sharp."

“But you kept going!”

“Blood shed is blood bid. It was lost at sea and there it must remain. Until Jamie turns up with his magic sewing kit.”

“Poor Jamie.”

“He was a lovely guy, a good guy. You know they had to identify him by his teeth?”

“Jesus. Should we be talking about this?”

“It’s a document. We can talk about *anything*. We can talk about creepy Donny.”

“Oh god, creepy Donny. He was like, this tech, but he just had the weirdest laugh. Like he was always close by.”

“This horrible leering grin, like somebody chunked up a piñata of Jack Nicholson, and if you broke it, burning birds and spiders with candystripe legs would tumble onto the floor.”

“Yes!”

“I thought he was quite fit actually.”

“Shut up!”

“I heard he had peepholes in all the walls. Private footage, that sort of thing. He was always rubbing his legs on set.”

“*You’re so wrong.*”

“So this is me with my wonky nose, reading a book that we had to nick from a library. And here’s you, looking *fucking* hot, about to have some fun with young Joseph. Is this the bit where they had to hypnotise you?”

“No, that’s later. They had to hypnotise me because the fire in the house was just—it was *freaking* me out. *Really* bad memories.”

“They had to hypnotise the girl on *Candyman*. Because of the bees.”

“Here we go with Joe...”

“Look at those tits! Was it fun getting your tits out? They’re a cracking pair.”

“It was very weird and, um, a little unnecessary?”

“We’ll see them again later.”

“I don’t think so...”

“And now haunted Joe has to spoil it all by asking you—”

“What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?”

“What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done? What about you Carli?”

“I don’t—”

“Was it the woman from school?”

“I don’t—when did I tell you that?”

“Some more girls lining up for a bit of John’s chopper. No, you did, you told me in makeup. There was a woman you would follow back from school. She was big and compact, wrapped in winter coats, winter hats, whatever the weather. Hair all around her mouth, like twisted wire. You found her repulsive didn’t you? Go on.”

“... We would follow her all the way home and throw stones.”

“All the power words. *Retard. Freak.* Bit of *weirdo.*”

“She never said anything about it.”

“There was nothing she could do to stop you. You’d walk to the shops by the swimming pool, that cut grass smell in the air, and just *know*. Just know how much you really hated her. I think it gave you quite a thrill. Do you remember?”

“This is weird.”

“You told us when they put you under love. You told both of us when we took you back to your dressing room.”

“Who did you tell?”

“Oh, this is my big scene with John. Originally this was supposed to take place at the *start* of the film—”

“Nina, *who did you tell?*”

“Oh. Just Donny.”

“*Donny?*”

“Do you want me to tell you the worst thing I ever did? You’ll like this.”

“Nina—”

“We took him to the lake. It was still warm. That dry heat that rides the wind through the mountains. I don’t think he knew what was happening. People in films never ask the right questions, and neither do people in real life. They accrue over time, don’t you think? These massive hallucinations. They take on lives of their own.”

“...what did he do?”

“First he tied him up with electrical tape. And then...well, you saw the papers. He told me later that he’d seen all sorts of stories. Horror stories, monster stories, stories about love, stories about pain—but he’d never seen the story of the body. Imagine if you could know every inch of the body like you knew the guts of all those glittering scenes. Of course, every good story has a sequel. After the body there’s the soul, and after the soul Carli—”

* * *

“Stop.”

Carli stared across the booth, willing the moment to stretch out and not slip into the next. “What do you want?”

Nina shrugged. She looked as glacial as ever, her features suggesting an attempt at collagen classicism.

“They’re going to make you one of them, my peacock.”

“I don’t—”

“Probably before your time. But then, so much of me is before my time now. Swept away in the tornado.”

The movie seemed to have stopped. The fat man was grinning. His eyes seemed almost black behind the glass.

Nina exploded into laughter. “Bloody hell, you should see your face!”

She chuckled for some time, rubbing her hands together as though wiping something away. She reminded Carli, distantly, of her naughty, boozy aunt up in Champog. “Oh my god,” she said, over and over, “oh god. Too good.”

Jamie had liked having her around. He said she was mischievous.

Carli stared at the desk. She felt Nina’s hand, surprisingly powerful, as it surfed the inside of her thigh. It was strange, she thought, how little she resembled her former self, only those cadaverous hands reminding of her less than amaranthine origins.

“Let’s go over again,” said Nina. “Let’s talk about second acts. You can’t take the word of a drunken crack-up. We’ll open a bottle of wine and get a bit cosy and you can tell me why you set the fire—”

She smiled as she tapped the microphone. “And who it was that had to burn.”

* * * *

Sam Verrall is a relatively new writer who has been published before in New Horizons and Murky Depths.

THE OPIUM EATER

JOHN S. BARKER

THERE WAS A MAN many years ago, not very old, perhaps only thirty at the time, who logged in the forests of New Brunswick. Most of the trees he felled moved down-river to St. John, where they were pulped and made into paper.

In 1875, he received an urgent message that his wife, a young woman, perhaps only twenty-three at the time, had delivered a child with difficulty—their third—and he took his leave of the logging camp without pay to head into town. It took him almost an entire day to get there.

When he arrived at the hospital in search of his young wife, a nurse escorted him to the maternity ward, where his wife, sitting up in bed, nursed their newborn, now eight days old. As he walked toward her, it occurred to him that his other children were most likely in the care of his wife's sister back at his house, which was a simple, small building on a simple, small plot of land just on the outskirts of the town's centre. It had been a bit of land that he had inherited from his father, who had inherited from his father, who had come to St. John during the war of 1812, from America. He was proud of his Loyalist heritage, and while not wealthy in the least, he certainly thanked his father, who had passed only the year before, for his inheritance.

His eldest child, a daughter, was only five years old at the time he walked down the hospital's maternity ward toward his wife, in bed. His youngest, which is to say, the one whose position was now changed to middle, was merely two and a half, and also a girl. Both girls had his features, or so he imagined when he looked at them. Both had blue eyes, with something of an Irish twinkle in them, and nearly white hair. Both had expansive, endearing smiles. Both were happy, contented children, with almost none of the rivalries one often sees between siblings. They had few toys between them, and only the most essential clothes, but together, they acted as if they had everything they could ever want.

As he neared his wife's bedside, he began to shake his fists and scream obscenities, hurling them at his wife and his new baby. Three nurses on the ward ran to him, but he pushed them away. He wrenched his child from its mother's arms, and shook it violently. It screamed in terror, then pain, and then died. It had also been a girl.

He lunged at his wife, and tried to throttle her with his bare hands. He nearly succeeded in killing her as well, had two orderlies not arrived, who, with the aid of the nurses, managed to restrain him at last.

Amid this turmoil, his wife, hysterical with the loss of her infant, her breast exposed, her milk seeping from her, climbed from her bed, collapsed onto the floor, on her hands and knees, and crawled to sit beside her dead newborn, hands alternately pressed to her face, and opened, reaching out, hoping for some miracle that would restore everything she had, in that one instant, lost.

Less than two days later the man, who had come to his senses while in the custody of the police, suddenly understood what it was he had done and at night, in his cell, took his belt and hanged himself until he, too, was dead.

Something within the woman had been extinguished with the death of that child. Some flicker of hope had sputtered, faded, and also passed away, and she was left alone, and penniless, with her two children.

Now about that time, Agnes Blizard's Young Women's Christian Association, which she had opened in St. John only a handful of years before, had heard of the woman's situation, and organized some visits to her, bringing her a few necessities. After a short while, the woman began attending the meetings, and took a good deal of comfort in the Psalms of the Bible, which Agnes read to the unmarried women.

Here spirits lifted, the woman arranged for her sister to take the eldest of the daughters into her own home while the younger she gave up for adoption. Now unencumbered, she worked to re-establish a life for herself. She sold her husband's property, giving half the income to her sister's husband, took up a bed in a rooming house for single women, and began doing good works herself.

It was during this time that she came across a volume of essays by Thomas De Quincey, and she was particularly taken with *The Spanish Military Nun*, which she read so often she learned nearly by heart. She was

capable of quoting long passages of it to anyone who might be interested. This feat brought her eventually to the attention of a man who happened to have known De Quincey just prior to his death. This particular man, by now more than seventy years old, introduced her to some of De Quincey's other works, including the work he is today most remembered by, *Confessions of an Opium Eater*.

But while the *Confessions* seemed somewhat tawdry to her, his essays shone, and drew her in. She was uneducated, except for the most basic elements of reading and arithmetic, but De Quincey, for her, described the world in its truest depiction: bleak, and perverse. In a way, she became De Quincey, even to the point of imagining she suffered neuralgia, as De Quincey had, and for which she, like De Quincey, was prescribed laudanum.

Together, she and her elderly companion traveled to England, where they took up residence in a house in London, near Berners Street. They resided there until her elderly companion died about ten years later. By that time the woman was thirty-five, and again left penniless. She turned to begging on the street, reciting De Quincey essays from memory, especially her favorite, *The Spanish Military Nun*. By this entertainment, she managed a regular enough income to keep herself in supply of laudanum. But it was not long before she had fallen into the company of prostitutes, and took up residence with them in a brothel.

Her sister, still living in New Brunswick, had no notion of any of this, and for nearly a dozen years had, with her husband, raised the eldest daughter as their own, even calling her their own, even giving her their surname. This daughter, by that time seventeen, was known as Grace Cyr.

Grace barely remembered she had had any mother other than her aunt, had no memory of a father other than her uncle, but remembered clearly her younger sister. At night, Grace would pray for all those families who had suffered tragic losses, for motherless children, and for lost siblings, especially for her sister, whom she called Margie, but whose real name was Marguerite.

About three months later, Grace, through her aunt, received word that her mother had died in England, and so Grace, feeling suddenly brittle, took it upon herself to go to London to settle any affairs of her mother's that might be outstanding.

She booked passage on a schooner that departed St. John in June of 1887, and the crossing took twenty-eight days. At first, she had been happily excited to be on the ship, but the seas were very rough, and the winds often uncooperative, and within two weeks she often felt ill, and was largely unable to eat.

The captain of the vessel, Jonathan Smith, was as attentive to his passengers as he was to his cargo, and understood the difficulties presented to a young woman traveling without companionship or guardians. Another couple on the vessel, returning to England from Maine, took Grace into their care, and the young wife, Elizabeth Renshaw, could not have been more than a year or two older than Grace. This put Grace remarkably at ease, so that the final week of the voyage uplifted her spirits, and nearly made her forget altogether the reason for her trip.

Being young and inexperienced, Grace had not made arrangements for a place to stay in London, and her aunt and uncle had not really prepared her for that city. How could they? There was really no place else in the world like London, and certainly nothing remotely approximating it in their limited experience.

The Renshaws invited her to stay with them, and she accepted their invitation with immense gratitude. They were well-off, and owned a manor, staffed by a butler, a cook, and two maids. Their generosity astounded Grace, and she stayed with them for two months, expressing her thanks in any ways Elizabeth would allow her. She set out to make a sampler for them, in embroidery, and spent hours with Elizabeth during the day, engaged in this activity. Elizabeth introduced her to several arts, and the two women read to each other, practiced music together, and attended church services. Grace became almost sister to Elizabeth.

After some time, Elizabeth's husband, William, inquired as to the affairs to which Grace had yet to attend, and she confessed her tremendous fear of engaging in this activity. William offered to have inquiries made on her behalf, and it was not long after that that they all came to understand the situation into which Grace's mother had descended, and Grace's humility gave way to humiliation.

Kindly, Elizabeth consented to attend with her. Together, they went to the brothel. To their surprise, the women were sympathetic to Grace's loss, informed her of where her mother had been buried, and gave to her the few belongings her mother had managed to preserve over the years. These included her wedding ring, a Psalter, a locket, a few letters, and a volume of essays by Thomas De Quincey. It was the address on one of the letters that had led the prostitutes to contact the New Brunswick relatives.

Among the letters was a clipping from a newspaper which told of the terrible deed of her father, and of his death. Reading it brought a weight upon her heart like she had never felt before.

One of letters was still sealed in an envelope, and on it was written, "To my daughters". Grace clung to it, and to all the things they gave to her. She felt as if her heart were on fire, as if it were beyond her ability to bear much more. She might nearly have fainted had Elizabeth not made her sit for a while, before heading back to her home.

That evening, after dinner, with Elizabeth beside her, she summoned what bit of courage she had, and opened that envelope, withdrew the parchment from it, and unfolded it. Surprisingly, she found her mother's hand to be elegant, graceful, refined. But the letter was not pristine. Her mother must have carried it with her for years, may even have transferred it from envelope to envelope to envelope, may have read it and read it again, a hundred times over, deciding to send it, then to keep it, over and over.

In part, this is what the letter said:

"Do not believe the wicked tongues that strike against your father, for judgment belongs to God, and not to those who encircle you with their hateful lies. Be mindful, my daughters, of those in whom you place your trust. There may be deceit in their smiles. There are those who would claim your father was a mad man, but this is fantasy. He lacked a son, and the baby, your sister, was weak, and would not have lived for very long, for if she had, we should all have come to an even worse fate. Think clearly on this point, because, while it does not relieve him of responsibility for those things he did, it releases him from any guilt. His soul must suffer the punishment of God, rather than His grace; yet it is God alone who can release him from what he suffered on this earth, and I have prayed what seems an eternity already for his salvation. And yet, I am not blameless, and you must not think me so. This heart of mine that beats within this empty breast echoes the hollow cry of my lost child. This has been my burden. You must never embrace a love so strong, should you ever come across it. It is merciless in its hunger, and inexhaustible in its need."

Grace folded the letter, returned it to its envelope, and turned her attention to the locket, which she then opened. On one side was a portrait of her mother, which must have been executed when she was as young as Grace was at that moment. On the other side was a portrait of her father, eyes wide, and sparkling, much like her own. Braided around them both was a tight circle of three locks of hair, each a slightly different shade. She could recognize her own hair in one lock, and that of Margie in the other. She knew the third was the infant hair of the sister she had never known.

Grace took these things, and put them away. As the weeks passed, she came to terms as best she could with the idea of who her mother might have been. She visited her grave many times, and Elizabeth and William purchased a proper marker for it, in her name, with dates inscribed, and the epitaph, "Loving Mother". On one visit, while contemplating those two simple words, she felt a warm breath near her, and distinctly heard in her ear a woman's voice, barely a whisper: "Daughters must perish by generations."

She stayed with William and Elizabeth Renshaw through the winter, and in April of the following year, booked passage on a schooner, when the Arctic ice was receding and it was safe to travel back to St. John. In the years after, she called upon the Renshaws only once more, to aid in her attempts to locate her younger sister. In time, she found her, living as the adopted daughter of a logger in British Columbia. When she was twenty-five, Grace married a salesman, and she became a mother, and understood some of what her mother had written her. But it was not until her own daughter was grown, and the World War had come and gone, that Grace went to meet her younger sister in British Columbia, in hopes that she, too, might understand who her mother had been.

In the end, understanding eluded her.

—Marguerite, 1940

* * * *

John S. Barker has been a freelance editor, a contributing editor to Cross-Canada Writers Quarterly (1980-84) and a technical writer. His novel, TRAJECTORY (Anarchy Books), is available through Amazon and The Robot Trading Company. His short fiction has appeared in several magazines. He plays piano and Angry Birds in Delta, BC. His website is brickswithoutstraw.blogspot.com or look for him on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).



Dreaming of Purgatory

INFESTATION

THOMAS KEARNES

FOUR MONTHS, NO SHAME in that. Barton hadn't intended to fall once more into its vicious and familiar embrace. When he clutched the tiny bag, however, no sacrifice seemed too great and no punishment too severe. He was on the tricky side of forty, his liver near collapse, his mother and teenage son distant as a star. Every line of crushed crystals barreling through the clipped straw brought him closer to the life otherwise only possible after death. Four months—no shame, no shame at all. Goof and Sister Pussy, eyes sparkling like coins at the bottom of a well, sat across the coffee table from Barton. Goof's fingers massaged the shaved wonder between her thighs.

"Vince told me what people were saying," Goof said. "About you and me. Little faggot flashbacks, huh?"

Barton laughed so forcefully the dope fled his nose in a gooe mass.

"Don't waste the shit," Goof said.

"You know not to mention that name," Barton replied.

"My brother is a bit of a Dope Nazi," Sister Pussy said, affecting the faux Southern twang of doomed Tennessee Williams heroines. She held Barton's gaze, smiling like she knew secrets she planned to tell. The girl had been a surprise. Earlier that evening, Goof threw open the door and bounded into the motel room, wrapped Barton in his bony arms. It wasn't until Barton freed himself from Goof that he noticed the unannounced guest. He recognized her from a photo glimpsed on Goof's bedside during their stint at rehab. Plain, pudgy, eager, a tongue both skilled and lacking in prudence. Moments before, as she sucked his cock while Goof watched naked from the bed, Barton realized he had no qualms throwing down with siblings. They belong in a sideshow, Vince might say. Sister Pussy and Goof—a girl and a boy. No, a girl and a man. Vince was nowhere near the obscure motel between Dallas and Fort Worth. If he were, Barton had no doubt he would wink and chuckle, finally vindicated.

Barton felt his groin stir despite ejaculating in Sister Pussy's mouth moments ago. Whether his desire had surfaced for her or Goof remained a question too forbidding for Barton to articulate.

"Who the fuck is Vince?" she asked.

Goof groaned, took the short straw from Barton. "Should you or should I?" he asked.

Barton grimaced, his head sinking. "That freak's taken up enough airtime." Despite the sneer in his tone, he smiled and shook his head like a father teaching an infant to speak. During rehab, Vince liked to call Barton his big brother; now Vince didn't call him at all.

"Barton, oh Barton," Goof declared as if Barton gazed down from a tower. "Make me feel like a *real* man."

"Fuck you."

"That was some funny shit."

"Maybe for you."

Goof snorted a line. His teeth were beige, crumbling like a sand castle at high tide. Barton paused in amazement he'd let Goof kiss him more than once, more than twice.

"That skinny bastard was so fucking smitten," Goof said.

Sister Pussy gasped, clapped her hands over her mouth. "No fucking way!"

"He thought I was a fag like him," Barton said, drumming his fingernails upon the table, eyeing Goof's last line, not caring if Goof noticed, knowing Goof wouldn't care.

"They oughta put all those cocksuckers in a cage and toss the key," she said.

Barton managed a half-smile, glanced away from his guests. He wasn't sure which one to approach next. The dope had sparked his desire, as it always did. The decision between Goof and Sister Pussy might reveal something to them; it might reveal something to him.

Sister Pussy started her share, snorts echoing down her throat as if she were slurping soup. Barton's gaze drifted toward Goof only to spy his charged look, the corners of his mouth creeping upward. At rehab,

Barton often teased Goof about letting him fuck Barton up the ass. Of course, it was all in jest. They weren't like Vince, a train wreck of bent wrists and wet consonant sounds. It was all in jest until Goof arrived. It was all in jest until Goof suggested they tweak, knowing just a couple of lines compelled Barton to squat down on any erection.

Four months—no shame in that.

Barton lied to the men—the women, too—about what kept him bent over strange tables in strange rooms, straw or dollar bill jammed up his nostril. It wasn't the sex, the absurd duration or indescribable euphoria before climax. What lured Barton into the synthetic degradation was how it allowed him to revisit without pain the moments in his past that haunted and shamed him. It was the comfort a mother offers after a father's beating, but it was the only comfort he knew.

If Goof or Sister Pussy heard the knock outside, they gave no sign. Barton wanted to whisper a warning, but he saw the siblings grinning like two vultures deciding to share a corpse. Another knock. Sister Pussy drew Goof into a kiss, the two consuming one another, snatches of teeth and tongue flitting into view. Barton's head fell back, his eyes closed, his body following. The knocks grew louder, closer together. So much was possible...

"Hey, big brother, you about to crash?"

Barton came to, sitting in front of the apartment he shared with Goof at Serenity Hills, the rehab that promised salvation but often produced stale resentment. It was another roiling summer in Houston, the air fetid and moist like horse feces. The courtyard teemed with patients too anxious to stay indoors, too exhausted to move once outside. Barton had killed many hours on his bench, smoking, bullshitting, imagining the crystal meth awaiting him, hating those fantasies and himself for having them.

"Did I come at a bad time?"

Christ, it was *that* night. The last days of July, a week before Vince's birthday. He'd coyly hinted to Barton, never within earshot of anyone, that he'd ask for his birthday present when Barton least expected it. Barton blamed himself for the awkward familiarity Vince expected each conversation. He couldn't be cruel, not to an enemy's face. He slapped the raised hand, roared at the terrible joke, smirked and nodded when an absent friend was ridiculed—Barton was a politician without a platform.

Barton smiled and slid across the bench. The slats dug into his thighs. Vince ignored the plentiful room Barton had allowed him, sat close enough to graze Barton's thigh. The crickets serenaded them, two men with more in common than one dared hope and the other dared admit.

"Five more days," Vince said.

"Till what?"

Vince slapped Barton's shoulder. "My birthday, you monumental shit."

Not wanting to, Barton rubbed the spot Vince had pegged. "I told you to remind me."

"That's why I'm here."

"When you gonna tell me what the fuck you want?"

"Don't worry," Vince said. "It won't cost you any food stamps."

"I've already bought you a case of Hamburger Helper."

Vince cackled, head snapped back and jaw dropped wide like the villainess from a Disney feature. Barton observed him, curious how such disparate elements coexisted: the lanky, compact frame; the thick dark hair spiked atop his head, giving him the appearance of deranged shrubbery; the jeans hacked at the shin, a bizarre riff on Capri pants. Vince's blatantly feminine gestures and affectations, however, silenced whatever desire Barton might have felt for him, how these traits comprised an exotic sort of allure. The animation drained from Vince's face. "I've grown weary of Hamburger Helper."

Barton's breath escalated. "So what do you want?"

"There's something I should tell you."

His throat went dry. "What?"

"I'm such a fucking fool." Vince pitched forward, as if to vomit.

"Dude, you're not—what is it?"

"I'm surprised you haven't guessed."

"Sit the fuck up. I can't understand you."

He rose to face Barton, eyes bright with mania. "I'm falling for you, Barton."

No, no, no. Anything but this.

Barton was popular among the addicts, the nutjobs, the incompetent therapists. With a laugh and a handshake, he'd disarmed the whole roster of patients and staff. Alas, his admirers believed him largely heterosexual, if not exclusively so. Only Vince knew to what extent Barton deviated from traditional carnal behavior. Deviant—surely Vince knew the word. Barton felt drained of power, anticipating Vince's words of devotion. He looked away, spied a large cockroach scuttling toward the ledge. He cringed, heart fluttering. Too bad Goof wasn't nearby with a flat-soled slipper or rolled newspaper.

"Vince, I'm not sure what to say."

"I'm just grateful you're not laughing."

"You must think I'm an asshole."

"I think you have secrets." Lips parted and breath shallow, Vince gazed at him.

Barton recalled a random moment from his last visit to the Dallas bathhouse. Not the one with shaven, muscled Caucasians drifting through dim hallways, grimly appraising one another, but the one two blocks south where gay men of color congregated—and cornered any white boy who dared enter. In a room tucked at the far end of a hall, the Latino moaning after his orgasm ordered Barton to lick his semen from the concrete floor. He did as instructed. He was grateful, a beaten dog whose master disappears indoors. Not even his primary therapist at Serenity Hills knew about that night, only a smattering of would-be tricks in cyberspace, their names and faces unmissed as the semen sliding down Barton's throat.

"We all have secrets," Barton said.

"You told me a few"

"And no one else knows?"

Vince shook his head, flashed the three-finger Boy Scout pledge of integrity.

"I trust you, kid." Barton wrinkled his nose, a telltale sign he was lying. He discovered, however, the words felt true once spoken. "I want you to trust me now," he said.

Vince nodded. The cockroach Barton last glimpsed at the ledge zipped to the window sill. Barton wished to return indoors before more pests arrived.

"You know I'm sick, Vince. We all are."

"I know that."

"But do you *understand* what it means?"

"We both like to tweak. We've talked about it when you first—"

"Buddy, I haven't fucked anyone sober since 1990. I wasn't old enough to buy cigarettes. You don't want me sleeping next to you when morning comes. Believe me."

Vince grabbed Barton's shoulders. "We can help each other." Soon after meeting him, Barton realized Vince's "playful" combat masked an urge for actual violence. Vince's eyes shone with fervor.

"Maybe a year or so from now..." Barton didn't know where to look.

"What?"

"Hopefully, we'll be different people. Maybe then..."

"You want me to forget you." Vince brought his hands to his lap, legs crossed at the ankle. Like a girl, Barton thought. Like a goddamn girl.

"I'd never forget you, kid."

"Are you swearing off men completely?"

Barton's pulse quickened with relief. Vince had unwittingly offered Barton a way to refuse him without resorting to ridicule. "None of us should be hooking up right now."

Vince nodded.

"We'd relapse together."

Vince nodded.

"Our friendship would hit the shitter."

Vince nodded.

"I know how much you care about..." Barton felt a prickling sensation upon his shoulder. He felt a cluster of them. "Is something crawling on me?"

"Hold still." Vince swatted at the cockroach, giving him another excuse to hit Barton. The bug leapt from his shoulder, landing on the balcony, oblivious to the attempt on its life.

“Jesus, that fucker’s big.” Barton shuddered.

Vince managed a flimsy smile. “There’s still the matter of my birthday.”

“Remind me the day before.”

“It won’t cost a cent.”

“Hmm, okay...”

“It’s not what you think.”

Barton’s leg shook like a paint mixer. Once you put a price on a man, decisions become easy. The two men had been speaking a while, so Barton scanned the courtyard for any neighbors notorious for starting rumors. No one seemed to notice them sitting closely like lovers.

“Good,” Barton said. “You can’t ask for anything sexual.”

“I’ll wait till you’re wearing a towel and a smile, wandering the halls.”

Vince laughed at his joke; Barton did not. Vince composed himself and offered a pained smile. “Dearest big brother, would you please kiss me on my birthday?”

Barton stared through him, jaw hovering and unsure where to land. So simple a wish from so vulnerable a soul—when was the last time Barton bent over for that alone? But Vince didn’t complete the equation, not remotely. No one would blame him for doing what he must.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“A kiss isn’t sexual.”

“What is it, then?”

“I knew you’d shoot me down.”

“It’s not you, not at all.”

Vince rose from the bench, pushed his hands through his hair. “Almost curfew.”

“Vincent,” Barton whispered, reaching out, not expecting Vince to take his hand.

And then, what Barton feared: the tears. “You’re doing me a favor, you know. Everyone knows rehab romances never work.”

Barton swept past Vince and blocked his exit. “Stay. I’ll get some smokes. They’re right inside.” He stepped toward the door. A squishing sound followed a sharp crack. “What the hell?” Barton lifted his loafer to discover the thrashed remains of a pest impossible to identify.

“Slay the dragon, big brother.” Vince laughed. Barton had no choice; he laughed, too.

Barton swiped Goof’s pack of Camels from the nightstand. He studied his roommate, absurdly grateful Goof would never learn how Barton broke a poor faggot’s heart. One cigarette and the night would end. He crossed the room, opened the door but went no farther.

Vince slept on the bench, grunting softly as if making love. Surely, he hadn’t slipped into dreams in less than a minute. Irritated he had to wake Vince, Barton reached for his shoulder. He drew back, however, seconds before it landed on the cockroach creeping up Vince’s neck.

“Motherfucker!” Barton shouted.

Vince’s eyes snapped open.

“Dude, kill it!” Barton cried. “It’s right there! It’s—”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Kill it! It’s fucking filthy!”

Barton’s guest jumped to his feet, inspected his clothes, the bench. No bugs anywhere. Barton panted like a sprinter crossing the finish. Vince observed him with a wry smile.

“Poor big brother. That was close.”

Barton collapsed onto the bench. “I can’t handle that shit.”

“Where’d you get the smokes?”

“Inside. I told you I had some.”

“You mean *my* apartment?”

“No, mine.”

“Your apartment is in the next building,” Vince said, spooked. “It’s on the second floor.”

Confused, Barton checked the door’s number. The brass numerals read 115; Barton and Goof lived in 206. He backed away, convinced Vince was in on it, ignorant as to what “it” might be. Goof called Barton’s name from the far end of the courtyard. Not responding, Barton dashed upstairs and never looked back.

Before room 206, Vince sat waiting, legs crossed at the ankles. “You left before I could finish.”

“How the fuck did you do that?” The words shot out like jets from a spray.

“I had a dream about you, big brother.” Vince rose, minus all the naked need Barton had associated with him since they met. He approached Barton with the certainty of the masked killer in a horror film. “It was my birthday, and you didn’t kiss me.” He gazed at Barton. His voice sounded hollow and smooth, like a customer service greeting. “Isn’t that an awful dream?” He wrapped his arms around Barton. “I’m so glad I woke up.”

Their kiss transpired like an assassination, the target besieged before spotting danger. Vince forced his tongue inside Barton’s mouth, the men’s teeth clicking like tap shoes against marble, hands frantic. Barton preferred kissing men over women; he lacked the insight to speculate why. His eyes clenched shut, his breath caught. There is no moment more heartbreaking than the end of a kiss.

“Took you long enough, fucker.”

Barton broke away from Vince and found Goof standing in the doorway of room 206. Shirtless, his slender chest caught the amber light from the streetlamp. Shaking, Barton peered over his shoulder and discovered that only the motel parking lot, its chipped asphalt and fading yellow lines, lay behind him. His eyes bugged with amazement.

“You’ve been gone a whole hour,” Goof said. “There’s a smoke shop five minutes down the interstate.”

“Sorry.” He didn’t know who deserved an apology.

“Baby, I need it up the ass,” Sister Pussy cried, indifferent to other guests in other rooms. Goof yanked Barton into the room, leaving him no chance to note the numerals posted on the door. Goof had lived with him in room 206, and now Goof waited in a room facing the interstate. The door slammed shut. Goof nibbled Barton’s ear, a gesture more menacing than affectionate, then strolled past. Goof smacked Sister Pussy’s bare ass. She bent over the bathroom counter. She wore her greasy blonde hair in pigtails; Barton knew she meant to please Goof, not him.

Again the canned Southern accent: “Dear Bart, can’t you see I’m dying for a man?” Her lewd wink and small jiggling breasts stirred Barton with their guaranty of victory. There was no risk, no possibility of rejection. This was pussy for pussies.

Goof held an iPhone in front of him. His rotten teeth emerged like a submarine from the ocean’s surface. Barton’s unease ticked higher; it was Goof’s dope and his party. Barton had paid for the room, but he felt naïve calling it his. After twenty-five years, he knew the rules and restrictions of this subculture; he knew them like his mother’s face.

“My ass might close up tight without some real dick real soon,” Sister Pussy said.

“Gimme one more line.” Barton stumbled toward the coffee table.

“Chill out a bit,” Goof advised. A cheetah tattoo stretched vertically down his side, the beast dashing for his armpit, undulated when he yawned, fists aimed at the ceiling. “Wanna give sister girl a booty bump?”

“I guess.”

“After you seed her ass,” Goof said, eyebrows jacked like he planned to blow her house down, “I’ll do one for you.”

“This is bullshit!” Sister Pussy cried. “Fuck me, pronto!”

Goof shrugged, rolled his eyes. He patted Barton’s shoulder. “House rules: Gotta keep the bitch happy.”

Barton ignored Goof as he snapped shots of Barton penetrating Sister Pussy’s ass. During Barton’s absence, Goof or his sister had cranked the heat to full blast. Barton sweat like a boy in junior high gym class. Each thrust of his cock roused louder, more piercing screams. He didn’t stop. He couldn’t stop. She called him Billy. It didn’t matter.

He couldn’t understand why the flashback—if that’s what one would call it—abruptly ceased before he and Vince parted, both devastated, one quietly and one with tragic fanfare. After Vince’s confession, the two shared a cigarette. They chatted about therapists, the sob stories doled out during group. No cockroaches lurked, just a chorus of crickets and an army of stray cats roaming the courtyard. Vince promised never again to ask for a kiss, fumbling the words. Barton’s heart drummed so loudly, he pulled Vince against him hoping for silence. They embraced like parents grateful their child landed in a fireman’s arms. As the seconds passed, a damp sensation fell upon Barton’s throat, his stubble scratching Vince’s cheek. A kiss—so simple, so essential. Without hesitation, Barton kissed Vince’s throat. His guest moaned so softly, Barton first believed he, himself, had made the sound. Giving Vince comfort made Barton feel worthy; he’d forgotten that feeling.

His lips lingered until Vince pulled away, surprising Barton. Anyone would've bet that he would conclude their unwise but unavoidable embrace.

"We're friends, Vince."

"Will you miss me when I'm gone?"

"I'll never tell."

"We all have secrets, big brother."

Vince vanished from the rehab a week later. His generous disability check proved too tempting. Goof claimed he saw him leaping over the complex's iron fence in the dead of night. No one informed Barton of his fate; he made no inquiries. He basked in Vince's adoration like a coed sunbathing beneath an overcast sky—the rays never emerge, but skin burns gold by day's end..

"You damn near wore my ass out," Sister Pussy declared. Goof caught Barton's eye and began to stroke himself, his other hand capturing still shots of this passionless moment.

"Don't stop now," Goof ordered.

"You bisexual boys know all the tricks," she said.

To dodge her litany of filth, Barton resumed fucking her. Sister Pussy moaned and shook and hollered and declared her ass belonged to Billy. It's Barton, Goof reminded her. Barton began his final assault. The first thrust slammed her head against the edge of the bathroom counter. The sterilized plastic cups tumbled from the surface. Barton didn't notice the streaks of blood smeared across the counter's edge. Sister Pussy coughed and gagged.

The dozen cockroaches she vomited dropped to the carpet without ceremony. They fell from her lips like snow upon a manger. Not until dozens more bugs skittered and crawled across the room did Barton shriek and yank his cock from her ass.

"What the fuck?" she cried.

"Jesus," Goof said, "did you get this room at a group rate?"

Barton leapt upon the bed, curled into the fetal position as he did whenever alone for the night. This was quite often. The moments crawled, parasites feasting on his fears and regrets. Perhaps if the creatures found what they wanted, they'd go away. Find *n/ho* they wanted.

"Stomp the fuckers!" Sister Pussy cried.

"It's kinda fun," her brother added.

They clomped and screamed like an inner-city dance troupe. For them, the joys gleaned during sex differed not one bit from those gained during destruction. This epiphany crept up like a toothache: Barton was not like them.

Vincent, Barton thought. Vince would know what to do. He gaped like a crash survivor at the amateur exterminators. No matter where or how hard they stomped, the bugs would not fucking die.

* * * *

Thomas Kearnes is a 37-year-old author originally from East Texas and now living in Houston. His fiction has appeared in PANK, Storyglossia, Spork, The Ampersand Review, Word Riot, Eclectica, JMWW Journal, Night Train, SmokeLong Quarterly, wigleaf, A cappella Zoo, Underground Voices, Prime Number Magazine, The Northville Review and numerous LGBT venues, including Educe Journal, Diverse Arts Project, Diverse Voices Quarterly, Wilde Magazine and the Best Gay Stories series. He is a two-time Pushcart Prize nominee and feels no embarrassment mentioning that. He occasionally writes for Flash Fiction Chronicles. His debut short-story collection, Pretend I'm Not Here, is now available from Musa Publishing. A second collection, Promiscuous, is due before Halloween from JMS Books. He is an atheist and an Eagle Scout.

IN FLAGRANTE DELICTO

LARA DONNELLY

lovers have always discussed
desire in terms of delectation
this is no different

thin sweat salts your collarbones
each ear tastes umami
where lingual apex touches tunneled skin

on heavy purple tongues of beef
my father called that part the shivers
you do

ecstasy and pain are often paired
cabernet and raw red meat
yielding makes you sweeter
veal is sweeter
never having struggled

seven pounds of pressure
pulls away a human ear
blood runs in the gore grooves of your throat
pooling thumbprint of your clavicle

swollen lips like escargot saliva-slick
cliche to say your testicles are oysters
instead apricots
soft skin furred and giving way
until it splits

basted red netted
by the checkered
white linoleum
I hold your wrist as if to kiss
your fine-boned hands
crunch and I feel infamous
caught with fingers in my mouth
a woman eating ortolan
uncovered

* * * *

Lara Elena Donnelly lives in Louisville, Kentucky, where she can often be found hogging the book in karaoke bars. She likes beer, bourbon, and buzz cuts and champions the Oxford comma. Her fiction and poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in Icarus, Strange Horizons, Mythic Delirium, and Asimov's Online.



The Madness In Crowds

DEAR AGNES

STAR SPIDER

May 4, 1923
Cairo, Egypt

Dear Agnes,

This place is made of dust and scorching sunlight. It has a violent sort of beauty you would find most unnerving. I am sorry you and Father did not approve of my coming here alone, but it was something I simply had to do. I hope one day you will be able to understand that.

I arrived three days ago in Alexandria by way of the Mediterranean sea. I then took the train to Cairo where I have been re-cooperating after my taxing journey. I haven't been here long, but I already feel as though I should have drunk my fill from the glittering waters of the sea while I had the chance.

As I write this I am sitting on my balcony overlooking the Great Pyramids. In the glow of twilight it seems as though the land is made of gold. The Sphinx is watching me from a distance, his enigmatic smile suggestive of something I can't quite fathom. Oh Agnes! I am certain you are reading this and thinking I have gone utterly mad. You are thinking I shouldn't have been allowed to leave and perhaps even considering scolding Father for allowing me to go. He couldn't have stopped me. Please rest assured though, dear sister, I am quite well.

I have secured a reliable guide to the city and I will be visiting the museum tomorrow.

All my love,
Rosemary

* * *

May 5, 1923
Cairo, Egypt

Dear Agnes,

I visited the museum today with my guide, a quick and cheerful man who insists I call him Uncle Ahmed. How I wish you had decided to accompany me Agnes! The artifacts here are so ancient that it stirs something within me. It is not just the inanimate artifacts drawing me in either, it is the people too. As we walked to the museum through the bustling square we came upon a rabble of women. They were covered in shadowy cotton from head to toe and their dark eyes peered at me with such interest. They surrounded me for a moment, not threateningly, but softly. They whispered with voices so slight they might as well have been a faint breeze. They touched my hair, my face, my clothes and then disbursed quietly. When they left I felt different somehow. I don't know how to explain it entirely Agnes, but I feel changed by my time here already.

I wish I was staying in Cairo long enough to receive your responses to my letters. You were always the clever one Agnes and I am sure you would have so many pearls of wisdom to impart as I make my way through this perplexing land.

Send my regards to Father.

All my love,
Rosemary

* * *

May 9, 1923
Cairo, Egypt

Dear Agnes,

After my journey to the museum, I found myself quite exhausted. It must be the immense heat of this place, it can be most oppressive. I finally managed to rouse myself today to visit the Great Pyramids with Uncle Ahmed. I find his company quite diverting and was soon back into the 'spirit' of my adventure.

If I could sum up the power and the presence of the Great Pyramids in one word Agnes, it would be; awesome. Uncle Ahmed insisted we take camels into the desert, he said it was simply the way it was done. I acquiesced only after many assurances that the lumbering beasts were safe and docile. Riding a camel is nothing like riding a horse, I assure you. First there is the task of getting onto the creature, which is positively strenuous, and then there is the swaying that is akin to being on the sea in a small, unstable craft. Through all the trials though I must admit I was excited, I felt like I was a queen of old being escorted to a monument built in my honor. The camel master was quite alluring, with eyes of a pale brown the likes of which I have never seen. I think he caught me staring at his fascinating eyes Agnes, and if I hadn't been so distracted by the Great Pyramids rising in the distance it could have been quite uncomfortable.

I should tell you I found relief from the overwhelming heat for the very first time in the haunting tunnels and chambers beneath the Pyramid of Khufu. Uncle Ahmed led me around proudly, as though it were his very own home and it was absolutely still in there. What an awesome experience it was Agnes, walking in ancient footsteps. There were many chambers, but in the Queen's chamber is where I spent the most time. I lingered there for hours. The silence and a golden, stony tranquility enveloped me. I could imagine myself resting forever in a place like that Agnes. How macabre I must sound! Forgive me.

Affection to Father.

All my love,
Rosemary

* * *

May 11, 1923
Nile River, Egypt

Dear Agnes,

You and Father will be pleased to know Uncle Ahmed has agreed to stay with me for the duration of my journey. I have grown quite fond of his giant smile and pleasing mannerisms. I couldn't imagine Egypt without him. Before you think anything salacious, you should know that Uncle Ahmed is older than Father and has been perfectly distanced in his attentions.

I am writing this from the deck of my felucca, a small sailing boat that Uncle Ahmed insisted carry us at least a short way down the Nile. You would think it an undignified way to travel, no doubt, but I find it quite delightful. It is far more peaceful than the noisy steam boats. From here I can see the strange almost prehistoric looking landscape of the Nile. I can, if I so desire, run my fingers through the water. Perhaps I will do so and gather a few drops on my fingertips, then I can let some fall onto the paper and send a piece of this remarkable country home to you my dear.

We will be in Helwan before sundown and from there we shall board a noisy, yet 'civilized' ship to Luxor to visit the Valley of the Kings where Uncle Ahmed tells me there is an archeology team hard at work.

A kiss to Father.

All my love,
Rosemary

* * *

May 16, 1923
Luxor, Egypt

Dear Agnes,

We arrived in Luxor last night after a leisurely trip down the Nile. It was not as noisy as I had feared and I found myself in good company with a British couple and a lively group from Germany. Uncle Ahmed has found me a comfortable room overlooking the river and I am quite content here.

I miss you my dear sister and I find myself wishing on a fairly consistent basis that you had come with me. Do you recall the adventures we used to have together? When it was just you and me in the emerald forests of our youth, exploring rock and root together? I valued your good sense then and I am sure you kept me from a great deal of mischief that I would have regretted later.

Why did you not accompany me?

All my love,
Rosemary

* * *

May 20, 1923
Luxor, Egypt

Dearest Agnes,

I had an absolutely inspiring adventure today. Uncle Ahmed took me to the Valley of the Kings and introduced me to a young man by the name of Allen Saunders, who is a part of the archeological team responsible for excavating the site. It was a barren place, but compelling as there are so many tombs that have been discovered! Mr. Saunders gave me the pleasure of a special tour and I found his company to be very soothing. He is a dashing man, with a sun-kissed complexion and a passion for his work. He told me he could spend his life in this valley and I understood him on a level I hadn't expected. There is something about the place that draws me and keeps me there. The mystery of it all perhaps.

You must think me a fool for all this talk of tombs and mystery. I have decided to stay in Luxor for an extended duration and I will enclose my address so you can send me correspondence. Tell me of life back home, of the green fields and spring rains.

Kisses for Father.

All my love,
Rosemary

* * *

May 21, 1923
Luxor, Egypt

Dear Agnes,

I returned to the Valley of the Kings again today and was pleased to monopolize the time of Mr. Saunders when he wasn't involved in his duties. I am finding his presence extremely absorbing and I am quite taken by the amount of information he has to divulge about our surroundings. He talks of ancient royalty as though he was there when they were buried. I will be going back to the site again tomorrow and perhaps I will undertake some explorations of my own.

Tell me Agnes, do you see much of Marcus Grace these days? I have to confess I believed him to be quite smitten with you. I am sure if you were here now you would think it a foolish thing to even suggest, but he has a lovely temperament and his free-spirited nature would do you a world of good.

A hug to Father.

All my love,
Rosemary

* * *

May 22, 1923
Luxor, Egypt

Dear Agnes,

I was left to my own devices today in the Valley of the Kings. Uncle Ahmed stayed in Luxor for the day and Mr. Saunders was quite distracted, so I allowed myself the opportunity to wander freely. Of course I had Mr. Saunders' permission, so please don't think I was rampaging around like a mad woman.

I explored the tombs and marveled at all the intricate and highly complex hieroglyphs that are to be found absolutely everywhere. What dedication it must have taken to carve so faithfully. It made me wonder about the lengths people will go to for what they believe in. In those dark and dusty tombs I thought of all the battles fought and all the struggling that we have done to get ourselves to this place. It's remarkable isn't Agnes? I look at all that has come before and I wonder what lies ahead.

I was wandering blissfully in a particularly quiet tunnel when I heard an unusual sound from the depths. Being ever curious (and having been provided with an electric torch by the lovely Mr. Saunders) I followed the sound deeper and deeper until I came to a chamber. It was not unlike other chambers I had seen with symbols crawling across the walls in orderly rows. It smelled of a certain kind of must that I have only encountered in Egypt. Perhaps it is the fragrance of the mummified remains of royalty or maybe it is just the aroma of hidden earth and stone. Whatever it is, I find it quite intoxicating and I stood, admiring the hieroglyphs for a great length of time. The strange sound had dissipated and I quite forgot about it, being completely absorbed in my study of the ancient arrangements.

It was then that I did something most unusual, dear Agnes. I cannot say why I did it, but I would ask you not to tell Father, lest he grow worried about my state of mind. As I stood in that mysterious place, soaking in the feeling of the cool chamber, I switched off my torch and lay down on the ground in the darkness. Are you laughing now? Or perhaps you are growing concerned? It would be like you to do so, but I can only do my best to assure you of my clear state of mind. Please don't be alarmed dear sister.

The darkness was penetrating and I opened myself up to it. I felt silly at first, and almost convinced myself to get up, but something kept me down. I wasn't scared and you shouldn't be either Agnes, I was calm as Balsam Lake on a windless day. I imagined myself a Queen of old, buried in honor and mourned by thousands. I pressed my palms to the cool ground and I felt the dust beneath my fingertips. Then the noise returned. In the dark (for some reason) I heard it more clearly. It was the sound of hoofbeats! Like a hundred horses riding off to war. The sound passed over me and I held my breath. At its nearest point I swear I could feel it, it was like drums in my chest and it caused a great welling of anxiety, which quickly turned to an awful sort of anger. A strange, primal feeling. I was beginning to get frightened then so I turned on my torch, rose quickly, dusted myself off and made my way back into the glaring daylight.

I felt flushed when I emerged and was lucky enough to meet with Mr. Saunders who escorted me back to my little room in Luxor where I am sitting now, enjoying the view from my window.

See what trouble I get up to without you dear sister?

If I decided to stay for longer here would you join me?

Affection to Father.

All my love,
Rosemary

* * *

May 23, 1923
Luxor, Egypt

Dear Agnes,

I could have used your good sense last night. For the first time since arriving in this alien land I felt truly afraid. That is to say I felt afraid at first and then horribly, desperately angry, but I am getting ahead of myself, allow me to explain from the beginning.

This country isn't like our quaint little town Agnes, there are different rules here. Uncle Ahmed has explained them and I was sure I understood, but for some reason last night I decided to ignore his warnings and break the rules. You see there is an unofficial curfew for women where I currently reside. Uncle Ahmed says it's for our safety. Women should not travel on certain roads at night, especially alone. This mostly holds true for the back alley streets and hidden markets, which have a labyrinthian quality. I have accepted this rule easily enough since my arrival here, but last night I just couldn't be still. The pounding of the hooves I had heard in the tomb was haunting me and I paced my tiny room becoming increasingly agitated until I thought I might burst. Do you know how it is to want to break free Agnes? Of course you don't. How could you? You are ever stoic and perfectly balanced, always doing as you are told. Well anyway that's how I felt, like I wanted to break free, so I grabbed my headscarf (which I have been wearing regularly to blend in) and burst from the confines of my room.

Out on the street I breathed deeply of the fresh Nile air and found myself somewhat more composed. I walked swiftly down along the river and back through the streets around my hotel. What sights I saw Agnes! The men gather on the streets here, talking and mingling, smoking bubbling sheehas (a sort of water filtered tobacco pipe) and drinking coffee as black as charcoal. Small boys pull carts and carry baskets here laden with all manner of items ranging from the mundane to the gruesome. I saw a boy of no more than five pulling a barrow containing a large, severed cow head. Its sightless black eyes watched me as I passed. It didn't disturb me though Agnes, not like it would have done you. You and your delicate sensibilities, so soft and fragile.

I hadn't been walking long when I came upon a group of men, around my age. They were gathered together around a fountain, laughing and roughhousing. They spotted me almost instantly and the group went silent. One man stepped forward, he had dark eyes and smiled a wicked smile. As I watched him move towards me, my heart began to race. At first he tried to speak in Arabic, but I shook my head and he switched to English. A surprising amount of men know basic English here. *You shouldn't be here*, he told me. *It's not safe*, he said. My heart was picking up pace and the sound of the hoofbeats resurfaced. It was so loud it almost drowned out his words. I looked into his eyes and felt an anger then that was undeniable. Next I said something I am embarrassed to write. *I am a queen in this land*, I told him, *perhaps it is you who should not be here*. I felt flushed with a fury I had never before experienced and in my mind's eye I saw an image of the man's head on the cart that small boy had been pulling. I saw his severed head there on that cart, his dead eyes watching me and it felt good to imagine. What do you think of that Agnes? At that moment, when I was lost in my thoughts, he grabbed my arm and held fast. I came to my senses then. I let out a small scream and twisted my arm to break free. He seemed surprised by my reaction and let go long enough for me to make my escape. I lifted my skirts and ran.

I am so glad now of all the time we spent running in the forests and fields together Agnes, because otherwise I might not have been writing you this letter. I ran for my life and the group of men gave chase. They chased me through the streets of Luxor and all the way back to my hotel. I ran up the winding staircase feeling as though I had a pack of hounds nipping at my heels. Down the hall they chased me and happily for me, Uncle Ahmed was both in his room (next to mine) and awake. He heard the ruckus and came out to investigate, immediately calling the chase to an end and sending my pursuers back from whence they came.

As soon as the horde had disappeared down the stairs, the sound of pounding hooves flooded back and I went from abject quivering fear to burning wrath. I was furious at the men for chasing me, disgusted with my fearful reaction and enraged at the world for the injustice. I quickly thanked Uncle Ahmed and retreated to my room where I proceeded to violently and unrelentingly assault anything I could get my hands on. Nothing was immune, bedsheets, clothes, even my trunk wound up in tatters and I had nearly exhausted myself when Uncle Ahmed slipped into my room (I had forgotten to lock the door) with a bottle of wine. We didn't speak,

I merely collapsed on the floor and he uncorked the bottle. He brought it to my lips and I suckled at it like a baby drinking mother's milk before falling asleep in a pile of shredded clothing.

I awoke on the floor this morning with a ghastly headache and my first thoughts drifted to you. What would you think if you were to see me like this? I imagined your clear eyes taking in the scene and offering nothing but condescending judgment. Who are you to judge me though, Agnes dear? Perhaps you think you're perfect, with your precise ways and your muted mannerisms, but I know the truth. In a world like this, nobody can be perfect.

Rosemary

* * *

May 24, 1923
Luxor, Egypt

Dear Agnes,

You must think me in the thralls of madness and I can't deny that it is a possibility. I feel different than I used to. My thoughts these days turn quickly monstrous and you would consider me quite vile if I were to reveal the fantasies I have been allowing myself of late. I know you and Father must be sick with worry and I am sure there is a letter on the way demanding my immediate return. I don't expect I will be coming home anytime soon though.

I walked through the markets today and visited the perfumery. Oh how you would have loved it Agnes! Small, fragile glass bottles lined the walls and each scent allowed access to a unique world. Sandalwood and neroli, frankincense and lotus, I must have spent half the day in the shop coating myself in the inebriating fragrances. I bought so many bottles I don't know where to put them all! Perhaps I will ship some back to you, if you could handle something so exotic?

All my love,
Rosemary

* * *

May 28, 1923
Luxor, Egypt

Dear Agnes,

I got your first letter today, at long last. I received it indeed, but as I stared down at your perfect handwriting, so small and soft, I grew so disgusted with it that I ran to the Nile and watched the unopened letter sail away. I felt better then and returned to my room, satisfied. I am certain whatever you had to tell me was unimportant anyway.

Mr. Saunders came to visit me last night. He had heard through the grapevine that I was almost attacked by that rowdy mob and wanted to come check in on me. I let him into my rooms and we sat chatting in a very civilized manner. It was all quite lovely really, but overwhelmingly and ludicrously stodgy. Here I was, in this wild and untamed land having a most ordinary conversation.

It was hot, so I unbuttoned my blouse (one button only) and fanned my face. We were drinking cold tea with mint leaves and for some reason I couldn't stop focusing on the dainty manner in which he held his cup. He held it as though it were a butterfly or the petal of a flower. Suddenly enraged, I slammed my cup down on the table, so hard that the weak little thing gave way and crashed to the ground bringing my teacup with it. Then, out of nowhere and for no reason I could fathom the man apologized. He apologized for my actions and it upset me so completely that it was all I could do to contain myself. It was such a peculiar thing to be enraged by, but there it was. I paced around the room like a caged animal and he could do nothing but watch me. Then, of course, further violence ensued.

Luckily for me Agnes, I had moved all of my perfume and clothing into Uncle Ahmed's room for the time being so there was little left for me to destroy. I had, however, managed to tear apart my mattress, the clothing I was wearing and I was eyeing my guest (who was watching me with an expression of dumb terror on his face) when Uncle Ahmed burst in with an armful of wine bottles and proceeded to nurse me into an inebriated stupor.

All I recall beyond that is the shocked face of Mr. Saunders and the words of my caretaker and friend Uncle Ahmed: *If you value your life you will stay away from this one.*

Rosemary

* * *

June 1, 1923
Luxor, Egypt

Dear Agnes,

I got my first taste of blood yesterday and I am not sure what will become of me. I revolve between short moments of lucidity and long bouts of uncontrollable anger now, with the rest of my time spent either in the throws of fitful sleep or being plied with wine by Uncle Ahmed. There isn't much that I don't despise when the rage takes me and the hooves of war pound in my heart. I loathe the sunshine and the river, the desert and the people all around. I can't stand the delicacy or pomp of it all and yet the primitive brutality and attitudes sicken me just as much. I suspect Uncle Ahmed knows something and I could murder him for not telling me, but perhaps I would hate him just as much for revealing the truth. Either way, in my moments of clarity, I am vividly aware that he is my only friend.

Did you get my shipment of perfume dear, precious Agnes? I think you will adore the blue lotus.

I can't go anywhere now without Uncle Ahmed walking in my shadow. But I'm sure you know what that's like don't you sister? I was your shadow for so long. Not that that I could ever hope to emulate you. I'm afraid that none of your goodness rubbed off on me. No sweet Agnes, I am but a sinful, wicked creature lost in this exotic land of sand and gold.

I throw all your letters in the river. I haven't read a single one. I can't tolerate the thought of your bitter judgments. You should know by now that your self-righteous perfection makes my skin crawl. In all of my wildest fantasies I dream of the ways in which I would punish you for your very existence if you were here with me.

I was at my little writing desk yesterday afternoon, wearing my nightgown despite the daylight. I had all my perfumes laid out before me in a line and I was breathing them in. Uncle Ahmed had been reluctant to let me have them back, but I had insisted. So there I was, drowning in the fragrances and I thought of you. I thought of you dabbing the perfume on your tiny, pale wrists and I couldn't bear it. I flung the bottles at the wall and watched the liquid seep onto the ground. I grabbed the shards (still slick with sweet scents) and began to rub them on my skin. I rubbed and rubbed until my skin was torn to shreds and the brown and yellow of the fluids mixed together with my blood. It looked like river mud then and soon I could no longer stand. But still I rubbed the perfume on my body and I screamed your name Agnes. I called you violent and horrible names until Uncle Ahmed, my only friend in this land and the next, came to save me and feed me soothing wine from his endlessly flowing bottles.

When I awoke this morning I was bandaged and Uncle Ahmed was attending to me. Don't worry dear Agnes, I didn't feel any pain. He said that in my drunken state I had drawn the enclosed hieroglyphs with my blood. He took them to Mr. Saunders to be translated and my young archeologist gave him one word to bring back to me. Love. Perhaps it was a message for you, dear Agnes?

A single kiss to Father.

All my love,
Rosemary

* * *

June 29, 1923
Luxor, Egypt
Case: 28743902

Dear Miss Agnes Kelley,

We regret to inform you that your sister, Miss Rosemary Kelley, has been reported as missing by Mr. Ahmed Mubarak as of June 19th, 1923. He has provided us with as much information as possible on her disappearance, but he believes her to be quite sick and even possibly dangerous. We are working hard to try and locate her and any help you could give us would be undoubtably valuable. If you have heard from, or seen Miss Kelley in the last ten days please inform us as soon as possible via telegram through the ministry of communications telegraphs department. Details enclosed.

Sincerely,
Mr. Mohammad Fayed
Director of Foreign Relations

* * * *

Star Spider is a magic realism and speculative fiction writer from Toronto where she lives and works with her awesome husband Ben Badger. Star is currently in the process of seeking representation for her first and second novels while working on her third and fourth. <http://www.happycreations.ca/writing>.

COLLECTIONS

DAVID ELSENSOHN

WHEN I MEET HER she is driving mostly west.

I'm seated on a gas station curb, wincing at freshly dispensed Coke passing cracked lips and regretting my decision to hike the thirty miles between a half-dead desert town I'd wearied of and some other dot on the map. To my distant right and left rise mountains drained of color and will, tinted only by the shadows of clouds; the air rarely moves, but when it does it takes the form of dust devils that blunder through the scrub brush until they get confused and die. I have somehow strayed off the main artery that pumps across the American Southwest.

She is filling up a massive Chevrolet pickup from the late sixties, faded white with a green stripe under its coat of dust. Standing with arms akimbo, she is bony and long-faced, with strong shoulders and a newsworthy pair of buttocks, a disinterested Valkyrie who spies no fallen warriors in the landscape. Her hair is dark copper, chopped and unstyled. A cigarette juts from thin lips.

I normally shy from striking up conversations. I've hitchhiked a little, asked locals for directions, had discussions on creaking buses, but speaking to strange women is not listed in my typical skillset. I'm a writer, not a talker—yet I am drawn intensely to her, and the prospect of walking farther is agonizing. I try my luck, hoping my visible notepad and pencils render me suitably harmless.

"Hey, this is something I'd never ask except that I'm desperate, but do you think maybe I can hitch a ride? I can help pay for gas." I don't expect a positive response, since I'd seen her lope inside, sift through a plump roll of bills, and hand sixty to the dusty-jawed derelict behind the register.

"I'm going to California," I add.

Going to make it in Hollywood? Her accent is odd, nearly emotionless, but vaguely western. Dark eyes of indeterminate ancestry stare levelly from under a rust-colored curtain.

"Ha, no. An editor friend hired me to write a couple of stories for next year's anthology. So I'm going to live at my sister's place. A last-ditch attempt to assemble some kind of environment to write in." I quickly scribble down a reminder to look up "last-ditch" and see if its origin dates back to what I think it does. I do that a lot, write things down; otherwise they become mental aches that grow far more ominously, naggingly important than they should, simply because they were forgotten.

In a hurry to get where you're headed?

"Not really."

She tilts her head in a confident come-along gesture.

A regular Salvatore Paradise. Clear off the shit on the passenger seat and get in.

I extend a hand after brushing it on my jeans, which is not terribly useful because they are powdered with desert, but I do it anyway because it's a pleasantly symbolic erasure of one's sins before greeting someone.

"Hi. I'm Byron. Like the Lord."

Her grip is firm but cautious, as if measuring my ability not to combust on contact.

Call me Magdalena.

* * *

It is a boxy old truck with a big nose, no sense of humor, and a mile-long stick shift, bent and angled like a rusted lightning bolt, and despite its near-total lack of shocks I decide riding in it is heavenly compared to hiking. The truck cab is hot but nothing like the stinging oppression of being outside in the desert sun. She drives with casual purpose, snapping the occasional cigarette from the yellow pack in her shirt pocket to her thin lips. We flash by fields of scrub and cacti standing like a patient mob, and pass offramps that lead to dirt roads that lead to cracked arroyos and nowhere.

"How about you? Traveling to somewhere?"

Not to. At.

I take it to mean she left something behind her. The focus—and I write this down because I think it sounds good—is a place to increase the distance from, instead of a place to decrease the distance to. I look at the smooth shifting of a catlike thigh muscle as she switches to a higher gear.

“Yeah, me too, I guess. Too old and ashamed to stay with my parents, too young and socially inept to get a typical job and live by paycheck. So I am seizing my opportunity to uproot myself and write.”

My father kicked me out a long time ago.

* * *

She agrees to let me ride west with her, taking me along with one proviso: if she ever goes off someplace by herself, that I never ask her where. I could wait for her to return, or not.

I wonder but do not pry. Maybe she likes to screw truck drivers for money. Maybe she’s an addict, scoring heroin behind corrugated shacks, but I never see any track marks on her, and her teeth are nice, almost too nice, gleaming like a serpent’s. She seems proud, unapologetic, dangerous.

After that initial exchange, we don’t speak much, at least not the small talk people seed the air with so they don’t collapse in terror from the weight of reality. She seems to like the fact that I don’t talk overmuch. I’m one of those folks who can wait a hundred miles for the next sentence, preferring to watch the world stretching by then diving into my notepad to write something down. She prefers I not touch the radio, which she rarely turns on but which always seems to play western rock when she does. Sometimes she lets the knob sit in the in-between places, letting the airwaves communicate their vastness. I see it as deconstruction, or post-modernism, or something I don’t recall from my classes.

What do you write?

“Horror tales,” I say, chewing on a pencil. “Or when I can be arsed to do research, magazine articles. If I didn’t need to sleep I’d write all day.”

* * *

The first place we sleep is the Paradise Motel, far from the highway and unaware of its own irony. It cannot be called kitschy, for kitsch requires a sort of brash enthusiasm; the motel is too old and defeated for that. She pays for the room. Possessed by a remnant of nice-guy gallantry, I offer to sleep in the truck, but she snorts; *it reeks bad enough as it is, and you’ll freeze.*

Her paying for rooms becomes a tradition while I travel with her. Another—which I quickly establish—is that I shower first, because she takes showers with the knob turned hard to the left until the bathroom wallpaper starts to sag from the heat. When she emerges in a billowing haze, I avert my eyes politely, pretending I don’t see her pointed, accusatory nipples. Her aggressively short hair is as straight as it is during the day, and she lets it dry, rivulets darting down her deeply tanned back. While she pulls on a fresh pair of jeans I stash the little complimentary bottles in my pack.

There is one bed. I pick its left side and lie rigid and narrow, teetering on the edge. I don’t want to assume. Brown curtains bloom and fold incessantly above the droning air conditioner unit. She is watching a western with the sound low when I drift off, and is absent when I flutter awake.

Weather doesn’t seem to bother her. Hot as hell yesterday afternoon and the sun wouldn’t burn her, now cold as hell in the morning and she saunters into the lobby in short sleeves, wiping dirty hands from the truck’s cantankerous engine. I am storing away a meager selection of scrambled eggs and lukewarm bacon; the alleged coffee is hot but drinkable only with a generous overapplication of sugar packets.

“Used to different seasons, huh?” I shiver in my ragged, useless windbreaker.

Yeah, different layers.

* * *

Magdalena has a talent for finding treasures in the most desperate of places: a pewter belt buckle from a roadside stand; a mean pair of turquoise boots in her size (seven and a half) at the bottom of a sale barrel; a pre-1930s gold wristwatch from under a pawn shop’s scratched glass counter. She is relentless, digging deeper, swerving suddenly into parking lots, knowing that what she seeks is somewhere buried. *There are always secrets*, she says while browsing through a trading post outside of a town consisting only of a gas station and a drive-through restaurant. *Something to uncover.* This as she draws forth a bear fetish pendant, carved of

intensely red jasper, which she haggles down to twenty-five dollars.

She leaves right after that, telling me to relax for a few hours. She takes her keys and her truck.

I spend the afternoon on a bench outside the trading post, leafing through booklets and local papers, tracing streets on maps, writing in my notebook. A story begins in my head, a scene really, of a clever thief who sells his soul for the ability to relive his life as often as he wants, but I know it won't go anywhere. I watch trucks pass in rectangular explosions of sound. When she gets back she nods, buys a root beer, and we leave. Drug-running, I think. Guns.

* * *

We wind through red desert country, on roads stark and disused. She sticks to her unfiltered cigarettes but doesn't mind my rolling joints on the flat dashboard of the pickup and wreathing myself in smoke while I read amusing travel guides or local anecdotes, adding my own editorial commentary. She says she likes how my thoughts taste.

"All right, I didn't know there's a Las Vegas in New Mexico."

East of Santa Fe. They did a scene from 'Easy Rider' there.

I shrug. I'd heard of the movie but remember only flashes of sunglasses and the U.S. flag blazing from helmets and motorcycle gas tanks. People say I'm an old soul but I'm still young as far as experiences go. "There's a San Antonio in New Mexico, too, looks like. Where Conrad Hilton was born, it says."

We may pass through there. A couple of good bars if you like green chile cheeseburgers.

I read on, and pick out factual snippets. Ghost towns have classifications, ranging from barren site to semi-ghost to a historic community (San Antonio is a semi-ghost). A semi-abandoned site can have a resident or two.

"I don't want to be that resident. Or maybe I do. It's a unique kind of lonely."

A ghost town is a ghost town because something was alive and booming, once. It has a romanticism associated with its past life, unlike the tiny outposts one passes on the highway, unknown points that never were: ever-dying gas stations and greasy spoons, peeling steel shacks still serving some manner of fuel, to vehicles or people. Nothing was ever big in such places, except addictions and depressions.

"What is there to do out in these parts of the world, besides drink, fuck and regret? Kill, I guess."

There are other places, really desolate places, that you wouldn't want to wander.

"I guess. But this *seems* more desolate... because sometimes people try to live here, and nothing comes of it, and years later there's some graffiti on an abandoned wall, and a tin can, or rusty car chassis, and scrub. As if life made an attempt, and failed. That's sadder to me than true wasteland.

"Speaking of sad, some priest got killed Saturday," I read. "Albert P. Sullivan, retired, Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, still said the occasional Mass, beloved of the community... suffered an accident while repairing the roof of his one-story house. Body was found tangled in the fallen ladder, neck badly broken." Even out here the news format had the same rhythm. I'd toyed with the idea of becoming a journalist once, but I want to write, not cramp my words in a full-justified column, and I never cared for the whole concept of having to be gruesome to sell. Stories should appeal by immersing the reader in a dismaying situation, a personal terror, not a pessimistic, expectant, masturbatory voyeurism. I tell myself there's a difference.

* * *

Even when name-brand hotels rear their square heads, she refuses them, searching out remote, anguished accommodations with faux-Navajo patterns on the bedcovers. But there are televisions, always televisions, and before I shower she strips away her jeans, pushes me down on the bed and sits astride me, while the screens bray guileless car commercials and real estate offerings. Ignorant of the reason behind my luck, I can but try to keep up, pretending to be experienced and passionate; I have no idea whether I give her pleasure or not. She moves with vigor, but I couldn't claim she is a wildcat, for that suggests a release of control, a temporary loss of self, and she is never anything but calmly intense.

She showers, while I smoke one of her short, brutal cigarettes and stare at carpet colored an unnerving chlorophyll green. I blow out a grey wreath, watching it struggle. It is not age these in-between places have in common, but decay.

* * *

In a somewhat populous town we sit in a real vinyl booth. I eat a surprisingly good stacked enchilada with egg and a revelatory red sauce. She takes a divide and conquer policy with a green chile cheeseburger, upon which she's shaken an absurd amount of salt and pepper. We discuss religion, which gets her quickly on a roll. She claims cultures fail once their gods become complacent.

Then barbarians come, with crueller gods, to destroy and renew. The Hebrew war deity stops driving his armies, and now? Lazy faith. Nonbelievers are judged with a disapproving shake of the head. Vague pity, instead of burnings and hangings and piles of rocks crushing ribcages.

"Okay, so not so many make with the hellfire. Those that do, well, you leave them alone in their little white churches. One guy with bad hair shouts, everyone else nods their heads and clutches their pearls. You try to outvote them during elections."

And in the meantime the rest of you pray to a white baby on hay who likes gifts, who loves you and carries you on beaches when you're sad. You buy sculptures of him playing soccer with the kids.

"Fine, but isn't it supposed to be that way? We're savage, then we grow up. We don't need the harsh gods any more. Someday we'll figure it out enough so that, I don't know, the world is bettered. Everyone equal. Find enough answers so gods aren't needed to explain them. We haven't reached it yet."

And you won't. Before you get there, outsiders will get here, the ones whose lives are shit, with their god who demands death, and your comfortable, complacent civilization gets raped and erased. You show me anywhere in history where it didn't happen. In the next booth I can see the white-haired ire of an elderly lady who cannot help but overhear. The clinks of her cup on her saucer are loud and judgmental, until Magdalena casually twists her head over to look at her with dark eyebrows lowered, and the old lady decides that her crossword has greater importance.

"It's slow going, historically. But the more humans learn, the less that will happen. The way I figure it, no one goes and examines all the scriptures—the Bible, the Qur'an, the Tanakh, the, um, Buddhist Suttas, the..."

The Vedas, The Daodejing, The Yasna, she says, sardonically.

"Dianetics, whatever, and decides, 'this one makes the most sense to me, I'm going with this one.' No, it's inversely proportional. The harder you believe, the fewer books you've read. The more you learn, the less you need divine mandate."

Hm, she says, and finishes off her burger in one irrefutable bite. She licks grease from long, dark fingers. *You can go explore downtown for a while. I need to look up some things.*

"I'll be done in no time. Downtown podunk." I grin when I say it.

She slithers up from the booth to her full height, and takes up the bill. *The word 'podunk' comes from the Algonquin. From the Nipmuc dialect. It means 'where you sink in mire.' Put that in your notes. I do.*

That evening she finds a hotel with a sign so decrepit that only the word "Verde" can be deciphered; there is nothing green within acres. I shower, she showers, she turns on the television, she kisses me carnivorously. She always runs hot; when I am inside her I can feel her body heat, almost painfully. When I go down on her I blow on her as if to cool her off, and she laughs at that.

* * *

Sixty miles from a gas station, she swerves into a gravel lot and strides into a faux-log cabin offering soft serve ice cream and native jewelry, kachina dolls and pottery. She roots through a crate of branding irons and horseshoes, coming up with a bolo tie, its clasp an iron ovoid set with a gleaming obsidian stone. She pays twelve dollars for it. I grab the day's paper and a periodical of real estate offerings, and we resume the road.

"For sale, abandoned store. Running water. Good idea that." I scan the columns. "Did you know they sell decommissioned missile bases as underground homes? I think I like the idea. Hey, decided not to go with the mass annihilation, we traded for an industrially designed loft."

To the left of an ad for livestock auction, I read of a service due to be held for Father Gerald Darning. Found murdered. He had been a resident for only three years, having been transferred from west Texas; survived by his wife and son. A grisly scene had unfolded in his kitchen: he had been torn apart as if by animals. Authorities are on the search for wolves in the area.

"Wow. It's like a grim TV drama."

We'll stop somewhere nicer tonight, she says, smoking. I realize that while she smokes incessantly, and I could swear I hear the occasional rasp of a steel lighter, I have never seen her actually light a cigarette.

I glance over at the wheel and lock up like a baby deer. Magdalena's cigarette thrusts between the index and middle fingers of her left hand, in her blasé Dean Martin draw. The pads of her fingers are stained. Her nails are short, each one rimmed with crimson. Magdalena does not paint her nails. She lets the vapor explore inside her, then releases it, her arm going back to rest on the open sill. The smoke flees out into the desert air.

The corner of the paper quivers in my hand, and I clear my throat. The facility of the human mind to create causal associations, invent patterns and similarities, is well-established. Like our back-and-forth about world religion and the way people think. It can be nothing. All the time she opens the hood of the truck to cajole its insides into greater effort. It is dirty work. That is why her nails are stained.

I put it away in my head and read of Saturday theater classes offered for schoolchildren.

* * *

The hotel isn't nice by any means, but down one glum hallway an ice machine is discovered chuckling to itself; I crunch cubes while she takes an actual bath. The bottom six inches of every wall are carpeted; my eyes trace the black line along their root, where vacuums could never reach, an eternal and ever-darkening divergence of floor and not-floor.

I have to pee, and I knock. She doesn't answer.

I go back to crunching cubes and changing channels, and get up again when the pressure becomes distracting, and I knock. I go in.

Her clothes are piled on the toilet seat. The tub is filled just shy of slopping over its railed edges. She lies under, peaceful, the water swirling around her exposed knees; her eyes are closed. I gaze down at her. A drop strains away from the rusted faucet to strike above her, spreading into her watery ceiling. A commercial plays in the other room, then another. There is no sound in here but the breathless silence of liquid.

"Magdalena?"

I wait, stupid and without solutions. A full seven minutes go by on my watch. I fidget, leave, chew at my nails, come back, then panic, yelling her name through the water.

Her eyes snap open. They are angry, piercing, not freshly awakened, but as if she'd been forced to change the channel.

* * *

"Are you a vampire?" I venture, as we speed down a highway with three digits on its signs. I feel ridiculous, but I've spent the last few dozen miles trying to hold my breath like a zen diver, and I can't get past seventy seconds.

Don't be stupid. She waves a hand out the window and lets the sun play over it.

* * *

I crunch back across gravel with a bag full of snacks and beer, and a local newspaper. I have a weakness for jerky, the flat leathery kind which threatens to loosen teeth when I tear at it, and I use it for a salve for my nerves; I press it against the roof of my mouth with my tongue, savoring explosive flecks of pepper and sour teriyaki tang. I walk around the back of the truck, where she stands aloof, snapping a dead cigarette away to bounce onto the dust.

"I've got it."

I can hear you about to say it. Don't say it.

"Are you an angel? Like an aveng—"

I am not sure how I end up on my stomach behind the truck, the bag of groceries under me. One of the cans of beer has burst and is hissing like an angry viper. In retrospect I think she backhanded me; at least the eggplant bruises on the left side of my face seem to match her knuckles, when I examine it later in a mirror. She follows it up with the toe of a turquoise boot in my stomach that will make it hurt to urinate for a few days, and which lifts me off the dirt to bounce off the tailgate.

She picks me up with one hand, tosses me in the truck bed like a duffel bag, and drives forty miles with me coughing and crying and banging against the steel sides and trying not to vomit, until we stop at a McDonald's and she lets me clean up and buys me a Coke. We sit in a corner, and she quietly tells me, and her eyes are black and dead and serious.

Her name is not Magdalena.

Her real name would parch throats and crack teeth.

But even that is not her original name. Her original name was like the others: trickling over the tongue and heart like crisp mountain waters, a joy of sound.

She is an outcast, raised with the other outcasts in a place fraught with the politics of cruel nobility; where she lives the air is thick with ash instead of with the name, breathing the name, singing the name. Here, in this in-between place I and every human on the planet knows, the air is thin and lifeless, air for the souled, air for those who don't know better, so she chooses not to breathe it. It reminds her of the Level of Drowned, where voices gasp and clutch in rivers of blood and feces and boiling pitch.

She runs errands. She used to punish simony—I write it down in my notepad—but her task is expanded. Things are different now. Our world is not what it was. Tired and complacent. She misses the temptation of the devout, the taste of desirous fury held in check. Once, that balanced out the arrogance of those assigned to be taken by her, and now there is only the arrogance, spread here like a virus.

Are you hungry?

An inane question, but she does not have humor like that. I look at my hands.

Don't go palsied on me now, Byron. I'm still going west for another seventy miles or so, then finding a room.

I get into the boxy old truck, and she drives.

“So is it a vengeance thing, or a justice thing? Is it your job?” I wince against being hit again, or killed, torn apart as if by animals.

Job, duty. Despite all your Faustian literature there's no compact with the employer, you're just allowed to do shit. Although there are concepts like payment and exchange.

I think about the fact that she has always paid for everything, and taken nothing.

“Is your employer...? I mean. Are you one of the bad guys?”

Your syllables grow smaller by the mile. Good, evil. It doesn't work like that. It's not this boss or the other boss. Somebody came up with an idea that their god can't be flawed, so you ended up with this unanswerable question of how evil can exist. The Epicurean trilemma.

“So it's all a matter of perception.”

And confusion about whether imperfection and evil can be from your god or not. The whole refusal to even entertain the idea is pandashit.

“They should have taken a note from the Greeks. Their gods were all sorts of fallible.”

She takes a drag from her cigarette in response. I look at her angular face, and her lanky form in the aged bench seat, and try to imagine wings sprouting from bony shoulders, or horns budding from beneath rust-colored hair.

“Wow. So much to think about.”

Are you going to worship me?

“No, I guess not. I mean, I want to make you happy, so maybe that qualifies as worship, but I wasn't planning to leave homemade casseroles and jars of hot peppers on an altar or anything.”

She angles her mouth in a smile. *Worship is for those who think they can change a god's mind.*

“Can I write a story about it someday? Fiction.”

No names.

“I'll use Magdalena. You didn't tell me the other ones anyway.”

* * *

I am at a hotel; night is come with cool air and stillness, erasing the dim glow from the tops of the mountains. Lanterns jutting from the wall next to each door glare out into the darkness. She is gone again, having left dust clouds and a gravelly scrape in her wake, and will return. I expect to pick up a paper in a day or two, and read of it.

I stand outside, smoking and letting it scour my lungs, gazing out onto the landscape. I am unnerved suddenly by how ancient this country seems, sparse and uncaring, how it swallows up what lives on it. I wonder who else wanders its darker places, collecting, removing blots from the canvas. I have a feeling I can never know why such judgment is made.

I am still standing outside when the truck crackles to a stop, and we walk in together. She showers, and the steam seeps from underneath the door. The television, its sound muted, displays episodes of a horror series from the fifties; a monstrous shadow looms along a wall, and a woman gathers her arms to her head, screaming. She

does not think to run.

Magdalena emerges, naked, and stands erect before the clouded mirror. She never looks at her image, never admires or evaluates, never leans in to examine nose hairs or a blemish or a bent eyelash. Some of the water runs down her in stripes, some of it lifts gently away from her skin, evaporating, or perhaps wanting badly to get away, to no longer be in contact.

“So... what do you look like? Really?”

You don't want to see. You're not supposed to see. Those who see it have done something so bad that they're being dragged through the gates over broken bone shards to be buried in Vaitarna, the River of Pus and Filth.

“Maybe it'll inspire me to write horror.”

She shrugs; it makes no difference to her.

She lets the world slide to the left, and shows me. I don't see everything at once. A blink, a shudder of a fluorescent bulb, a hummingbird's wingbeat, and it is enough to clench my buttocks tight because my body suddenly wants to shit itself empty so it can flee, except that neither of my legs would work anyway, like the hollow resignation of a man too close to the slow birth of a mushroom cloud, too close, knowing that the bow wave will hit and there is no use in flight. She shows me, and I know that only God could allow such distortion of physical form. There are teeth, and feet, and genitals, and something rippling like fish flakes, and weeping holes where something organic and pulsing should live, and everything is long and undulating and howling and could reach out and collect me wherever I go in the world.

I am not sure if I scream or whimper, or merely look, but she snaps reality back into its socket and looks down at me.

You should see what the Host looks like, she laughs.

* * *

I don't speak for a day or two, but I don't leave, either. I think my brain is trying to make something of it, taking its own damaged parts and examining them with great interest, as if burying itself in the details will prevent having to accept such heavy, looming truth.

She kills another old man just east of the Arizona border.

We have sex once or twice, I am not sure how; probably I disconnect that fevered, knotted nightmare vision from her lanky, rugged, cowboy chick form with the turquoise boots. She feels the same as she always does. I read the same papers, glossing over the news, and crack the same jokes. We eat burgers and fries and tacos and deep-fried things.

I can never again watch her as she eats, though. We sit across from each other and I fill the air with earnest silence; if I look at her my guts quiver, and I can hear the clicking of mandibles and a distant, cosmic sucking sound.

We part after California's welcome sign with the golden poppies, and I wave for some reason. I sit down on the curb outside the gas station, slurping at a much-needed soda and tapping my pencil against the spiraling wire of my notebook, unable to summarize my thoughts.

* * *

Dammit. I am alive, and should be grateful. I am alive, living where the western coast shrugs off the water, and I cannot write of it. It keeps sliding back, buckling under itself like the tide.

I cannot, in fact, write at all. I keep my notepad at hand and do not open it, and I absorb everything with eyes, ears, nose and skin. It aggravates me still. My sister moved out months ago and left me here to stay; sometimes she helps with the rent although I do not ask. Perhaps she has hope for my future.

So, I sweep up a little, keep places clean for money, and eat a little, and drink a lot, and smoke unfiltered cigarettes, and watch sunsets designed but then forgotten by Heaven, but I do not sleep.

* * * *

David Elsensohn lives for coaxing language into pleasing arrangements, and for making good chili. A native of Los Angeles, he lives with an inspirational wife and an curmudgeonly black cat. He has works published in the Northridge Review, Crack the Spine, Kazka Press's California Cantata, and Literary Underground's Unearthed Anthology.



The Drowned Sorrow

DARK LAKE

ANDREW HOGAN

IT'S BEEN MORE THAN fifty years since I've been to Dark Lake. Some of the features on the shore have changed, and the water level is lower due to a recent drought. The water is colder than I expected. I hope my wetsuit can keep me warm enough. With the passage of so much time, I have a hard time figuring out exactly where Marv set out the witch net. I swim out to the area where I think we placed it, fishing spear in hand, and dive down about twenty feet.

My mind is clear and alert, even though last night I drank more than my fair share of beer during the celebrations commemorating the inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places of the Forest Service Guard Station at Olallie Lake, for which I am one of only two surviving members of the Civilian Conservation Corps for the state of Oregon who worked on its construction during the summers of 1933 and 1934. It was a small crowd, and I was happy to have an excuse to get back into the mountains, although I kept the real purpose of my visit to myself, informing no one about my intention to explore the bottom of Dark Lake. Attached to my belt in a leather pouch is the throwing star that had fallen from Herb Jonkins' neck. This will be my last chance to solve the mystery of how it ended up there so many years ago.

If I'm going to find anything on this tank of air, I have to go deeper, even though I can feel the cold seeping through my wetsuit. I dive down another ten feet and swim a large circle around the area. There's a brief flash of light. I dive toward it. The witch net lies below, glowing.

* * *

When I first showed up at the Forest Service Office in Idanha in May of 1933, the district ranger didn't know what to do with me. I slept in the tool shed that night, until the ranger had reached his supervisor up in Sandy and was told to make use of me somehow. Next morning when I got back from breakfast the ranger was sitting at his desk with a mangy guy wearing a scraggly beard, maybe forty years old.

"Ah," the ranger said. "Here's the communist they sent me. Take him with you. He can dig the grave in case Herb didn't make it out of there in time."

I wasn't exactly sure what a communist was, but I knew it wasn't good. My family needed the \$25 a month that would be sent to them from the \$30 I would earn in the Civilian Conservation Corps, so I ignored the insult.

"I'm hoping Herb got over to the Warm Springs Indian Reservation before the big storm hit," the ranger said.

"Herb didn't like Indians much," the mangy beard said. "Besides, he would have sent a telegram long before now."

* * *

Next day I was riding up to Olallie Butte with mangy Marv Butterfield, the forest service handyman, to fix up the cabin with the new money President Roosevelt was sending the states to help out with the Depression. We'd stocked up on extra blankets because it was an awfully cold spring, following a hellacious winter. Even now in the first week of May we were bundled up like it was March.

"Ever seen a dead body, kid?"

"Yes, sir. My Grandpa Louis died of an aneurysm last year, I saw him laid out at the funeral home."

"No, I mean a dead body that's been left outside, maybe the wolves or the bears have got at it?"

"Nothing like that, sir."

"Well, let's hope it doesn't come to that. Not a pretty sight."

Back on the coast in Brookings, it had been pretty much your typical cold and overcast winter, but up here in the Cascades, they'd had lots of snow, starting with a major blizzard late September that closed all the trails to the forest fire lookout cabin on Olallie Butte. Herbert Jonkins, the fire lookout, hadn't been heard from since before the blizzard when the ranger sent him a message by carrier pigeon to get out.

Loaded down with our extra supplies, we struggled across the Breitenbush River, which was running high because of all the snow run-off. We camped next to Breitenbush Lake around three in the afternoon. Marv left me to set up our camp and took his fishing pole down to the lake. Within an hour he was back with half a dozen cutthroat trout for supper. He cooked the trout up along with some cowboy pan-fried biscuits. I slept like a baby on a full stomach.

Next morning we started up the trail to Olallie Butte. By the time we reached Spoon Lake, we felt a cold breeze coming down the trail.

“Something’s wrong,” Marv said.

We crossed over a ridge and saw the west slope of Olallie Butte. It was covered with snow all the way down to the shore of Olallie Lake. When we reached the south shore of Olallie Lake, we found it was still frozen. Marv knew of a small pond to the east above the rim of Dark Lake that was fed by hot springs, so we would have water for the animals and for cooking.

“I’ve been out here every spring for the last twenty years, hunting, logging, or lately working for the Forest Service,” Marv said. “I’ve never seen snow like this, not even back in ‘23. Look how it’s all on one side.”

Marv was right. On the east slope of Olallie Butte, where the old volcano had collapsed into its cone, there were patches of snow, but quite a bit of bare rock. On the west slope, the trees were buried half way up their trunks as though hit by a giant snowball.

“We’ll have to try to get up to the cabin on the east slope,” Marv said. “It’s a lot more rugged, but I don’t know as the west slope is going to melt off before August. The top looks pretty snowed in as well.”

We made our base camp by the hot springs pond. Marv decided we should explore the east slope trail before we tried to take any gear up to the top.

“We’ll try and find Herb Jonkins before starting work on the fire lookout cabin.”

Marv gave me instructions about setting up the base camp. He was going over to the fishing resort on Olallie Lake to pick up any local gossip that might be helpful to us.

“If I’m lucky, I won’t be back until tomorrow,” he said.

I wasn’t sure what being lucky meant, a meal, a bed, maybe some companionship. Marv handed me a rifle.

“Ever killed a bear?” he said.

“No.”

“What kind of hunting have you done?”

“None, my father is a fisherman.”

“Well, the bears might be hungry around here because of all the snowfall keeping the spring plants down. They might come looking for food, like the mules, for instance.” Marv got down on all fours. “Whatever you do, don’t shoot at the head. The bullet will just ricochet off and make him mad. He’ll kill you and then eat the mules. Shoot right here.” Marv pointed to the area behind his shoulder blade. “Here you’ll hit something important. If he rears up on his back legs, shoot him right in the middle of the chest.”

“Okay, I’ll do my best.”

“After you got the camp set up, you’d better go down to Dark Lake and do some target practice. Try some ducks or a beaver. Something that’s moving. The bear won’t stand still for you.”

“Right.” I’d never been out in the woods overnight by myself. I’d never seen a bear, except along the shore from my father’s fishing boat. I tried not to look too scared.

“I’ll see you later tonight, or maybe tomorrow, if I’m lucky.”

Maybe I was the one who needed to be lucky.

* * *

Dark Lake was just over the ridge from our hot springs camp. The lake sat down about three hundred feet below our camp, inside an old volcano. The lava was visible on the walls surrounding the lake.

The lake was frozen and covered with snow except for an area just off the northern shore. I had Marv’s rifle. I took a few practice shots at some tree trunks, but the recoil was murder on my shoulder. I was flinching every time I squeezed the trigger. I tried lying down in the snow and packing some snow between my shoulder and the rifle butt. That helped, and my aim got a little better. I had the chance to shoot a couple of rabbits. I could filet a salmon in under three minutes, but I had no idea about how to skin a rabbit, so I aimed just behind for target practice.

After a supper of beans and biscuits, I laid out the bed rolls under our Army surplus tent and lined them with the extra wool blankets. I had the rifle perched next to the bed roll. Marv hadn't returned by the time the sun set, so I assumed he'd gotten lucky. So far, I was too.

Sometime after midnight I woke up to the mules whimpering. I grabbed the rifle and the flashlight. The moon had been out, but a cloud soon covered it. I started singing *Old Fishing Grounds* at the top of my voice, remembering that it was never a good idea to surprise a bear when it's looking for food: "*Well, light comes early, it's early in the day, it's four o'clock and we're on our way...*"

Fifteen minutes of serenading the owls and I couldn't figure out what was bothering the mules. Maybe they were just hungry, there wasn't much grass because of the snow cover. On the way back to the camp, I noticed a faint glow coming from Dark Lake. I walked over to the rim, the rifle hammer cocked. A pinkish light oozed out of the ice on the north end where the snow had been blown away.

When fishing with my father at night, we'd seen lots of glowing algae. I understood it only occurred in salt water, but I guessed I was wrong. It bothered me that the glow was steady and only in one spot. Ocean water had to be disturbed to cause the algae to glow. Maybe some kind of underground stream was creating constant turbulence.

Next morning, I made breakfast, and still no Marv. I went to the lake where I had seen the glowing. I'd thought the snow had been cleared from this area of the lake by the wind, but now I could see it had been melted. The ice itself was clearer than I expected, looking like it had re-frozen overnight, perhaps several times. In the center of this area a small projection reflected in the sunlight. I bent down to touch it; my finger started to bleed. The object was some kind of razor blade. Blood ran down the side of the blade into the ice, which began to melt. There was something underneath me, a dark figure, possibly a person. Could it be Herb Jonkins? The shape seemed too small. Jonkins had been described to me as a big guy, over six foot, husky. I went back to the camp to get the ax.

I'd been raised in a fishing town, so I wasn't too good with an ax, and the ice was very hard. I worked for over an hour without making much progress. It was nearly noon and I was getting hungry. I heard a gunshot. Marv was standing on the rim in the direction of our camp, waving his arms. It looked like he was calling to me, but I couldn't hear him. I went back to camp.

"What the hell were you doing?" Marv said.

"I found something in the ice. I thought it might be Jonkins. I was trying to get it out."

"Did you check to see if the ice was thick enough to support you? You could fracture a piece and have it separate under you. You should never do something like that on your own, and you should have been tied to a lifeline in case of a fracture."

Marv turned and marched back to the camp. I was in trouble. After a silent lunch, Marv said, "I want you to cut down some of these Pacific silver firs. They need to be about ten foot tall. Cut off all the branches and the tops so the pole that's left is about 8 foot long. Then haul them down to the lakeshore where you were cutting the hole."

"What are we going to do with them?" I said.

"Just do what you're told, or I'll send you back to the ranger's office."

I cut the trees down, trimmed them up like Marv told me. Marv was assembling a pile of saplings he'd cut from the swampy area in the cove on the north end of the lake. He wouldn't let me back near the figure under the ice. I dropped the fir poles in the snow on the edge of the cleared ice. He immediately sent me off for more poles. From the rim I could see he'd laid the poles out as the spokes of a large wheel right over the spot where I'd found the metal razor. The saplings were laid out to connect the spokes together.

Except for barking out a few orders, that night's supper was silent as well. I woke up after midnight and made my way toward the latrine. On the way back I circled around by the rim. The north end of the lake glowed beneath the ice.

"Lost your way back to the tent?" Marv said. "Or are you sleep walking?"

"No, I was just wondering about the light," I said. "We see light in the ocean water when the algae are disturbed, but it's blue-green and it only lasts for a few seconds until the algae calms down again."

"It's not algae," Marv said. "Dark Lake was a side vent of the old Olallie Butte volcano. It filled with water once the volcano went dormant, but the light of the hot lava still shines up through the water."

"How could the lake be frozen if the water was in contact with the hot lava? Wouldn't it be like the pond

we are using for water?”

“Hey, I’m no geologist. I’m just telling you what somebody told me. Get back to sleep, we’ve got a lot of work to do tomorrow.”

Next morning, after another silent breakfast, Marv had me cut and trim eight medium size willow trees, for the outer wheel, I was guessing, since he kept his plans to himself.

After I’d finished with the willow poles, Marv said, “Ride over to the resort and get me two hundred feet of the medium size rope, like we use to tie up the bundles on the mules. I don’t want the thick stuff. If Marjorie gives you any lip, tell her it’s a forest service emergency and I’ll come back and requisition it if I have to.”

As I walked back up the rim of Dark Lake, I could see Marv laying out what looked like a net. Each fir spoke would have a network of saplings running around the wheel. The willow saplings were attached to the ends of the poles, holding them together in a wheel. The rope I was sent to retrieve would hold the wheel together over the figure in the ice.

When I arrived at the resort in the afternoon, a teenage girl sweeping out one of the cabins near the Olallie Lake told me to look for Marjorie in the store. The store was a T-shaped building, with the entrance through a large porch at the bottom of the T. The steps to the porch were made from river rock, the railings of branches and small logs with the bark removed. Inside the floor boards creaked under my feet. The store smelled of pine and cedar.

“Marjorie?” I said.

“Speaking.”

“Marv sent me over. We need a couple of hundred feet of pack lashing rope. It’s a bit of an emergency,” I said.

“Ah, the chinaman witch,” Marjorie said.

“Witch?”

“What? You didn’t see it in Dark Lake? The Indians have been having conviption fits about it all winter.”

“Yeah, I saw the glow at night,” I said. “I figured it was some kind of freshwater algae. Something’s trapped in the ice, but I can’t tell what it is.”

“I went over there a month ago when the snow melted off the north side of the lake. It was an overcast day, so I couldn’t tell much about what was down there.”

“Did you find a piece of metal sticking up through the snow?” I said.

“Nope, but the Indians claim the ice’s melting around the witch. So maybe she’s got a knife in her hands and it’s getting closer to the surface what with the melting.”

Marjorie turned around and went back into a store room. She came out carrying four rolls of the lashing rope, two on each arm. She handed them to me, but I could only carry two at a time.

“I’ll put them on Marv’s Forest Service account. Anything else?”

“That’s all he said to me, which isn’t much,” I said.

“He probably worries you’ll think he’s a superstitious fool, but he got the Indians to agree to help find Herb’s body once he’s got the witch lassoed.”

“They’re sure he’s dead?” I said.

“The Indians say the chinaman witch killed him, not the storm. Who knows? It was such a freak of a storm. Nobody around here’s ever seen anything like it. The snow came down like a blanket. Peg Murphy had a horse trapped out in her meadow not a quarter mile from her stable. She couldn’t get to it before the snow got too deep to walk in. Damn horse froze to death in sight of the stable. I mean people were out every couple of hours dragging the snow off their roofs with the snow rakes.”

“Maybe Jonkins stayed in the cabin during the storm? He could have gone down the east slope of the butte, and from there over to Warm Springs,” I said.

“Maybe, but I doubt it. He’d have showed up by now,” Marjorie said. “The Indians seem to know where he is, but won’t go up there until the witch is taken care of. So get to work on your witch net so we can find Herb.”

Marv had supper ready when I got back to camp with the rope. I told him what Marjorie had told me.

“Crazy Indian superstition,” was all he would say.

* * *

The next day we finished the witch net. My final task was to find medium size boulders that Marv attached to ends of each of the eight spokes with baskets he made from the rope. We gathered up our tools and packed them on the mules. By the time we reached the rim, the wind had come up out of the southeast. The wind grew stronger and warmer all afternoon. We had to move our camp away from the hot springs pond into a depression a hundred yards away to keep the tent from being blown away.

After supper Marv pulled a bottle of whiskey out of his saddle bags. "I figure we're deserving a little vacation tomorrow," he said, pouring some whiskey into my empty coffee cup. "We'll take tomorrow off, our day of rest."

I wasn't going to argue. We both got good and hammered and didn't wake up until three in the morning when our tent went airborne. We grabbed it and rolled it up. The wind was howling, but it wasn't cold. We went back to sleep out in the open. We didn't even buckle up our bedrolls it was so warm.

Just after dawn, Marv kicked me. "Get up."

"What's wrong?"

"We've got to get the tent set up again, and try to find a sheltered spot for the animals."

I looked east. A massive wall cloud was headed toward us. I could see the lightning in the distance, but it was too far away to hear. I secured the tent with extra stakes and tie lines. I moved fallen logs inside the tent to get our bedrolls and gear off the ground in case of flooding. Marv found a crevice not too far from camp that would be protected somewhat from a storm coming out of the east. He tied the horses and mules to a large boulder. It was already raining by the time he got back to the tent.

* * *

The storm was a disaster. The tent was blown down repeatedly. Marv and I were soaked; fortunately it was a warm rain. The mules and horses got spooked by the incessant lightning and broke loose. When the rain finally stopped the afternoon of the next day, Marv and I had no choice but to hike over to the resort for shelter and to hire horses to find our own animals.

The route we'd been taking to the resort going north was blocked by a torrent of water rushing out of Olallie into Long Lake. We trudged along the southern shore of Olallie Lake until we reached Mill Creek, the normal drainage for Olallie Lake. The spillway of the Mill Creek Dam that maintained the water level of Olallie Lake was completely clogged with uprooted trees and other debris.

The warm rain had melted the snow cover on Olallie Butte. Rivers rushed down the butte into Olallie Lake, carving out deep ravines and carrying down boulders, trees and other vegetation. From the western shore we could see that cabins 5 and 6 at the resort had been swept away, one of them was floating about thirty yards from shore. Cabins 4 and 7 were surrounded by water and appeared to be listing. All of the boat docks were under water, and all but one of the fishing boats had sunk. We reached the resort just after dark. Marjorie gave us a nice meal. She put me up in cabin 1 that was safe from flooding; Marv got lucky again.

Over the next couple days, we managed to recover both horses and one of the mules and set up our camp again. The rain and the warm weather had a dramatic effect on the snow pack, which, according to Marv, was now about normal for mid-May. The Forest Service sent in a couple of teams of mules to clear away the debris from the Mill Creek spillway. After a week, Olallie Lake returned to its normal level, but Dark Lake was at least thirty feet higher than it had been before the storm. All of the ice had melted, and our witch net had disappeared below its opaque surface. That night I detoured back from the latrine to the rim of the lake, but the glow was gone.

We got ready for a trip up the mountain, and the next day a couple of Indians showed up from the reservation to help with the search for Herb Jonkins. One was a chief and the other a shaman, both from the Paiute tribe, the smallest of the three tribes on the reservation.

After a couple of hours riding, the Paiute chief stopped, looked at the shaman, and said, "Look over there, in front of the hemlock."

Since I was the most junior in the party, I got off my horse and started shoveling away the snow. After a while I got tired of shoveling, Marv looked at the chief, who said, "Try a little to your right." I hit something almost immediately, a boot.

Marv noted the location of Herb's body on the map he'd brought. With a box camera he'd borrowed from Marjorie he took several pictures of Herb's corpse after I got it uncovered. Then we wrapped Herb up

in a tarp and loaded him onto the mule.

We had a hard time getting Herb down the mountain. The corpse was still frozen and couldn't be tied very securely to the mule. As he thawed out, parts of Herb's body would relax, and then the corpse would slip off the mule. By the time he arrived at the resort, Herb was getting pretty flexible. Marv found a local rancher with a pickup, and they took Herb down to the district ranger's office in Idanha, where he was shipped off to Salem for autopsy.

When we found Herb, he had a pointed metal disk sticking out of his throat, an engraved Chinese throwing star, but somewhere on the way down the mountain Herb's neck defrosted enough for it to fall out. Before Marv left with the body, he sent me back up the mountain to find the throwing star. It wasn't a big deal, since he had some good photos of it in Herb's neck, but he thought the Sheriff would want it for his investigation.

The investigation took a while to complete, since Herb was murdered in a part of a national forest that was claimed by the Warm Springs reservation and located in Jefferson County, but the murder was reported in Marion County by the district ranger. Everything eventually got sorted out a year later. Since Herb was a federal employee killed while working on federal land, the FBI took jurisdiction and determined that Herb had been murdered by person or persons unknown. I don't think keeping the engraved throwing star I found along the trail made any difference in the outcome of the case. There were never any suspects.

* * *

The Pacific silver firs I trimmed out for Marv more than fifty years ago light up like eight foot fluorescent tubes, blue, green. The witch is trapped beneath the net, her eyes glowing red, her teeth sparkled gunmetal gray in the dim sunlight. She raises her arm through the net, another throwing star in her hands, silver, shimmering. She screams, "bèi pàn," and flicks her wrist. The disk floats toward me. I'm not afraid, it's moving too slowly. I catch the disk in the tines of my spear. It has the same engraving as the one from Herb Jonkins' neck.

A fish, a black and white fish, big, like the white sharks that got tangled in my fishing nets and had to be killed, swims past me. How could a shark have gotten into this lake? There were no seals or sea lions to eat here. The shark slides past me. I stab at it with my spear. The shark swims away but then turns like a boomerang and bites me in the back. The pain's awful. I'm sinking. My right arm's paralyzed, so is my left leg. The shark disappears into the murk. Didn't like the taste of me. I struggle to stay afloat, I'm getting very tired. I hit bottom. Only a faint gray light shines above me. I'll rest just a minute and then swim back to the surface of Dark Lake. As soon as the witch lets go of my leg.

* * * *

Andrew Hogan received his doctorate in development studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Before retirement, he was a faculty member at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, the University of Michigan and Michigan State University, where he taught medical ethics, health policy and the social organization of medicine in the College of Human Medicine. Dr. Hogan published more than five-dozen professional articles on health services research and health policy. He has published twenty-one works of fiction in the OASIS Journal, Hobo Pancakes, Twisted Dreams, Thick Jam, Thrice Fiction Magazine, Long Story Short, Defenestration, The Blue Guitar Magazine, Fabula Argentea, The Lorelei Signal, SANDSCRIPT, and the Copperfield Review.

DANDY DARLING

CATE ENGLEHART

You and I should have been
Laudanum drinkers
Dragon chasers
Opium den lazing on tea stained brocade
Nodding in an aura of antique intoxication
Hazy veil descending like a caul
Reborn into an artificial paradise

You and I should have been
Kept poets
Court laureates
Bound by quills and parchment
Inking pretty words
Love letter confections for powdered ladies
To devour ravenously
Like creme pastilles from satin boxes

You and I should have been
Preening peacocks
Dandy dilettantes
Attending cultured salons
Cavorting with whores and courtesans
Dragging lace cuffs through fine feasts
Red wine spilling from your knife wound mouth

But, bound in blood, a decadent cliché
The suicide pact
Just staving off your final inevitable histrionic
Would you have held me to my word?
Mostly I just wanted to watch you dance and swoon
Conspire and gossip
Leave off your death mania for a while
I held your attention for moment, didn't I?
More than the cold grey world could

Better suited for greater times, you and I
If we wished to court Le Morte
We should have been
Buried alive in silks and excess
Choked by the cloying perfumes of moral decay
Raucous and drunken
Dis-eased by our own wantonness
Spinning, staggering
Giddy to the last into a pauper's grave

* * * *

Cate Englehart says, "I write from visions, or to purge my obsessions, or to exorcise my ghosts. I want to crystallize these moments so I can visit them again. This way I never lose these loves, I always remember these passions, whether they healed me or tore me apart." Visit her at <http://confessheretic.blogspot.com/>.



Buckshot Passage

THE SYNTHESIZER TOWER

IAN KAPPOS

EXPOSITION

I fell in love once, after my father fell from the Synthesizer Tower. His falling went like this:

He was already thirty feet high before anyone noticed.

“This is not a spectacle!” he shouted at the gathering crowd below.

Everyone knew it was.

My dad was a pianist and until recently he had found pretty steady work as one. Up until recently, he hadn’t been staying up all night, poised over his baby grand piano with a snifter of scotch. Up until recently, his wife hadn’t been hiding his razors.

I knew my dad could hear the grumble from the onlookers. The wind hadn’t kicked up yet, but it would soon.

“I’ll make it!” he assured us.

I had never seen someone try to scale the Synthesizer Tower, but I had heard of those who had tried. No one ever made it.

A few weeks ago my dad had gone to the curator of a venue at which he usually performed, ready to prepare for his set. The curator had told him something like: “I’m sorry, Thor, but there’s just no business for this kind of thing anymore. People don’t come here for music anymore, Thor, they come here to drink and be merry. They get music all the time. The Synthesizer Tower takes care of that. I’m sorry, Thor.”

This was, absolutely, a spectacle.

My dad looked down at us. His fingers gripped an outcropping of plastic, his feet horned into slight alcoves in the analog edifice. Tufts of wire and circuitry confused his ascent. The Tower soared above him.

My mom and I were wedged in the cluster of spectators. She was crying. My sister was at home, tucked into bed for the night. I wanted to say something.

My dad started up again. “This is not a spec—”

And then he slipped. The wind did the rest.

* * *

My falling went like this:

She came into my work a few weeks after my father’s death. Her hair was wavy and brown as chestnuts. Her smile was wide. It seemed like she had too many teeth for her mouth. Her name was Olivia—I found that out later.

“I’ll just have the garden salad, please,” she said. “Extra Caesar, please. And four coffees.”

Franz Schubert’s Piano Sonata Number 21 in B-flat Major was playing. I hated that composition.

“...and four coffees,” I echoed, after a stall, plugging at the register.

“For my band-mates,” she added, I’m not sure why.

I nodded. I didn’t want to look at her. There was a line behind her. The keys on the register were like little teeth with numbers on them. They stretched outward, as if through a fish-eye lens. I had to look back up at her to readjust my focus.

“Do you play music?” she asked. She was still smiling.

“No,” I said. I gave her change to her, careful not to brush her fingers with mine.

“I guess you don’t need to,” she said, “when you have a face like that.”

There was nothing I could think to say to that. I didn’t need to. She told me her address and the numbers bit into my memory like little teeth.

* * *

The Synthesizer Tower went like this:

No one knew when the Synthesizer Tower came about because everyone came about after the Synthesizer

Tower. In its corded roots we built our homes and our businesses. On its metronomic chimes and jingles we based our school bells and our shift changes.

I remember one night, when Olivia and I sat atop the shingles of a roof after an hour of traversing the roofs of the neighborhood, we looked up at the Synthesizer Tower and talked about the Man in the Synthesizer Tower.

“I hear he can’t grow a beard,” she told me. “He’s permanently clean-shaven, and none of his hair ever goes gray. What about you?”

I was staring wistfully at the Tower, which stood like a massive beaver tail above the nubs of houses. Circuitry sputtered reds and greens in the moat of refuse around its base.

“Do I get gray hair?” I said. “I don’t think so.”

“No, Dylan,” she said, maybe a little impatiently. “What do you know about how he looks? The Man?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said. “I’ve heard the same as you. Also the opposite.”

“I hear he loves to play what he plays. All the same pieces. It’s like playing them for the first time, every time he plays one.”

“I wish I felt the same about hearing them.”

“He’s supposed to learn a new chord every day, even though he doesn’t play them. A new chord every day. Do you know how many chords there are, Dylan?”

“No.”

“No one really does.”

The wind picked up a bit, and carried with it a clattering of notes. It must have been the top of the hour, or a quarter after. I should have known by now.

“Do you know what that is?” Olivia asked.

“Debussy’s Preludes Book Two,” I said. Multicolored lights glittered at random—or maybe synchronized with the notes, but they were coming too fast for me to keep track—across the black stretch of Tower.

“Let’s fuck,” she said.

“Okay.”

A gust nuzzled past, bearing down on us an endless amalgamation of displaced noise.

* * *

DEVELOPMENT

At home things weren’t going very well. My mother signed to my sister over dinner.

“*It’s okay, honey,*” she was saying. “*Things will be back to normal soon.*”

I didn’t know what she meant by that. My sister nodded mutely and didn’t sign anything in response. Instead she shuffled her food with the end of her fork, reconfiguring it in the candlelight. We hadn’t been able to pay the electric bill this month. I was working overtime, but we were having some issues with Dad’s insurance benefits. Some red tape stuff that I didn’t understand and that I didn’t think Mom understood much, either.

“How’s that girl you’re seeing?” Mom asked me. My sister read Mom’s lips intently. They both looked at me, awaiting my response.

“She’s okay,” I said, and shoveled a bite of food into my mouth and tried to swallow it, though my throat was very dry. The Synthesizer Tower shone through the dining room window, fractals of colors occasionally magnifying through beads of moisture on the glass.

“I hear she plays music,” Mom said.

“Where’d you hear that?”

Mom cleared her throat and picked at her food. My sister signed something at me, very quickly. I asked her to repeat her motion.

Don’t leave us, she said. *Don’t make a spectacle.*

* * *

I sat in Olivia’s room and watched her undress. She was beautiful. She was like a drop of milk, frozen in the air, stretched just before impact.

She asked me, “Do you want to hear something?”

I didn't answer right away. I was still fully clothed, sitting on her bed. I didn't want to say what I wanted to say.

"Why is it you don't say much?" she asked as she sat down at her keyboard. She stretched her fingers, perfect little icicles, nimble through the cold.

"I don't know."

She began to play. I didn't know what it was; it was no composition I'd ever heard. It was nice at first, until she reached the bridge, dispelling notes at a breakneck pace, and then I doubled over, fell off the bed, clutching my stomach, then my face.

She stopped. "What is it?"

"I don't know," I moaned.

I could hear her looking at me. She did not get up from her piano bench.

After a while, she said, "Your father's the one that jumped from the Tower a few weeks ago, wasn't he?"

"Yes," I said. I didn't raise my head to look at her.

"I'll stop playing," she said.

"No," I insisted, but not very forcefully. "Keep..."

She didn't continue. I know she knew I was thankful.

"I won't play the piano," she said. She got up, walked over to me, knelt down, placed her icicle-fingers on my back, stroked. They were hot through my shirt. My pain, whatever it was, hadn't subsided, but at least she gave me something else to focus my attention on. "I can play another instrument, if you like."

"Okay," I said.

She got up and I heard her fumble through equipment. I kept my eyes closed. The windows were shut and the air inside was stagnant.

* * *

My mom took up another job. I didn't ask what it was. She was out late.

During my time off from work I stayed at the apartment to watch my sister. Olivia wanted to come over on these nights, but I told her no. Said it wouldn't be a good idea. Mom had gotten rid of my dad's piano, anyway. So, Olivia said. So, just not a good idea, I told her.

My sister and I sat at the dinner table. I slid some potatoes and string beans onto her plate. It was dark inside, but we had laid about more candles. Instead of paying the electric bill, Mom had bought a new pair of curtains for the dining room window. There was still just the slightest impression of the Tower's lights through the fabric.

I sat down and waited for my sister to start eating. She was drawing something.

"What are you drawing?" I asked.

She did not see my lips. Her head was inches from the paper. An arsenal of colored pencils sat beside her. I tapped her shoulder, lightly. She looked up at me.

"*What are you drawing?*" I signed.

She shrugged. I scooted my chair closer to her and lifted a candle above the paper. On it, amateurishly drawn giraffes consorted on a checkered floor. They were outlined in orange and filled in with black spots. Their necks were charcoal, though, as if they had wedged their heads through Chinese finger traps. Across the charcoal necks glittered spots of neon greens, reds, blues.

"*Do you like my colors?*" she asked me.

I swallowed a coppery knot in my throat. I was grateful, for once, that she didn't have to hear my voice.

"*They're nice,*" I said. I scooted my chair back.

Music began outside. I got up.

"*Want some tea?*" I asked.

She shrugged.

I went into the kitchen and filled the teakettle with water and set it on the stove. I waited for the steam to rise.

* * *

"That must be so crazy," Olivia was saying, "to not hear *anything*."

I didn't appreciate her flippancy. I thought of my dad, suddenly, trying to teach my sister a chord on the piano. She was so delighted. She felt the vibrations, she had told him.

"She wants to hear," I told her. "My mom was a singer for my dad's ensembles, sometimes. She wants to hear her mom's voice. I don't think that's crazy. I think that's sad."

Olivia shrugged. My trachea locked up at her reaction and I couldn't think of anything to say. Relationships have this way of turning all your brick walls to mud.

She must have seen the frustration in my eyes or something because she immediately changed the subject.

"I have something for you," she said.

I looked at her.

She went to her dresser and from a drawer she extracted a small mechanical monkey, the kind that claps two cymbals together at the flip of a switch. She handed it to me. "It needs batteries," she told me. "I thought if you don't like it, maybe your sister will. But maybe it will remind you of me, when I'm gone." She smiled, but it looked more like a grimace.

I said, "Gone?"

"My band has a gig," she said. "It's out of town. I'll be out of town for a few days. It takes a little while to get there."

Olivia grabbed my hand. It was so hot I thought my skin would evaporate at its touch.

"Will you miss me?" she asked.

"Don't be crazy," I told her. I gripped the monkey in my other hand. The cymbals scraped together.

* * *

Mom got home late one night, very drunk. I was up, sitting at the dinner table. I hadn't been able to sleep. I was examining one of my sister's doodles. I couldn't quite tell what was happening in it, but it looked like smoke curling above a bicycle helmet, or maybe a boot.

"What are you doing here?" my mother spat at me. She wore a dress, which was wrinkled and bunched in places. She used to only wear dresses to Dad's performances.

"I couldn't sleep."

"Don't you have work tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"Then what the fuck are you doing up, Dylan? Huh? What the fuck is this?"

She grabbed the toy monkey from the table. She stared at it, her mouth contorting into a maniacal smile. With one vicious tug, she ripped the cymbals from the monkey's grasp and threw them to the floor.

I hushed her. "Please, Sue's sleeping."

"She can't hear me, Dylan! Or have you forgotten, she's fucking deaf? She can't hear me. She can't *beeeeeaar meeeee.*"

I looked down at my sister's drawing. The smoke blurred.

My mother began to sing: "*Strangers in the night, exchanging glances, wondering in the night, what were the chances, we'd be sharing love before the night was through. Something in your eyes was so inviting, something in your eyes was so exciting—Dylan, what the fuck are you doing?*"

I stood in the kitchen doorway. "I'm going to make tea."

"You're going to bed."

"Okay, Mom." I kept my head low as I passed her on the way to my room.

"*Something in my heart told me I must have you...*"

* * *

Olivia arrived back in town a couple days later. She called me. Can we meet, she asked. Yes, I said.

We met on the roof of a derelict apartment building. It was not that far from my apartment building. I arrived before she did. Olivia swayed as she pulled herself over the ladder. The floor of the roof was hard-packed with gravel and cigarette butts. Olivia was very pale, paler than usual.

"Dylan," she breathed, and she fell into my arms. We stood there for a while, in silence, holding each other. Then she said: "Dylan, it was amazing."

We sat down and propped ourselves up against a ventilation shaft. Our view was not of the Synthesizer

Tower, which stood behind us, but of the trickling of buildings that fell away, deep into fog. Olivia began to talk, very excitedly.

“There’s a whole market out there, Dylan,” she told me. “People out there, out there—out there, they don’t see music, hear music the way we do, the way I do. I don’t know about you, maybe they see it the way you...no, they don’t. They’re different. They *like* it, Dylan, they like it, they like *my* music. Here, everyone’s so...stale, so *cold*. No one can tell good from bad. They don’t know anything. But outside...there’s energy. There’s fire. Here, there’s none of that.”

Her chest rose and fell very fast. Puffs of gray bulleted from her mouth. I thought of the mutilated toy monkey on the floor of my apartment, cut off, excised.

I said, “You’re leaving, aren’t you.” It wasn’t much of a question.

“Come with me,” she said.

I didn’t say anything. She gripped my hand. I couldn’t feel it through the cold.

“Come with me. I know you don’t like the music, but maybe you will out there. Everything’s different out there, maybe you’ll change. Maybe it will change you. Come with me. Just come with me, please.”

“My mom, my sister, need me,” I said. “I can’t, Olivia. I’m sorry. I can’t.”

She looked at me, her eyes darting from one of my eyes to the other. She didn’t seem to be examining me so much as filling the time between words with movement.

Finally, she said, “Fuck you, Dylan.” She got up.

I remained where I was, my hand frozen in the position she had left it, clutching invisible fingers. The ground in front of me lit up with a shadow of red, and then diffused into a liquid green.

“Stay,” I whispered.

“Goodbye,” she said.

She whistled on her way down the ladder.

* * *

I got home that night and my mom wasn’t drunk. She didn’t mention anything about her behavior a couple nights prior and neither did I. She wore sweatpants and watched my sister read the subtitles on the TV. The power, I noticed, had been turned back on. I nodded to my mom and she nodded back.

My sister didn’t notice me. Her colored pencils were nowhere in sight. Neither was the monkey.

A cold dinner awaited me on the table. I went to the kitchen to prepare some tea. Peeking out from the doorway, I watched the television. A man was on it, interviewing a band against a backdrop of bright watercolors. The sound was off.

“I don’t understand these shows,” my mother said to me. “I don’t need to see these people. They mean nothing to me.”

As if on cue, my sister grabbed the remote and tapped a few buttons. An image of dancing people in animal costumes stuttered onto the screen.

I went back into the kitchen and turned the burner on.

“Make some for me?” my mom called.

“Okay,” I said.

* * *

RECAPITULATION

My sister started school and my mom found a better job. I stayed at home a lot. Drawings began to accrue on the refrigerator, drawings of trees and houses and dogs. The Synthesizer Tower, and the Man inside it, played on.

I ended up quitting my job at the café. I couldn’t stand the people. Still, I got lonely.

When I got particularly lonely, I started to watch pornography. One day, while browsing the internet, I came across a video that made my fingers go very cold.

It was Olivia. She was totally naked save for a necklace of piano keys that drooped between her breasts. She lay across a leather sofa. In the background sat a gutted baby grand piano. A man stood behind her, gripping the hammer-end of a wire that was once presumably connected to a piano key. He whipped the wire across her back, viciously. She may have been in orgasm, but I saw the wetness on her cheeks. Her mouth

was a black hole totally bereft of its many little teeth. Long, glistening lines of red surfaced across her back with each lash. The video was very long.

I exited the webpage and went for a long walk. I stuck to the ground, avoided rooftops. Over the ensuing days I went for many walks.

* * *

Rumors began to circulate through town. I heard them at the café, at which I had resumed my barista position. I heard some kids talking about it.

“...Thought she was gunna sign...”

“...Guess she didn’t read the fine print...”

“...What’s a ‘fine print,’ anyway?”

“...I don’t know...”

“...Anyway, she’s up there now. Should we...?”

The kids departed. They were young and it didn’t sound like they knew what they were talking about. I didn’t fully understand what they were talking about, really. But I knew where they were going.

A woman was waiting on me. She repeated herself very slowly and snidely: “I said, I wanted a double-shot—”

“Sorry,” I said, and withdrew from the register. I left the counter, parted the afternoon crowd and emerged onto the street. I walked. Then I broke into a jog. The Synthesizer Tower grew as I pumped my legs across the sidewalk, across the streets, across intersections. Chopin’s Ballade No. 4 in F Minor began to play. It did not sound right.

A crowd had already gathered, as was to be expected. Somewhere in its mass a group of kids contributed their fervent whispers to the cacophony. The massive ring of forsaken, outdated equipment around the bottom of the Tower flickered and glinted in alternating colors. I didn’t know how anyone could make it through that obstacle course to begin the climb upward. I didn’t know how my dad did it.

She was pretty high up, but not high enough that I couldn’t recognize her. Her chestnut hair was matted but coming loose in the wind. She was white like bird shit against the industrial gray of the Synthesizer Tower.

Please don’t open your mouth, I thought. Please don’t let me see...

“You’re not special,” Olivia said, the void between her lips leaking the words, hollow, stale. She may have drooled. Her eyes didn’t seem to lock on to anyone in particular.

Then she looked down. I don’t know if she saw me. Notes tumbled through the air. She stretched a foot outward, but not to a foothold. Then she stretched the other foot outward.

She did not whistle on her way down. The wind did that for her.

* * * *

Ian Kappos’s short fiction has appeared in numerous periodicals, while his occasional nonfiction has appeared in The Sacramento Press and Maximum Rock ‘N’ Roll. His story “In The Leper Colony” was an honorable mention in Ellen Datlow’s Best Horror of the Year Volume 5. He lives in Sacramento, California.

THE LAUGHTER OF DEAD CHILDREN

JAMES FREDERICK LEACH

The trauma that ghost-children endure
when crossing, while becoming phantoms,
scrapes away their innocence,
like shit from the heel of a hard boot.

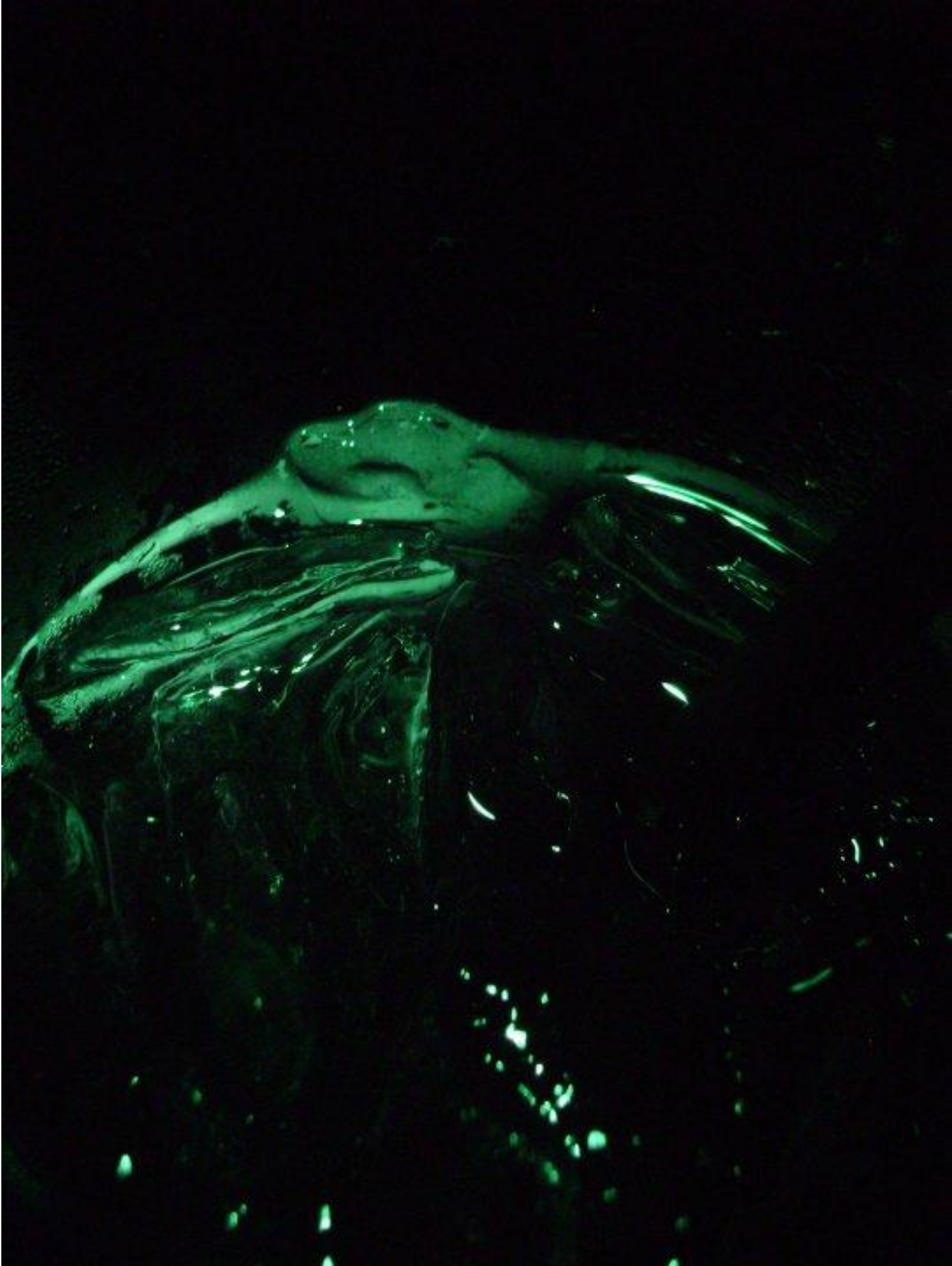
The meat, the substance is torn off
but a residue of purity remains,
a greasy smear of hope that dims
their translucent skins, their glimmering souls.

This hint of aspiration, once-human,
harmonized with new phantasmal vitality
distorts even impromptu mirth.
Simple giggles transform to ghastly hollow tones.

This disembodied cherub choir mocks our ideals,
a hymn cribbed from Puck: what fools, what fools.

* * * *

James Frederick Leach writes dark, speculative fiction and is a contributing editor to the website dailynightmare.com which is devoted to Midwest Snob Horror.



Ibis Monsoon

I CAN HEAR THE GORGONS SINGING

ADDISON CLIFT

THERE IS A CERTAIN kind of sorcery that draws its strength from the ruins of human endeavor. As the landscape of our aspirations crumbles around us, with a glance it preserves our regretful lives in stone for all eternity. It is not interested in our excuses. It simply pauses, documents, then moves on.

* * *

Ray watched nervously out the window as they approached the sunken wreckage of New Orleans. Dark was falling fast. To their right was the levee. To their left was a soggy backdrop of trailers, empty warehouses, and small brick homes, their porch lights just coming on.

“People still live here?” A.J. asked.

Mario said, “Yep.”

There was a checkpoint under the Huey Long Bridge. No civilians beyond it. Mario showed a bogus smart card to the black soldier with the rifle slung across his shoulder. He poked his face into the van and looked around. There was something in the back, covered with a tarp. He shined his flashlight, right in Ray’s eyes.

“What you got back there?”

“Supavac,” Mario said. “Don’t worry, we won’t wake the neighbors.”

The soldier laughed and waved them through.

With the bridge receding in the mirror, Mario turned off the baseball game they hadn’t really been listening to. Ginny waved the box of gas station donuts at the others, but didn’t get any takers. No one had much appetite before a job like this.

They fought their way over potholes and mud to St. Charles, which was lined with abandoned cars. This was Ray’s first trip into the city since they closed it off for good. He looked around at the strange but familiar landscape. The grand old mansions he used to rob were now just crumbling shapes in the twilight. Their windows were boarded up, their Greek columns splitting like broken bones. Soon the water would take them, too, like it had the rest of the city.

A.J. snapped him out of his reverie. “Is it true what I heard?” he asked. “This guy we’re after—he’s into, like, Satan and black magic?”

Ray looked at him, annoyed.

“I mean, I’m not scared or anything, I just want to know.”

* * *

Several days before, Jarvis Rook had called Ray out to his house. He said he had a job for him at twice his usual rate. Ray was surprised. It had been a long time since he worked for Jarvis.

He drove out to the faux Italian villa near LaPlace. His bodyguard D’Angelo came to the door. D’Angelo was real tall, an ex-baller for LSU. He took Ray back to the solarium where Jarvis and Freddie Pinto were sitting on wicker chairs. Here and there throughout the room incredibly lifelike statues peeked out between the palm fronds. The raindrops streaking down the glass roof cast beady shadows across their faces.

As always, there were no greetings or formalities. Jarvis just nodded at Ray, and Ray sat down.

“Tell him what you told me,” Jarvis said.

Freddie cleared his throat. “I seen Anton West. Two days ago. I’m in my boat, on Toledano Street, lookin’ for scrap. I look up, and there’s Anton polin’ down Galvez in an old pirogue. He seen me, but he don’t know who I am.” He took a long drag from his cigarette, then added, “He looks crazy. Kill-crazy.”

Jarvis nodded at D’Angelo, and he showed Freddie out. After they were gone Ray said, “Do you trust that greasy motherfucker?”

“Why not? He always been cool.”

“He’d sell his mama for twenty bucks.”

Jarvis leaned in close to Ray. “Nobody steals from me. Anton West about to become nobody.”

“What’d he take?”

“You ever hear of the Medusa?”

“Say what?”

“Say nothin’, just find Anton West.”

“In the flood? Shit.”

“Go at night so you can see the squatter lights.”

“How many people I get?”

“Way I see it, this a four-man job. I’m sendin’ a guy with you—white guy, A.J. Torres. He’s a little weird, but he’s cool. That leaves two more. You got a crew, or you want me to cover it?”

“I know a guy named Mario Picou. Him and his girl. They lost everything in the big one. But they got a van.”

“Fine. Just remember—this ain’t a courtesy call. I want Anton *dead*.”

* * *

They parked the van behind a church and got out into the dog’s-breath air. It was almost full dark. Oily water sloshed around their feet.

Ginny opened the back doors and threw the tarp off their two canoes. Mario helped her unload them. Then he looked around at the others.

“Maybe it’s ‘cause I was raised Catholic,” he said, “But if we’re gonna kill a man, I like to have a moment of silence.”

He bowed his head. His cohorts interrupted the loading of magazines and chambering of rounds and bowed theirs, too. Ginny lit a cigarette. The moment lasted thirty seconds, tops.

“Okay, let’s go.”

They carried their canoes down Napoleon, hitting standing water almost as soon as they were off St. Charles. Ankle deep at first, then, right around Loyola Avenue, up to their knees. The boats went in.

“Stay on your walkie-talkie,” Ray said. “And check out every light.”

They split up—Mario and Ginny stayed on Napoleon; Ray and A.J. turned up Freret Street. The half-submerged houses were little more than misshapen hulks marking their way. All around them the dead city screamed with life. Tree frogs croaked, night herons cackled, and from somewhere off in the darkness came a sound so wild and unearthly Ray couldn’t imagine what made it. They didn’t want to use their flashlights too much for fear of being seen, but with clouds blocking the moon it was as dark as a grave. Ray’s eyes had done all the adjusting they were going to do, and he still led the canoe into fence posts and the tops of cars and whatever else he would have seen just about any other night.

They turned down Amelia Street. The water reeked of petroleum. Here and there, gas bubbles rose to the surface. In places, they came upon logjams of plywood and siding. The rising water was dismantling the shacks of New Orleans, one plank at a time.

A banging sound caught Ray’s attention. He pointed his flashlight. The whole outer wall of a bungalow was just flapping there, like loose skin.

“They call this Cottonmouth Venice,” A.J. said.

“I know.” Ray killed the light, then peeled off his shirt. The heat was maddening.

“You ever been to the real Venice?”

“Nope.”

“Me either. They say that one’s sunk, too. But my little brother Jaime, he could talk to cottonmouths. He’d start swaying back and forth and chanting in some weird-ass language, and they’d all come stick their heads out of the water and watch him. Then one day he went blind and they found a brain tumor the size of an orange. He died real soon after. I still dream about him, though.”

They floated across the wide, pitch-black expanse of Claiborne Avenue. It was disorienting, like being in outer space. Ray looked both ways and saw no squatters’ lights anywhere. Once they found the other side, Amelia Street became Delachaise. The water was deeper here. Except for the occasional two-story house, all they saw were rooftops. Some had gaping holes in them. Others were strewn about with furniture. Two gators lounged on another until the beam of Ray’s flashlight chased them off. He looked around uneasily. Under one of these roofs was the house where he killed his wife.

Esperanza. The word still burned his throat. After he got shot during a bank job, Jarvis stashed him in a safe house and sent Esperanza to take care of him. She was unlike anything he'd ever seen. She spoke no English, so they had to communicate with hand signals. He made her laugh doing shadow play. When he got better they moved in together, in a little shotgun house on Delachaise. He loved her like he'd never loved anyone. When he found out she was planning to leave him, he shot her and buried her out in the swamp. No one came looking for her. Ray knew, even back then, after Hurricane Juanita but before the big one, that everywhere, all around, waters were rising, leaving secrets deeper and deeper beneath the surface, provided they were weighted down enough.

A squawk came over the walkie-talkie. It was Mario. They found a light on Galvez. Ray ten-four'd. They headed over.

Ray could see it from blocks away, in the front room of a house built on stilts. It flickered like candlelight, casting a spectral reflection on the dark water below. Mario and Ginny were sitting in their canoe across the street, swatting at mosquitoes.

Ray brought his boat in beside them. No one dared shine a flashlight or speak above a whisper.

Ray studied the house and laid out his plan: "There's about three steps above the water, then the porch. Now either that's Anton or it ain't, but we ain't surprisin' no one once we step on that old porch. So me and A.J.'ll go up the front; you two wait around back. I'm gonna knock. If someone answers, I'll just say I'm lookin' for my friend, and we'll roll. If no one answers, we kick it down. You do the same. Got it? Let's go."

Mario and Ginny rowed around the house, as quietly as they could. Ray watched the wavering light for any sign of activity. "You think they know we're here?" A.J. asked. Ray told him to shut the fuck up.

When he was sure Mario was in place, they paddled over and tied their boat to the front steps. They climbed up on the porch. It creaked even worse than Ray thought. With his right hand covering his Beretta, he knocked, then stepped to the side. They waited. Not a sound came from within. He knocked again.

"Willie? Cousin, you in there?" Ray called, trying to sound guileless. Still nothing.

He nodded to A.J. Both men readied their firearms. Ray took a step back, then slammed his foot into the middle of the door. It gave way like wet cardboard. They took cover on each side of the doorframe, and when no gunshots came, Ray entered, first ducking behind a corner, then into the main room with A.J. right behind him. He heard Mario coming in the back.

The room held a filthy mattress, a blanket, some food wrappers and fish bones, a bucket being used as a latrine, and two lit candles. The heat was oppressive, the stench even worse. Shit and piss and fish and mold. A.J. cried out in disgust. Mario came through the other door and immediately pulled his shirt up over his nose. Only Ginny didn't seem bothered by it.

"Search the house," Ray said. "Someone was just here."

Mario and Ginny headed toward the bedrooms. Ray went into the kitchen and cast his light around. It was dank and reeked of mildew. The ceiling was caving in, and the peeling linoleum tiles came loose wherever he stepped. Some kind of thick brown liquid was dripping from above, making a purplish hole in the floor.

Ray tucked his gun into his belt. He was about to say something to A.J. when Ginny started yelling from the other room.

They ran into the hall. Ginny was kneeling before an open closet door. Inside was a black girl, maybe twelve or thirteen years old, maybe seven or eight months pregnant. She was covered with sweat. She'd pressed herself into the corner, trying to escape Ginny's reaching hand.

"I'm not gonna hurt you," Ginny said. "Are you hungry? Can we get you some food?" She looked at Mario. "Go out to the boat and get her some food."

"But we're gonna be out here all night."

"Then I'll let you have some of mine, fatso, just bring her some food."

Mario left. Ginny coaxed the girl out of the closet and over to her mattress. "Whose baby is it?" Ginny asked, but the girl didn't answer. "Is it your papa's baby?" The way she stiffened her body indicated it was.

"How come you shit in a bucket when you got the whole flood to use?" A.J. blurted. Ray wanted to shoot him.

But the girl spoke for the first time. "There's things that come out at night. Out on the water. Ghosts."

* * *

They left the girl with two sandwiches, a bag of pretzels, and, much to Mario's chagrin, an entire six-pack of Royal Crown Cola.

They split up again almost wordlessly. Ray and A.J. rowed back the way they came, then turned onto either Eden or Elba, Ray wasn't sure. So many street signs were gone.

The wind was picking up. With it came the smell of something burning. And something else, too. An eerie, discordant wail, undulating and faint. One minute it was there, the next it wasn't. Ray pricked up his ears, trying to place it.

"Hey, Ray," A.J. said.

"What?"

"Why do you think Jarvis sent us out here?"

"To find Anton."

"Yeah, but why us? We ain't exactly his A-team. I only worked for him one other time. And I heard you was a junkie."

"Was," Ray stressed.

"Well I've been thinkin' about it. See, I believe in black magic, and whatever Anton stole, I think it has some kind of power. I think Jarvis sent us here as a test, to find out if Anton knows how to use it. He don't want to send his real crew till he knows what he's up against."

"You ain't bein' paid to think."

"Maybe I ain't, but —"

"Quiet. You hear that?" That sound again, floating across the night.

"Hear what?"

"Listen."

About a second later A.J. said, "I don't hear nothin'."

"Listen harder."

"Just, what is it?"

"It sounds like—" *It sounded like singing.* "I don't know what it sounds like."

As they rowed down Fourth Street, the weird, high-pitched vibrato only got louder, at least to Ray's ears. Finally he said, "I'm calling Mario."

He fished the walkie-talkie off the floor of the boat. "Mario, you hearin' this?"

Nothing.

"Mario, where you at? Are you hearing this sound?"

Still no response. He and Ginny should have been somewhere near Napoleon. Well within range. Lightning flashed overhead. For that brief, pale instant, the submerged city looked like a mausoleum. Ray ground his teeth.

"We're going after them," he said once the thunder subsided.

A.J. protested that dark forces were clearly at work, but started rowing anyway. There was a gust of wind, and the singing came again. Unmistakable this time.

"Okay, now I hear it," A.J. said. "I don't like it, but I hear it."

Despite the heat, Ray felt cold. He put his shirt back on. Left on Dorgenois, then across Toledano. He remembered what the girl had said: *There are things out on the water.*

It took him a minute to realize that A.J. was dragging the oars and they were slowing down.

"Ray, look."

He directed his light to where A.J. was pointing. There was a canoe, about twenty yards away. Tangled in a tree. It was Mario's canoe. It was empty. Mario's canoe was twenty yards away and it was empty.

Not knowing what was out there in the darkness, Ray didn't want to yell. So he called to Mario in the loudest whisper he could.

As if in answer, that high-pitched tremolo drifted toward them again.

"Take us over there," Ray said. "Real slow."

A.J. started to paddle. Ray kept his flashlight fixed on the boat as they approached. He pushed the branches out of the way and gave it a quick inspection. It wasn't tied up. It had drifted against the tree and gotten caught. All of their supplies were still on board, including a .45. Ginny's gun.

"The walkie-talkie there?" A.J. asked. Ray looked. It wasn't.

“What are we gonna do?”

“Just go slow,” Ray said. “I’ll keep my eyes peeled.” Lightning flashed above them, illuminating cadaverous houses and skeletal trees. Then it all went dark again.

“Ray?”

“What?”

“Don’t turn around.”

Ray started to turn.

“I mean it Ray! Don’t you fucking turn around!” The fear in A.J.’s voice was so intense that Ray froze.

“What’s goin’ on back there, A.J.? Talk to me.”

“Jaime?” A.J.’s voice was soft, bewildered. Then there was a splash.

Ray spun around. A.J. was gone. He crawled back to the stern and shined his light over the side. The water was still churning where he’d fallen in, but it was so murky he couldn’t see six inches below the surface.

Jaime, he thought. *That was his brother. His little brother, who died.*

Ray plunged his arms in. The lightning flashed, but he still couldn’t see anything below. Rain began to fall. The water, which had felt hot and filmy all night, was suddenly cold. He grasped around beneath the surface, finding nothing. He had to be down there. It couldn’t be more than five or six feet deep. He had to be there.

Then he found him. *Thank Christ*, he thought, and pulled. A.J. came up easily. But when Ray yanked an arm out of the water, it wasn’t A.J.’s arm. The body that surfaced wasn’t A.J.’s body. And the face he looked upon wasn’t A.J.’s face.

It was Esperanza.

All night long, with no city lights, no stars, and no moon, Ray thought he’d been lost in the most complete darkness possible. He was wrong.

* * *

When he woke, Ray was lying naked on his back on a damp mattress. His arms were cuffed over his head to the wrought iron bars of the bed frame.

He looked around the dim room. The nearest wall was moldered from water damage. Strange symbols had been spray-painted across it.

Lightning flashed, illuminating two statues against the other wall. Statues of A.J. and Ginny. Before Ray could even consider how weird this was, it came again. Only this time he knew these weren’t statues. It actually *was* them. They’d been turned to stone. Without knowing why, this suddenly made perfect sense to him.

There was a strange play of light and shadow coming from the next room. And that awful singing— whoever or whatever was doing it was right through the open door, just out of sight.

Then he heard Mario screaming. “Please!” he cried. “Please God don’t!”

Another voice, which Ray identified as Anton West’s, said, “Did Jarvis send you?”

“Yes!” Mario yelled. “Yes!”

Ray pulled at his cuffs. The bed frame was old and rusty. He thought maybe he could get free. The only trick was doing it without making too much noise.

Anton shrieked, “Jarvis Rook is a *dead man!* A *dead man* is Jarvis Rook!”

Lightning flashed again. Ray waited a few seconds, then pulled hard, timing it to the thunderclap. The crossbar snapped away from the mainframe and he slid free. His hands were still cuffed, but at least now he could get some use out of them.

He rolled onto the floor. His every instinct screamed to run. Instead, he went over to the doorway and looked into the next room.

Mario was standing naked against the wall. His arms were chained through metal loops on the floor. He pulled and pulled, but all that got him was more chain.

There was a naked black woman standing opposite him. She was blindfolded. Her body was covered with sores, and her hair was a nest of wriggling eels. Ray realized it was the eels that were making the sound he took for singing. As they writhed together, their bodies made a frenzied, hivelike hum.

And Anton West was there, also naked. He was fully erect. He had a snake in his hands and he was chanting under his breath. He held the snake up to Mario and it struck, biting him right below the nipple.

Mario screamed. Anton cackled like a demon. He held it out again, and it bit him in the belly.

Then he went over to the woman. He whispered in her ear, and she laughed.

“I will,” she said.

Anton pulled down the blindfold. The piercing tremolo of the eels increased in intensity, becoming almost unbearable. The woman locked her eyes on Mario. Mario’s eyes locked back. Ray could tell he wanted to look away but couldn’t.

Then, as Ray watched, Mario’s body began to stiffen. A dry choking sound rose from his throat. He fell back against the wall and started to turn gray. His eyes and nose bled. His arms and legs fought, then found their final pose. Mario, now, would outlast them all.

Ray had seen enough. He didn’t know the way out, so he took a crazed leap out the window, crashing through the glass and landing in the foul water below. He sank to the bottom, where he briefly lay stunned, before struggling to his knees. From there he pushed upward, seeking the surface, for what felt like an eternity. As he rose, a thought struck him with terror: *It’s too deep! I’ll drown with these cuffs on!* But at last, stretching to his toes, his upturned face broke through and he hungrily gulped the open air. It was pouring rain. He saw the house, looming above him. Sulfurous light and maniacal shrieking came through the smashed window.

Ray turned and flailed desperately away through the flood. His only means of breathing was to jump, break the surface, and try to fill his lungs before coming down again. He thought he heard Anton rowing after him. The pollution burned his eyes and stung his cuts, but he kept going. Mercifully, he soon found he could keep his head above water. Then, his neck. Then his chest.

As the sun came up a patrol found him, lying on his back in the ankle-deep muck a few blocks shy of St. Charles, so exhausted he couldn’t stand or form sentences. When they asked him about the handcuffs, he mumbled something about it being a sex thing, and they believed him. They took him to the station, where they gave him some clothes, got his cuffs off, and treated his cuts. Then they threw him in the holding tank, where he fell asleep in the corner, then woke up screaming an hour later. The next day they let him go without charging him.

* * *

Ray went straight. He found a legit job on a garbage truck, mostly working the squalid FEMA-towns that had sprung up along I-10. He bought a house off Airline Highway in Sorrento. It was a modular home, standing by itself among the Chinese tallows. It was nice enough, but it was so close to the bayou that if he went into the kitchen at night and turned on the light, the cockroaches would scatter.

He never went into the ruins of the city again. Some developers built a *nouveau* New Orleans, a Disneyesque replica, outside of Shreveport. Nobody moved there. Eventually it, too, was abandoned.

Ray often thought of Esperanza. Every summer when the floods came, the bayou would rise and spill over its banks, and every year the flood line would come closer and closer to his house. One sweltering night he was sitting out on his small back patio, swatting mosquitoes and nervously watching the water, which had crept within twenty feet. Little ripples charged quietly across the surface, like a tiny tide coming in. He heard something on the wind. He listened.

Singing. The sound he heard was singing.

* * * *

Addison Clift’s fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in Shock Totem, Wicked Seasons, and The Future Fire, among other places. Though he grew up near where this story takes place, he now lives in the Green Mountains of Vermont.

RED RIVER ROAD

CANTH? DECIDED

WALTER DOLE DIDN'T HAVE much to do in the way of packing. He disassembled his hibachi and put it into the cargo container on top of his camper. He kicked the blocks out from around the tires of the camper and hooked it to the hitch on the back of his panel van.

Walt had died once before. Seeing the gates of death had convinced him, among other things, that there was little point in owning more than he could drag on a trailer hitch. He put a hopeful few hundred dollars in an envelope at the trailer park office in expectation that he may want his lot back, if the mythical Jason Rhode or Red River didn't kill him.

Planning two months in advance was the closest thing to optimism the world ever got out of Walter Dole. The glass was never more full than when Walt made a plan based upon the phrase 'if I'm still alive in two months.'

Follow the Yellow brick Rhode. Which one is more mythical? Rhode? Or Red River? He knew more about Rhode. There could be (had been) books written about the guy, but there was only the barest of records at all about the place called Red River. Only those photos, and the knowledge that the place's actual location baffled everyone who should know better. He had just as good a chance at landing in Oz. Maybe he would have to find a tornado.

He'd seen the photos: a cyborg left tied to a post, stripped of identity by the elements far more efficiently than being merged with machine had ever done, a gutted skeleton. The long bones had been shot through with little holes, each a few millimeters across. The femurs were peppered with occlusions, and the metal parts themselves had strange extrusions, as if the solid state cybernetics had been somehow convinced to depart from their design and grow new, extraneous tongues and tendrils of matter.

Could the place be found by someone who wanted to find it? Had these poor bastards found it? They had not, at any rate, returned to the Army or the other technocratic institutions that had sent them.

Walter Dole went to Needles and filled his gas tank with the expectation of not being able to do so again until he was retreating from this snipe hunt victorious or, most probably, otherwise. He had a short conversation with a man with poor enough eyesight not to take offense at his disfigurement. That man's name was Johnson, although everyone called him Johnny. Walter listened on impassively while Johnny talked. He used to be a farmer. He told Walter to lock his doors. He'd had a red Ford stolen right out from under his nose a few years back. Never did find that truck.

Johnny was also kind enough to tell Walt that there used to be a big irrigation project, back in the 50's and '60's, aiming to turn the red desert out here green. Told him how, for a brief period, it had, and how he owned this here gas station back then, too, selling fuel, candy bars, ice, and RC cola with his wife, Roberta, to the thirsty farmers who had come to try their luck growing corn in sand. Told him how, while the Red River project had been up and running, they'd succeeded. There'd been about a hundred thousand acres sown and harvested for a decade or so.

"You know where I can find the town of Red River, or if anything's left of it?" Walt finally asked the man point blank, when he realized that his cataracts prevented more than the man identifying the scar where his ear used to be. He didn't trust his fellow men down here not to identify him if the authorities came to question. His size was enough of a giveaway. Walt's voice was a whisper for his stature.

Johnson just stared through his nearly seven foot tall, four hundred pound form as Walt spoke, and even though he'd not actually seen their surroundings for almost seven years, he pointed out the ghost of a gravel road that led off for that accursed place, Red River. Walt thanked him kindly, went back to his truck, and drove off.

* * *

Johnson turned away, belly turning over with memory.

"You know where I can find Red River?"

Damn right he did.

Manny Parsons had come out here to Red River from the San Joaquin valley with his wife and two small kids in the spring of '59. He made friends with Johnson and his wife, and the two couples had had a regular bridge night at the Needles VFW.

Manny's house had been situated in what was then the middle of the Red River effort, and he'd built a nice house out there among the rolling fields of green corn. They had been happy out there, and his two kids had grown up almost as fast as the corn they ran and played in among the rows.

Johnny remembered them. Twins... a boy and a girl like night and day. Sharing their momma's womb, they were born only seconds apart, the boy dark haired, dark eyed, the girl a red head with cheeks full of freckles and bright green eyes. Their momma was a redhead, pretty enough to make Johnson think about things it wasn't Christian to think about another man's wife.

Now that his own wife was dead from cancer and him gone blind from the cataracts the harsh desert sun had given him, he allowed himself sometimes still to think about Manny's wife, the way she held her cards in hands too elegant to be a farm wife's. But he never did think about her for long, because when he did... he remembered the rest of it.

The summer of 1962.

All the talk at the VFW was the locusts. They'd come at the end of the growing season, when summer's scorching heat and the Red River project's water had brought forth unexpected hordes of six inch hoppers that had at times darkened the skies and stripped everything bare. They'd eaten the corn down to the topsoil along with the grass and trees, rendered the verdant hills into waste, and turned them all to desert once more.

The kids had been five, and Manny had told him how the whole lot of them had gone to beating the things off the sides of the house and how his wife Clara had saved part of the herb garden by pulling up the plants and putting them into pots they kept in the living room of the two story farmhouse. She'd been pregnant with Manny's third by then.

The locusts had been the first hint that the Red River project was doomed to fail. The state scientists had told them that wetting the soil had enabled their eggs to hatch in greater than usual numbers, and had proscribed spraying to keep the pests down, but by the time they'd told them that, it'd been far too late, and the whole crop of '62 was a bust.

The next year they thought they were prepared, with their tractors and sprayers ready with filled tanks of DDT. They sprayed every inch of the planted soil, and sure enough, the locusts didn't return. But in the fall of '63 it wasn't locusts that stopped the harvest. It was storms.

By then, Manny and Clara had taken to having more than a glass of beer during bridge. Johnson hadn't seen Clara with a flask like Manny would pull from, but he'd smelled the whiskey on her breath more than once as she sipped her glass of Coke.

She'd delivered a baby girl in August. It'd said 'Sophie Marie Parsons' on her death certificate. She took three breaths, and died. She'd been a perfectly formed little girl already crowned with a shock of red hair, and the doctors had no answers to the Parson's questions.

The Parsons wouldn't let them do an autopsy. Manny would talk about it with him only after several Pabst Blue Ribbons and more than a few tips of his lacquered flask.

"I jus' couldn't let them cut into her..." He'd been holding her when she drew the only breaths of her life.

But Reba Marsh, a nurse at the Red River Hospital who had been the one to wash her little body and dress her for the coffin they burned her in had shared a secret fact with Johnny's sister, Irene.

"That little girl had autopsy scars. They did an X-ray of her..." She'd told Irene over coffee. "And what they found made them do it anyways."

Red River Hospital was a teaching hospital. It wasn't big, but it was the biggest within two hundred miles, and during the 50's, when the Red River project began and they were laying the irrigation groundwork, diverting water from the Blue River to the north and bringing it 100 miles in the direction of Sierra Vista, and on through the '60s, it supplied Red River, Three Way, Mule Creek, and Spur Cross with doctors and nurses for their hospitals and clinics.

Irene and Johnny agreed to one another that they'd never breathe a word to Manny and Clara about what Reba told her next.

“They opened up that little girl and found another baby inside her. It only had one bloodshot eye and what looked like fingers or horns sticking out of the middle of its face. It only had one arm and a sort of flipper like lower body, and it had grown up into her chest and crushed one of her lungs. The head nurse told me that when they’d looked at her little heart, that it had hold of it. That it had literally squeezed the life out of that poor little baby.”

In the winter of ‘63, Clara stopped coming to the VFW, although Manny spent more and more time there. “Has to take care of the kids...” Manny muttered when asked after her.

* * *

“I don’t think the water’s right, Johnny.” He had said one night in late April of ‘64. Johnny tried to get him to play cards with him, but Manny wouldn’t bite. He just sat there with a Camel burning down to the filter as he stared at the TV in the rec room that they’d turned the volume down on. Johnny managed to bring in enough harvest that year between the storms to break even, but he knew that in light of the extra burden that his wife and two kids put on his means, Manny was being hounded by more than just dreams of his dying daughter.

‘62 was a total bust for him, and Manny went further into debt with the spraying he had to do, so when the hail and winds and cold rain had taken their toll on Manny’s land a second time, there were phone calls coming at dinner time as his friend was feeling the pressure of his creditors.

“Manny, what do you mean?”

“The water in my well...” The Arizona Department of Water Resources sunk wells for anyone who’d wanted to try their hand at farming back in ‘54.

“It got into it, and must’ve rot there.” His voice was dreamy, as if he were lost in thought through the haze of the homebrew.

“What got in it?”

“The meat, Johnny.”

“You mean something got in there and drowned?”

Manny shook his head emphatically. The clock on wall struck eleven pm... the news was showing footage from the Birmingham, Alabama race riots that had happened a couple months previous. The rec room was empty except for the two of them. Manny set the spent cigarette in the ashtray and lit another, finishing off the last of his Pabst before he began to speak. Johnny noticed his hands were shaking.

“No. No.”

“Well... how did it get in there?”

“It fell out of the sky.” He was staring at the silent images on the TV screen, a commercial for Kraft Macaroni and Cheese. Johnny followed his gaze, but finding no connection there, he looked back at his friend as he pulled a deep lungful off the cigarette smoke.

“Happened in February... February third...and then again on the seventh, and once more on the twenty third. Was cold and dry, hadn’t been rain since November...just clouds... and on the morning of the third they was like blood, Johnny. Red clouds without any wind on the ground. Clara called me out to have a look... she was... she was just starting to show with Sophie then... and we watched it happen the first time. At first, we thought it was hailin’ because there was rain that started up, then we heard things hitting the shingles. When we looked over to the roof, that’s when I noticed the blood. That was what the rain was, Johnny, spattering Clara’s apron, just red as red could be, and evil smelling. It started out light, and then came in buckets, and me and her come in off the step and stood on the porch and watched it run out of the gutters, and it was red.”

Johnny could only stare at him. There was no reason whatsoever to believe that Manny was lying to him. He’d only begun to drink heavily after Sophie’s death.

“The banging on the roof was awful, and we looked out into the yard to see what could be making it...sounded like stones... but it wasn’t. It wasn’t. It was hunks of meat, Johnny. They fell in a swatch more than four acres across and maybe ten long, took about five minutes from start to finish. And when it all let up, it looked like the inside of a slaughterhouse. Pieces of meat, with skin on... some of it looked like hog meat. Some of it looked like beef. And some of it... God Almighty, Johnny I don’t know how to say it, but it looked like it was human skin on some of it, right down to the hairs.”

Manny went on to tell him how he had picked up what he could to get the yard clear of the stuff, so that the kids didn't get into it. Manny said he'd raised his voice to his wife that day, because she'd wanted to come out and help him with the horrifying task. He'd never spoken harsh to her in all their ten years of marriage, but he did that day, telling her to keep the hell in the house. To keep the kids, he'd said, without talking about how he feared that contact with the stuff would be harmful to their unborn child. The stuff was steaming hot in the cold air, and it stayed hot for hours after it fell.

He'd collected four wheelbarrows of fallen flesh, and when it was stacked onto itself, the heat increased to the point of where it started to sizzle and pop, just like it was frying in the pan. He dumped the entire sick mess into the burn barrel as much as he could, and when he splashed gasoline across it, the accelerant had started the fire all by itself, and the flames had roared high, terrible, and red like no fire he'd ever seen. The smell had driven the whole family out to his parents, who lived in Barstow.

A year after that, Clara and Manny Parsons were both dead, Clara, from cancer of the uterus that everybody whispered had started when Sophie was in her womb, and Manny, two weeks later from a self inflicted gunshot to the head.

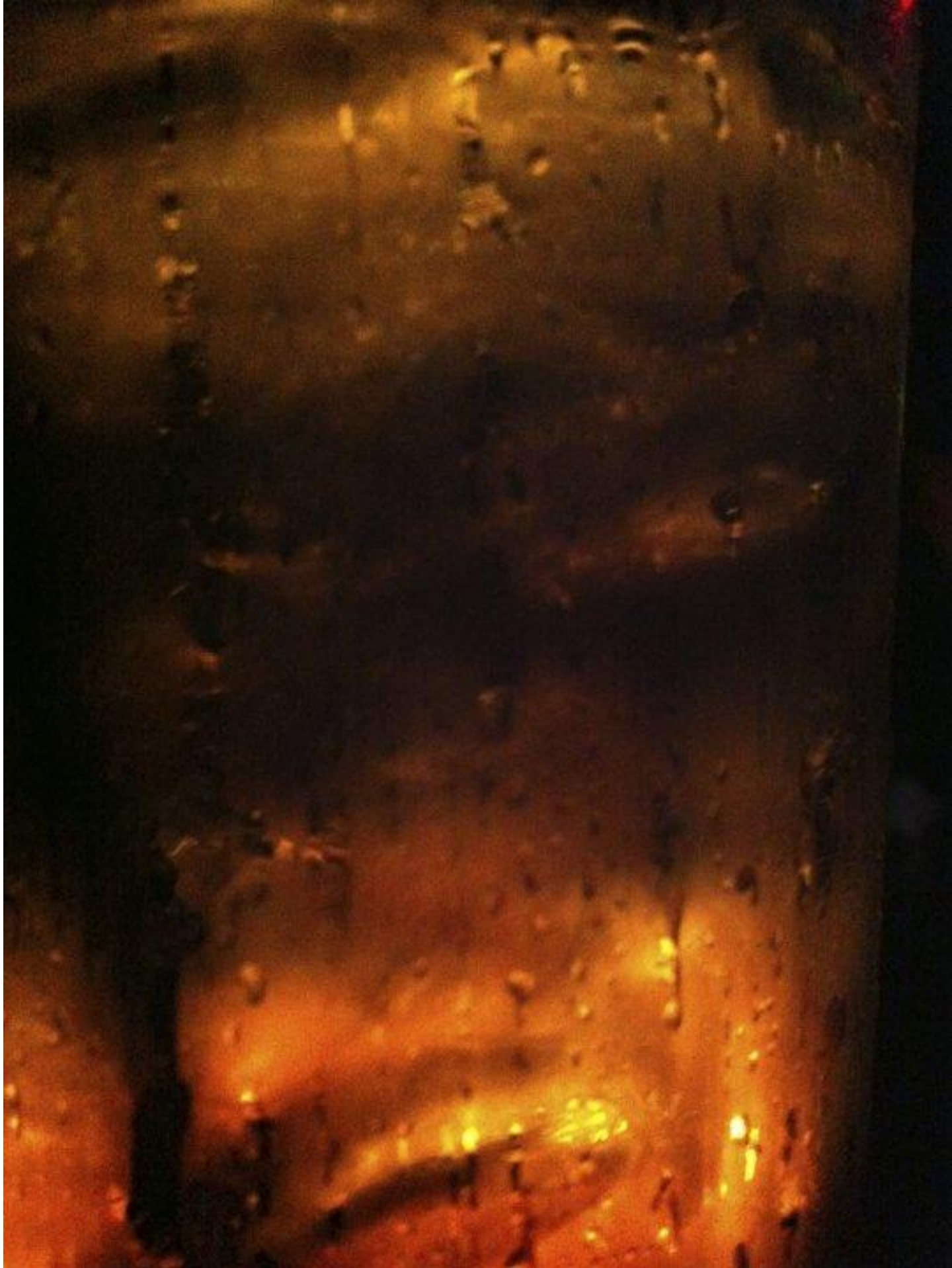
Johnny and Roberta had gone to both their funerals, and had helped to pack up the kids' belongings and move them to Manny's parents in California, where he lost track of them.

By the end of the 70's, they'd blocked off the direct road to Red River from the highway. At that point, the only thing the road was for was for those making their final exodus from the dead town, and when no one came down it any more, the road disappeared. It withered and died like the last vestiges of the organ the artery was once attached to. Johnny had used the unpaved road to Needles to access the highway until cataracts robbed him of his sight,

Walter Dole drove out on what was left of that access road. Old, blind, and bent under the weight of memory, Johnny did not listen to him go.

* * * *

Canth? Decided is a storyteller and painter whose works cover everything from the brilliant sunbeams of childhood fantasy to the macabre and unsettling reality of death and entropy. She has one short story, "Experiment IV" published in the anthology, A Wicked and Wanton All Hallows Eve (2011) by Naughty Nights Press.



She's Always Watching You

GLASS ONION

MICHAEL WEHUNT

PAUL HADN'T SEEN A soul on Mearn St. since he and Colette moved in. He smoked his cigarettes alone, surveying his new earldom.

He remembered the town, of course. The greater chunk of his life had been spent peering into all the corners of it. He'd splashed its creeks and perched on the limbs of every other tree, been summoned home from chalkless baseball diamonds at dark. The town was big in the way that a handful of seeds can be spread out across a field. He even remembered, distantly, the swath of park that curled around the playground across from their new place. This end of Mabelton felt different now, the street hazed and empty, held in a bubble, the swings and jungle gym slowly rusting in disuse.

The Victorian sat in its bitter shambles like Job in sackcloth, a fool on a hill. Any majesty left in its walls had been honeycombed into eight faded apartments. Weeds choked the yard; the belled heads of bent-backed tulips hung over the cracked walk, embarrassed to be seen.

"Glot," he read off a deflated basketball half-swallowed in the weeds. The word was lumpy and blackened, as though melted into the rubber by cigarette embers.

Paul knew he probably looked at home fitted into the sour, melodramatic scene, with the five o'clock shadow atop his shaved head and the arm and a half of ink, a jumble of flame, torn hearts, and crust punk iconography.

The split soles of his prehistoric Doc Martins matched the cracks gaping in the concrete walk, too. He thought of the old rhyme about stepping on cracks and mothers' backs, but his own mom was safe from that, at least. She'd been dissolving flat on her railed bed for three years and a handful of months. Osteoporosis had begun to eat her bones at fifty-nine.

She was the one reason he'd pestered his wife to transfer back to the States. It had been a shock to see how much less of her there was now. The photos the nurse had been emailing him every week were almost lies in their cheerful lighting.

So the Georgia boy was back, his tail between his legs and no job prospects. Not the kind without a nametag, anyway. He hadn't written a song in ages, didn't even have a garage for a garage band. Those two years in Liverpool for Colette's work, and he hadn't absorbed a drop of the Englishness he'd hoped for.

"Paul!" He looked up to see Colette leaning out of the upper right corner, framed in the window like a postage stamp.

"Yes, dearest?"

She rolled her eyes. He couldn't quite see them rolling, but it was a look he could have sketched in the dark. "The attic, Paul. Throw the stupid cigarette out and come help me get rid of this junk."

"Of course, dearest." He pulled his pack from the clamp of his too-tight jeans, slid out a second cigarette. "Haven't smoked yet, actually. I'll be right in."

He turned away and heard the window slam into the sill. The sound was very loud, like a gunshot in the thin stillness, and its echo snapped across the street. His burnished Zippo flared and he drew in the taste of kerosene. His feet carried him to the curb, next to an army-green trashcan spray-painted with the mystery word GLOT.

Something lay in the rush of grass just inside the park. It looked like a baby sprawled on its face, and when he crossed over to it he chuckled. It was a doll, though one that seemed to be sunning itself after a few months in a sewer. Plump and naked with half its head rotted through. He toed it over onto its back and saw the rim of the cavity curve down the forehead and wind away to the ear. It was packed tight with some sort of soil.

"Glot," he muttered. That word again, cut into the baby's torso. He nudged the doll with his boot, tipping it to the side. The dirt remained firm inside without spilling a single grain. It looked rich.

He stooped and pushed his cigarette butt deep into the soil. The doll twitched and Paul froze. When it

was clear he'd imagined it, he said, "Grow me a pack, little buddy," then crossed the street and tromped up the steps to apartment six.

They'd put off wading through a small thrift store's worth of moldy crap in their portion of the attic. It had the look of a hoarder's nest. The landlord, Ms. Nowak, had been vague about the dearly departed tenant. Paul didn't know if, "Never talked to her, come to think of it" was evasive or not, but he'd chosen neither to push the subject nor bring up the questionable use of the words "charming" and "cozy," which had peppered the online rental ad. Those words instead fluttered unspoken like dull, dusty moths.

Colette was up there now, in gloom and heather gray sweatpants. She wasn't so different from the girl he'd first talked into bed a decade and a half ago. A few stray pounds had found their way on, but she was still pretty when she tried. She rarely did. Her hair was in the ubiquitous ponytail that actually managed to make her look a bit horsey. Why the long face, he thought, smothering a smirk before it could hatch.

"I should really be job hunting, dearest," he said as he climbed into the smell of age and slow rot. A cobweb snagged his ear and he slapped at his head.

"Well, *dearest*, I want all this gone." Worse than the look she gave him was how quickly she turned away. "What is 'glot' supposed to be, anyway? It's written on half this stuff."

"I saw it outside, too, on the trashcan. Must be a local gang." He picked up a button-eyed plush walrus. "Hey, bro, don't mess with the Glots, man." He thrust the toy out at her. The word was Sharpied on in rough strokes below moth-eaten tusks.

"Just get rid of it, Paul." She handed him a garbage bag, then pointed at a couple of flattened boxes. "If there's anything worth keeping, use those."

"Fine, but I was thinking of making this guy my new mascot." He opened the bag's mouth and tipped the walrus in.

There wasn't much of note or value in the attic, and most of it carried a patina of greasy dust. Lampshades, mildewed shoes, a stack of plastic record players, coverless paperbacks, dozens of items he forgot about the moment they left his hands.

Paul was just about to cry for a mercy break—dust and mold always bothered his sinuses—when she came across the bottles in a time-softened cardboard box. "Hey, check this out." The bottle she held was clear glass with a hint of milky yellow, a bulbous base and a skinny stoppered neck. "Wonder what's in it?"

In the infected light from the weak bulb hanging from the ceiling, its contents resembled nothing so much as mud, the color of day-old bruises. "Looks like a plant without the plant. Or maybe some crazy-lady moonshine."

"It's a cool bottle. I'm going to wash them."

"I think I'll step outside."

"Whatever. You know, it'd help out if you quit those nasty things. Being unemployed and all." She kept her back turned as she said it, her signature move. "Especially since I took a payout so you could be close to your Mommy." The top half of a yellow crescent surrounded by stars slid out from the scooped back of her tank top. Paul glared at her, his anger eclipsing the moon. It was her only ink, despite plans to get sleeves that complemented his. Plans sketched through college and then scratched out the first day she clocked in behind a hotel desk.

"Right," he said, fearful of what might follow if he kept his mouth open. Her parents still drove themselves to the store, went on cruises, gossiped and crocheted and smoked cigars. Her mother's hugs were tight, rib-squeezing things followed by hints about grandchildren. The sort of hugs that could never know what it was like to rage against your own arms because they will not lift to enfold your child. Colette didn't try hard enough to understand how he felt cradling his mom's hands—the brittle filaments of them—hands that had never failed to pick him up, from bloodied knees all the way through bloodied egos asking for help.

He swallowed all these words and carried the box with two other identical bottles down the unsteady stairs. Left the box on the counter by the sink and went outside.

The first cigarette broke under his tapping finger just a few drags in. He was lighting another from the dented box when he heard a shuffling behind him on the stoop. A tiny woman in sliding pink slippers came into his view, pausing at the top of the easy grade of steps. Aside from the cumulus hair suspended about her head, she reminded Paul of sepia photos of ancient Native American women. Wrinkles like canyons in her loose cheeks and dry riverbeds tracing across her forehead. Her eyes crouched just inside caves and regarded him.

The last of the dusk bled out of the sky as he stared back at her, until his throat clicked and he could swallow. “Hi there. I’m Paul.”

She looked down at him for an uncomfortable time. “Number six,” she finally said. Her voice was both childlike and as lined and pitted as the rest of her.

“That’s right. My wife and I just moved in.”

She watched him, stooped and still and crudely hewn.

He tried again. “Did you know the woman who lived in our place before?”

In reply she began to turn her body around with a stiffness that was painful to watch, her legs bowing back, thin muscles flexing as though she had no knees.

She was gone, and so was his smoke, before he recalled the landlord telling him that he and Colette were at the moment her only tenants. He stared at the trash bin with the strange word sprayed across it in runny silver. “We’re on Glot turf, man,” he said to the yard, and lit another cigarette.

Colette was asleep when he came back in, a lump under the comforter and pillows. “You okay, hon?” He poked her through her cocoon. Nothing. He thought about climbing back into the attic to finish, but picturing the wary pleasure that would spread across her face couldn’t stir him into motion. Instead he opened his laptop and lay down beside her.

Half an hour of job sites later, bookmarking restaurant help-wanted ads he’d probably never open again, she began to twitch beneath the covers as if in a bad dream. He noticed then that one of the old bottles sat on the nightstand. The inside of it was coated in grit.

“What the hell?” He shook her, but not hard. It didn’t take much for him to just ignore her. He’d tease her about the bottle in the morning. An hour later he was asleep on the couch in the other room, Jimmy Stewart and Jean Arthur flickering across his face.

* * *

He came awake with Colette’s tongue rasping along his cheek. She straddled him on hands and knees, her hair draped around his head like a sack. Her tongue licked him again, coarse against his eyelid up to the stubble on his head. He unlocked his arms and shoved her, but she fell back onto him and speared her tongue into his mouth. He gagged as he felt it jab the back of his throat. Coughing, he pushed harder, and she tumbled to the floor.

She gazed wide-eyed at him with her mouth hung open, tongue swiping around her lips, along her teeth, a restless thing. It looked too big. “You gotta try what’s in those bottles, Paul,” she said. “You don’t know how good it is.”

He pulled his feet up with the rest of him on the couch, away from that crazed, shaky look. “You *drank* that? Who knows how long those things were up there, and I don’t even think God knows what’s *in* them.”

“They’re onion bottles, Paul. That’s what they’re called.”

“Okay, but I doubt that’s onion juice. You’re sick, dearest.”

“Come on, please? It’ll make us close again. You taste so salty.” She slid a hand along his legs. “Just let me do you, baby.”

“You need to go to the hospital, hon. You look like Gene Simmons.”

“Fuck you, Paul.” The words lunged from her wet mouth, splattered against his skin. “More for me.” She struggled to climb to her feet, gave up.

He watched her crawl through the doorway into the hall. He picked up a water glass from the coffee table and spat furiously into it. His torso kept leaning forward, as though to pull him from the couch and into the bedroom, where he’d bundle Colette up and put her in the car. In the end he could only sit, stiff and watchful, sleep forgotten until it finally remembered him.

* * *

She was gone when he dragged himself into the kitchen to start the coffeemaker. Rinsing his mouth out from the faucet did little against the vague sweet taste coating his gums. He thought of Colette’s behavior as he stared through the grimy window at the house next door, a far statelier Victorian, though its windows spoke as loudly of vacancy.

He looked around, thinking she might have left a note about going to see a doctor. It didn’t take long for

him to realize he was actually searching for the bottles. The onion bottles, she'd called them. Colette could have been poisoned, for all he knew. He shook away the image of her tongue.

Paul checked cabinets, boxes still not unpacked, even the fridge. He found the rotted box from the attic, but the apartment would not give up the other two bottles. The first was still in the bedroom. He snatched it up and peered through the glass. Damp soil—or whatever it was—clung to one side and clotted the bottom quarter-inch. A whiff of cinnamon, or something close to it. He stuck a finger into the neck, tilted the bottle. A clod rolled down its curve. He mashed it against the glass and rubbed it against his thumb.

Then placed it on his tongue.

His mouth went numb with an intense sweetness. No sugar or fruit, no cloying words in simple language could approach it. It flooded his sinuses, tingled in his eyes, expanded in his throat. He nearly dropped the bottle in a momentary wash of bliss. A sigh streamed out of him—an airy string of vowels—and he turned his head toward the ceiling and the world trembled. When the sensation dimmed he upended the bottle, the glass clacking against his teeth as he shoved it in his mouth and rapped the bottom with a palm. The soil was hardened and would give up only a few stray bits.

He licked his arms, the salt of old sweat cutting the sweet. The taste was severe enough to make him whimper, almost mewl, as he slurped.

He staggered into the bathroom and twisted the cold tap, filled the bottle halfway. Shook it up with a thumb over its mouth and drank deep.

An hour yawned and swallowed him.

* * *

Colette stumbled two steps into the apartment before Paul wrestled her to the floor, fingers twisting through her hair.

“The other two,” he shouted in her face. “Where are they?”

A smothered sob came from her, and his vision cleared long enough to see the impossible folded contortions of her body, the breadth of her neck distending as she struggled to speak.

“Did you drink all of it?” He slammed her head into the floorboards, but already his violence ebbed. The fog peeled back. The awful black yearning parched his mouth in its wake. His stomach was a tight knot of wood.

Colette's hands scrabbled for purchase on his shirt, snagging between buttons. Her left arm bowed like rubber against his leg.

Then her tongue spilled from her mouth, trailing a dark paste like coffee grounds across her cheek. It curled and reached past her ear to lick his wrist. He jerked away. The thing was six, eight inches long. It lolled against her neck for a moment, then crawled down to the vee of her shirt as more of it slid out of her mouth from the flexing throat.

Her lips were rimmed with that muddy gore, and a gleam in Paul's mind told him what they had ingested from the onion bottle. His mother, the mender of his false starts and mistakes, filled his mind with a different sweetness. He thought of her bones softening to mush on a slab mattress. He had moved across an ocean for her, after all. The gleam brightened. He sprang to his feet, grabbed the empty bottle, and pulled the door open against Colette's shoulder. Kicked her aside, inch by inch, to gain clearance to the stairs.

He tore the lid off the trashcan by the curb. It was half-full of soil, a candy wrapper and a few shreds of Styrofoam scattered on top. And the soil was moving, little sinkholes opening and closing like puckered mouths. A weight nestled against the back of his neck, and he turned to look up at their front window. The ancient woman stood in his living room, her map of wrinkles smoothed behind the pane.

His insides itched. He replaced the lid and crossed to the park, dimly noting the small figures on the playground. One lay atop the jungle gym, its body seeming to fold through the bars, while another crawled through the bed of pebbles beneath the swings. He paid them no mind.

The doll was still there in the long grass, frozen gaze on what was now a crisper, bluer sky. He fell to his knees, dug two fingers into its open head. The soil within was cool until he met resistance and a thickness twitched against his fingertips. He scooped a bit of the dirt out and placed it in his mouth. That same suffusing sweetness crashed through his body, his nerve endings. But thinner in some way, diluted, like steeping a tea bag in a second cup of water.

A shadow fell across the doll and he turned, still sucking on his fingers. "It's blood, what brings out its flavor," the woman said in that elderly child voice. She stood nearly pressed against his shoulder; the pruned face hovered barely higher than his own as he knelt in the grass. Her eyes glimmered in their recesses. "There is much of my soil here, but the blood you provide."

He looked at her, but his eyes were full of Colette's boneless arms. "This," he said, and gestured at the doll. "Can it help—"

The woman shifted an inch and the sun speared him from behind her head. Then she turned in her gradual, arthritic arc, and Paul forgot about her, forgot about the figures on the playground and the entire street, as he returned to the doll. He pinched soil from its head and pushed it into the bottle. Soon the cavity was mostly empty, and the deformed tissue inside it contracted and expanded, as though gasping for air.

He stood quickly. A chain of pops zippered up his spine and stars fanned out through his vision. When they faded he walked, bottle clamped in his fist, back to the apartment, stopping at the trash bin to jam more soil into a hip pocket.

Colette still lay on the floor, wracked with mild spasms. She moaned when she saw the bottle in Paul's hand, reached up toward it. "Hello, dearest," he said from above her, smiling.

* * *

Paul only returned to himself as he pressed his mother's doorbell. The ten-minute drive was a blank record skip. The last thing he recalled was changing out of his spattered clothes. He'd taken a tiny sip from the onion bottle just after he'd gotten a good mixture of blood and soil. The sweetness dwarfed his first experience and he'd sunk for a while, ballasted, onto his wife. The potency of the blood welling from her into his mud-clotted mouth was endless.

The nurse, ruddy in olive scrubs, opened the door and smiled. "Paul, how nice," he said, standing aside. "Allie will be so happy you came by to see her."

He'd just met the man but couldn't dredge his name from his muddled mind. He wanted a pull off the bottle more than anything.

"What you got there?" the nurse asked, nodding down at Paul's hand. He chuckled. "A little tonic for Mom?"

"No. No, of course not. It's some fertilizer I'm taking Colette. For...the garden." He felt a detached gratitude that sensible words seemed to be coming out of him. "Look, I'd like to be alone with Mom for a bit."

"Sure, sure." A frown passed across the nurse's face then softened back into buoyant concern. "I'll just be in the living room, reading. She's not having such a good day, though, just so you know. The pain's a little much, ever since she woke up. I'll be in there in a bit to bring her a pill."

"I'll look after her." The nurse said something else but Paul wasn't listening. He turned the bedroom doorknob and stepped in, locking it behind him.

"Paul." Her voice was a door that needed an oiling. He winced at the sound of it as he bent to give her a light hug. It had been a while since she had any mobility. She lay perfectly flat, her arms dead sticks at her sides. Her eyes roved in her still face to follow his movements. A face twenty years older than it should have been.

"Hi, Mom. I wanted to come see you, make you feel better." He began to shake the bottle.

"That's nice, Paul. I'm so glad you're back here now." A strained sigh whistled out of her.

"Mom, I want you to drink this. I'm going to feed it to you nice and slow."

"What is it?"

"It'll help you get better. Turn your bones stronger."

He tipped the long neck to her mouth.

She gagged and spluttered at first, but then the mixture eased in. "You'll have to chew a little, Mom." Her eyes widened and glassed over. He took the bottle away from her and gave himself a sip that turned into a long swallow. Together they groaned.

He was ensconced somewhere wet and bristling with pleasure, like a womb, struggling to hold to clarity as he shared out the rest of the bottle. It emptied much more readily this time, as if the blood were thinner than water. He savored its last grains of sweetness as he ground his teeth together.

His mother's head descended into the cloud of her pillow, eyes rolled back to whites and jaw hanging almost to her wasted chest. Paul pulled a baggie from his pocket and began to cram wads of soil into her mouth.

"Just to be sure," he told her, and with a small folding knife laid his palm open. "You have to get enough to be sure." Blood dripped onto her teeth. He squeezed his hand into a fist and made a stream.

"Now chew some more." He pushed her chin up and sat down at the end of the bed, just past the rail. Her cheeks tautened and relaxed as she obeyed him.

He lifted up his fresh t-shirt and carved a crude *G* into his belly. The pain only deepened the sweet. He couldn't help but pause every minute or so to catch blood with a cupped hand and suck it into his mouth, chasing it with balled clumps of soil.

His tongue pushed against his teeth so he let it out. It was longer now.

An *L* followed by a nearly perfect *O*, and his throat filled up. Two, then three more inches of his tongue slid out, and now it ranged across his face, seeking salt. As the knife crossed the roof of the *T*, a knock came at the door.

Beside him, his mother's fingers curled, slightly, like damp paper. A longer rap on the door, a rattle of the knob, and the nurse spoke his name.

At last he finished and put the knife down. The door trembled and the nurse shouted. Paul smiled and felt his body thickening from within. He held his hand before his eyes and watched his mother through the glass onion.

* * * *

Michael Wehunt's fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in Shock Totem, One Buck Horror, and Shadows & Tall Trees, among others. He spends his time in the lost city of Atlanta. Please visit him at www.michaelwehunt.com.

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