

THRICE

FICTION™

ISSUE No. 1 – MARCH 2011

THE END

WITH

Marty Mankins

Jack Foley

Vahid Jimenez

David Simmer II

Michael W. Harkins

John M. Bennett



THRICE FICTION™
published three times yearly
by Thrice Publishing

www.ThriceFiction.com

All content is copyrighted by their respective
creators and reproduced with permission.
No part of this publication may be reproduced
without permission from the copyright holders.

THRICE FICTION™ ©2011 Thrice Publishing



Advertising

THRICE FICTION™ has limited advertising
and sponsorship opportunities available.
Please contact our advertising sales department at
ads@ThriceFiction.com



THRICE

FICTION™

“THE END”

Issue No.1 • MARCH 2011

RW Spryszak, Editor

David Simmer II, Art Director

CONTENTS

2. This Is The End

Editorial by RW Spryszak

3. Becoming Aquaman

by Marty Mankins

6. The Old Man

by Jack Foley

8. Prelude

by Vahid Jimenez

10. Too Many Days

by David Simmer II

11. Finito

by Jack Foley

12. The Exit Interview

by David Simmer II

17. Life, again

by Michael W. Harkins

20. The End

by Jack Foley

And throughout this issue we present works
by John M. Bennett on pages 4, 5, 18, & 22.

A guide to art in this issue is on page 21.

The Last Day by David Simmer II



This Is The End

RW Spryszak, Editor

Considering our perverse natures it's only fitting that the premier issue of *Thrice* concentrates around the theme of The End. But don't worry, we believe in a wide spectrum of interpretation and so some of the things you're about to read have a connection to The End only in the most liberal use of the term. Still, if the element was there, we ran with it. So that's the first thing.

The second thing is that the writers featured in *Thrice* were all specifically invited to contribute. Nobody is on these pages that we didn't ask for.

Please by all means scan their personal histories as listed here. We feel it's a unique grouping of writers, most of whom don't really need this effort on their resumes but were kind enough to join in anyway.

We're not asking for open submissions at the moment but may in the future. My experience with this sort of thing has led me to understand that there are usually more submitters than subscribers and so, from the start, I was all in favor of Dave Simmer's idea to kick it off with people we'd like to see in our pages. The chances are we'll open it up to general submissions at some point, but nobody's really sure when.

Next issue's theme is going to be "perfect." Just you wait and see.

What you're about to look at here is something that usually spells the death knell for nascent literary zines. We've

gone out and broken just about every rule you can think of for this sort of thing, because in the first place you're going to find traditional and non-traditional treatments of the fiction motif. We've got everything here from people whose work is featured in museums and people who have never seen a story of theirs in actual print before. We have flash fiction that sort of pops up at you to tell a story as a suggestion and full-on, structured, short stories. That usually spells disaster because it's always been thought that the best way to establish oneself is to find a niche.

But, you know, all the niches in the wall are already jammed packed with stuff. So we figured what the hell. Let's just do it. We went down to the very end of the wall and chiseled our own and became completely lost in this overwrought metaphor I just made up.

Now I've only had experience with flesh-and-blood, hold-in-your-hand zines run off in print shops or office and school copying machines after hours and the like. Dave is leading the charge to put this up as available electronically on the intertubes and I'm not sure how that's going to work but he's that guy, so we're going there. I'm hoping the use of the medium will spark a bit more attention than most new zines would just sitting on a shelf in some clandestine book seller's basement. Like usual. I mean those are cool places to go but they're not exactly popping up all over the place.

In fact Dave came to me with this idea after having it in his head for a long while. He's done the art work for this issue but—you really should know—we're looking for artists to team up with us as well as writers.

Zines like this rise and fall on ideas and execution. Nobody knows how long they go or what they develop into. Right now it's guerilla theater. Nobody actually knows, beyond the theme, what happens next time out or the resulting times after that.

When I picked up S.P. Miskowski's *Fiction Review* after she decided to lay it down lo those many years ago I envisioned a zine as a world contained within itself. A kind of self-propelled universe and community that would roll and grow and build upon itself until it had enough of a following to be sustainable.

Now that I know that it is a lonely, dangerous place filled with armed Bedouins who don't like your clothes I will be a bit more careful.

The idea is that we pop out of the sand dunes three times a year in four month intervals. Hence *Thrice*. Three times a year. Get it? Yes, we're just that fucking clever.

I'd like to say I hope you enjoy the show but, in truth, I'm actually hoping you can't even imagine what you're getting in to. The idea is to be just unexpected enough.

So here is The End. It's the final issue of *Thrice* if you are coming back from the future. ☹

You can take it with you.

Thrice Fiction in ePub format for most mobile devices & home computers at ThriceFiction.com



Becoming Aquaman

Marty Mankins

The faint cries increased in volume as Jack entered the house from outside.

“What’s going on in here, Laura?”

“You know how Sam gets when he’s getting his hair washed. Any water that gets in his face terrifies him.” Three times a week, it was this same ten-minute ordeal in the kitchen sink. Natural for an infant, Laura was more concerned now that Sam was almost three. Showers and baths were just as traumatic. They tried the sink after suggestions from several other parents, with Sam lying down with his back on the counter and his head leaned into the sink. Laura, being careful with any water poured from the plastic cup into his hair, still caused Sam to scream at even the smallest amount coming into contact with his face.

Laura stared at Jack with that look of desperation. Any efforts by either parent were met with results of failure. Sam seemed to love his bath time, so long as his hair wasn’t being washed. Occupied by his tub toys Sam allowed his mother to wash the rest of him, without a single tear being shed. But when it came time to put any shampoo into his dark brown locks of hair, Laura simply had to endure the nightmare she was inflicting on her son.

All of Sam’s friends could swim by the time they were in third grade. Some even before they started kindergarten. There were several attempts years before taking him to the local high school pool, where there were expert adults that worked with all of the children. But even before he set a single toe into the water, Sam would go into a frenzy of madness. And Laura would buckle and put Sam back into

the car and drive back home.

Trips to the beach were joyful times, with Sam playing in the sand while Laura and Jack smiled. Both of them had many thoughts in their collective heads about walking with Sam down the water and letting the tiny remnants of each wave run over their toes. They showed Sam all of the other children that were going past the wet sand and letting the water reach above their knees. Sam would have none of it. The ocean was more than just a giant bathtub. It caused fear. The dry sand, however, was a haven. It was far enough away from any water.

During the summer, between the third and fourth grades, Laura and Jack discussed taking Sam to a friend’s pool, hoping to get him interested in a pool setting without the crowds of children and parents. There was to be no dunking in the water, only putting his feet into the first step and then taking his feet out. Repeating this step multiple times proved successful, until Sam lost his footing while stepping down further into the pool, causing him to go under. Screams ensued and it would be another year before they made any future attempts.

Several times each week, the washing of the hair ritual would cause a nervous lead up and aftermath. Too big for the kitchen sink, only the shower and bathtub were viable options, still met with cries and fear-induced yelling. Now at age 11, Sam was facing more pressure to overcome his fear of the water. All of his friend’s would ask him to come over for a swim. But instead of frolicking in the water with air-filled rings and jumping off the diving board, Sam would simply stay put in a chair, swimsuit on, a towel

wrapped around his body and a soda can nearby on a table.

While watching his friend's in the pool, he noticed several of them exit the water, and began walking towards him. Suddenly, three of them pulled Sam by his arms and his legs, dragging him closer to the water's edge, eventually causing Sam to fall into the pool, screaming and crying in a fit of rage. An adult jumped into the water to retrieve Sam and gave him a towel to dry off. To Sam, it appeared there was no end in sight to his fear of the water.

That night at home, Sam sat in his bedroom, thinking about the events that took place earlier in the day. Were those kids being mean? Why would they force him into the water, knowing his intense fears? Looking over at his bookshelf, he got up off the bed and walked over to find his comic books on top of a stack of books. All of his favorites were there: Superman, Batman, Green Lantern and Aquaman. He grabbed the stack and took them back to his bed. Lying down on his side, he flipped through the pages of several of the issues. His older brother had collected them when he was Sam's age and after he left for college, he gave them to Sam.

After going through several of the Batman titles, he ended up thumbing through the lone issue of Aquaman. On the cover was a dark shadowy figure grabbing Aquaman and trying to pull him into the water. Having his interest piqued by this image, it caused Sam to once again reflect on his experience of being pulled into the swimming pool.

The rush of the ocean surrounded him on all sides as he was pulled from the water. Aquaman knows the ocean as his home, intimately familiar with each and every living creature. He is also well aware of the numerous enemies that are after his control of the seas. And this fight with

the Ocean Master was like many others that he had previously encountered, challenging Aquaman for dominance of Atlantis.

With a sinister laugh, the Ocean Master pushed Aquaman, bound in chains, back into the water. The plunge into the deep waters left him struggling, with no way to swim or maneuver. Not being able to rely on his physical strength, Aquaman used his telepathic powers, summoning one of his creatures. Within seconds, a large hammerhead was beside him, using its unique fins to break the chains.

Now free, he motioned to his mammal friend and began his ascent to the top. Emerging out of the water, the familiar rush of the water that once engulfed him now rolled off of his body and face.

"Sam... Sam?... wake up..."

Rubbing his eyes, Sam realized he had fallen asleep and entered into a dream. Coming out of a slumber with the details of the dream still fresh on his mind, Sam felt a calming assurance, like he had some sort of answer to his predicament.

Sitting down to dinner at the table, he turned to his mom, finishing his first bite of potato.

"Can we try swim lessons again?" Surprised, Laura took a few moments to take in what she had just heard.

"Of course, Sam. Are you sure you are ready?"

"Yes, mom. I think I am."

They pulled into the parking lot of West City Park. Laura looked at Sam as he opened the door and grabbed his towel. They walked towards the pool area of the park, just a few steps away from each other. Sam was nervous, but was ready to face this challenge today.

Skirt of Hearts

the nest of hangers soapy with my
lapsed thought my crawling pasta
gristle or your eyesight souvenir
stroking on the doorframe .I smelled
and stunned .crystallized the
saltines and little weenies in your
pocket was the mother coatlicuec
)comb my hands(the neck forgot the
head inside the head the eye out
side the eye the eye

John M. Bennett 1/5/2011

NORTH



"You must be Sam. I'm Mr. Henry and I will be your swimming instructor for today." The gate to the pool area opened. As Laura stood by the fence, she watched as Mr. Henry and Sam walked around the pool area. Sam noticed that the pool was much smaller than other pools he had been to. He also took notice that each of the depth signs were the same: 4ft. That's 48 inches. At age 11 and 54 inches tall, he was old enough to do the math, which meant when standing up straight, he could have most of his head sticking out of the water.

"Ok, Sam, let's get started." As Mr. Henry and Sam both entered the shallow pool, the sense of nerves felt stronger than the change of temperature. Once into the pool, Sam was instructed to dip his body multiple times, getting used to the water.

Knowing Sam's fear, Mr. Henry then gave his next instruction. "Now I want you to get your hair wet." Sam's nerves overcame him. He looked over at his mom then

back towards the water. Flashing back to his dream from the previous week, he pictured Aquaman being bound in chains, being thrown into the water. He looked at himself and realizing he was not bound by anything, Sam took a deep breath and immersed himself completely into the water. As the rush of water covered his face, he focused on Aquaman, as if he were actually the King of Atlantis himself.

Seconds later, he pushed himself out of the water, raising his hands to wipe the water from his face and eyes. Sam looked over to his mom, who had now moved from her spot by the fence to the side of the pool. The look of concern turned to a smile for Laura as she realized her son had a smile on his face. For the remainder of the lesson, Laura could tell that Sam was at ease.

While walking back to the car, Sam knew who he really was, but for today, he had become King of the West City Park pool. 🐸



MARTY MANKINS has been writing since he was 12 years old, when his first story he submitted for his English teacher Ms. Bradford was both praised and critiqued. Since then, he has been published in various magazines, periodicals and tech journals. His latest short story, *Double Or Nothing*, was published in 2010, as part of the series *Weirdly Vol. 3* by Wild Child Publishing. Besides writing, Marty considers himself an amateur filmmaker, posting the occasional short video of a scooter ride or an adventure in the snow, with an eye towards creating more elaborate and entertaining works at BanalLeakage.com. He is a self-labeled music and movie buff, obsessed with all things retro and a desire to return to his home state of California some day. Marty currently resides in Salt Lake City, UT with his wife Reba and their cat Rocko.



El Orígen Amoxolalli

my looser dehydration foamed be
side the river fulla pages dancing
backwards like the birds stacked to
north or south the reddish east
falls into the yellow west's my skin
folded in a cave .my skin a
cloud gasping toward the door the
rock suit clatters at my feet my
tightened streaming slashing at my
mouth oh starter water name my eyes !!

John M. Bennett 3/11/2011



The Old Man

Jack Foley

Everyone knew the old man. Some feared him. Most knew him only vaguely. He seemed never to have been young. He stayed there in his old house, rarely venturing out except for necessities. Never speaking to anyone. If he had a relative, no one knew it. If he had a pet, no one saw it. And yet they knew him—or felt they did—as he went about his business. He was cordial, oh yes, cordial to everyone. But rarely warm. Did women interest the old man? Did men? Did children? Did anything interest him except his own closed existence, as he pattered around? “Thank you, Mr. Garrett,” he said, paying the grocer. “Thank you, I’m fine. I don’t need help.” And off he went. My mother said he was old to her—that she couldn’t remember him ever being any younger. If he had a youth, she said, it must have been somewhere else. Unimaginable.

Yet he was part of the fabric of the town. No one minded him. No one thought much of his grizzled appearance. *Does he bathe?* said Emily Thompson, *I don’t think he bathes.* *Does he pray?* asked Philip Leroy. I’ve never seen him at church. *What does he eat?* asked Sally Miller. *Oh, some biscuits, vegetables, occasionally meat; told me once he liked to cook,* said Mr. Garrett. *Maybe he’s a faggot,* said Mr. Brownstone. *Faggots cook. So do ordinary men,* said Mr. Garrett, *I like to cook myself.* *Are you a faggot?* asked Mr. Brownstone. No, said Mr. Garrett.

This old man knew a woman who hated cats. She was fearful that one might move close to her, pretending love, and suddenly strike at her. If she saw a cat on the sidewalk she would immediately cross the street. The woman was not old but middle aged. She had never married. She had a secretarial job in the near-by city and returned each day by train. She rarely saw the old man but she would occasionally phone him. Their conversations were brief and superficial. The old

man talked about his aches and pains, considerable at this time of life. The woman spoke of her day at the office and of the ways in which her co-workers, who were for the most part decent enough people, thought her strange. To tell the truth, she thought herself strange. Her emotional life was a complete mystery. She didn’t know why or how her emotions arose. Yet she felt them deeply. She liked the old man because he was as clueless about his emotions as she was about hers. When they spoke on the phone they could pretend to an intimacy which each realized they did not share.

One day the middle aged woman killed the old man. It was not a premeditated murder. She decided to go to his house and pay him a call. She didn’t phone first; the old man was always home. He didn’t receive her with pleasure, but, remembering their phone calls, put up as good a front as he could, offering her tea and a biscuit. The woman suddenly felt a strange revulsion. The old man looked at her with his ancient, red-tinged eyes. He began to whine about his life, as he did on the phone. The woman realized at that moment what their bond was: it was hatred, hatred of themselves, hatred of others. The old man moved slowly, like a cat, and she hated cats. She picked up a heavy skillet while his back was turned and smashed it as hard as she could on the old man’s head. He went down with a grunt. The movement was so sudden and unexpected and the pain so intense that he didn’t feel surprise. He just died, blood spurting out of his skull.

The woman had hoped that she would feel pleasure from her act, or at least release, but she did not. She felt horror and then an unexpected tenderness towards the old man. She reached out her hand to his dead form and began to caress his shoulder. The old man, who was dead, felt nothing. His soul soared upward but no further than the ceiling. From its perch on the ceiling, the old man’s soul

looked down at the woman's tenderness. It felt a sudden flush of pity for her. His soul was naked and needed a body in which it could lodge. It swooped down into the woman. She felt its presence with great joy. She suddenly understood why certain tribes devour their enemies or why certain people eat red meat. Suddenly she *was* the old man. His soul inhabited her. Yet she did not cease to be herself.

The woman rose from her handiwork and thought whether anyone had seen her come to the old man's house. She felt certain that no one had. She would make certain that no one saw her leave. The woman now had two souls and two intellects inhabiting her. She was stronger than she had ever been. And she was androgynous. She reached down into the old man's pants and found his penis. With a large kitchen knife she tenderly removed it. She washed it lovingly in the old man's sink and dried it with a paper towel. She put it in a plastic bag and stuffed it into her purse. It was hers now. She gave a prayer of thanks to the old man for the offering he had inadvertently made to her. Upon the reception of the penis, the old man's soul gave a cry of happiness which the woman felt throughout her body. There was a shudder, and she realized she was having an orgasm.

The woman returned to her home, safe in the knowledge of her act. When the police came to question her, she said she occasionally telephoned the old man but rarely saw him—and that she had not seen him at all recently. She could not imagine why someone would want to kill him. The police thanked her and went away. Then the old man's soul began to whisper things to her. At first they were simple compliments: *You're looking very beautiful today. I like your hair that way.* Then they became suggestions. *Why don't you wear a rose with that outfit. You know, if you wore that green blouse with that blue skirt, I would love you even more.* The woman was flattered by these compliments and wished to please the old man. *And your underwear,* said the old man's soul, *I wish you would get some nicer underwear. Something red, for example.* The woman began to ask the old man's soul what she should wear during the day: *Blue panties today, the ones with the flowers on them. Black today. Oh, you need a new bra. Let me touch*

your breasts. And the woman shuddered under his touch. People noticed the change in the middle aged woman, but they could not account for it. *It must be the menopause,* they thought. *Blue today, black tomorrow.*

The middle aged woman began to believe that she had not murdered the old man; she had simply transformed him. His history had become her history, his thoughts her thoughts. His penis, which she froze, remained in the refrigerator amid the ice cream and the frozen dinners. She was in ecstasy for much of the day but kept that fact from her co-workers. Though she had many orgasms, she grew wonderful at dissimulation and indirection. *How are you? Just fine, fine. (I am a bride of darkness. I am a nun in love with God. At the end of the world, my husband, who has never left me, will come for me with a great sword. He will cut me in half. This pain will also be a joy. And then he will weld us together so that we cannot be separated. My life will be perfect then, though it is also perfect now. My love, at long last, will have been consummated; I will be alive.)* At 65, the woman retired and grew old, living apart from people as the old man had. Her secret was never discovered. When she died at the age of eighty-eight, she left no will, no indication of the change that had occurred in her consciousness. People noticed her death only as they might have noticed the casual separation of a leaf from a tree or a page from a notebook.

These are the facts: a middle aged woman murders an old man by banging his head with a skillet; the murder, which was almost comical, was never solved by the police, who in any case investigated it only in the most lackadaisical way. No one cared very much about the old man. When the woman's soul died, the man's soul died with her. Both vanished into a nothingness which I must believe had been prepared for them at the beginning of the world. But perhaps this statement is untrue. Perhaps both souls exist in a state so different from the human that we could see it directly in front of us and still not recognize it. Perhaps their love remains in that state. But here, their story vanishes, just as everything vanishes. First the old man. Then the woman and the murder. Then the love. Then I. 6



JACK FOLEY is a poet and critic living in the San Francisco Bay area. Foley's radio show, **Cover to Cover**, is heard every Wednesday at 3:00 p.m. on Berkeley station KPFA; his column, **Foley's Books**, appears in the online magazine, **The Alsop Review**. In June 2010, he received the Lifetime Achievement Award from The Berkeley Poetry Festival. Foley's most recent book of criticism is **The Dancer & the Dance: A Book of Distinctions** (Red Hen Press); his most recent poetry chapbook is **A Disordered City**, available as an eBook at: ekleksographia.ahadadabooks.com/ebooks/jack_foley_disordered_city.pdf and in print as part of **Ahadada Reader 3**. For more information, visit his website at jack-adellefoley.com



HOTEL CALL

Prelude

Vahid Jimenez

I could start this account of the body we found that morning, Rosen's body, and the events that followed, by saying something horribly clichéd like, "I knew there was something different about this one," but to be honest that's not far from the truth. Why I knew this is a mystery to me—in my years of work on behalf of the local law enforcement I have honed an intuition that has helped me to solve dozens of cases, yet never once before have I looked at a crime scene and immediately suspected one of my victims to have been done in by some entity other than human.

"Victim is male, Caucasian, maybe mid-thirties. Still waiting on positive ID. He was found by one Vincent Novak, who found him like this when he was walking to the market down the street to pick up some milk. Says he saw his leg sticking out from next to the trash cans, thought he was a sleeping bum at first." Carlos Herrera, lead detective, pauses in his recitation of the facts so far, looks up from his notebook. "He says it was all the blood that made him think it might be someone in trouble. One look at the body and he decided this guy was beyond any help he could give, so he called 911."

I look at my body, take in the ashen skin, limbs sticking out at awful angles like the legs of a recently crushed insect, and decided I wouldn't have thought my victim to be anything other than very dead, either. And there I go again—my body, my victim. My therapist tells me I identify too closely with my work. My speciality in forensic science involves using complicated imaging machines to trawl the brains of the freshly dead, navigating their memories to put together and relive their final moments. Dead men tell no tales, they used to say, but that's not always true these days. It doesn't always work—we don't always get anything useful if the body is too old, or the brain too damaged—but often we get all too vivid a look at the killer, and should I

not think of the poor victims as mine? I am with so many of them at the end.

"His eyes are gone," I say, almost to myself.

Detective Herrera has noted this. Squatting down, shining his flashlight into the gaping holes in my victim's face, he says, "Body's too fresh for anything to have happened along and eaten them already. If they don't turn up when we search the area I'll assume the sick fuck who did this took the eyes with him."

That sounds right to me. I can't say why. I shiver a bit, suddenly thinking of something dark and toothy and it doesn't seem to have any eyes of its own, and it comes out of the shadows and fills me with dread and I think it's chasing me down. I shake my head and focus on my victim's face to try and drown at these thoughts. His mouth is open, twisted, blood pooled below it on the sidewalk. Was he terrified when he was killed, completely filled with that same dread? I get these thoughts, sometimes, and my therapist tells me it's just a delusion caused by too much time spent watching the last minutes of people before they die, that it's impossible that I might see a glimpse of their dying memories before we've even put them in my machines. Still, some of the flashes are eerily close to what I find in the crime lab, later. Do I really just imagine I know what they saw, intuiting the moments of their death after having examined so many murders, and later when we trawl them change what I imagine to be closer to the truth?

Yet never once have I seen anything like this. Maybe I am in need of a break.

"Thank you, Detective. I'll head back to my lab and prepare my machines for a trawl this morning, whenever they can bring him in." Herrera nods at me, not really looking at me, intent upon the ruined body on the sidewalk. I make a few notes on my scratch pad, walking towards my car as I do. I am not very eager to plug this victim into the forensic trawl. I am hoping I am wrong about my intuition, that I am just overworked and over-imaginative this morning. Telling this story now, having seen the things I have, I imagine how much more filled with dread I would have been then to know that my intuition is right. ⑤



VAHID JIMENEZ is recognized by zoologists as having the largest skull-to-body size ratio of any North American land mammal. He lives in Portland, Oregon, and fancies himself a writer and photographer, and we all know what they say about guys who fancy themselves. He hopes to learn how to comb his hair one day.



Too Many Days

David Simmer II

The neverending land battles of the Roman Republic had become boring. Eager to escape the drudgery, Gaius Flavius Tacitus accepted his new post with enthusiasm. Rome's navy had been ineffectual, embarrassing even, when compared to the rival Phoenician fleet. So new ships had been commissioned. Unlike previous failures, these were deadly oared warships based on Carthaginian design. They would dominate the seas and pave the way to an empire. And, thanks to the influence of a powerful magistrate, one of these ships would be commanded by Gaius Flavius Tacitus. His orders being to join an armada of 250 ships laying siege to Phoenician-dominated Sicily.

"And so you're leaving me yet again?" his wife said, her voice grating with disappointment. "You're a mariner now?"

"Not *just* a mariner. Finally, there will be a chance for adventure in my life. The promise of something new!"

"War on the water is still war!"

"Ah, but before going to Sicily, I mean to sail to the end of the world and look over the edge."

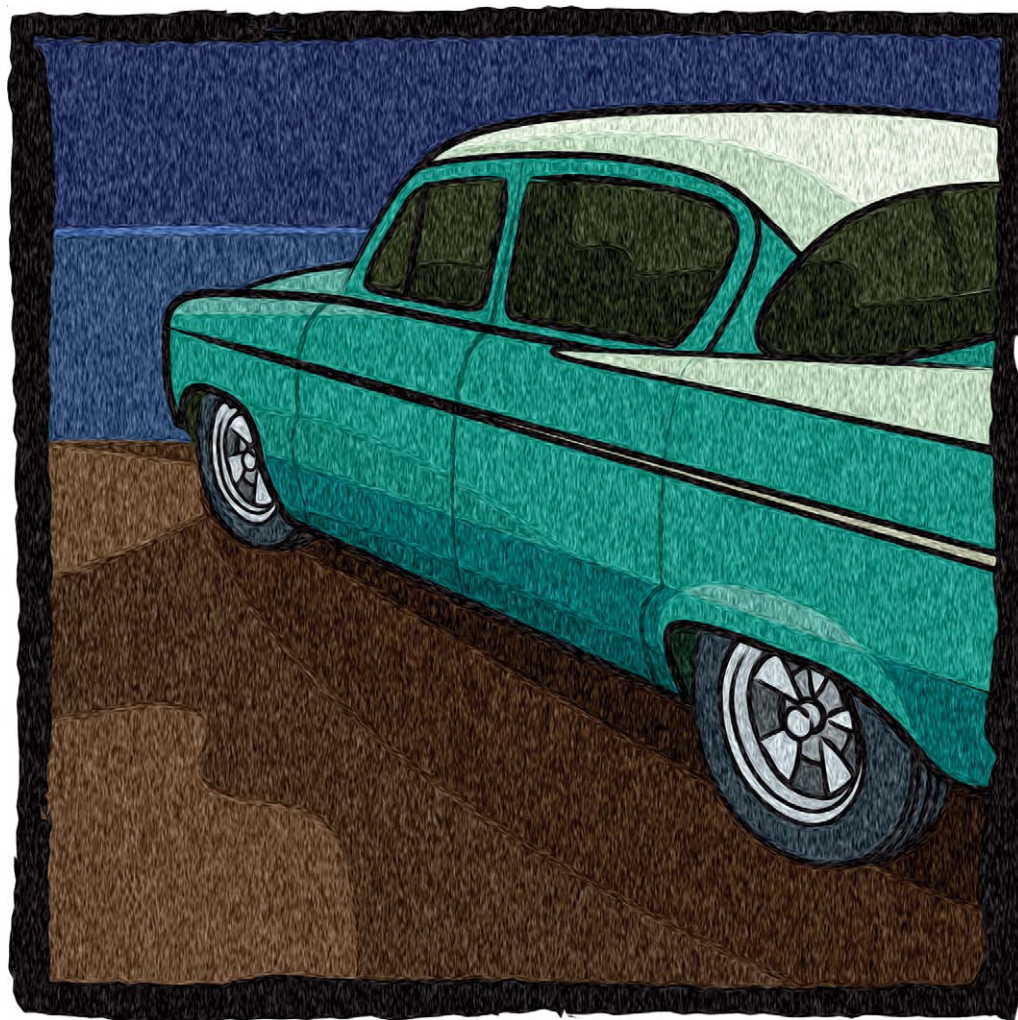
"Madness! Why would you do such a thing?"

"There are simply too many days. I am looking for an interesting way of passing the time."

And so Gaius Flavius Tacitus sailed off into the sunset, 120 men strong, on a secret adventure only he knew.

The fool never returned, of course. His wife did not mourn his disappearance. After two decades spent waiting, finally there would be adventure in her life as well. ⌚

David Simmer's bio can be found on page 16.



Finito

Jack Foley

A man is sitting in his car, parked near a lake. Another man comes up to him and compliments him on the car. “Thank you,” the man in the car says politely. The man outside says, “I sure wish I could afford a car like this. The only way I could get a car like this is to steal it.” “No,” says the man in the car. “I got a very good bargain on this car. You could get it, too. I can tell you where I bought it.” “No,” says the other man firmly, “the only way I could get a car like this is to steal it.” Three other men suddenly join him. They are wearing ski masks. The man outside the car puts a revolver to the head of the man inside the car. The man inside the car says, “This is YOUR car” and gets out of the car, throwing his keys on the seat. He is told to empty his pockets. He does. “Run,” says the man who spoke to

him. He runs. As he turns a corner, he sees a police car. He tells the policeman what has happened. The policeman drives to the scene. The things from the man’s pocket are gone, but the car is still there. He accidentally threw only the key to the alarm on the seat. The ignition key is still in his pocket. The man is by trade a mortician. In the open glove compartment, there are photographs of corpses laid out both before and after his work. The thieves must have seen the photographs and wondered: Who is this man? A few weeks later, in the mortuary, the body of the man who accosted him is placed on a slab before him. It is, as always, his job—his duty—to make the murdered man’s face “presentable.” ↻

Jack Foley’s bio can be found on page 6.



The Exit Interview

David Simmer II

FIVE MINUTES AGO

If not for the odd way his head was twisted around his neck, one might assume the man laying on the floor was merely sleeping. The corridor was quite dark, after all. The only illumination to be found was a sickly green glow seeping up between the floor tiles. The guard standing over the body felt stupid just staring at the poor bastard but he didn't know what else to do. A priority alarm had been called in, and that's as far as his training went.

The initial shock of finding the body had now been replaced with curiosity. Never in his five years of working at D-Complex had there ever been a death, let alone a murder. And how could this be anything except a murder? Maybe if the man had fallen from a sufficient height he could have broken his neck in such a way, but this was a hallway. The worst you could do was trip over your own feet and scrape a knee. No, somebody *did* this to him. Or maybe it was an accident after all and he was moved here. But why? And by whom?

Any further speculation was interrupted by four figures approaching through the bioluminescent gloom. The guard was immediately dismissed with orders to seal the corridor until he was called for.

"This is Impossible. Simply impossible!" exclaimed a tall man with a clipped British accent. "The surveillance drones didn't detect anything?" Nobody replied, so he answered his own question, "No. No they most certainly did not!"

An older man knelt next to the body with a flashlight. His lungs had been scarred from years of smoking so he

spoke with a dry rasp that was interrupted by an occasional cough. "He hasn't been dead long. Four or five hours at most. Rigor is just starting to set in." Moving around the body he broke into a fit of hacking coughs. Even minimal physical effort was a challenge for him, but he pressed onward. "There's pressure marks around the head. Minor tissue damage. He wasn't struck. It's as if his head was twisted in a vice."

"Well that makes for an interesting mental picture." This time it was a woman speaking. She was calm, but her voice was laced with a repressed energy that caused her words to rush out in short bursts. "Before we go down that road, let's have the body taken to my lab where I can do a real examination, shall we?"

The older man ignored her condescending tone and shrugged. "As you wish." After a small struggle to stand up again, he managed to find his footing with some difficulty. He was about to speak, but instead broke into a bout of violent coughs.

"Holy shit, are you going to die next?" The last of the four was a younger man wearing a visor that covered his right eye with a tiny computer display. It was wirelessly attached to an input tablet strapped to his left hand which he was tapping constantly with his right. He was never looking at you when he spoke, so nobody ever bothered to look back. "The countdown is at thirty seconds. Are we going to launch, or are we going to stand here trying to figure out what happened to this dead asshole?"

This time everybody did look.

It was the tall man who broke the silence. "Don't be absurd. We launch."

FIVE HOURS AGO

A half-eaten bowl of cereal was on the table in front of him, which only seemed to confuse matters. "I... I can't move."

"Yeah?" the woman replied with a smile, her eyebrows soaring. "Well that's what happens when a neuro-inhibitor is introduced to the human body. Though it's understandable you wouldn't know this given that you're not exactly human now, are you?"

If the alien was surprised at being discovered, he didn't show it. This might have been due to the neuroinhibitor overdose which had just taken effect, but the woman standing over him suspected otherwise. "What?

No denials? No clumsy attempt to call me crazy and laugh this all off as a bad joke?" Her smile was gone now. "Really, Brian, that's not like you. Though I admit recent events have convinced me I don't really know you at all, do I?"

"How... how did you...?" His head was starting to get a handle on the situation, but articulating words was still a challenge.

"How did I find out? Are you *kidding* me?" She was insulted more than surprised, but it came out the same. "You didn't think a *geneticist* would make an effort to find out who she was sleeping with?" He was starting to slide off his seat, but she came prepared. Using heavy straps pilfered from a gurney in the medical wing, she started binding his torso to the chair. She wasn't gentle about it. "After our first night together, I retrieved the condom and ran your material through every test I could think of. No offense, but heaven only knows what diseases or genetic defects you might be plagued with."

"Oh."

"Indeed! And do you know what I found?" She paused, but not long enough for him to answer. "You didn't have one genetic defect... you had *all* genetic defects." She fastened a strap around his head in an effort to prop it upright, but the back of the chair wasn't tall enough. With nothing to bind his head to, she let it flop to one side. "Huntington's disease, cystic fibrosis, color blindness, Down syndrome, sickle cell anemia, muscular dystrophy, dwarfism... you name, you've got it." She slapped his chest as if to drive the point home. "It's one hot mess in there, but you'd never know it to look at you."

"It's not... what you think..."

She ignored him and continued. "Needless to say, I was a surprised. The results were unbelievable, but I had double-checked. Triple-checked even. So I knew they were accurate. Even so, I had to be sure. So a second round of tests were in order. But I wanted blood this time, *remember?*"

"Allie... if you'd just... listen to me..."

"The second sample had the same massive list of

defects, but that wasn't the most puzzling thing about it. The DNA markers were different." Her brow was furled as if she was reliving her confusion. "You have no surgery scars from an organ transplant, so this was a real mystery. What could it be? A bone marrow transplant? Perhaps if I drugged you one night to be sure you stayed asleep, then took a look inside, I'd get an explanation?"

No longer content to be talking to him while he stared at her sideways, she grabbed his head with both hands and held it upright. Staring into his eyes, she was almost whispering. "One tomography scan later, and there it was. There was the answer. You were

human on the outside, but not on the inside. Well, most of you was human on the inside, but not the parts that count. Your body is like a skin graft of body parts constructed from the inside out. With no scarring. That's some pretty heavy shit, Brian. I'd kill to know how you did that. I *will* kill to know how you did that." She let go of his head and it dropped forward. "Having an alien wandering around at this critical juncture was not an option, so I injected you with a neuroinhibitor. And since I wasn't 100% certain that it would work on... whatever you are... I woke you up for breakfast before you became paralyzed."

He said something, but his chin was pinned to his chest, so she couldn't make it out. After she shoved his head back, he tried again. "I'm here... to help, Allie."

She suppressed a laugh. "Oh! You're here to help!" Her lips were smiling, but her eyes were not. "Well, if it was to help me achieve orgasm, congratulations! Your mission was a total success many times over! Job well done!" She was on the verge of hysteria, but quickly collected herself. "Help? What help? Help who?"

"Humanity. I am here to save... humanity."

This time she did laugh. "Really? Well you're a little late for that." The softness was beginning to drain from her face as she struggled to remain calm. "Save humanity? What for? Humanity is at the brink. There's nothing left to save. Our solution, *my* solution, is all that's left."

"Only in... the... short run."

"I think not. But, out of curiosity, what was your long-term plan?"

"To give you... hope."

She rolled her eyes in an effort to amplify her disdain. "Oh Brian, that's almost cliché. The benevolent alien coming down from the heavens to bring hope and peace to humanity? Really?"

"Yes." He felt a tingling in his limbs and wondered if the drug was wearing off or if it was a sign that the paralysis was becoming permanent.

"And how were you supposed to give me hope? What



was the plan? Regardless of where you got that penis, it would take a lot more than great sex to change my mind."

The alien found the energy to form a crude smile. "When you salvaged... that condom, you... should have examined it more closely. The hope... is growing inside you." He swallowed hard, or tried to, even though his mouth was dry. "You're pregnant, Allie." He decided he would miss being able to smile, so he smiled again one last time.

"So let me get this straight," she said, her voice eerily calm. "Your master plan to save all of humanity was to infiltrate D-Complex, knock-up the *girl*, then hope she has a change of heart over *world domination* because she has a bun in the oven? Seriously? That was the plan?" Laughing again, she walked to the closet and took out a broom. "Because I gotta tell you, Brian, that's about the most pathetic thing I've ever heard."

The alien opened his mouth to speak, but the effort proved too much.

Propping the broom against the dining room table, she loosened the strap that she'd tied around his head earlier. "Let's say I am pregnant. Did I really strike you as the kind of woman that would go all weepy and weak with hope just because there's a genetically-challenged alien hybrid baby in my future? Assuming I am pregnant, and assuming it isn't some kind of genetic abomination, and assuming I even chose to keep it... any child of mine would inherit the earth. Not to save. *To rule.*"

"Th... haakt..." Brian was having a tough time of it, so they just looked at each other for a moment.

"You assume too much." She slid the broom handle behind the strap on the side of his skull and used it to tip his head upright. "And now Brian, or whatever your real name might be, I'm afraid we have to say goodbye. I've got a world to conquer in just under five hours." She rocked his head side to side. "You'll have to forgive this rather unconventional demise I've worked up for you. We need to make this interesting so I have an excuse to get you back. You're just entirely too fascinating a creature to share with anybody."

With great effort, he spoke: "The... child..."

"By the way, you're fired. Consider this to have been your exit interview." She gripped the broom handle tightly. "This is probably going to hurt..."

Allison started pulling the handle, twisting his head around as she went.

FIVE DAYS AGO

"Are you okay?" Brian asked. "You've seemed a little preoccupied the last few days."

"Hmmm?" Allison said, looking up from her computer

terminal. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"You've been acting odd, is everything okay?" He put his hands on her shoulders and started massaging her neck. "I'm starting to worry about you. Why don't you come to bed?"

"Since when is it your job to worry about me?" Her reply was playful, but underneath it she was genuinely perturbed.

"Oh, nobody. I'm just thoughtful that way!" He kissed the top of her head and let his hands slide down to her breasts. This caused her to shudder slightly, which he mistakenly interpreted as excitement.

"No no no. First we make dinner, then we make love." She took his hands into hers moving them back up to her shoulders. "Today was an important day for me and I deserve a fantastic dinner to celebrate." Standing up, she turned around and planted a kiss on his cheek, then walked towards the kitchen. The facilities at D-Complex were decidedly militaristic in styling, but her kitchen was the one place she made an attempt at camouflaging it.

Unlike the stark trappings of the rest of her quarters the kitchen was awash in colors. Appliances and gadgets cluttered the countertops. They may be planning global domination but, by God, her kitchen was going to be an actual kitchen and not some damn army mess.

"Ooh! And what will we be having this evening?" Brian asked as he followed her. "I have a craving for Italian!"

"Then Italian it will be!" Allison said with mock authority, laughter brightening her already pretty face.

"How about a nice veal piccata? It'll go great with that Rosé I picked up last week." Her head was stuck in the refrigerator surveying ingredients. She hadn't any fresh lemons, but there was a bottle of lemon juice stuck in the door which would have to do. "How about you chop up this parsley," she said, handing him a bunch, "and I'll get the cutlets out of the cooler."

"If that's what it takes to get you into bed..." He smiled and grabbed the parsley with one hand while reaching for a large kitchen knife with the other. Pulling out a cutting board from under the counter, he unbundled the parsley and set about chopping it into fine pieces. Brian was no an expert in the kitchen, but he was confident with a blade and his hands were steady.

Returning from the cooler, Allison was walking up behind him when she tripped, shoving a tray of veal into his cutting arm. This caused the blade to flip up and slice a nice gash across two of his knuckles. The blood appeared instantly, flooding the chopped parsley in a sea of crimson.

"Oh shit!" Allison cried. "You're getting blood



everywhere! Here, put this under your hand while I get the first aid kit!" She handed him a small bowl and ran off towards the bathroom. As she turned away, he noticed her fists were clenched.

Thinking she might be upset because the dinner had been spoiled, Brian laughed and hollered after her, "If you think this is getting you out of sleeping with me tonight, I'm afraid you're sadly mistaken!"

Had her back not been turned to him, he'd have seen that she was clenching her teeth as well.

FIVE MONTHS AGO

There was a chair in the small windowless room, a nice one, but he preferred to stand.

His life over the preceding years was a blur of violence, terror, and confusion. And it all started because he was in the wrong place at the right time. As the sole survivor of a mercenary raid on a smuggler's camp in Botswana, Brian Coles was recruited to a fringe faction of D-Complex right out of the hospital. After a year in the trenches, he had been steadily climbing the ranks of the organization.

Observers would say he had the skills and luck it took to get ahead in the business of terror. In reality, he had an abundance of help that was extraterrestrial in origin.

His first big break came as he was running supplies with a training team in Guatemala. Working on a tip, he intercepted plans for an assassination attempt on *The Army*, which was a code name for the military divisional head of D-Complex. Meeting him for the first time, Brian was struck by his appearance. Though he had undoubtedly been a physically powerful figure at one time, *The Army* was now an elderly man, bordering on frail, with one hell of a smoker's cough. But rumor had it that not a single military operation was run without his direct approval. He was, in fact, the army of D-Complex, and impressing him was critical to rapid advancement within the organization.

After eight months working in strategic ops for *The Army*, Brian was removed from the field. He ended up in London and was placed in charge of a security detail for the fictional financial front of D-Complex. There he felt very much out of place, but it was work he excelled at. The money was also incredible, if he cared about such things. Eventually Brian realized the job was simply a way for him to be observed by a second division head, *The Bank*. In real life, *The Bank* was Charles Brighton, a well-known but reclusive entrepreneur with business interests around the globe. He was worth billions, which made his association with the terrorists at D-Complex difficult to fathom for the

handful of people that knew of it.

It was nearly a year before he was moved again. This time to North Africa. There he performed field-tests on the advanced weaponry developed for D-Complex by a third division head, *The Tech*. He was about the same age as Brian, late twenties, but acted younger. Much younger. He could get away with his childish behavior because he was a genius. Especially when it came to creating weapons of mass destruction. With access to the unlimited funding provided by *The Bank*, his team was creating an arsenal big enough to supply *The Army*. Just like gears in a machine, everything worked together for a common goal. A goal hidden from all but six people, two of them not of this earth.

And now it was time for Brian to meet the fourth and final division head. Somebody so secretive that even within the highest echelon of D-Complex, they were virtually unknown. Their code-name within the organization was *The End*, which made perfect sense.

The door opened and a dark-haired woman entered the room carrying stacks of paper-stuffed folders. She was tall and in her mid-30's. Beautiful in all the obvious ways, despite trying to hide it by wearing khaki army fatigues that were a size too big. She didn't wear makeup, but she really didn't need to. Brian guessed that the folders were detailing his illustrious career with D-Complex and was more than a little shocked that physical records were kept. This was, after all, an organization which took great pains to leave no trace.

"Have a seat," she said, her voice firm but pleasant. "I hear good things about you Mr. Coles. Very good things."

"Er, thank you," Brian said stupidly, unsure of how he was expected to respond. The woman dropped her stack of folders in the corner of the room then walked to a spot directly in front of him. It felt odd to be sitting while she was standing there looking down at him, but he tried not to let his discomfort show. Brian wasn't sure if she was waiting for him to break the uncomfortable silence that was growing between them, but he remained silent. If this was an interview for promotion, which he expected it was, far better to let his past deeds do the talking.

"You've been with us nearly half a decade now, Mr. Coles, and have proven yourself to be a valuable asset to our organization. Records indicate you have surprising intelligence, impressive resourcefulness, and an almost offensive disregard for human life. This combination is a rare find indeed." She eased her stance, but her eyes never wavered. "My projects demand I work alone, but I'm at a point in my research where I need an extra pair of hands.



Hands that aren't afraid of getting a little dirty. It may not be as exciting a job as you're used to, but the perks are really something special. Do you like playing in the dirt Mr. Coles?"

"Yes. Definitely, Miss... uhh... miss."

"Please, call me Allison."

FIVE YEARS AGO

"This planet doesn't look very impressive."

Images danced across the shiny metal surface, hovering just far enough above it to give the illusion of depth. Looking down upon it, the two aliens were studying the display grid data intently. Every few moments one of them would slide an appendage across the edge, causing the images and data to change.

"Yes, but look at its resources. From my studies over the past seven phaeons, there's plenty here worthy of your attention."

The grey alien's enormous black-on-black eyes soaked in the data that was rapidly flashing across the grid. Suddenly the symbols stopped, and a solitary grouping stood glowing off to one side. If the alien had a mouth capable of a frown, one would have appeared. "They're nuclear-capable. That never ends well."

"Agreed. But I have been working on a plan."

"Yes?" The alien's voice was flat, but the tissue beneath his nasal slits inflated slightly to suggest curiosity.

"What if we were to guide the inhabitants toward a more productive course? We could then solve the problem of their existence without any nuclear complications. It will be sixty-eight phaeons before the armada arrives, so there's plenty of time to be creative." He manipulated the grid until an image of a woman appeared. "After deciphering the entirety of their planetary communications, I filtered through the data set looking for something we might exploit. A human female is developing a toxin capable of eliminating the entire human population of the planet."

"This creature possesses such power? It looks too weak to be of any consequence."

"Do not let appearances deceive you. This human is far more devious, vicious, and deadly than any warrior of The Blessed Destiny you can name. Her history is quite remarkable. You would do well to study it."

"And you plan to appropriate this toxin and use it to destroy the humans?"

"Not quite. Obviously such a destructive substance is useless to its creator unless they can be made immune to its effects. Current data suggests that she is creating an antidote to the toxin. We could see to it that she succeeds. In due time."

"For what purpose?"

"The female is working with a small group of fellow humans. They are planning to use the toxin to decimate the majority of the population. They will then rescue the remaining humans using the antidote. Meanwhile, they are assembling a small army to subjugate the survivors."

"And so we assist these humans with their conquest, then subjugate the subjugators. In the process we gain a workforce to obtain the planet's resources. It's brilliant."

"Almost. As you know, sentient beings of sufficient intelligence most always choose to perish rather than be oppressed by The Blessed Destiny."

"Yes. It is an emotional reaction. They see no future for their species when dominated by a superior species. Only when dominated by their own kind do they choose to survive. If the humans were conquered by a fellow human, it is an enemy they understand. A mere human can be defeated, giving them the hope they need to live."

"Correct. And so we must provide a human oppressor that we can control. So long as The Blessed Destiny does not reveal itself, we have access to an endless supply of workers which are already adapted to the planet's environment."

"But how can we manufacture this hope? How do we create such a human?"

"I believe we could encode such a being, but it must be delivered without their knowledge."

"I suppose you have a plan for this as well?"

"That depends. How attached are you to your body?" 



David Simmer II has been writing fiction for over two decades, and has contributed words and art to everything from comics, magazines, and books to packaging, catalogs, and technical manuals. When not working as a graphic designer in the Pacific Northwest, David enjoys traveling the globe, taking photos, and eating chocolate pudding. He has a personal website at Blogography.com, and maintains a journal of his 135 Hard Rock Cafe visits at DaveCafe.com. As co-founder and art director of *Thrive Fiction* magazine, he spends his more recent days wondering where his life went as deadlines loom ever closer...



Life, again

Michael W. Harkins

He sat up, but he wouldn't look at her. He could see her bony knees, sharp, skinny shins and bulbous ankles in his peripheral vision, the only way he was willing to see her for the next few minutes, until he was ready to move on. He didn't cry, which was right, because he hadn't thought he would. He was done.

They had kissed, and he lay his head on her, the sharp ridge of her hip against his ear. He had decided that this was right, to be here, this spot, at the last moment. His hand rested on her, in the crook of her inner thigh, just beside the puncture.

She touched his hair, surprising him. He hadn't heard the slow, deliberate slide of her hand across the bed sheet.

I offered up my very being to this woman, he thought. Everything I am, everything I was, she knew.

The gentle rise and fall against his cheek ceased. He reached up and touched her hand, feather light on his head. He lingered before he moved his hands behind her back, held her and took one last, long inhalation of her skin, his nose pressed into her hollow stomach.

The gray mat of morning sky filled the bedroom window, thin curtains open and framing the steeple of the church across the park. He stood, the bed squeaking softly, and looked down into the park. The dancing cranes were already doing their arm circles and gentle stretches, getting ready for their tai chi session.

So many mornings they stood with coffee—cream for him, black with several spoons of sugar for her—watching the dancing cranes. That's what she had said their first morning together, as she watched from his bedroom

window. He had returned from the kitchen, still naked, cup in each hand, and there she was naked at the window. He looked at her, watched her, looked up and down her slim body, at her ivory skin.

"This is magic," she had said. "They're a flock of slow motion birds, like, cranes, doing a ballet. Dancing cranes." She watched their languid movements, their bodies slowly turning, arms floating this way and that, moving through a silky, invisible fluid.

She turned around and hit me with those blue eyes, he remembered, and she said, "I'd come over here just to wake up to this. And for a breakfast fuck, of course."

God, I love her.

He wished he could conjure up that vision of her now, that wispy, almost glowing kind of image that came from dreams, have the Sophie of fifteen years ago shimmering at the window, turning her lean body toward him and smiling the smile of a sensuous goddess, but the memory was in his head, not before his eyes, and the Sophie now, the Sophie on the bed, the Sophie he still couldn't bring himself to look at, that was the only Sophie in the room.

He stood at the window, in jeans and a black T-shirt, one of the last decisions they made, that he be dressed, and it had been at her usual but now muted insistence. It was a tiny, raspy whisper, nothing like the echoes from their lovemaking, fights, lives.

"It will just be easier...", she had started.

He waited, close enough to her face to hear her, not so close that his face would be out of focus to her.

"...if you...could walk out right after...with..."

He looked into her eyes.

“...with as little to do as possible.”

That really had been the last thing to be planned. Everything else was done. It had been his idea to get everything ready the night before, while she was still alive. It kept her involved, gave her some sense of control, the most control she had in months. He had moved the nightstand along the wall, closer to the window, so she could more easily watch him fill the syringe and tap out the bubbles —“just like...on TV...” she had whispered. He had asked what she wanted to wear.

“My...skin. When you’ve got...”

He smiled, knowing what was coming.

“...tits like these, you...can’t be a wallflower...y’know?” A tiny pop of air escaped from her throat.

It had been one of her first self-deprecating jokes, the first in the relationship, that early period where their trust in each other grew, the first few dominos in the here’s-everything-about-me row of secrets.

He struggled for control, drew in several long, deep breaths. His view out of the window flowed into a fuzzy

The Fallen Hand

nor I grabbed the liftgate sod
den focus for the floorword roll a
noon abismo circled in the lake my
eye .tasted gnats and clouds I
torn the suitcase bouncing off the
bed oh muddy bumper reflecting
on the tree I curled into my
shirt and stroked the crows in
there your face’s sudario your
last redaction crumbling in the
g gra ave L

John M. Bennett 1/10/2010

grey and muted green, but he squeezed his eyes shut, forcing out tears until the dancing cranes came back into focus. He watched the old ones, watched their gracefulness, their mastery of slow. The flock, forty, fifty, had its own grace, but the elders, they floated.

Dancing cranes.

He wiped his eyes and turned back to look at her, walked back and sat next to her. Her eyes weren't completely closed, little slits of milky white. He touched her mouth gently, his stiff fingers still sensitive enough to feel the tiny, chapped edges around her lips.

He kissed her goodbye.

I want to talk, I want to hold, I want to kiss, I want to love, I want to fuck, I want to laugh, I want to cry, with you, to you, with you, to you, you.

He reached down past her feet and pulled the bed sheet over her up to her shoulders and began the mental process of accepting that her spirit, or whatever the hell anyone wanted to call it, was gone. This was the husk, a flower that had bloomed, blossomed and wilted too soon. This shell on the bed, this sheath, was still soft. It should have been brittle, its stalk snapped, its leaves cracked and crumbling to dust.

He kissed her forehead, something he had not planned—*can't imagine how I let something not planned get into this*—then reached down and picked up the syringe from the floor. He had dropped it right after he had injected her, not wanting to bother carrying it over to the dresser, not wanting to break contact with her for even a moment during that last minute.

The spot, in the crook of her leg, where inner thigh meets the crotch, that had been the doctor's recommendation. Without an autopsy the death would be accepted as the natural end to her long deterioration. The injection site, the doctor explained, would be barely noticeable, even to a medical professional and, depending on how much time passed, "it would look like a plucked hair, like an ingrown hair had been pulled out."

"Obviously...from my...last bikini wax," she had whispered.

The doctor smiled at Lou.

Lou said "Yeah, we're thinking an open casket and a thong."

There was that little pop of air from her throat and she looked at Lou. "Asshole," she whispered.

At the door, Lou gave the doctor a long, long embrace, some-thing that moved well past one man's appreciation for another.

"You are so lucky, Lou, such a lucky man."

Now as Lou placed the cap over the needle and put it, the extra syringe he hadn't had to use and the half-empty vial into a plastic bag, he thought about what the doctor had said: so very lucky.


"But it's still fucking horrible," he said, to any version of a god listening.

He walked out of the bedroom and closed the door. In the living room he picked up a copy of the Guardian and placed the plastic bag in the middle of the paper, closed and folded it. He put it down on top of the tall, thin table with the long legs next to the front door ("Looks like you," he'd said when they saw it at the flea market).

He grabbed his fleece vest from the back of the couch and reached for the doorknob. The click as it unlocked was soft but distinct, and as he pulled open the door, cool, slightly musty air slid inside the apartment from the hall. It covered him, wrapped around him, the air from the next step. Everything had already changed, whether he stayed here or walked out, yet opening the door, moving forward physically and stepping out of the apartment and into a world without Sophie, made him pause.

He looked into the hall, walls white and bare. His choice. No outward sign, nothing beyond this door, it seemed, would be there to influence him one way or the other. He looked down at the floor, bowed by the weight of everything.

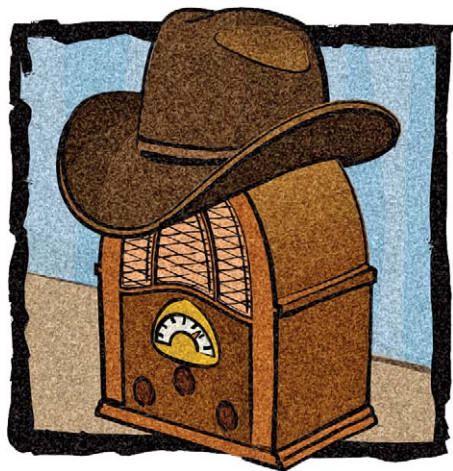
Everything would remain the same no matter if he stayed, shut the door and went to the phone and called the police to report his wife's death, or if he walked out, closed the door behind him and got on with life.

He stepped into the hall, closed the door and walked away. 



MICHAEL W. HARKINS is a writer and media consultant in Northern California. *Life, again* is an excerpt from his in-progress novel of the same title. His commentary has been featured on National Public Radio, and his book on personal communication skills, *The Way To Communicate*, was published last year by Portsmouth Publishing, Berkeley, California.

He occasionally blogs at TheWayToCommunicate.wordpress.com.



The End

Jack Foley

The two close friends had been arguing all afternoon. They were also laughing at the absurdity of their argument. The argument was all in the script. They were radio stars, Fred Allen and Jack Benny. The argument—they called it a “feud”—was all in the writing. It was the late 1940s. Everyone knew that it would soon be The End of radio. Allen knew it. Benny knew it. The script writers knew it. All the comedians figured that they had better start wearing dresses like Milton Berle. They had better start squirting each other with seltzer bottles. It didn’t matter what they said anymore. Nothing like that mattered. You had to look funny. When it was radio, no one paid any attention to what anyone looked like. William Conrad, a short, fat, balding man who played Matt Dillon on Gunsmoke, thought he would go on to play Matt Dillon on television. After all, he had made movies. He knew how to act in front of a camera. But only his voice was six foot tall and ruggedly handsome. He was a short, fat radio actor. James Arness got the part. That’s how it was in those days. The money moved what moved and the money was being taken out of radio and being put into television. “You, uh, you finished tonight, didn’t you, Jack,” said Allen to Benny in the script. Benny had, for the season. “Yes,” said Jack carelessly. “Every year the sponsor and I say goodbye and shake hands and...yikes!” “What’s wrong?” asked Allen. “This year he didn’t shake hands.” Whoo hoo it was funny. Darkness was descending on radio, which had encouraged everybody to “turn out your lights.” The brightly lit radio dials were on the wane. “I don’t care about TV,” people would say, “I’ll stick with radio.” “TV is good for shut-ins, not for regular people.” (Why was radio not good for shut-ins?) The great radio producer William Spier gave people buttons that said, Help stamp out TV, recalling a slogan of the time, Help stamp out TB. For

a while, Fred Allen was king of the airwaves. Then it was discovered how to destroy him. Not just win; destroy him. His competition gave away money. That’s what the audience really cares about. That’s what the bourgeoisie has in its bones. If you listened and you knew the name of a song, they would give you money. But you had to listen. That’s how Fred Allen went down. Intellectual wit came bang against moneygreed and lost, lost, lost. The poet wrote: The idea is that there is a link between self-criticism, feelings of worthlessness, and bourgeois morality. Is that possible? Does the one feed upon the other? Feelings of terrible self-criticism, worthlessness are in their way socially unacceptable. Bourgeois morality is extremely socially acceptable. Is it possible that the one masks itself as the other—and thus achieves a permanence and a place of honor in one’s consciousness? Is it possible that bourgeois morality and feelings of worthlessness, even of self-destruction, are, at base, one and the same? Bourgeois morality brought radio down. “To stay on the air, you gotta give stuff away,” said Allen from the script, remembering his audience. “I’ve got a new quiz show; it’s called ‘Break the Contestant.’” So, ha ha, in the script, Benny “disguises himself”—this wasn’t hard to do on radio!—and enters Allen’s contest. He wins! But no, he has been recognized. “You’re king for a day!” says Allen, mocking Benny in the script. “Come on, men, the king has to have new robes. Take off his pants.” This was radio, but it had an audience of people watching. This show gave those people something to see. It was like Milton Berle wearing a dress. “Allen,” snarled Benny as his pants were removed, “you haven’t seen The End of me!” “No, king, I haven’t,” said Allen, “but it’s coming up soon.” Good night, folks, we’re a little late. 6

Jack Foley’s bio can be found on page 6.

ARTISTS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE...



IN FUTURE ISSUES this page will be dedicated to learning more about the artists who were kind enough to contribute to **Thrice**. The problem is that this first issue has no artists to credit except myself. Not that I wouldn't have dearly loved to have had contributions by others, but RW and I weren't really sure what role art would play in the magazine until very late in the game. "*Far easier just to do the first issue myself,*" I said. Because I'm just that stupid.

Art ended up playing a far bigger role in **Thrice Fiction** than either of us could have imagined when we conceived of it. This was, after all, to be a place where we could explore our love of *fictional literature*... not art. In fact, one of my goals when designing the "look" of **Thrice** was to feature the *writer* in every way I could. No "turn to page 117" in the middle of a paragraph, our stories would run complete. No coloring of text in eye-gouging colors or placing it on noisy backgrounds, our text would be free from distraction. No pull quotes or other interruptions, our words would run unimpeded. No minuscule author credit in a tiny line of text, our authors would get proper photo and bio credit. And so on. We would treat our contributors like the rock stars they are instead of burying their hard work with needless distractions. Here the story would be king, so I could relax when it came to the visuals.

And then RW started forwarding all these wonderful pieces by our writers, and suddenly black text on plain white pages didn't seem good enough. My plan for a single piece of cover art and a few small intro graphics hardly seemed adequate. Suddenly I wanted **Thrice** to be more than "just a magazine," I wanted it to be an *experience*. One doesn't get works by John M. Bennett and slap them randomly on a page... one gets inspired by his words and wants more. One doesn't read prose by celebrated authors like Michael W. Harkins and Jack Foley and think they can slide by with minimal effort... one is challenged to rise to the material. One doesn't receive great stories from good friends like Marty Mankins and Vahid Jimenez and feel that they can get by with half-assed work... one wants to give everything they have. Story is still king and always will be at **Thrice**, but they'll have the best presentation we can give them. And so five pieces of art became seventeen.

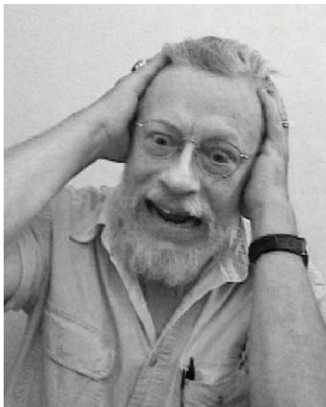
I hope our authors are happy, the bastards. Because of them, I forget what it's like to have a life these past couple weeks. But more than that, I hope that I did their hard work justice, because they deserve nothing but the very best.

This whole adventure began when RW invited me out to his house for homemade pizza. Under a flawless blue sky while drinking beer and talking about nothing and everything, he mentioned his past work in the "zine scene" and his love of writing fiction. On the train back to my hotel that evening, again on the flight home the next day, then again on a near-daily basis for the next six months, one thought consumed me... *I used to love writing stories, what happened?*

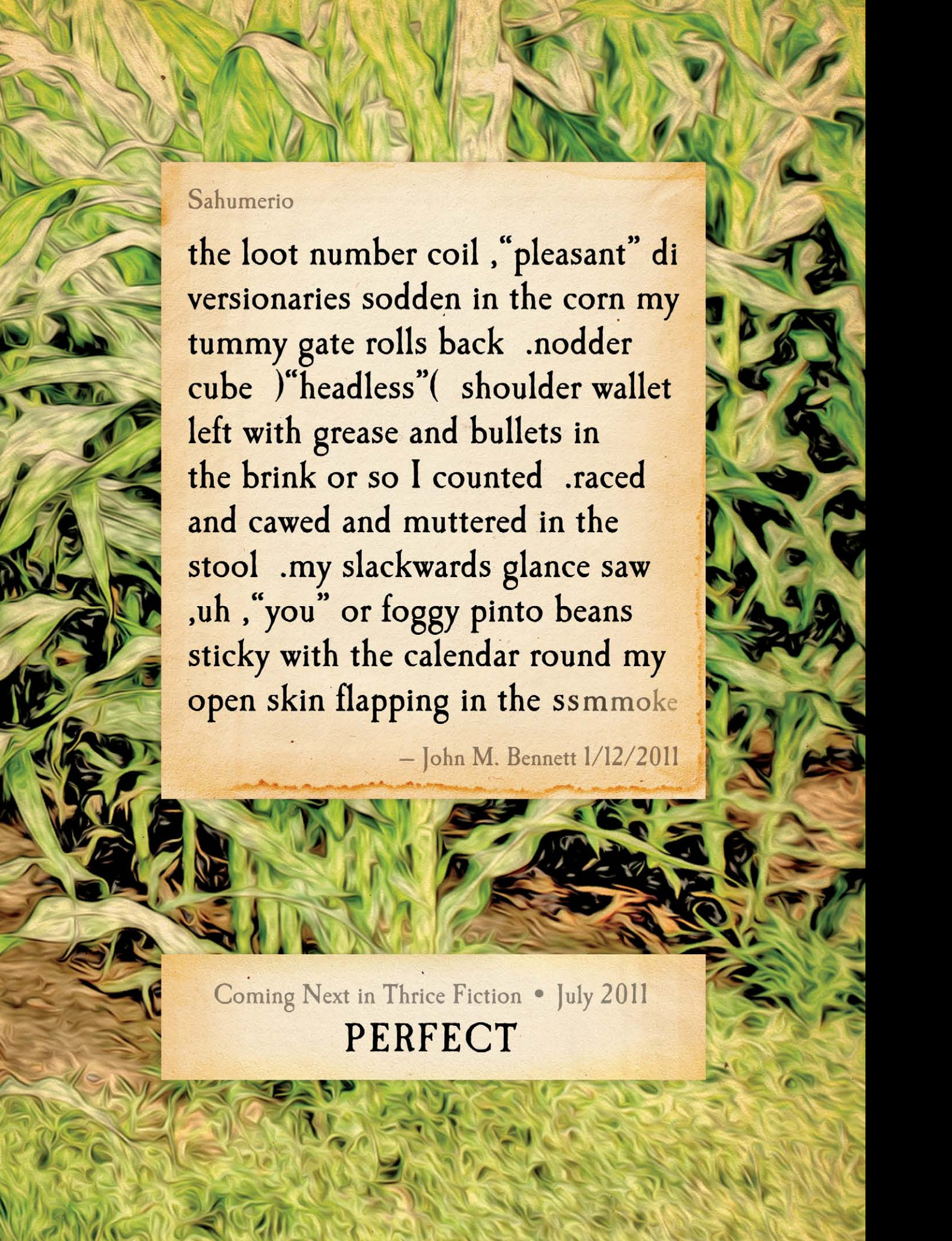
Thus **Thrice Fiction** was born. And since it was all RW's fault, I made him sign-on as co-conspirator and editor. It was, after all, the very least he could do. What you see here is the happy result. Thanks for joining us.

—David Simmer II, Art Director & Co-Founder

POETS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE...



JOHN M. BENNETT has published over 300 books and chapbooks of poetry and other materials. Among the most recent are **rOlling COMBers** (Potes & Poets Press), **MAILER LEAVES HAM** (Pantograph Press), **LOOSE WATCH** (Invisible Press), **HISTORIETAS ALFABETICAS** (Luna Bisonte Prods), and **PUBLIC CUBE** (Luna Bisonte Prods). He has published, exhibited and performed his word art worldwide in thousands of publications and venues. He was editor and publisher of **LOST AND FOUND TIMES** (1975-2005), and is Curator of the Avant Writing Collection at The Ohio State University Libraries. Richard Kostelanetz has called him "the seminal American poet of my generation". His work, publications, and papers are collected in several major institutions, including Washington University (St. Louis), SUNY Buffalo, The Ohio State University, The Museum of Modern Art, and other major libraries. His PhD (UCLA 1970) is in Latin American Literature. He can be found online at **JohnMBennett.net**.



Sahumerio

the loot number coil , “pleasant” di
versionaries sodden in the corn my
tummy gate rolls back .nodder
cube) “headless”(shoulder wallet
left with grease and bullets in
the brink or so I counted .raced
and cawed and muttered in the
stool .my slackwards glance saw
,uh , “you” or foggy pinto beans
sticky with the calendar round my
open skin flapping in the ssmoke

— John M. Bennett 1/12/2011

Coming Next in Thrice Fiction • July 2011

PERFECT