

The background of the cover is a photograph of the Manhattan Bridge, looking down its length towards the city. The bridge's steel cables and walkway are prominent. In the distance, the New York City skyline is visible under a blue sky with scattered clouds. Several people are walking on the bridge's path.

THRICE

FICTION™

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THRICE FICTION™

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RW Spryszak, Editor
David Simmer II, Art Director

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THRICE PUBLISHING NFP, a private corporation registered in the state of Illinois, reaches outside the mainstream to publish the work of selected writers whose efforts, we feel, need to be seen. It's flagship publication, **THRICE FICTION**, has been a platform for presenting this work alongside exceptional artwork since 2011. **THRICE ARTS** provides design and editing services to writers at large.

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FijiCat by David Simmer II



Thrice 8 Notes

RW Spryszak, Editor

It's a thing.

There were creatures who looked like us and they figured out how to make a tool and the next thing you know - blammo - rocket ships and computers.

Seriously. Things.

Look at the room you're in right now. Check all the things that have been manufactured and bought and now you live with them and there they are. Things. What's up with that?

Some people had to invent these things to make those things. You get money for many things. Or you hand over money for some things. Of course money is also a thing. Don't get me started.

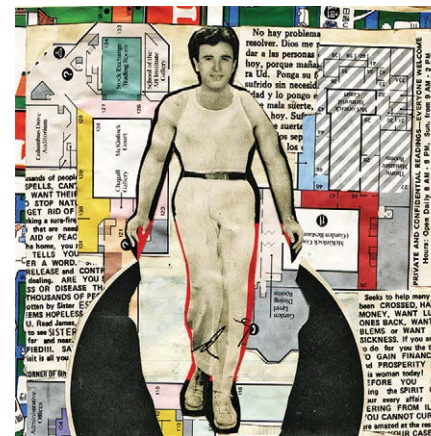
This magazine is a thing. And if you value some things over other things the things you have are important and you may even get pissed at people who have the wrong things, because to make those things some things had to happen and other things were lost or changed or special things were not made or maybe even some things were abused and that's not a thing you care for.

The world is a collection of things. Some of them weren't made so other things could be made. Think about those things for a while.

Glass is sand and something else. Paper is pulp and something too. A totally new idea is something else altogether. But it's still a thing.

The difference between people and matter is that matter is things and people don't like being thought of as things. And that's what this issue is about. People and things.

It's a thing.



Rocky 4

Ann Bogle

Rocky, a Russian immigrant, new, I guess or never knew, gave no response when I stepped out of the car, expressly to wave to him. He sat on a bench near trees transplanted to a black-edged rock pile in front of April's house. I did not say "hi." Jack Y. and I were there to pick up his boys, born eighteen months apart, both under ten, to take them to the County Fair. Rocky looked iron-built, tall and lean, not round like April. Russian lawn ornament, I said, mistaking the thought as mine. Some year later, Jack said Rocky committed suicide. He was glad Rocky took it away from the house. The boys were told only that Rocky died.

Topiary statues bring that back.

"Is that Tinguely on the right?" I asked my teacher.

"Yes," my teacher said.

It interests me more than the one on the left. 🌀



ANN BOGLE's short stories appear in Internet publications such as *Black Ice*, *Big Bridge*, *Minnetonka Review*, *Mad Hatters' Review*, *Istanbul Literary Review*, *Metazen*, *Blip*, *Wigleaf*, *Big City Lit*, *fwriction : review*, and *Fictionaut*. *Solzhenitsyn Jukebox*, a collection of five stories, was published by Argotist Ebooks in 2010. *Country Without a Name*, 24 stories and prose poems, was published by Argotist in the summer of 2011. A print version of *Country Without a Name* is forthcoming from Veery Books. Visit Ana Verse at annbogle.blogspot.com



Waiting

Maroula Blades

I can almost pick up his dreams in throes of a mad world. Cigarette-butts lay frozen near his blue rubber clogs. His eyes wheel in sockets. Eyelids panic shortly, as a yellow lorry, housing full-fat dairy products tears up the road, rumbling, trying to catch the amber traffic light before the red ignites above the two-lane street. It stops in front of me, a huge print on the side of its metal frame is one of a picturesque landscape; a picnic and fat, hairy cows grazing in an open field. On a patch of freshly cut wheat, a starched red gingham tablecloth with perfect edges sprawls out. A large slab of butter with its golden wrapper folded neatly down on a porcelain dish brings a slight smile to my face. From the crusty brown rolls, thin curls of steam rise. I imagine the delicious smell and feel the baked warmth, heat from another dimension. Beside the plate is an outsized bottle of milk with a thick cream layer at the bottleneck. A bunch of sunny daffodils show off their full beauty, fanning out on the cloth, mirroring a half sun. A minute later, the scene is lost up the road. As crowds bustle pass, tormented by the weather, an image of a compass comes to mind. Umbrellas and hats want to make a quick getaway. In this fume-logged city air, a broad lamppost

props me up, as I hug myself in my nylon puffer-jacket with a broken zip against the chilly wind that kicks empty beer cans and bottles into the gutter. The bruised cans clank on their journey southwards. A pungent odour lifts with a cause from the shoeless body, sleeping behind me on the frost-lit bench. It is odd that in his state one can almost be invisible. The queue for the bus is getting longer; most eyes are fixed on the tarmac. In the waiting, cold inches up the feet to the calves that tense to hold their ground. A heavy pregnant woman looks towards the bench, out of the corner of my eye; I see her shrugging shoulders, as if to say, *Such is life!* She waddles towards me, positioning her body on the other side of the lamppost where she drops shopping bags to ground, heaves a breath and eases herself slowly, back first, to the post. Dusk falls at a snail's pace. The cold shifts, pelting up sleeves, stealing body heat; my teeth chatter. We are both in need of something, as is the thin life-bitten man, shivering in sleep. 🌀



MAROULA BLADES is an Afro-British poet/writer living in Berlin. The winner of the Erbacce Prize 2012, her first poetry collection *Blood Orange* is now published by Erbacce-press. In February 2013, she was a finalist in the Small Axe Poetry Competition, Columbia University, and in April 2013, Maroula was awarded 2nd Prize in the Leaf Art and Poetry Contest (US). Works have been published in the *Volume Magazine*, *Trespass Magazine*, *Words with Jam*, *The Latin Heritage Foundation*, *Domestic Cherry*, *Caribbean Writer*, & others. Her poetry/music programme has been presented on stages in Berlin, and singles *Meta Stasis* and *Ms Betty* (Havavision Records, UK) are available from iTunes & Amazon. More information at: facebook.com/Poetrykitchen



Chaz & Betty

Bud Smith

Chaz got emails from his dead ex-wife. "I miss you, I wish you were here with me now." Eventually, he had to block her, flag her emails as spam. That's when the phone calls started.

"Hey."
"Hey..."
"Hey."

"Come on, how much battery life does your phone have?"

"I've got extra batteries. Visit me, Chaz."
"We're over."

He changed his number.

But Betty still loved him and sabotaged his love interests. She sent cryptic voicemails to his new girls. They'd wake to find the walls in the house sprawled in dark ectoplasm. Messages like, "Don't be playing with my man."

Everyone was worried. Betty insinuated on message boards and forums that she would rise up, consume all the life in the town.

Chaz couldn't get a date because this malevolent supernatural ex-wife baggage.

He decided to go to talk some sense into her at the cemetery. He brought flowers, set them at her headstone. But at the grave, he was uneasy. Would he ever be forgiven for what he'd done to her?

Suddenly the soil beneath him caved and he fell down next to her coffin. The casket opened, as if spring loaded. There was Betty, wrapped in thick chains—still beautiful.

"Betty, can you hear me?"

She was giving him the silent treatment.

Chaz couldn't help himself, he kissed her lips. Her eyes shot open. Green ethereal fire projected from her irises and mouth. The chains exploded. Her hands wrapped around him. They erupted up into the sky, flying wildly over the moon.

She said, "I still love you."

He said, "Still?"

"Always."

When they came back down to the earth and went out for a nice Italian dinner at that place next to the park, he ordered the goat cheese salad, the rock fish. They shared a fig gelato as the ground trembled.

At the contact of their kiss, the restaurant filled with fire. 🌀



BUD SMITH is a writer from Washington Heights, NYC who likes the movie *My Cousin Vinny* for a lot of reasons. He's recently appeared in *The Bicycle Review*, *Killpoet*, *the Nervous Breakdown*, among others. His book of short stories *Or Something Like That* was released in 2012 and was followed by his first novel *Tollbooth* in June 2013.

She was slow to realize that the man seducing
her *must* be mute.



Lyle or Waking Up is Hard to Do

A Tribute to Spencer Holst by David Bowman

The alarm goes off. Shouting starts.
“Why! Why! Why! Why! Why! Why even
bother getting up? Why bother getting up, Lyle?
Don’t say taking a shower, Lyle! Don’t say to go
to work, Lyle! Give me a reason, Lyle,” the alarm
clock yells.

Lyle tries something he knows is pointless. He tries to
smash the clock.

•
Six months ago Lyle’s girlfriend disappeared. She left a
letter that said he had no direction, no ambition, no creden-
tials, and she said she loved him but he needed to figure out
what he wanted from life.

Twenty-five and working as a garbage man—no as-
pirations, no desires. He made close to eleven dollars an
hour. Not bad really—work started early, but it wasn’t bad.
Especially for a guy with ‘no credentials.’ He never pressed
for more responsibility and they never offered him any.
There weren’t many opportunities in Harford County.

When his girlfriend disappeared she took her stuff with
her—her alarm clock too. Lyle was happy about that—he
hated her alarm clock. It was a Hello Kitty clock, and even
though it was cute the snooze button was a cat. When he’d
slam his hand on it every morning he’d jab his hand on the
ears.

So Lyle went out for a new clock when she left. He didn’t
have much money, and now he had to pay his girlfriend’s
share of the rent, so he grabbed a lonely, unboxed, digital
clock from the clearance end-cap next to the sofa cushions
in Target. Grabbed it before he even had a chance to look
for the rest of the clocks. It looked okay enough—not beaten
up. It had small screen the color of a dollar bill. Its shell was
navy-blue and the buttons bright orange. It was 75 percent
off—marked down to two-fifty. It had a snooze, and a
volume knob—what more could he ask for?

The first time he used the alarm, it woke him up by
screaming.

“Hey!” it shouted.

“Hi. What? Wait,” Lyle said. He thought maybe it was just a clock that’s noise was yelling—maybe that was why it was all alone on the clearance shelf.

“Why are you gonna get up today?” the clock said.

“I have a job,” Lyle said.

“What do you do?”

“I’m a garbage man.”

“Oh that’s important. Go back to bed—they’ll survive without you.”

“I’m going to work.”

Lyle went to work and came home and went to bed. He thought about what the clock said all day long. He set his alarm and hoped for the best in the morning. It talked again the next day.

“Did you know that your death will be of absolutely no consequence to anyone,” the clock said.

“Jesus Christ!”

“Just true. Why get up today? Being a garbage man isn’t important. Being you isn’t important. You aren’t capable of anything—”

Lyle hit the snooze and the clock didn’t stop. He unplugged the clock and it didn’t stop.

“How are you still running?”

“Do you really think I’m stupid enough to tell you how I work after you unplugged me?”

He decided to return the clock.

After work he went back to Target and waited in line at customer service.

“You’re really gonna get rid of me? I’m only telling you things you already know. Can’t handle the truth?”

“Shut up,” Lyle whispered. People were staring. Lyle thought he looked like a nut in his jumpsuit from work. A little below average height, a little underweight—Lyle always thought he was a little less than everyone.

“It won’t change anything,” the clock said. “You know I’m right.”

When he got to the front of the line the woman asked him why he was returning the clock.

“It won’t stop yelling at me.”

“Is it a clearance item? We don’t always take clearance items back,” she said.

Lyle carried the clock through the store with him, muffling it under his arm. He decided even if he couldn’t return the clock he would buy a new one.

“Can I help you find something?” an employee asked. Lyle looked down at his nametag. It read, “Derek.”

“Clocks?” he asked.

“Let me walk you over. I know where it is, I just can’t remember the aisle number,” Derek said.

“This kid looks about as desperate as you,” the clock said.

“What was that?” the employee asked—Lyle had already forgotten his name.

“Nothing. You know what? I think I’m good actually,” Lyle said. He walked back to get a new clock and grabbed the first one he could.

He put the talking clock in his closet. When he woke up the next morning the new clock had been smashed and the talking clock was next to it, plugged in and watching him.

“You should kill yourself,” the clock said.

Every day for the next month Lyle would go to Target

and buy a new clock and every morning he woke up with another smashed clock. One night he took the clock and sent it down his building’s trash chute—nothing survives the garbage truck. Then he used his phone’s alarm.

“Nice try,” the clock said. Lyle looked at the smashed remains of his phone.

He gave up and decided to use the clearance clock again—after paying to replace his phone he decided he’d wasted enough money. Plus the employees at Target started to recognize him since he’d bought roughly thirty clocks from them. The clock’s voice was slowly wearing him down—and the snooze still didn’t work. Nothing he tried worked.

“Being a garbage man is plenty important,” Lyle said one morning. “I keep the streets clean. People need to get rid of their garbage.”

“How many people thank you everyday?”

“None.”

“Anyone at work ever tell you ‘great job, Lyle?’” the clock asked.

“All the time.”

“They tell you how important you are to the world, the county, the town—their neighborhood?”

“No.”

“They don’t say that because it isn’t true Lyle. They could replace you with anyone. No one needs you.”

“You’re wrong,” Lyle said. “I know you’re wrong.”

After another month Lyle’s arguments with the clock were affecting his punctuality. He tried unplugging the clock—it still talked—, not setting an alarm—that just made him late—, sleeping in different places (away from the clock—that made him late too)—but nothing worked. He woke up every morning with the clock plugged in, taunting him.

“Why do you argue with me?” the clock asked one morning.

“Because I matter. Because what I do matters. Because you’re a clock and I am a person and I mean more than you ever will to the world,” Lyle said.

“If that’s true why do you have to prove it—to a clock?” the clock asked.

Three months into owning the clock he had started being late for work everyday. Ten minutes every day just to tell a clock that he mattered. So he set his alarm earlier. And the arguments took longer. They never *really* changed the subject.

“Because if there’s a God and he made us, then he made us for a purpose,” Lyle said. He was trying to confuse the clock with religion—clocks probably couldn’t understand religion. At least Lyle hoped so.

“There is no God,” the clock said. “And if there was that means he put you on this planet to argue with a clock and waste away to nothing.”

Halfway through the fourth month he tried to smash the clock. It didn’t work. He hurt his hand pretty bad too.

“So now you’re trying to smash me?”

“Why are you doing this to me?” Lyle asked.

“I’m just waiting for you to tell me why you get up everyday,” the clock said. “You should have a reason. Don’t you agree?”

“I have to. That’s all.”

“That’s a stupid reason.”

He tried to smash it a few more times. Sometimes with a hammer—some times with his hand. Sometimes he threw the clock out the window—then he realized he needed it so he went to get it. It would only come back anyways. No matter what he did the clock came back.

He tried researching the clock. He posted questions up on different websites. Everyone always replied, “you need serious help,” or “get fucked,” or “check the clock’s box.” Lyle drove across the county looking for the same clock at different Targets. He didn’t find anything, and the clock knew what he was up to.

“You’re not gonna find much on me,” the clock said.

By the middle of the fifth month he didn’t do anything at all. He jut got up and told the clock it was right. Every morning for a week and a half he said the clock was right. Then he stopped getting up. He had a box of cereal by the bed and he would eat handfuls. He wouldn’t eat enough to keep him from wasting away—just enough to keep his stomach from hurting.

“Why don’t you go to work?” the clock asked.

“I’ll go tomorrow,” Lyle said.

“That’s what you said yesterday. Remember? I mean it’s pointless. It’s pointless—they probably don’t even know you’re gone. Maybe they replaced you and forgot to tell you—they didn’t even remember that they have to call and fire you.”

“I’ll go tomorrow. I have to go tomorrow,” Lyle said. But really he knows there’s nothing he has to do. There’s no reason to do anything so there’s no obligation to do anything.

Today is the third morning of the sixth month since the clock started talking to Lyle—the sixth day of work he’s missed. Lyle hasn’t paid his rent for the month, and he’ll be out of money if he tries to.

“Why! Why! Why! Why! Why! Why even bother getting up? Why bother getting up, Lyle? Don’t say taking a shower, Lyle! Don’t say to go to work, Lyle! Give me one good reason, Lyle,” the alarm clock screams.

Lyle wakes up angry and he tries to smash the clock again. The clock doesn’t break. But now that its giddy little victory chant is over, it stops talking—the clock knows it’s won. The phone rings.

“Hello,” Lyle says.

“Lyle, where have you been?” the voice asks.

“I don’t—who is this?” he asks.

“Dave from sanitation.”

“It doesn’t matter. None of it matters.”

“Listen if you don’t get in here and explain yourself you’re fired.”

Lyle hangs up. He doesn’t eat. He looks out the window for hours. No sun today—a storm’s coming. The massive thunderstorm knocks out the power around six that night.

“How long before the power comes back?” the clock asks.

“Why do you care?” Lyle asks.

“No reason—just curious.”

This is the end of the story.

It’s a sad ending. Seems like Lyle’s never going to beat the clock. He’s resigned to apathy. But there’s hope in this ending—there is. Look closely. Really get in there and work for it. There are three reasons to hope for a change:

1. Lyle has no reason to set an alarm for tomorrow because he has nowhere to go.
2. There’s no documented case of a man arguing with an alarm clock without being locked up, committing suicide, or burning down several buildings.
3. Tonight, after a 34-hour power outage on Lyle’s street, the clock’s rechargeable spare battery will finally die. What happens after that is on Lyle. 🕒



DAVID BOWMAN is a notation candidate at the Jimenez-Porter Writer’s House, and the prose editor for *Stylus: Journal of Literature and Art*. His voice can be heard on “Not Another College Radio Show” at wmuc.umd.edu on Fridays from 10:30 pm-12:30 am (EST). This is his first publication, but in the summer of 2013, he will start reviewing music on a blog called “I Don’t Know Music” at dontknowmusic.blogspot.com.

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room :a diagram

Eric Hawthorn

make an X on a sheet of paper &pin it to the center of this corkboard ;set up another board beside the first one ;enemies go on 4x6 index cards ;suspects go on 3x5 index cards ;turn on the lamp when the daylight fails ;pushpin photographs &newspaper clippings &other evidence to both boards &if you need more space use the wall ;every three hours address your biological needs ;are you sure you have only two corkboards ?;write a list of allies &tape it to the wall ;don't return dr. littman's phone calls ;persons on 4x6 index cards are unquestionably guilty :link them to X with black string ;persons on 3x5 index cards are probably guilty :link them to X with yellow string ;document every harm committed against you &connect to their perpetrators with red string ;discover the source of that wailing noise ;*yes i'm sure i have only two corkboards &that wailing is kitty i think she's hungry* ;hydrate ,urinate ,feed kitty ;use pencil for probable factors &permanent marker for inciting events ;write these on sticky notes &connect with white string ;keep the shades closed &double-check you've locked the door ;press your ear to the wall ;sounds like the neighbors coming home—make them suspects 50 &51 ;the lady at the shop-n-go who calls you dear—make her suspect 52 ;drag away the bookcase when you need more wall ;don't answer the phone it's dr. littman i'm sure of it ;unplug the phone &write dr. littman on a 4x6 index card ;get some string ,he knows people ;since kitty keeps wailing &won't eat her food ,cross her off your allies list &make her suspect 53 ;tear down your allies list ;take three aspirin ;when you run out of sticky notes ,write inciting events on pieces of napkin ;when you run out of pushpins ,use this nail gun ;when you run out of wall ,use the floor ,&if you run out of floor get a chair &use the ceiling ;unfold this map to organize evidence geographically ;don't turn on the fan—are you insane ?if it's unbearably hot undress ;when you run out of red string use shoelaces ;when you run out of black string use dental floss ;when you run out of index cards tear up these take-out menus &if you need something else shred the linen from your bed &the pages of this book ;if kitty tries once more to sabotage your investigation ,lock her in the bathroom ;move slowly &deliberately to avoid catching on the strings running ceiling to floor &wall to wall &door to corkboard to ceiling ;if you still need something to write on ,take the paper with X from the center of the corkboard &let this cardboard drink coaster represent X ;if you need the drink coaster let this sock represent X ;if you need the sock let the remaining blankness represent X ;don't open the bathroom door—it's layered with evidence &kitty might escape ;if you absolutely must relieve yourself go in this corner ;press your ear to the wall :never mind it's only a neighbor's alarm clock ;if the webwork of strings makes it difficult to move ,don't ;if it's too dark to see your work ,wait ;stay in the center of the room until daylight arrives ;don't twitch or breathe too deeply—this might disturb the lines tightening past your neck &legs &torso ;*but what if I have to sneeze or fix a tangled string ?* ;listen :awaiting the moment to isolate X ,is it too much to ask that you simply keep still ? ↻



ERIC HAWTHORN studied writing at Naropa University's Kerouac School. Now he lives in Philadelphia, where he works as a writer and researcher for a non-profit. His fiction has appeared in *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Monkeybicycle*, *The Legendary*, and elsewhere. His favorite short story is Jamaica Kincaid's *Girl*, which inspired the story you just read.



Good Day for a Landslide

Howie Good

The worst problem isn't the cold or the mud, but the insistent longing. Clouds mope about. Babushkas drink a fifth a day. My heart swims around like a goldfish in a clear plastic bag. It isn't true that an angel appeared one morning with an announcement. I can't remember now why I ever thought it was. In this country, you can easily become the sort of person you never wanted to be, broken statuary along your path, a secret hiding place up ahead, schoolgirls whispering behind their hands. ↻

The Shadow of an Airplane Climbs the Empire State Building

Howie Good

First thing every morning I take a pill that may cause drowsiness. The darkness begins to peel away in long, uneven strips, exposing brighter patches of darkness underneath. I feel as I often do, like a candle eavesdropping on sunlight. There have been times in history when anyone who isn't a victim is a suspect. Going up on the escalator, a vague little man who reminds me of me hugs a bag from Infinity Shoes to his chest. In infinity shoes, you could, theoretically, walk forever. ↻



HOWIE GOOD, a journalism professor at SUNY New Paltz, is the author of five poetry collections, most recently *Cryptic Endearments* from Knives Forks & Spoons Press. He has had numerous chapbooks, including *A Special Gun for Elephant Hunting* from Dog on a Chain Press, *Strange Roads* from Puddles of Sky Press, and *Death of Me* from Pig Ear Press. His poetry has been nominated multiple times for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net.



Requiem for a Silent Childhood Dinner Table

Kevin Tosca

No matter how beautiful the plates, no matter how proud she was for having prepared them, no matter how tenacious her optimism and her belief in the possibilities of a Meal, she knew her joy would evaporate because no matter how slowly she chewed, no matter how conscious she was of the portions on her fork, she would finish first, and then she would have to sit there and suffer her husband's chewing and his swallowing and his dancing his food around with his fork and the awful scraping pinging sounds which that made, followed by more chewing and swallowing and scraping and she having nothing to do, no words to say, no words to hear, no conversation, nothing, only the thoughts, like, It's normal, It's natural, It's okay, but it wasn't okay, and she couldn't explain, couldn't speak, couldn't politely or impolitely escape, and there was nowhere near enough wine in the world to drink to make her stop hating breakfast and lunch and dinner, to un-waste the hours, to allow her to deny that something was fundamentally wrong, and that it had always been. ↻



KEVIN TOSCA's stories have recently been published in *The Bicycle Review*, *Jersey Devil Press*, *Litro* and *More Said Than Done*, among others. He lives in Romania. Read more at KevinTosca.com



There's No Pleasing Them

John Riley

When I paint my lips with chocolate lipstick it's gone in less than a minute and I apply more. I prefer the powdery confection. When the lipstick is fresh my lips look like the Mississippi River, up north, when it's still insignificant, a thousand miles from giggly New Orleans. They have lots of bears up there and one has to make special allowances for the beavers. I'm a reticent man. Live alone in a house I rent from my favorite aunt. She's been teaching me how to talk to snakes.

On our last salad day I took the raccoon to spend the night in a motel the same color as my lips. I'm usually too stable for spur of the moment, but this outing was a last-minute decision. I'd bought an actual gilded cage and wanted to show him a good time. Things had not been going well and I planned to teach him to dance on his toes. I learned to dance from a preacher's wife. When I first sweet talked him into leaving the forest I thought the raccoon would have a tail like a spatula. I had him confused with a platypus. I had learned since that he came to live with me because he thought I owned a candy store, but I thought things could be mended. In the room he sat in his cage, hissed and pouted. Finally he told me it wasn't going to work out. He gave me five minutes to hit the curb. He was keeping the car. A bus came by on the hour and I could catch a ride back to where I came from. He'd sweet talk the maid into driving him home, back down by the river, where he could sleep on the wet clay. I grabbed my coat and headed toward the street. I had to walk slowly, my eyes were blurry with tears. I muttered and swore. My pain made me transparent. A white cat standing by a green Caddie saw my anguish. She fell in beside me, said she knew a place we could go. ↻



JOHN RILEY lives in Greensboro, North Carolina, where he works in educational publishing. His fiction and poetry has appeared in *Fiction Daily*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Connotation Press*, *Blue Five Notebook*, *Willows Wept Review*, *The Dead Mule*, and other places online and in print. He is an assistant fiction editor at Ablemuse.



The Intruders

Joel Allegretti

A cigarette and an ashtray appeared on my coffee table alongside the wine carafe from Paris, the twig of coral from a beach in Puerto Rico and the New Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible.

The cigarette was unfiltered; it made no pretense about itself. It was half-smoked. The burnt end projected a gray-white curl of ash the length of a baby's pinky. Filaments of tobacco were in a Diaspora around the ashtray. If lint were brown, I think it would be tobacco.

The ashtray was a lime-green dollar-store plastic dish. It didn't have the decency to be ceramic or a decorative Japanese plate gone utilitarian. It belonged back in the store aisle with the rest of its kind, not on a glass table sharing square feet with bibelots from France and Puerto Rico in a room with crammed bookshelves and my grandfather's mandolin.

A week has gone by. The cigarette and the ashtray haven't moved. The carafe, coral and Bible resent their presence, but like 1980s squatters in an East Village tenement, the duo holds its ground. Because the one who smoked half the cigarette is certain to come back for the other half.

I'm waiting, for no other reason than to see who it was.



JOEL ALLEGRETTI is the author of four collections, most recently *Europa/Nippon/New York: Poems/Not-Poems* (Poets Wear Prada, 2012). His second book, *Father Silicon* (The Poet's Press, 2006), was selected by *The Kansas City Star* as one of 100 Noteworthy Books of 2006. His poetry has appeared in *Smartish Pace*, *The New York Quarterly*, *PANK* and many other national journals, as well as in *The Best American Poetry* blog and journals published in Canada, the United Kingdom and India. Allegretti is the editor of *Rabbit Ears: TV Poems*, the first anthology of poetry about television, scheduled for release in fall 2013 by Poets Wear Prada. He has published his fiction in *Think Journal*, *The Adroit Journal* and *Petrichor Machine*, among others.



Good Enough

Momina Mela

The taste of my own lipstick

Solidified in fish scales

Stained like a careless murder

Upon the brim of a glass of honeyed tea

The magnificent culprit

Of past flesh

Printed like crimson charcoal

Is good enough.



MOMINA MELA is a poet and an undergraduate student of English Literature at Goldsmiths, University of London. Originally from Lahore, Pakistan she is currently based in London and enjoys writing poetry that encapsulates a singular moment in a verse form. She also reads at open mic and spoken word events across London. She has recently been shortlisted to be Young Poet Laureate for London. You can access her blog at mominamela.wordpress.com to read more of her work.

Whale Lessons

Jane Flett

The ocean is a big place but after a while even your semisonic burbles will bounce back and find you.

An ocean is a big place, but it is not so big as space.

Even if your heart is as large as a small car, your tongue as heavy as two grown men—even then—you will have to carry it with you wherever you go.

Even after you die, there is a long way to fall: silently, suspenselessly, downwards, down.

After you're gone, the little guys who fled the shadow you cast will nibble upon the flesh of your bones.

Perhaps this is your chance to live again.

If you spend too long playing too close to the shore, you have only your greed to blame when your body is beached.

And is there any thought worse than being stranded on your belly, blushing, rotting in your own sack of skin?

The reason a beached whale dies is because their body collapses beneath the weight of itself.

The reason you get stuck sometimes is because the thing you are carrying round is so very heavy.

Maybe we'd all be better off floating.

It is easier to become a giant if there is something around to support you: water for your muscles, suspension for your skin.

A house is sometimes just the place your self is suspended.

A home is sometimes a thing that can drift.

Maybe all we are all looking for is the echo of our own voice to prove that this isn't forever, to prove there's an end.

If you wait for long enough, mouth open, just moving in the direction your gravity pulls you, something will get caught in your teeth.

Or your gills, or your hooks, or your handbag, or anywhere you leave open to catch things.

You could be a huge thing, a whale, and live outside time.

You could be a mayfly.

You could reject all these lessons as just words in a world that has no need for words.

You could believe that whales do not ponder philosophy.

These are all options.

Maybe, even, we could take a trip together to the zoo and stand holding hands and watching the sea lions laughing at each other.

I could buy you a white chocolate chip ice cream and you could feed me some candyfloss and

everything could be high-hats and boom-tishes

everything could be easy

we could shut up about whales and trying to find some cod philosophy

we could stop working and stop worrying

we could give up on i ching dice rolling fishing fodder tarot

we could find a well

and throw a coin down inside

and stay holding hands

and waiting

and listening

until, like a dead whale,

it hits

rock

bottom. 🐋



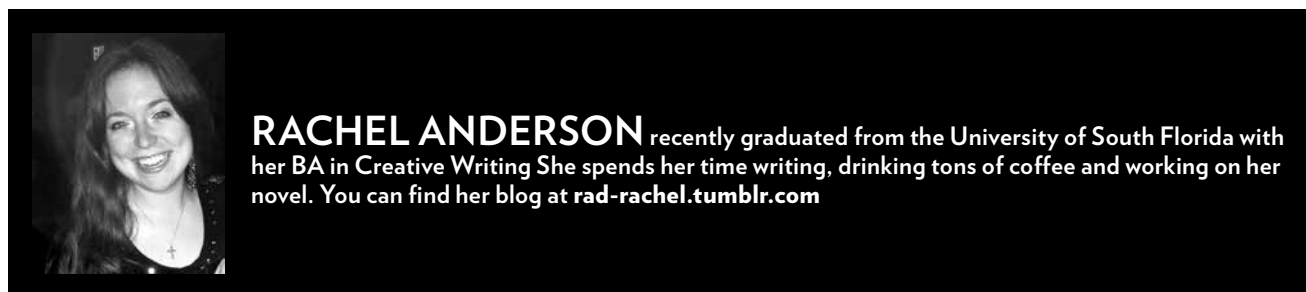
JANE FLETT is a philosopher, cellist, and seamstress of most fetching stories. Her poetry features in Salt's Best British Poetry 2012 and is available as a chapbook, ***Quick, to the Hothouse***, from dancing girl press. Her fiction—which Tom Robbins described as “among the most exciting things I've read since social networking crippled the Language Wheel”—has been commissioned for BBC Radio and performed at the Edinburgh International Book Festival. Visit her at JaneFlett.com



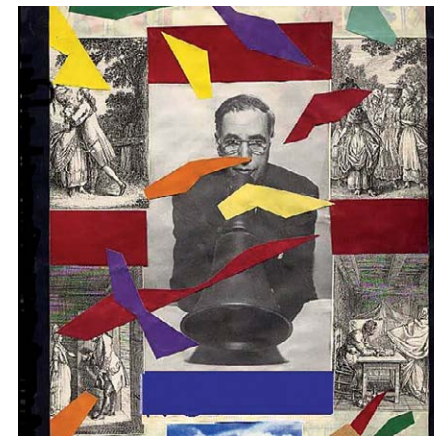
Disclaimer

Rachel Anderson

This story is about you, Steven Splenke. Any resemblance to people, events or places is completely, one hundred percent, intentional. Nothing is fictitious. But that's okay; I know you won't believe a word of it. It started at the 7/11. You stood at the beer cooler, staring at me under the fluorescents. With a flicker of light I was gone from your heart. Shut out, just like that, while pouring myself a blue raspberry slushy. Two days later you did the deed. And here we are. I didn't understand at first, but I do now. You thought my hair was too frizzy. You couldn't see our future; driving down Route 66 with the top down like we planned, popping Natty Light because it's all we could afford. I wasn't Sharpie-d into your life. I was a receipt. A reminder of where you'd been in shitty ink. And you left me out in the sun. Still sound too vague? What about the bird you intentionally hit on Old Brook Way? Or the Hot Wheel collection the antique dealer holds for you? And your journal. Yes, I knew. Squished between your mattresses; an old comp book from High School stuffed with magazine clippings of sexy models. And your confessions. Your fantasies. Tiny green scribbles denoting your desires and desperations. I know this story well, Steven. It ends with you sad, alone and miserable. It ends with you in prison. Because you didn't think this through. You messed up. You don't get a house in Texas. Or a Dalmatian named Triad. Johnnie Walker black, or green, or blue. You don't get to sky-dive. You won't sink your toes in black sand. You don't fuck any models. You don't get away with it, Steven. You get caught. ☹



RACHEL ANDERSON recently graduated from the University of South Florida with her BA in Creative Writing. She spends her time writing, drinking tons of coffee and working on her novel. You can find her blog at rad-rachel.tumblr.com



Every Man an End in Himself

Brandon Patterson

Part I: *The Matter of Being Trusted*

It is not an adage, but it should be: billionaires do not disappear. They are followed forever by contrails of entitlement. Laurent Cabell Venable Coker, II was not a smart man—fiscally capable yes, but enabled by the silver spoon, and so existed without having learned (or earned, in an ethical sense)—which was why he stayed safely sequestered for so long, and also why I unearthed him when other investigators couldn't. I didn't realize Laurent was missing, not until his daughter entered my office—all air of ownership and privilege, lawyer in tow and deferent as a crusading gendarme's shield bearer—having flown in from her summer estate with a throw pillow of a paper file, all stuff prepared for another investigator: profile sheets, portraits, airline ticket receipts, bank statements, old correspondence, and the like, well-thumbed and oft-sorted, the photos and pages bent. Were it a lady, it had serviced every private dick on the east coast, with my little outfit getting sloppy umpteenths.

"So it's been two years now?"

"Twenty-three months," the lawyer pipped.

"And you think he's still alive?"

"There's no reason to think not."

I turned to Elaine. "You?"

"I believe he is alive."

"Well, I'm guessing he's got plenty of folks that'd like him dead."

Elaine smirked. "His enemies are the kind of people who don't have the fortitude for such things."

You see, every liberal organization in New York had rallied outside of his offices at one point. Patchouli and tear gas parties, but the smell never rose to the high offices and the penthouses of a man who pumped millions in cash-blood into his front groups, attacking Democrats in two-dozen states, and funding faux-grassroots campaigns on every issue from climate change to abortion. There were

a dozen different LLCs that fed into and about each other in a chain of nesting ownership, and leaving only vacuous websites and UPS post boxes as evidence of their existence in a window where John Birch was passé, Citizens United only a twinkling.

I pinched the most recent picture of Laurent—him standing on his yacht in a pair of too-tight trunks, well-tanned as a man of easily-gotten money should be, and flanked by girls in and partially out of bikinis and toasting under Mediterranean or Caribbean sun. Issues of scratch aside, he'd bequeathed Elaine a mixed bag: on the one hand she'd gotten his "boxer who waited too long to retire" looks (in his multifaceted heart of hearts, Picasso was surely inspired by the sweet science), though bust-wise they seemed amply on par. My mind jumped to the term "pugilistic attitude," which is coroners' talk for a crisp-burned body clenches up, and something I'd seen plenty before switching to private sector work. I kept the thought cloistered: would've been an impolite diversion.

So I gave them my usual methods talk, where I probably said nothing the other PIs hadn't already jawed, and then ushered them out to a wall map in the lobby, where they pointed out Laurent's properties and favorite retreats, and I took notes and asked questions, drilling details on locks and security systems, deeds and taxation, scribing each dutifully on green-lined graph paper (the quadrilles enforced a measure of legibility on my wayward hand.)

Of course Denny Hamm, my partner in unearthing human secrets, was jammed into the coat closet behind my desk, ready to bust out and take photos of the lawyer's notes, which had been studiously recorded for us in a legal pad. Denny, a man like a chest of drawers, stuffed in there among my coats. Must've been like a hamper full of hot laundry. I was worried that he'd pass out or start wheezing during the meeting, or make too much haste in his egress and tumble from the space like a meaty, bureau-sized accordion.

He was ex-force, too, but a bruiser, a vice guy who

skimmed a little too deep and partied a little too hard. Maybe violated the integrity of a cranium or five in a way that wasn't quite warranted—I think fist-massaging a dopehead who owed him either a gram or an equivalent monetary value was the fuse/culminating explosion that put his career on the rocks. When I found him he was the picture-perfect germination of the broken ex-cop: encrusted by sequential showerless days, steaming malt liquor from his pores, living in an apartment that had so many “rooms” compressed into a single square of space that a closet or two may have resided in a fourth dimension alongside the litter box for Schrodinger's tom. But he pulled through in a way I realized was par for his more-rough-than-green course. He was back in the closet by the time I wrapped with our potential clients

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The notes placed me in a third round of PI interviews initiated after the local hires in New York couldn't come up with leads. It was easy to figure that of my competitors, Elaine was hiring Jake Brenner, human recovery extraordinaire, currently of Delaware. He was the last interviewee before me, and of the five other fellows they quizzed, nobody else had as many notes or quotes underlined and circled as Jake. It didn't surprise me: Jake tracked fraudulent property and life insurance claims, most of it for the big credit card companies, most of his quarry the kind of people committed enough to issues of finance to fake their own demises.

He was the pretty boy type, cheekbones you could hold over a plate of buttered spaghetti and grate parmesan against. Came from uppity stock, but his folks overleveraged during the dotcom bubble (a bit like pony wagerers who over-leverage the house and the savings for the kids' braces) and left him well-off instead of permanent Hamptons. His biggest catch was snagging Rose MacFarland in Argentina after she faked her sign-off—a ruse involving four different island nations, an arms smuggler, and reef sharks—during a St. Croix scuba trip. It was top-third headline stuff, not discrete like my work, which had me hunting down rich runaways gone AWOL to Cabo Wherever, and tossing their pouty asses on the nearest econo back to the lower forty-eight. Not a whiff of cameras or seeing my mug on CNN, but that didn't matter as long as the bluebloods kept my name circulating at their tea parties and their clubs named after Mayflower settlers.

I figured Jake might have problems with the case. He out-smarted people—Rose MacFarland was a claims investigator who covered her caboodle almost perfectly, and it took Jake going full-Sherlock to nab her. Laurent, though, was a brute force guy: anonymity via hundred dollar bills. You busted his ilk with tenacity and legwork because somebody, somewhere was eventually going to talk or screw up. Rope-a-dope versus a bullheaded puncher, in a way. I researched Laurent and Denny drove to Wilmington to pick through Jake's trash once a week before garbage day. I knew Jake didn't shred his work notes and correspondence because I'd swiped it before. That was the other thing with Jake: he was so cocky that he'd gotten sloppy. Denny sent me e-mails, notepads, contact lists and info, and even an itemized evidence list. The way to a man's mind is through his dumpster.

Part II: An Objective Pursuit

Big picture, Laurent was worth about \$8 billion. Back in the sixties he coasted into Harvard and some investment firm positions on his father's and grandfather's reputations and donations, gradually working his way up without distinction, before finally taking the family helm at The Coker Group, which was the largest private equity firm in the world at the time. He muddled along, clan and partners doing most of the heavy lifting of gutting and rearranging corporations, selling off assets like black market organs, cutting away necrotic employee tissue.

Wasn't until the aughts that things got interesting. A quantitative analysis professor from Stanford sold him on an investment strategy that promised huge returns, which led to Laurent's subsequent partnership with the guy, and just as subsequent act of shafting his erstwhile equal on the contract and then lawyering the beleaguered academic into silence (a surprisingly easy maneuver, considering the man lectured for the Harvard of the West): Mephistopheles, thy profession is private equity management. Next, he opened a hedge fund and raked in money faster than if he was baking sourdough at the New York Times: thanks all to this approach, one I don't have to tell you was built on the advantages of collateralized debt obligations and their self-consuming habits with mortgages, particularly those whose cuts were less than prime.

Unlike the brightest brains in the mess—and this includes the prof he shafted—Laurent didn't know the carriage was about to turn gourd, nor did he know how deep he needed to hedge on their inevitable failure; by the time things rolled south, he'd lost most of his fund, was getting his ass sued-off by clients, and the SEC was playing twenty questions with anyone who'd ever been within a hundred yards of him. A year later after that he'd bunked like Hoffa.

Also disclosed was that Elaine wasn't quite on the square with me, as the patriarch was making post-skip check-ins with her up until six months before she approached us, beaming in from who-knows-where to talk politics and the state of her protected accounts. I'd assumed as much: nobody waits two years to cash an inheritance. Between what I learned and what Denny found, it was pretty clear that Laurent had gone underground in a way that'd make a mole man proud. Most of his accounts were transferred off-shore, though the guy had paid his debt to avuncular Sam enough to where the IRS didn't bring the squeeze, and then he spritzed all evidence of his presence in the fifty nifty so completely that Jake thought our prey had bivouacked in the metropolitan wilds of Taipei, home of the Coker Group's Asia headquarters and where Laurent squirreled away six properties under faked records, including a high-rise with a rooftop greenhouse made up to a look like a Buddhist temple that incubated exotic fruits—rare banana cultivars, durians, black watermelons—from which a cadre of waitstaff crafted his daily meals.

The big kicker for Jake was a kiss-off e-mail Laurent sent to the capos of his front groups:

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*Friends,
I have grown too disgusted with this country and its
stifling of our greatest contributors*

*to society. I see before us a future where we our wealth is
stripped of us to feed the
brown masses that spill over our sovereign borders even
as I write. America will
collapse under this thievery, though I've lost the patience
to wait for that day. I promise
that I will return when we are needed and when this
nation is ready for us to lead.
In truth,
Laurent Cabell Venable Coker, II*

•
Laurent was an aviator, his winged steed a Cessna CJ3 finished in Art Deco aluminum like something Howard Hughes himself had just lowered the landing gear on. The last flight plan was cleared for a one-way trip into the side of a mountain in Colorado, an obvious ruddy fish in my competitor's assumption: rather, Mr. Brenner suspected Laurent had never gotten on the plane, and instead had it trucked to a scrap yard to be incrementally redistributed among millions of pop cans. I thought it too big a zag for a man like Laurent, a layer of deception not his style. Not to mention that plane (adorned and remodeled with custom parts, an interior fashioned from Italian walnut) was equal parts beloved child and flying phallus, both of and hitched to hip in a way that a simple scrapping wouldn't be a reality to a man so entitled.

Denny and me spent a day ringing every runway from the Atlantic to the Rockies. Laurent had been bestowed the honor of mandatory remedial air safety training (two near collisions and a landing on a closed runway that scattered a blacktop repair crew), so we also looked for mysterious distress signals—“Have you received any mayday messages coming from an unnamed individual?”—or reports of unidentified plane parts—“Did you notice a fridge-sized digitally-locked humidor in the wreckage?” One week later we were in a shared stupor brought on by badgering airports and ranger stations for hours on end: in engaging air traffic controllers and the men of the woods, I spoke to the abyss, and it spoke back.

“Well, this ain't shit,” Denny commented sagaciously as we stared at an air traffic map that both of us could draw from memory (with, at most, the curvatures and altitude markers canted to slight degrees and feet of difference) the most mocking of them all the straight line emerging from a private airfield near Albany and reaching an improbable and abrupt conclusion in No-Name Ridge, Colorado. It was then that the investigator's muse of cognition—to be fair, Miss Jack Daniels in this situation, though if I hadn't exhausted Miss Remy Martin earlier in the week, she no doubt would've elicited and epiphany—leaned in, her oaken breath light in my ear.

“Let's pull up a satellite pic of the destination,” I told Denny.

38°1'24"N, 107°40'20"W provided a grassy plain, half a mile of the King's length or a baker's klick of the geek's—long enough even for an aeronaut as dubious as Laurent. Better images showed planes tucked under the surrounding trees like Hamptons' Christmas presents and a resort town clustered in a steep valley with the exacting inexplicability and quaintness of a railroad diorama as gainful in artistry as it was lacking in logic.

Right then I got Miss Coker on the horn. “I know where your father is. I know and Boy Wonder Brenner doesn't.”

Having the angles already, it didn't take long for me to negotiate double Jake's take. Jubilation and drinks were in order, as was sleep. In retrospect, though, we'd failed to appreciate some items in my competitor's trash. He was also tracking a senator from Texas, two missing Wall Streeters, the head of MIT's engineering department, and the owner of a megasized pig farm in Arkansas. If I'd stopped to consider their potential connection, I might've inferred the scope of our situation: this case, a speck in the petri dish, but we didn't know it, so intense was our focus down the microscope lens. Gumshoes like me are finders, not thinkers, and we'd found him absent from the public eye, and we'd found him upset with all the petty grievances of the wealthy, and finally we'd found him in a secretive resort, where we would find him enjoying the comforts of the most comfortable.

•
Fruitless web searching beget fruitless phone calls, so we packed a week's wardrobe and a pocket Baedeker, flew to Colorado. We rented a Jeep in case we had to off-road, and for three days we drove near and about the valley: three days going down every bit of blacktop, quizzing every store clerk and mail carrier we came across, getting blank stares from just about every variant of hippy and mountain-dweller possible, all probably wondering why this dynamic duo—plainclothes officiality marred by light-headedness and dry-mouth from the altitude—was chasing ghost hotels in the stony heights of the Laramide orogeny's offspring. At one point I was resigned to thinking that our destination had no access road and was reached only by prop, turbine, or trebuchet.

We paused our odyssey at a relic diner rusting away in a tourist trap that was devoid of tourists. Classic red vinyl seats and linoleum floor squeak, and we sat at the bar on chromed stools with internal springs that twisted back to center after turning too far. Denny got a stack of syrup-drowned wheats and I got a slightly desiccated T-bone. While we ordered, a rotund man in a dark flogger and fedora made his waddling way in and sat at the opposite end of the bar from us, ordered a cup of hot water, after the delivery of which he opened his coat and removed a pouch of black tea from his shirt pocket, the tea going into the steaming cup and the coat carefully resealed. Face like a puffin—all cheeks and narrow-eyed—and a monogram on his pocket that could've been an 'S' or a dollar sign. We observed each other in glances and off the back mirror just above the soda jerk handles, our looks meeting frequently enough for the respective curiosity to be obvious.

“Excuse me,” he said while standing, “but I do feel like we've met somewhere.”

“I can't say there's any bells ringing.”

“Lewis Powell, political consultant.” He handed me a card, chiseled embossing with metallic ink, the font common like script on a DIY website. “Doing some campaign scouting for a client.”

“Didn't realize Ponderosas voted.”

Forced smile. “Perhaps not,” he said. “You two strike me as lawmen.”

Denny laughed so hard bits of maple-infused pancake goo disengaged from his mouth. So I asked, “Scouting

voters, eh? Who's your candidate?"

"Oh, no candidate, just interested parties seeking some change—intelligent change, the kind that respects freedom and property and the right to earn a dollar."

"Sounds like you're up in something I don't want to be."

Mr. Powell finished his snort of brew and wobbled upright. "That's your call, sir, but I believe in the future you'll find yourself on the wrong side of history."

I tipped my lid. "Well, in the long run we're all dead, ain't we?"

So that was Mr. Powell, obviously not too dapper with the informal talk-up and not much better at hiding a GPS tracker. So bad, we figured the black box clamped under the Jeep was a coffee-and-doughnuts decoy meant to throw us from the real one hidden in some impossible crevice. But no, he wasn't that smart, so we transplanted it to a battered Honda, likely our waitress's, and I'm guessing he wasted at least a couple of hours on a tundra trail before he figured out we'd spoofed him. There was mirth at his expense, but the existence of a co-pursuer had us wondering just what the payoff of our snoop was going to be.

Part III: A Monument of Splendor

I thought we had it when I spotted a dirt track—fenced with a swinging gate, homey NO TRESPASSING signs, and a chain that didn't hold up to cutters—off a main route that pointed straight at the landing strip. Of course, it ended about twenty miles short of our goal. We sat stumped at the dead end, sat like stumps ourselves in the Jeep, before uprooting and reconnoitering the scene. The premise of cutting our losses was as prevalent as the aspen chill, for even though it was summer, we were high enough for the hairs on our arms and hands to salute passing breezes.

"Thoughts?" I asked, figuring we'd just made a trip for biscuits.

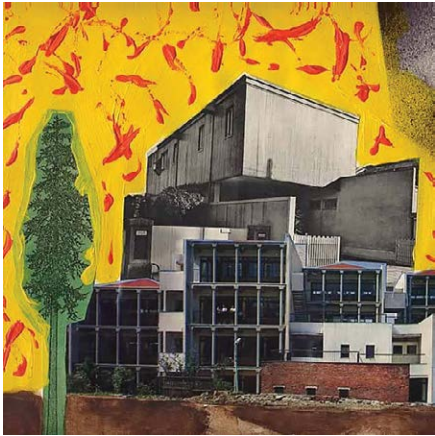
Denny focused on a patch of ground in the manner of an inquisitive bulldog. "Them bushes don't look right."

I didn't see it until he plucked one of the waist-high plants from the ground like he was Kryptonian. The bush was rootless and fixed to the earth with a stake, and beyond the fake shrubs was a weed-knotted track. We drove on and didn't stop until we found a muddied car that had been left in a low place on the trail.

It was a strange vehicle with a cockpit bubble in the front and three wheels with thin tires that were sunk almost to their axles, the backend a bench-seat passenger compartment and what I guessed was an electric motor, with the entire contraption of a utilitarian appearance that suggested a homebuilt science project rigged and assembled in a garage—parts of mismatched colors and fits like they were stripped from different vehicles, rough weld beads, traces of grease pencil measurements and "cut here" notes.

"You'd have to be crazy to drive this thing on a muddy track," I said.

"No kidding." Denny pawed a patch of dirt from the



car's body. "Check this out."

He'd found the gas cap, only it had "H₂O ONLY" stenciled in red above it. Some enlightened mind—an associate of dim, bullying Laurent Coker, no less—had created a machine that cracked hydrogen and oxygen from inert common water, and judging from the set-up, was pretty damn efficient about turning it into motion. Sultanates felt a cold shiver on its first lap out of the shop, no doubt. We opened the doors and found that where the exterior was mud-bathed, the inside was mint except for pairs of clodded footprints and crystals of rock salt.

"So they drive out here during the spring thaw," he said. "This is a low spot, still muddy. They pick up speed coming downhill, hit the patch, get stuck. Got enough momentum to get all three wheels in deep. No way to get clear without a winch. And I don't see a radio anywhere, so there's no way to call for help unless they brought one or a satellite phone. And that's assuming there was someone to come get them."

I conferred with GPS. "On a straight line, that's a fifteen mile hike back to the resort. Could be twice that following the trail, but still doable."

"Assuming there was enough daylight left. If it got dark and they didn't bring gear, they probably popped."

I looked back at the shoe prints, at least one set a pair of casuals, probably loafers of the thousand-dollar-or-so variety—smooth, luxuriant, not resistant to frostbite.

•

We were quiet as a church's graveyard after that, Denny's eyes on the woods, probably watching for sign of the passengers, which by that point would've been bones and synthetic clothes, and me getting the inkling Mr. Coker had bought the big one. I didn't know what to expect when we got to the resort. Even the crispest satellite images just showed black roofs protruding from the trees.

The trail opened up to a high wall of barbed wire threaded through the pines, then wound through an open swinging gate that emanated a Dantean aura in its solemn simplicity and collusion with circumstance, and after passing we saw the first cluster of buildings, none the rustic lodges I'd expected.

Mansions: glass, concrete, and steel, and topped with solar panels, all seemingly abandoned. We honked and shouted, scaled the steps to one and found inside rooms with ornate furniture and original paintings. Another private palace was filled with a menagerie of taxidermy: bears, lions, buffalo, moose. Two in a row might be comfortably furnished and obviously lived-in, if still neat (like the occupants had stepped away for the afternoon), and the next would be as bare as a new build in an empty subdivision. In one animals had shredded the furniture into nests and dens, and across the way its neighbor had been ransacked as if the house had given a shuddering sneeze that unanchored all fixtures and furnishings from nostril floor and wall. For these differences, in summing outward appearance most were untouched, with the exception being

a fancy colonnaded thing cleaved by a fallen tree, the tree also taking out what looked like an electrical substation and a big motorized Yagi antenna.

The houses also had gold. A coin or two in one, in another a hundred trays, candle holders, frames, and such, scattered as if blindfolded Midas had felt his way from room to room; and among all were plastic cards with strips of gold or silver embedded in the top and safes made with a degree of workmanship reminiscent of a main battle tank. The largest of the mansions just had a few tons of bullion stacked in its basement in an honorific to Fort Knox, a coin-filled swimming pool perhaps to be added at a later date. Just as constant were the dead electronics—some battery-drained, others plugged into wall outlets that didn't carry a carpet shock, much less push a volt or two.

And then, well, there was the in-between where we checked the packed lots, and in the yards (if they could be called yards, with all the homes butted against the shield of the tree line) Denny noticed a shallow pit between two houses. Mottled bits of bone protruded from the thin dirt, and he squatted and pointed to them, naming the bones of birds, deer, and livestock.

"It's a real mix. Most recent looks domestic. That's a dog skull right there, and those look like scrape marks from a knife."

"They ate dogs?"

"Maybe more than that." He pulled a long bone from the ground and I knew his observation before it was said, the shaft length and particular arrangement of trochanters unmistakable, and even more so the presence of an artificial joint head grafted to the end.

We found a diary in one of the last houses, only eight months of entries, with the early sections bragging about the "grand colony" and "this spark of ambition," and the later months a bit less rosy: "crops failed," "supply plane still late," "no word from rescue party," "damnable mistake," etc., with the last reading: *Dug up Haverford today. Ate what we could. Mary cried but I made her eat. She vomited and wasted most of it.*

"I don't get it," I said. "A bunch of rich folks voluntarily fly out to a colony to scrap off the land for a bit. They don't tell anybody where they're going, got diddly for back-up plans. And then they starve to death. When've you ever heard of rich people starving to death?"

"Donald Trump meets the Donner Party. Makes as much sense as drowning in a desert."

"Nothing came in or out, at least by the road."

"The landing strip," Denny added, "might've had six feet of snow on it in the winter. The road, too."

"For the same reason, I'm guessing they all stayed pretty

close to here. Kept people strike me as the kind to stay put and die."

"Yeah, don't want to leave your last food source, either."

"Lovely place, ain't it Denny?"

A thoughtful nod. "That John Denver's full of shit."

"We should find the graveyard." I hoped Laurent Coker had a headstone there. Proof pays the private piper.

A path tracked beyond the houses to a building-sized rain cistern with a faded sign advertising water prices in ounces of silver, and past that were a few meager farm plots grown over with vetch. One field bore a harvest of stones, at the near end of which was the unmarked hole where 'Haverford' had briefly resided (and some of him—presumably the less gastronomically-pleasing parts—remained). Moving along, the stones became almost proper markers made out of concrete blocks with barely legible names and shakily scratched sign-off dates. One of them was Laurent Cabell Venable Coker, II, though here reduced to "L. Coker" in a way that would've chapped his pampered ass had he seen it. We beheld our quarry, now barely-buried bone what was once a man who could have purchased small countries but rather chose to buy the politicians of a particularly large one. With all due respect, I opened his skull for dental pictures and for DNA snapped a finger bone sheathed in skin husk.

Last item on the shopping list was a good shot of the tail markings on Laurent's plane, so we made our way to the airfield. At the edge of the runway was a statue of an athletic-looking man standing on a pillar, his lines and shape reminiscent of yesteryear; perhaps in a way belonging to a World's Fair where he pointed to a sky soon to fill with flying cars and zeppelin fleets, and children scampered about him marveling at the glory of the future and the wonders wrought by the hand of man. He faced the airfield, both welcoming arrivals and signaling an imminent long-ball launch into the horizon, and at the front was a placard:

I Will Never Live for the Sake of Another Man,
Nor Ask Another to Live For Mine.

Stringy weed covered the crediting line—the name of the immortalized figure under whose Ozymandian purview this graveyard of the vanities lay—revealed when we pushed aside the veil. Denny scrunched his face.

"Who the fuck is 'John Galt'?"



BRANDON PATTERSON'S recent fiction has appeared in *Confrontation*, *Prime Number*, *Knee-Jerk*, and *The Evansville Review*. He's a fellow at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and a graduate of the Hollins University MFA program in Creative Writing. In addition to short stories, he also writes about American gridiron football at secondlevelfootball.com and about sport-conditioning science and practice for several websites.



Shape of the Frames

Peter Clarke

My girlfriend wears glasses designed by Karl Lagerfeld, the most pretentious old ass in the fashion industry. I'd tell the man to his face he's ugly. But what good would that do? I wouldn't even know about the man if it weren't for my girlfriend's taste in glasses. Similarly, he'll never know about me unless he randomly comes over here halfway across the globe and introduces himself. I wouldn't recommend for him to do that. I don't want anything to do with his idiot glasses. And I'm assuming he doesn't want anything to do with my chainsaw artwork.

I specialize in carving native animals (mostly grizzly bears) out of cedar, oak, and Douglas-fir. I also do more exotic works, including totem poles and ancient Greek goddesses. For all of my works, I exclusively utilize the only tool I need—a chainsaw.

I also brew my own beer that is far too stout for the open market and I once won a hamburger-eating contest for a cash prize.

The problem is: this Karl Lagerfeld character really gets under my skin—just like the “tough” guys who star in all the good gangster movies and also all the “great” artists whose best works look like something a two-year-old pukes up after a mildly bumpy ride at the county fair.

I've really been hung up on this one conversation I had with my girlfriend. Last Tuesday. That time of day when everyone gets antsy in the way that compels them to buy useless things and lust after the even more useless things

they can't afford—all with the incredible enthusiasm of the happiest man alive, which is the man granted by God's own handwriting permission to worship Satan to his heart's content.

While we were driving home from the shopping mall, my beautiful girlfriend of four months strong turned to me.

“Hey, let's see if I can read that sign up ahead. Can you read it?”

“No.”

“Oh...! Oh...! John Wayne Marina, next right! Gosh, it's so clear! I've never been able to see so clearly before—ever, I swear; it's like a miracle!”

“You know we pass that same damn sign every day.”

“Not every day. Also, that's not the point. I didn't say, ‘Do you know what the sign says,’ I said, ‘Can you read it.’”

“Yeah, well...”

“I'll have to look up more about Karl Lagerfeld, the designer guy, now that I own a pair of his glasses. I feel fancy. We'll have to go to Paris soon.”

“Sure.”

Then I had a question.

“You really think this guy Karl Logger-what's-his-face really knows a thing about lenses? You know it's the actual lenses that make you see better, not the shape of the frames!”

“Baby, you seem jealous or something. I didn't mean to offend you. Did I?”

“Of course not.”

“Besides, when you do your carvings, it's not like you actually know anything about the Greek goddesses. You just think they're pretty. And your beer. You don't worry about its function—its nutritional value or anything—you just make it because it takes good and your friends like it.”

I almost wanted to get personal and mention that, even though I had just bought a new pair of jeans, I wasn't so eager to get home and look up more about whoever “Carhartt” is or was. But I let it drop. It's a stupid thing. I'm stupid. He's stupid. Nothing to it, just dumb all around. And I'm not getting married to this girl anytime soon either, come to think of it—even if she is pretty. Prettier than her own good, if you ask me. ↻



PETER CLARKE is a recent law school graduate currently living in Sacramento, California. His short fiction has appeared in *Pif Magazine*, *Curbside Splendor*, *Western Press Books*, *Hobart*, *Elimae*, *Denver Syntax*, *Pure Francis*, *The Legendary*, *Zygote in My Coffee*, and elsewhere.



Lion Tamers

Cara Long

I head down the front steps and across the street to Mrs. Hernandez's house like I'm told. My mother wants me to return a casserole dish she borrowed last week. I carry it with both hands til I'm down the steps, then let it swing next to me at my side, clutching it with just my fingers. If my mother sees me do this, I will surely get yelled at. But she doesn't see.

I knock on Mrs. Hernandez's screen door and wait. She appears in the hallway a few seconds later. “Oh, Nini,” she says, “I wasn't expecting you.”

“Here,” I say, holding out the dish to her. “My mom wanted me to return this.”

She looks at the dish in my hands.

“Oh,” she says, “thank you. I was driving myself crazy looking for it.”

She takes the dish from me. I stand on the front porch waiting to be dismissed.

“Do you want to come in, have some juice with me?” she asks.

“Um,” I say, and bite my lip.

Mrs. Hernandez smiles. “Nevermind,” she says, “you go have fun, Nini.”

“Bye,” I remember to yell back as I'm crossing the street. I find my mother in the kitchen, washing dishes.

“What did Mrs. Hernandez say?” she asks me.

“She said ‘thank you,’” I say. “Can I have some chips?”

“Maybe after you help me dry the dishes,” my mother says.

I groan and grab a dish towel.

“When did Mr. Hernandez die?” I ask my mother, standing at her side, towel ready.

“Hush,” she says, and hands me a glass.

“I don't remember him at all,” I say.

My mother stops washing the dishes and places a fist on her hip.

“Honestly Nini,” she says to me. “You and death. It's all you talk about. You watch too much T.V.”

“It's not all I talk about,” I say, wounded. “You never answer my questions.”

She hands me another glass. “Pick a nicer topic then,” she says.

Sometimes I hate my mother. Last summer I went to stay with my father's parents. I hadn't seen them in a very long time, and when they saw me they talked about how big I'd gotten and how much I looked like my father. My mother wasn't crazy about my going, but they had begged her and she felt bad because their only son, my father, had died when I was just a baby. My father's parents live seven hours away by car. I rode in the back seat of their big, old Lincoln and my grandmother gave me popcorn and chocolates to eat for snacks. She asked me about my favorite things and I told her I liked to roller skate and so she took me roller skating once a week every week that I was there.

My grandfather was quieter, but he let me work in the garden with him. I got to pick string beans and grow my own sunflower. When I left in August it was already taller than me. Before I went back home, I asked my mother if I could visit again the next summer and all she said was “we'll see.” She still hasn't told me if I can go or not and it's already almost April. Last week we got into a fight and I packed my suitcase and put it in my closet. It makes me feel happy when I think of it in there, waiting for me, ready to go.

When we finish with the dishes, my mother tells me to help her set the table.

“Why?” I ask, because we never eat at the table. “Who's coming?”

She ignores me and places the plates and silverware down on the table.

“Don't put the knife with the fork,” she says to me before I've even touched anything.

“Who's coming,” I ask again, putting the knife with the fork until she gives me a dirty look.

“Mr. Dolan,” she says, looking away from me.

I stay silent to punish her. I hate Mr. Dolan. He is a gross old man who hangs around with other gross old men and tells me to say ‘hi’ to my mother whenever I see him.

“He's a nice man,” she says gently.

“He is not,” I say, “he's gross and old and he smells.”

“Nini!” she says loudly, and I notice her eyes have darkened. “Do not speak that way in my home.”

We finish setting the table in silence. Before I storm out of the room I say, “it's my home too.”

I run upstairs and lie on my bed. I wonder if my mother will let me fake sick and skip dinner. Probably not. She likes to have everything just so. I sometimes wish she had died instead of my father. I also sometimes wish that she would go away and never come back.

A few minutes later I hear the doorbell ring and I know that it is Mr. Dolan. I can feel his grossness climb the stairs and stare through the door at me.

“Nini,” my mother calls up the stairs to me, “come downstairs and say hi to Mr. Dolan.” I don't move. I will embarrass her tonight for doing this to me.

After a pause she shouts, “NINI!”

I head downstairs slowly and find them in the living room sitting on the sofa together having wine. When they notice me standing there, staring at them hatefully, my mother flushes.

“Nini,” she says, “you remember Mr. Dolan.”

“Why hello, Nini,” he says.

I mutter hello and my mother says “speak up Nini.”
“HELLO,” I shout, knowing that I will regret doing so later.

“Go fill the water cups,” my mother says. Mr. Dolan looks slightly amused, which makes me want to cut him with a knife.

I fill the water cups and bang them down loudly on the table. My mother comes in and pulls me aside by the arm.

“Cut it out Nini,” she says through clenched teeth.

I yank my arm away.

“I didn’t do anything,” I say, spiting her. “You’re just mad because I won’t be nice to some fat old man.”

She pinches the skin on my arm, behind my muscle.

“Be good tonight, Nini. I’m warning you.”

“Owww,” I say, rubbing the spot where she has pinched me, acting more hurt than I really am.

When we finally all sit down to dinner, we eat in almost complete silence. Mr. Dolan tries to make a few jokes; my mother laughs then shoots me dirty looks when I don’t. I push my lasagna around the plate with my fork until it resembles a wet mush. When we’re finished, my mother says, “Nini, be a good girl and clean up the table for me.”

She and Mr. Dolan go back into the living room and I can hear them laughing. My face burns hot with anger. I am ashamed of my mother and I think that I will hate her a little bit for the rest of my life because of this. The only good thing is that after I’m finished cleaning up, she doesn’t make me join them. Instead she says, “Go upstairs and do your homework, Nini.”

Mr. Dolan winks at me and says, “smart as you are, it won’t take you too long.”

I don’t look at him and I leave the room without saying anything. I go upstairs but don’t do my homework. I pull my suitcase out of the closet and inventory the contents. I add some socks to the pile of clothes, then zip the case up and put it back.

I play on my computer until I hear my mother’s footsteps on the stairs. She pokes her head into my room. “Nini,” she says, pointing to my knapsack, “do your homework *now*.” She closes the door and goes back downstairs.

I haul my knapsack up onto my bed and spread my books out. I start with Math, my favorite subject. I save history for last because it’s so boring. I have to keep re-reading the worksheet to find the answers. I’m almost finished when I hear my mother saying good night to Mr. Dolan. I shut my bedroom light off and peek downstairs. I see him lean in to kiss my mother and I have to cover my mouth with both of my hands so I don’t throw up.

Mr. Dolan notices me peeking and says to my mother, “we’ve got company.” I try to sneak back into my room even though I have been caught. If my mother asks, I will say I was going to the bathroom for some water and that I thought that Mr. Dolan was attacking her. But my mother doesn’t ask. She only knocks on my door at 9:30 to say lights out.

Tomorrow, I think, as I lie awake in the darkness, I will call my grandparents and ask them if I can come and live with them.

The next morning, my mother doesn’t wake up with me. I go into her bedroom to ask her for lunch money and she says, “I made you a lunch. It’s in the fridge.”

I start to leave her room and she says, “Wait a minute.

No kiss?”

“I thought you were sick,” I say, lying.

“Stop being silly,” she says, “and give me a kiss good-bye.”

I go over to her and brush her cheek with my lips.

“Hey,” she says, pulling me toward her when I try to move away, “you’re not mad at me, are you?”

I blurt out, “I want to go and live with dad’s parents starting this summer.”

She sits up.

“Nini, what did you just say?”

I look down at the floor. “I don’t want to live here anymore,” I say.

She stands up and turns her bedroom light on. She motions for me to sit down next to her on the bed. “Are there problems at school?” she asks me.

I shrug. I want to cry. “Hey,” she says, cupping my chin with her hand, “what’s going on?”

I blink back my tears. “Nothing,” I say, standing up. “I gotta go catch the bus.”

That afternoon, right before lunch, the buzzer goes off in my classroom.

“Nina,” my teacher says to me. “Go to the home office. Your mother is here.” The other kids look at me with envy. My best friend, Tillie, gives me a ‘what’s up?’ look. I shrug and pack up my knapsack.

I get to the office and see my mother standing there, talking with the secretary. She has a bright smile on her face when she sees me.

“Hey kiddo,” she says. “I thought we’d get lunch together and do some shopping.”

I look at her and say “ok.” She grabs for my hand, but I put it in my pocket before she can get it.

“Good-bye, Nina,” Mrs. Pratt, the principal’s secretary says and winks at me as we’re walking out.

When my mother and I are in the car she asks me what I feel like having for lunch.

“Anything you want,” she says.

“I dunno,” I say.

“Nini,” she says, turning towards me, “what is the matter with you?”

“I don’t like Mr. Dolan,” I say, swallowing my fear, “and I don’t want him at our house.”

My mother looks at me more intently.

“That’s why you want to go and live with your grandparent’s?” she asks.

I grind my heel into the carpeted floor of our car. “I’m not going to be told what to do by some stupid old man and his stupid old man friends,” I say angrily, giving my mother a mean look to let her know that I am serious about this.

“When has Mr. Dolan ever told you what to do?” she asks me.

“You just don’t get it!” I scream at her. She jerks her head back, surprised by my yelling.

“You don’t know anything,” I continue. “You just stay in the house and you think everything is ok and it’s not! I have to go to the store for you – ‘Nini I need this’, ‘Nini I need that’ and I have to see stupid OLD Mr. Dolan and his stupid friends who never do anything but stand around and I have to hear them talk about you. I hate you! I hate you for that.”

Hot, fat tears roll down my cheeks and my hands are

ballled into two tight fists. My mother turns away from me and silently backs out of the parking space. I put my head against the window and sob. She reaches out and places her hand on my knee, rubbing it.

“I’m sorry, Nini,” she says. “Please don’t leave mama. I love you more than anything.”

•
Two days later, I am at the store for my mother, buying flour. Mr. Dolan is there, as usual, drinking coffee and hanging out with his old man friends.

“Hello, Nini,” he says.

“Nina,” I say.

“How’s your mother?” he asks.

I spot Mrs. Hernandez near the soda cooler and I’m suddenly grateful to see her. “Mrs. Hernandez,” I shout and rush toward her, leaving Mr. Dolan behind.

“Hi Nini,” she says surprised, glancing around the store to see if there’s trouble.

“I’m buying flour for my mother,” I say to her.

“I see that,” she says, nodding at the flour sack in my hands.

“Yeah,” I say, “we’re going to make cookies.”

“Well, that sounds like fun,” Mrs. Hernandez says.

I nod. Mrs. Hernandez smiles at me, and I check to see that Mr. Dolan isn’t near the cash register.

“Bye,” I say to Mrs. Hernandez before going to the counter to pay. I run the two blocks back to my house and deliver the flour to my mother, breathless.

My mother opens the flour and begins measuring it out for cookies.

“Can we have Mrs. Hernandez over for dinner tonight, mom?” I ask her.

“Sure,” she says, as she dumps two cups of flour into a bowl. “I think that would be nice.” As soon as she finishes the sentence I fly out of the house and see Mrs. Hernandez walking back down the street from the store.

I wave at her excitedly. “Do you want to come over for dinner tonight?” I shout, running up to meet her. I offer to take her bag.

“Nini,” she says, “what has gotten into you?”

“Do you wanna come?” I ask again. Mrs. Hernandez laughs softly. “Alright Nini, I’ll be there. What time?” she asks.

“Come over right now,” I say. Mrs. Hernandez tells me

that she’ll be over right after she puts the stuff she bought at the store away.

I head home and tell my mom that Mrs. Hernandez is on her way over.

“Right now?” she asks.

“Yeah,” I say, “I told her to come.”

My mother shakes her head, then says “Ok, Nini. Make a salad to go with dinner.”

Over dinner, I listen to my mother and Mrs. Hernandez chat. They talk about their lives and I learn things about my mother that I didn’t know before, like what her first job was and that she had a baby brother who was stillborn. Mrs. Hernandez talks about her daughter, Janet, the one who joined the army and died in the war. She says that Janet always wanted to be somewhere else, even when she was a little girl. She says that one time, when Janet was seven, she ran away and left a note saying that she was going to join the circus and become a lion tamer. Mr. and Mrs. Hernandez

found her an hour later, walking by herself on the highway with a little plastic bag full of clothes.

Mrs. Hernandez laughs when she tells this story, but it is a laugh that hides tears. I notice my mother glancing over at me. She reaches for my hand and I give it to her. She presses it. That night, I unpack the suitcase in my closet. My mother comes in and sits on my bed.

“You can go to your grandparents again this summer, Nini,” she says. “Just promise me that you will come back,” she says.

“I promise,” I say and kiss her on the cheek. That night, she lets me sleep in bed with her. I wake up pressed against her side.

“What was your brother’s name,” I ask her, “the one who was born dead.” Instead of saying “Nini,” as I expect her to, she tells me his name. Charles.

“I used to imagine what he’d be like,” she says sleepily. “Maybe the three of us would be lion tamers. Would you like that, Nini? We could be a family of lion tamers.” A few seconds later, she is snoring. I imagine me, my mother and my Uncle Charles taming lions together. I am the bravest of all of us, and my uncle always compliments me for my courage.

I fall back to sleep again, imagining myself wearing a sequined suit and prying open a lion’s jaws. My mother cheers for me and the crowd is on their feet chanting “Nini! Nini!” 🐾





CARA LONG lives and works in New York State. She hopes Hillary Clinton will run for President in 2016 and win. Her work has appeared in *WhiskeyPaper*, *Crack the Spine*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Halfway Down the Stairs* and the *Circa Review*.



Thoughts on Pacaya

Jenny Ferguson

And if it rains tomorrow between the hours of noon and three, maybe I'll decide to stay. I'll live on the hillside of an active volcano, see what I've been missing all these years, add volcano to the list of things I have seen. I'll sell pineapple ice cream to the tourists on the grassy clearing where the horses wait for them to walk on lava and snap pictures and light their cigars from the heat of the magma. Pineapple ice cream and bags of marshmallows. I'll stay long enough in the same small house on the hillside of an active volcano to become a local, a fixture. I'll grow corn and give an ear to all the girls who are patiently waiting to leave.

Over eggs, he'll say, "Where do you want to go?"

And I'll answer, "Anywhere." I will glance out the window to assess the morning sky because it promises no rain today. "Tell me a story. About an orange church. Or a girl who lives on a volcano. At the very, very top. And she must love pineapples."

He will swallow the last of his breakfast, sip at his coffee and smile. When he opens his mouth, he will lie to me and I will love the way the lies sound on my ear.



JENNY FERGUSON is a Canadian studying for her PhD at the University of South Dakota. She's currently obsessed with the musical *Rent*, and sincerely hopes to one day use this line in unscripted conversation: "I didn't recognize you without the handcuffs."



The Spy Goes Shopping

Mercedes Lawry

The spy went shopping for hats. His line of work required him to appear in a variety of personas, each disguise convincing enough that he would not stand out or appear ill at ease or costumed as someone he was not.

This was a new position and he very much wanted to impress his bosses, some of whom he had never met and never would as they, too, were spies or spy-masters and must retain a certain amount of anonymity to be effective. The new spy had recently been shopping for shoes for the very same reason, although he had a fondness for shoes and so it was not only the fulfillment of a job requirement but equally a modest pleasure. He had no such feeling about hats and in fact, believed his head was not suitable for hats, as it was a tad on the small size and he could easily look silly which in some cases could contribute to his success at spy duties although he had to learn to ignore the jab at his self esteem. The spy's father had worn hats as had most men of that generation and he remembered his father looked good in a hat – almost dashing, and he wondered if he found the right hat if he too might achieve a measure of that flair, just enough to minimize the awkward factor conveyed by his disproportionate head but not so much that he would be noticed, which might hamper his spy efforts and even put him at grave risk.



MERCEDES LAWRY has published poetry in such journals as *Poetry*, *Rhino*, *Nimrod*, *Poetry East*, *The Saint Ann's Review*, and others. She's also published fiction, humor and essays, as well as stories and poems for children. Among the honors she's received are awards from the Seattle Arts Commission, Hugo House, and Artist Trust. She's been a Jack Straw Writer, a Pushcart Prize nominee twice, and held a residency at Hedgebrook. Her chapbook, *There are Crows in My Blood*, was published in 2007 and another chapbook, *Happy Darkness*, was released in 2011. She lives in Seattle

Because of her astigmatism she looked
At my left ear whenever she gave
Financial advice and at my belly whenever
Remembering the sex we had together.



Superstition

Adalena Kavanagh

Washington Heights had a reputation for crack and murder in the '80s and '90s. When the city got serious about routing the drugs and crime, helicopters hovered over the five and six story tenements like mechanical raptors and shined bright lights into people's bedrooms. This all happened about six blocks south of us, though, closer to the George Washington Bridge. And while we saw crack vials underneath trees in Bennett Park, where children chased one another, and teenagers promenaded, it was also the highest point in Manhattan and that was a small thing to be proud of.

Our Northern section of Washington Heights was where old Jews, classical musicians, theater hopefuls and Dominicans coexisted much in the same way people do on the subway, everyone minding their own business, tolerating one other's idiosyncrasies just as long as certain codes of conduct were followed. It was a neighborhood of distinct factions, but it was the kind of place where shop owners still

called you by your childhood nickname.

Across the street from our elementary school stood a run down single-family house between Art Deco apartment buildings. Over the years, as it fell into greater disrepair, its legend as a haunted house grew. Sometimes people lived in the house, but often people did not.

None of us lived in houses. We might have visited relatives' houses, but more often we had only seen them on television, or in the movies. I longed to navigate the secret passages and hidden corners inside all the Victorian houses I encountered in the books I read.

The haunted house was made more sinister by the backdrop of the grey Hudson River and the scrubby New Jersey Palisades, and though we really did fear it, we also felt protective of it. It was our haunted house and we dutifully dared one another to cross the street and run up and touch the first step.

Then, when the neighborhood started changing, a developer knocked down the house, and though the condo

that replaced it was still dwarfed by the apartments on either side, it was too new, and the lines too straight, to remain haunted.

Other than the haunted house, the only other scary place in our immediate vicinity was the alley parallel to our apartment building. The alley opened to an inner courtyard off of the building's basement and the laundry room. If our parents sent us to throw out the garbage, or change a load of laundry, we made sure to race through the passage and toss our garbage, or dash into the laundry room. There were water bugs and rats in the courtyard, and for a short time there was also the man in the basement.

He only got me once. I had put the wash into the dryer and when I exited the laundry room he flashed me and reached out to touch my shoulder. I stood still and then I ran, thinking he was going to follow me and drag me away. He didn't. I never saw him again and I didn't tell my parents. I don't know why. It seemed easier to pretend it never happened.

I went all the way to Korea to teach English in order to escape Washington Heights but there I was again. Laid off from my easy telemarketing job, I moved back into my childhood home on Fort Washington Avenue. It was the New York City version of an inheritance—my parents were retiring to Pensacola, where the cost of living was lower, and I was getting their rent stabilized two-bedroom apartment.

They had rented a small ranch house, but the day they were set to move my mother decided she wasn't going to go. She began unpacking their dishes and my father picked up his suitcase to call her bluff. She continued to unpack their pots and pans, taking a moment to wipe away some tears. I'd been imagining how when I got a new job I'd get a cute set of dishes and paint the kitchen, but there was my mom putting the worn out dishes and pans back where they had always been.

Too angry to yell, my father went down to his car. I was angry, too, but I was like my mother. I yelled. I asked her what she was doing. For once she was too aggrieved to yell back and after she finished putting the kitchen things away—the only things that hadn't already been shipped to Florida—she went to her bedroom and shut the door. I don't know what she did in there. The bed was gone. She probably looked out the window onto our busy street, or further east toward the Bronx, lost in who-knew-what kind of thoughts.

When my father reached Florida he called my mother. I listened in on the phone in my room.

He told her that she could swim everyday and she reminded him that she didn't know how to swim.

“Never too late to learn!” he said.

She just sniffed.

Then he told her about all the seafood she could eat and she hesitated, as if that might convince her, but then she remembered her private grievance and said, “I have no appetite.”

“I found a Chinese supermarket,” he said. “It's only forty minutes away.”

“I bet you it's run by Cantonese people, full of things made in China—you want to poison me? I only buy things made in Taiwan. They probably don't have what I need,” she said.

“No, they do. I checked.”

Her response was icy. “How do you know what I need?”

He sighed and said he'd wait for her but that she had to join him eventually. My mother hung up the phone.

My father called again to beg me to convince my mother to make the move. I told him I'd try. I was just as eager as he was to see her relocated to Florida. I thought that I'd have the whole place to myself, that I could finally put my own stamp on the place but she held on for reasons I couldn't understand. Still, I reassured my father that I'd work on her.

Instead of my working on my mother, she worked on me. When I slept past 9am she kicked my door open and said, “Buddha thinks you're lazy.”

She'd set up a makeshift altar where her old one used to be. It was very simple. She'd planned to carry the small gold statuette of Guan Yin, and prayer beads, to Florida in a special case. So when my mother didn't leave, she set up Guan Yin on a cardboard box she covered with a yellow silk cloth. During her morning prayers she had asked—*Is the reason Pearl can't keep a job because she is lazy?* When she threw down the half moon-shaped divination sticks, Buddha's answer was clear—Yes, I was lazy.

My mother had always been superstitious in the stereotypically Chinese way—the number four is a homophone for death; the color white is for mourning, and you don't stick chopsticks into your rice bowl because it's blasphemous.

My mother was on a permanent high alert to bad luck. My father, an Irish American, and superstitious in his own way—mostly about gambling—learned to humor her but as she grew older, and her superstitions became more baroque, it was harder to do so. The rational part of me knew that superstitions are just a hedge against life's random cruelty, but the part that had been nurtured by my mother was too wary to test fate.

When I questioned her about her reluctance to move to Florida she said that the new house was unlucky. She had trusted my father to find them a good place and had stayed in New York. When he came home and showed her some pictures he had taken she thought the neighbor's house was their house. When she showed him the photograph, a few days before the big move, and pointed out where she wanted to plant a jasmine bush, he told her that she was mistaken.

She didn't like the way their house sat on the property. She didn't like the front door because it was blue, and she was convinced that she would never be happy there, but she couldn't change my father's mind. The only time he blew up at her he shouted, “We already signed the papers!”

My mother shook her head every time she looked at the photograph. “If only I had realized which one was ours.”

I pointed out that it was obvious which house was the focus of the photograph.

“The one next door is nicer,” she said. “I thought he picked the nicer house.”

I told her the house next door looked exactly the same. She disagreed and pointed to the red door. When I said they could always paint the door she waved her hand in disgust.

“If you're so picky, why didn't you go to Florida and pick out a house you like, in person?” I asked.

She shook her head. “You think everything is so simple.”

All of her furniture was in Florida with my dad. I imagined it was still in boxes without her there to direct him where to place things. I'd only brought my bed and an old

couch I was planning to get rid of once I had some money. My mother was sleeping on the couch, but then one night she came into my room and nudged me awake. She wanted to share the bed with me. I thought about telling her to go back to the couch, thinking that maybe sheer discomfort would drive her down to Florida into my father's arms but she looked so pitiable in her shorts and t-shirt, her permed hair unruly. I lifted the comforter and let her slip in next to me. She made a point of not taking up too much space but I actually didn't mind. When I was a little girl and I was sick my father always picked me up and gently placed me next to my mother so she could watch me during the night. He slept on the couch until I was well again.

I ran into Letti in the hallway. She was living in *her* parent's old apartment. After thirty years working as a building manager, and moonlighting as a security guard on the weekend, her father had built a retirement home in the Dominican Republic. Letti's parents handed down their lease and she let her mother's carefully appointed two-bedroom apartment deteriorate as her malaise deepened.

That day, though, Letti was in a good mood. She'd just come back from visiting her parents. We reminisced about our childhood.

Letti and I had never been friends when we were children. She was three years ahead of me in school and at the time that was a gulf in age too wide to cross. One summer my father got into an expansive manic mood and he invited all the kids on our floor and the floor below to come to the beach with us. Most parents declined the invitation, but Letti's father gave her permission to join us.

That night, after a full day of swimming, soggy ham sandwiches, salty potato chips, and Capri Sun juice pouches, she sat on my bedroom floor hugging a stuffed polar bear my grandmother had given me for Christmas. His name was Benjy, and I adored him. I felt nervous watching her cuddle him but then Letti said that she liked Benjy so much she wished she had one just like him. So I said she could have him. I loved Benjy, but I wanted to be liked even more.

After Letti went home with Benjy slung under her arm, as if he were just any toy and wouldn't mind being handled in such an indifferent manner, I cried. My father asked me what was wrong and I told her that Letti took Benjy. My mother was ready to demand Benjy's return, but my father questioned me further. When I told them the whole story, that I offered Benjy to Letti, my father sighed. “You can't take back a gift. I'm sorry.”

My mother agreed and added, “Sometimes you don't know what something is worthy until you lose it.”

Letti was also unemployed but she had signed up to be a test subject for a new allergy medication at Cabrini Medical Center. They paid her more than what she got from unemployment. I'm sure she had completely stopped looking for a job, even though she always told me she was polishing up her resume.

I spent many hours in Letti's dark apartment just so I could avoid my mother's scrutiny. We both had other friends but when you're unemployed it's hard to relate to people with jobs. There's a fear that you'll never get another job, that you'll never be normal again. Re-connecting with Letti felt a bit like fate. I thought we had a lot in common.

I'd been going on interviews and had a call back for a

temp agency. I was excited but Letti's reaction was listless. The change had been gradual, like the slow leak from a helium balloon. When I re-connected with her she had been up, but two months later she was down.

I asked her if the medication she was testing was the cause of her new mood but she waved her hand to dismiss the idea.

“I just get in these funks.”

The only thing that got her worked up was talking about her old job. Letti obsessively recounted the circumstances of her firing—the jealous co-worker, the ill thought-out affair with another co-worker, and the final accusation that she was stealing from the petty cash reserve. At first it seemed natural she felt such bitterness about the situation but after a few months I saw that it was easier to focus on the definite slights of the past than the uncertain future.

Unable to change her mood I hunkered down into her couch and kept her company. We watched yet another *Law and Order* marathon. All she ever wanted to watch was *Law and Order*, whether it was the classic iteration, or another series in the franchise. Since she had cable, she could usually find an episode any time she turned on the television.

Letti told me she wanted to be an FBI agent when she was a girl. “I wanted to catch the fuckers who ruin everything,” she said.

Letti had been a skinny girl with long legs. Now she was tall but lumpy around the middle. Sometimes she greeted me at her door with her face half made up. Either she'd done her lips in a crimson shade or made cat eyes with thick black eye liner. Eventually she'd wipe off the makeup with frustrated swipes of cold cream. It was like she was practicing for when she was ready to face the world again.

One night we were watching an episode of *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*. I disliked this series but it was Letti's favorite. In this episode there was a subway flasher who graduated to sexual assault and it reminded me of the man in the basement. I asked Letti if she knew what I was talking about. She paused, and then shook her head, concentrating on the television.

I hadn't thought about the man in the basement in a long time, but when I moved back and walked down the familiar alleyway I remembered. It was a feeling of fluttery panic more than a concrete image. I couldn't tell you what his face looked like. I just remember how I felt—afraid.

After the show was over Letti asked me if I believed in fortune-tellers.

I felt wary for some reason.

“My mom sometimes reads my fortune,” I said.

She became excited. “Do you think she'll read my fortune?”

My mother liked Letti from a distance because she was unfailingly polite and helped her with the groceries if they met in the lobby, but my mother refused to read an outsider's fortune.

“My mom says her fortunes only work for Chinese people,” I said.

Letti squinted at me. “But you're only half Chinese.”

“I guess she means it only works on family.”

Letti sighed. “So. Do you believe in it?”

It was a good question. I always liked hearing my mother tell my fortune because she always took it seriously,

this idea of my future. Afterwards, even if she warned me to be especially cautious about things like crossing the street I felt warm with her concern, even though most of the time it was unwelcome. When she translated the tiny Chinese script in her divination book it was a validation of my entire existence. I didn't know anyone else who could give this to me. To share something so private and intimate with Letti was unthinkable. Still, even though hearing my fortune always makes me feel good, I don't really believe in it—how could I? The only times I read my horoscope like it matters is when I feel uncertainty in my life. That's why I didn't want my mother to read Letti's fortune. I could see that she was desperate for something to believe in, to tell her how to live and that seemed like a dangerous place to be.

I also didn't tell Letti about my mother's prophetic dreams. They weren't like the dreams I had about treacherous steps and broken elevators. Hers were full of numbers and animals that made perfect sense to her. She won the lottery once playing a set of numbers she dreamed of.

I just told Letti I didn't believe. Not really.

Letti nodded her head and then looked around the room as if seeing it for the first time. Her mother's stuffy furniture would have been oppressive in the Dominican heat. Under Letti's neglect the couches were stained and dust collected in the corners of the room and all the surfaces.

"I've got to get my shit together," she said.

The next day I knocked on Letti's door and asked her if she wanted to take a walk in Fort Tryon Park. She nodded and slipped her feet into a worn pair of sneakers. Her eyes were puffy and she looked like she hadn't slept.

As we walked toward the park I told Letti that I was going to start temping on Monday. She looked at me and blinked as if the concept of a job was foreign to her.

We sat on a park bench and gazed out over the naked tree branches at the Hudson River and the Palisades. Letti was distracted and we didn't talk but then she seemed to have made a decision because she started talking more than she had in months.

She said while in the Dominican Republic she had consulted a healer—a *curandera*.

"She told me that my grandmother put a curse on me."

The hairs on my arms stood up. My mother always talked about good and bad luck but she never talked about curses.

"I told myself she didn't know what she's talking about but it makes sense. My grandmother always hated me."

"Why would your grandmother do that to you?" I thought about my grandmothers. My Taiwanese one didn't speak English so she showed me her love by picking out the best fruit and saving it for me to eat. My American grandmother used to press her forehead against mine and we rubbed noses. We called them Eskimo kisses.

Letti looked at me and then looked away. "You don't want to know. But believe me. She fucked me up. She fucked

my life up big time."

"What do you mean?"

Letti was agitated. "Look. I'm not going to go into the details but believe me. My life has been shit for a long time. Part of it's my fault, but that bitch. That *bitch*, she's crazy."

"How did she curse you?" I asked.

Letti laughed. "Senora Carmen said she took hair from my brush, burned it and then buried the ashes in her yard in DR."

"How could she know that?"

Letti gave me a look. "She's a fortune teller. It's her *job* to know these things."

I must have given her a look of my own because she said, "I know it sounds crazy but she *knew*. There's got to be a part of you that believes."

It was true. It was easy for me to scoff, but there would always be that tiny uncertain part of me nurtured to see signs in the random coincidences and lucky guesses that make up a life, but I just shook my head.

She had called the woman the night before. She had to buy a calling card for the Dominican Republic at the 24hr bodega.

I tried to suggest that she was simply depressed, that she might want to talk to someone other than a so-called healer. I told her that I'd seen a therapist and it had helped with my own depression. She put her hand up to stop me. "Don't try to talk to me about that psychiatric bullshit." She added, "This lady is the real deal."

"How do you know, though?" I

asked. "Where's your proof?"

She threw her arms back. "This is my proof. My entire fucked up life."

"If you need to talk to someone, there are people whose job it is to listen," I said. Letti kept talking around her life, but never said what happened to make her so unhappy. I told myself that I was respecting her privacy but maybe I didn't really want to know.

"Pearl, I don't need talk, I need action. I need someone who can help me fix this." Then she said, "I know a part of you believes when your mom reads your fortune. You can't deny it."

I was frustrated. I didn't want to end up like my mother, who blamed her fear of change on something like *feng shui*.

"Even if I did believe her—and I don't—I don't have to pay her," I said.

"You pay for medicine don't you? This is the same thing," said Letti. She leaned back into the bench.

"Then why not go to a doctor? Why not go to a therapist?"

She shot forward again. "Hello? Pearl? Have you forgotten? I don't have a J-O-B job. Who's going to pay for these doctors and therapists you talk about?"

Before I could talk about clinics and sliding scales she said, "Yes, Senora Carmen costs money, but she's cheaper than a doctor."

Then she asked me if she could borrow fifty dollars. She



said Senora Carmen was going to send her a special tincture once she wired her the money.

I knew that if I didn't lend Letti the money we probably wouldn't be friends anymore. That's just how it is sometimes, but even though I knew it was a waste, I gave it to her anyway. The worst is that I had to borrow it from my mother. I asked her for \$65 dollars and told her I wanted to get a new haircut to look sharp for job interviews. She gave me the money and I got a bad haircut at Supercuts. I gave Letti the rest.

When my mother saw my hair she said I got robbed.

Letti received a package wrapped in rough brown paper but when she opened the box she saw that the carefully wrapped and padded glass bottle had broken in transport. All that was left had soaked through to the cotton used to pad the bottle. She told me it was sticky and she tried sucking the damp cotton but felt ridiculous and spat it out.

When she tried to call Senora Carmen again she heard the shrill disconnection notice.

A few weeks into temping I was assigned to an adult English language school doing administrative work. When I'd returned from Korea the last thing I wanted to do was teach immigrants like my mother—I'd spent so much of my childhood making phone calls for her, or going to appointments with her to make sure she understood, even though I didn't speak Chinese and couldn't really translate for her—but as I peeked inside the classrooms I realized that I shouldn't assume the students were like my mother. Or, if they were like my mother, they would not need me when the class period was over.

I decided to apply for a teaching job.

I told my mother that night and she looked pleased. She said she'd read my fortune and it said I would finally find peace after years of uncertainty.

I met Letti on the stairs after work the next day. She asked me if I could do her a favor. I was afraid she was going to ask to borrow more money; she still hadn't repaid me from the last time.

We went into her apartment and I saw the coffee table stacked with greasy dishes. One wall was painted gold while the rest remained their dusty creamy white. I pointed to the wall and asked her if she was painting.

She eyed the wall suspiciously. "I'll have to get back to that eventually."

After we ate some pizza, Letti told me she'd found another healer. She'd asked if she could bring a friend with her and he'd surprised her by saying he encouraged it. I asked her how much it cost.

She drew in her breath. "Five hundred dollars." She held up her hand. "Don't worry. I asked my parents for the money. I just need you there to be my witness. To make sure he doesn't rip me off."

I was skeptical of course, but part of me hoped that if she finally saw what a fraud it all was she'd finally consider talking to a real therapist.

On Saturday we took a van from the George Washington

Bridge bus station to New Jersey. She had a shopping bag full of the ingredients he'd told her to bring. A bag of white sugar, a bottle of water, unopened, a bottle of vinegar and a new white ceramic bowl.

The healer's instructions had been clear and easy. She followed them exactly and even put check marks next to each item on her list. I'd never seen her that motivated.

Our final destination was a strip mall with a nail salon, pizzeria, and three vacant storefronts. His office was next to the nail salon. Wide white vertical blinds hung in the plate glass window. There were a few *botanicas* in Washington Heights I used to pass on the way to the library and they were shadowy places filled with herbs, tinctures, statuettes and plants, so I expected the *curandero's* office to be plastered with images of the Virgin Mary and smell like the bitter medicine my mother sometimes bought from Chinese herbalists in Chinatown, but this place looked like a dentist's office.

Inside there was a clean couch and mail order catalogs instead of magazines, but aspirational ones like Pottery Barn, and Williams Sonoma. Letti seemed relaxed. We waited. A secretary sat at a white desk.

The *curandero* opened a door and invited us to sit in two chairs across from his desk. He was old, in his seventies, probably, his wrinkles soft folds. His thick wiry white eyebrows over soft brown eyes made him look kind. He asked Letti if she wanted him to speak English or Spanish and she told him she preferred English.

"So you told me you think you're cursed. I can't say one way or another if you are, but you have to believe that when I'm done today, and if you follow my instructions, you will be cured. You have to start living the life that you want, even if it's hard. I'm not talking about hitting the lottery, but just being content that life will be hard and filled with suffering, but that it's worth trying. You have to silence the voice of doubt. You have to silence the voice of self hatred."

Letti raised an eyebrow and looked at me. I smiled weakly even though I thought he was clearly full of shit. I couldn't believe she was paying \$500 for this.

He told her to stand up and he had her line up everything she had brought on his desk. I watched, intently, looking for tricks.

He gave her clear instructions. "Pour the sugar in the bowl. Just a few tablespoons. Ok. Now hold it in your mouth. Don't swallow!"

Letti complied.

"Pour vinegar in my hand and then pull your shirt up until your belly is exposed."

Her belly jiggled as he rubbed vinegar into it.

Letti's eyes ran. I couldn't tell if she was crying or if it was the vinegar smell. The *curandero* seemed immune to it. I discreetly held my hand against my nose.

Then he stepped over and told her to take a small sip of water.

"Swish the sugar and water in your mouth but don't

swallow.”

Letti did as she was told. She looked like she was concentrating.

“Now spit it out into the white bowl.”

And she did. It was black. Like rich soil. She made a gagging sound. My eyes bugged out. I looked around, to see if there were special lights or something that could have turned the sugar black but the room was nearly empty except for the chairs and desk.

He had her swish more water but had her spit that out into his garbage can. It was a brown stream.

Once she was done, Letti said, “Holy shit. What the fuck was that?”

The healer smiled. He was wearing a heavily starched white button down shirt and loose white linen pants. The contrast between his white clothes, and the black stuff in the bowl was sharp.

I didn’t say anything but I kept looking around. The ceiling was plain sheetrock. There was just a window with shades. No odd lights. I couldn’t work out what had happened.

“That is the darkness inside you,” he said. “I’ve purged you but you have to perform a special ceremony to complete the ritual.”

Letti pulled her lower lip into her mouth and nodded. Her hands shook.

He told Letti to put the bowl into a giant Ziploc bag. He said she had to go to a forest with ancient energy and bury it.

“If your grandmother buried your hair like the other woman you talked to said she did, then this will reverse the curse. I noticed you’re a bit thin on top, so she might have been right.”

I willed myself not to look at Letti’s head. She definitely didn’t need one more part of herself to scrutinize and agonize over. She was always asking me if I thought she was getting fat. Of course she was—she never left the house, and all she ate was junk, but I could only suggest we go jogging in the park, which she never took me up on.

Letti asked him if Inwood Hill Park had enough “ancient energy.”

“Yes! Perfect.”

“That’s where they do Santeria at night.”

He grimaced like she’d given him a whiff of something nasty. “It has good old energy there regardless of the religious practices that take place.”

“It’s the last primeval forest in Manhattan!” I shouted it out like I was on a game show and about to win a million bucks.

It was like I had broken a spell. Letti rolled her eyes at me, and then snorted.

She asked him how she was supposed to bury the sugar-dirt.

“Under a tree, with your hands. Use a spade if you have to, but then your hands. The most important thing is to put the past behind you.”

We took the van back to the bridge. She was quiet and looked out the window.

Finally I said, “What the hell was that?”

Letti didn’t look at me but blew her breath against the window so there was a wet cloud on the glass. She wrote

M-A-G-I-C in her condensed breath.

I shook her arm. “I’m serious. Do you think he did something?”

She finally turned to me, “How could he? You saw. Nothing. He did nothing except what you and I both saw.”

I tried to accept it but couldn’t.

“Well, did it feel funny? Did it taste like sugar?”

She looked frustrated with me. “You saw. I poured it out with my own hands. Then she made a face. “The sugar was gritty,” she said. “I wanted to gag.” Then she added, “When he told me to swallow the water it felt like sludge. I couldn’t wait to get it out of my mouth.”

After a moment she said, “When he first put his hands on me I wanted to die. I thought about my belly. How ugly I must have looked, but then when he rubbed it I felt warm all over, like I’d just had a cup of hot tea. It was nice.”

I nodded, trying to take it all in.

She nudged me. “Crazy, right?”

“I don’t know what to think.” I couldn’t reconcile what I’d seen, and what I knew to be real. It seemed dangerous to go down that path, to allow myself to believe in magic.

“Why are you so skeptical?”

I shrugged. “I just am. I can’t help it. Everything I know to be true says that this is impossible. That it’s bullshit.”

“But you saw it with your own eyes.” She gave me a pleading look.

“I guess I just don’t think life is that simple.”

Letti shook her head and looked back out the window. I felt like I had disappointed her.

We picked up the spade, and walked over to the park. Broadway was full of cars honking, the sickly yellow street lamps casting shadows.

We didn’t go far into the park. Whether it had ancient energy or not was debatable, but whether sinister things happened inside the park was not. A girl was killed in the park a few years before. They said it was probably a homeless man, but whoever it was, the killer had left a bizarre arrangement of flowers and twigs around the poor woman’s body. It had been a white girl jogging at six o’clock in the morning. They never caught her killer. We stuck to the well-lit paths near the entrance. We weren’t crazy.

Letti picked a pretty tree. The healer hadn’t said anything about whether the tree should be pretty but it was important to Letti. She took the spade and dug a hole, and then she used her hands. I stood over her, in case prying eyes tried to take a look.

She placed the giant Ziploc bag in the ground and then patted the dirt over it. That was it.

I looked at Letti, waiting for some cue. I thought I saw a smile creeping across her face, but it was dark, and honestly, I’m not sure I ever really saw her smile in the short time we were friends.

As we walked back to our building Letti and I discussed what had happened at the healer’s office again. I admitted that I couldn’t see any tricks, even if I remained skeptical.

“Do you think I’ll get better?”

I sighed. Suddenly our friendship felt heavy, like a sack I’d been carrying on my back all day.

When we walked up the stairs and stood on Letti’s landing she turned to me. I thought she was going to invite me inside to watch television. She stopped me and touched

my arm.

“I knew the man in the basement.”

Letti frowned and I could see tears welling in the corners of her eyes. I had seen her be despondent, and indignant, but that was the first time I saw her pain.

“It was my uncle. He stayed with us for a month when I was twelve. I never told anyone, not even Senora Carmen. The only person who knew was my grandmother. She caught him once but she didn’t do anything about it. She didn’t tell. She treated me like shit afterwards. She said I was disgusting.”

I didn’t know what to say. If he had been living with Letti I didn’t even want to imagine what he’d done to her with all those hours and opportunities for harm.

I grasped her hand and told her I was sorry. I’d had no idea. My words felt useless. Maybe that’s why she had always been so reluctant to rely on talk. At that moment I couldn’t see how words could heal, even though I knew that they did.

She shook her head. “Don’t worry. It’s all over now.” She had shut down that vulnerable part of herself again, as if she had lots of practice.

I chewed on my lower lip. “You can’t fix this yourself. You have to talk to someone. A professional.”

Letti looked at my hand in her hand. “No. It’s not necessary. I’m fine now.”

Then she released my hand and went into her apartment. It felt wrong to leave her alone but I didn’t know what else I could do. Who was I to her? I didn’t have the power to bundle her up and force her to talk to someone until she was better—I couldn’t guarantee that she would ever feel *better*. Sometimes you can’t help people. It’s not always possible. Sometimes you just have to let people go. At least that’s what I tell myself.

I walked one more flight up and let myself into my parent’s apartment. My mother was sitting on my ugly couch. She had a reluctantly determined look on her face, like she was about to swallow some bitter medicine. “I will join your father in Florida.”

She pronounced it, “Flor-ree-dah.”

“You can have this apartment all for yourself,” she said. “Finally.”

I looked at the walls I thought I could improve with coats of paint but I knew that too many of our collective worries—about money, about our obligations to one another—were trapped between the walls of that apartment. No matter what color I painted the walls I could never have a fresh start as long as I stayed there.

I told her I didn’t want it.

She looked up at the cracks in the ceiling. “It’s not worthy, is it? Better let it go.”

I agreed.

I asked her what had changed her mind.

My mother looked at me. “You don’t need me anymore.”

Since we children of immigrants so often act as guides through this new world we forget that the entire time our parents believe they are teaching *us* how to live. And they do. They do.

•

My mother moved to Florida at the end of the week. I helped her ship the boxes of dishes and woks she was afraid she wouldn’t be able to buy in Pensacola. We dragged the ugly couch to the curb. I found a room to rent. It was small but I already saw how I could make it feel like home.

I hadn’t seen Letti in a while, busy as I was with work, and packing. I called but her cell wasn’t in service. I figured she hadn’t paid the bill again.

I went downstairs to knock on her door to give her my new address but no one answered. I pressed my ear against the door to see if I could hear the familiar hum of the television but all I could hear was silence echoing against my ear. A small part of me was relieved, but I was sad, too.

The rational part of me told me that Letti hadn’t vanished like an elephant in a magic show, that she had simply moved and not bothered to tell me where she had gone, that our friendship couldn’t bear the knowledge we shared, that my usefulness had come to an end, but that’s how it felt. I pictured her sitting in her living room and then disappearing in a puff of stage show smoke, but I knew it wasn’t like that at all.

Letti had been there, and then she wasn’t.

Soon enough neither was I. 🌀



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Distress Signals

Phillip Sterling

In his eleventh year of marriage, Roger could no longer recall his dreams. He slept soundly, often waking in the same position as when he had gone to sleep: on his stomach, his right ear pressed to the scrunched pillow, beneath which stretched his right arm (so as to face his wife, who often stayed up later). In the morning, at the alarm's soft music, he felt rested and ready for the day. And while he was occasionally disconsolate by the loss of the foggy, damp, sexual pleasures (and aberrances) that he'd acted out in his more pleasant nighttime fantasies, he was also gratified that nightmares no longer roused him to feverish sweats or to Leslie's anxious prodding.

And it was just as well. For in their eleventh year of marriage, his wife Leslie had begun to have dreams enough for two. Breakfast became a routine of coffee, orange juice, English muffins, and tales from the subconscious of a woman who'd read too many self-help books.

"Last night," she might say, "I brought home a puppy, and it turned out to be my mother."

"But you're allergic to pet hair," Roger would reply.

"I know," she'd say. "What do you suppose that means?"

Roger was fortunate, according to her. He was ignorant of even the red blips on their radio alarm's digital display; for him, time stopped between sleep-mode and the "Classical Sunrise" of 95.3. Leslie wished she had it so good.

"Sometimes when I wake up," he'd counter, "I can't feel my arm. I must cut off the circulation or something."

"But we lost our tent in the blizzard," Leslie would reply.

"So we had to sleep in the parking lot, when a hundred thousand carpenter ants began dragging me toward a storm drain." She'd pause then to sip at the swirl of her pale coffee.

"And?" he'd say, hoping that the word would sound at least encouraging, if not empathetic.

"My twin sister rescued me in a bi-plane, but I wasn't properly belted in and so I slipped between the floorboards and plummeted toward . . . My falling woke me up."

"You don't have a twin," said Roger.

"Nor a bi-plane," Leslie replied. "What do you suppose that means?"

"Sounds terrible," Roger would conclude. He meant listening to her.

His fears were more real. They played out in his daydreams like violent movies: poisoned brownies in the teachers' lounge, a pipe bomb during assembly, eighth graders with assault rifles. By the end of the school day, he was exhausted.

"Maybe it's the tea," he'd once said. On the advice of a health guru, his wife brewed herbal blends during the eleven o'clock news. Roger drank scotch.

They'd go to bed shortly after. Leslie would stay up reading a book somebody recommended, and Roger would sleep like the dead. 🕒



PHILLIP STERLING's most recent book is *In Which Brief Stories Are Told*, a collection of short fiction (Wayne State University Press). His flash fiction has appeared in *Edge*, *Driftwood Review*, *Midway Journal*, *Opium*, *Bear River Review*, and *Epiphany*, among other places. He is also the author of the poetry collection *Mutual Shores* and three chapbook-length series of poems: *Significant Others*, *Quatrains*, and *Abeyance*.



The Lady in the River

Nels Hanson

The water pipes banging as the shower ran woke me from the wreck of time—

I lay back in the morning Montana light, watching dust motes circle the old room's warm air. On each sunlit speck, an ant-like army lined miles of parapet, while Ellen—Helen—stood alone at the tower's balustrade . . .

"You up?" Glad called.

"I'm awake."

Glad was at fault, with his drunken tale of the crazed heartsick boy and the huge fabricated bull—I didn't like those dreams with a cast of thousands, every wheel spoke and sword hilt and epaulet real. It was like staring at a miniature battlefield on display in a museum, everything modeled perfectly out of painted matchsticks and paper clips, until you felt dizzy, drawn down into the toy world.

A stellar jay cried out hoarsely. The shower had stopped.

"Okay, Phil, it's all yours," Glad called.

I lay in bed a moment longer, watching the dust circle across the window as I traced cause and effect, the intricate, apparently random chain of circumstances that had triggered the tiring dream:

My child's picture book of the Horse and flaming Troy—Ellen and her death 10 years ago in New York—the cabin's fireplace made of river stones—Glad's story of deranged Jim Sloan and the wheeled, horned contraption—Lucinda, rich rancher Web Olson's mythical captive daughter—my policeman father killed by the Texas tower assassin in 1966—the coiled rope in Blair's trunk, next to the folder that held the photo of the mutilated bull—

I stood under the shower until the water began to turn lukewarm and I dried myself and shaved, for a second my soaped face a bearded warrior's in the mirror. I slapped on Skin Bracer and in the hall smelled coffee and bacon cooking.

"Ready to eat, Phil?"

I dressed in Levis and a sport shirt and went into the living room where Glad had breakfast laid on the coffee table: beautifully fried, unbroken eggs, crisp bacon, toast

with grape jam.

"Looks great, Bob," I called, sitting down in one of the leather chairs and quickly starting in on the eggs.

Wearing the tooled belt and silver buckle, Glad came from the kitchen with a frown, with a plate of four eggs crisscrossed with half a dozen strips of bacon.

"When I got up this morning I didn't feel good. I didn't know if I dreamed last night up, or if it really happened."

"Strange story," I agreed, sipping my coffee.

Like the eggs and bacon, it was excellent, smoky tasting. As a chef, Glad was expert and meticulous, better than in the role of movie cowboy he'd recently assumed.

"It wasn't funny this morning," Glad said, grimacing and sitting back. "Just weird."

"It sounded weird," I said. "You gave me bad dreams."

"It gave me a creepy feeling," Glad went on, "like things up here are cockeyed. They are, aren't they, Phil?" Glad asked suddenly, watching me. "Something's bothering Blair."

"I think so," I said. "He acts like a man with things on his mind."

"Bad things," Glad said, lifting his fork. "Weird bad. Pete told me in the bar, before we drove to the ranch. Some mutilation thing. I can't remember, except everybody's spooked."

Last night Bob had said "mutation." I remembered the awful photo in Sheriff Blair's trunk at the airport, when I'd set down my suitcase and opened the manila folder.

"Skinheads and spaceships. I can't remember," Glad said. "Pete said everybody's armed."

"I'd like to see the kid's bull," I said, cutting into an egg with the edge of my fork.

"No you wouldn't. It was too big, like a robin the size of an airplane. Then he got inside and came after us with the horns, when Pete told him he was nuts."

Glad leaned back, wiping his mouth with a paper towel as he stared at his half-eaten breakfast.

"I guess I'm not as hungry as I thought."

"You'll feel better when we get to work," I said.

"Maybe so." Glad leaned forward again, playing with his fork. "You know the girl, this Lucinda Olson, the big rancher's fine daughter? She's fake, a figment of Jim's imagination."

"That's what you said."

"Did I? I can't remember. His girlfriend dropped him, he went off the deep end and decided to save Lucinda."

"I guess it happens." Helen's lost beauty had caused 10 years of war.

"Well, you've been through it, Phil."

"Huh?" I set down my cup.

"When your ex-wife died. Ellen."

"It's true," I said. I picked up the other piece of toast.

"I didn't mean to get on that," Glad said. "I'm not comparing."

"Forget about it, Bob," I said.

"Okay, Phil. I'll let it lay. It just hard, you know, to get something out of your mind. Something that strange. Like the shrink's heart in the handkerchief, in the teacher's purse."

"That was bad."

"The kid on the lawnmower? Running down his dad,

because he knocked up the kid’s girlfriend?”

“It’s an old story.” I lifted my empty plate and stood up.

“I’ll do it, Phil.”

“No, you cooked,” I said. “I’ll wash. That’ll be our routine, when we’re not eating out.”

I took my plate and cup into the kitchen and set them in the wooden sink, watching the river flash yellow through the aspen as I let the water run hot, then squirted soap and picked up the sponge. I rinsed the iron frying pan and set it in the rack with the dishes.

I felt better now, after the bad dream of Troy and the Horse, Ellen, and my father in the funeral pyre. I dried my hands and stepped into the bedroom, made the bed and strapped on my shoulder holster, then crossed to the bathroom and brushed my teeth.

I glanced at myself in the cracked mirror framed by unvarnished pine. What had I looked like to Sheriff Blair yesterday, after three years, when I was struck by the age in his face?

At least I didn’t wear a helmet and a leather breastplate.

I ran a comb through my thinning hair and went out into the living room, past the other bedroom where Glad was slipping his bolo tie over the raised collar of his new plaid Western shirt, frowning.

I waited in front of the cabin of square-cut logs and white chinking, breathing the piney morning air, listening to the rush of breeze through the papery aspen boughs and underneath it the muted sound of the river. I looked up at the unending blue sky so much higher and fresher and bluer than smoggy Fresno’s. Something smelled sweet. Glad didn’t come out and I walked the path through the ferns toward the river.

I stood on the bank near a clump of yellow wildflowers, watching the lit ripples go past like moving stairs down the middle of the current where yesterday I’d caught the rainbow and let it go, when I’d heard Ellen’s ghostly voice ask me to. I looked downstream, contented.

I stiffened, trembling.

“*Save the girl!*” my father ordered.

I looked again and stepped into the quick current and felt its cold strong shock and moved through it. She was two yards out on her back against the pebbly bottom. The morning light and the ripples cast faint shadows across her white face and body.

I stared at her, paralyzed. I didn’t understand. I looked through a window, or into a mirror. She was smiling.

I plunged in my arm above the shoulder as I watched her beautiful face and breasts through the icy wavering lens of moving water.

“No—”

I felt surprise, an instant repulsion. Her slender wrist was cold and hard under the slick film of algae.

I stood upright and nearly fell over backwards as I threw out my hands for balance. I hadn’t budged her when I’d tried to lift her heavy body and she seemed to pull me towards her to kiss and drown. I steadied myself, looking again through my shadow at the nude woman lying on her back, still staring with wet open eyes, smiling.

It was a statue, a woman made of stone— I turned, sloshed to the bank, slipped, got out, looked over my shoulder where she lay like a blurred photo underwater, and

slogged back through the ferns to the cabin, just as Glad came out the red door.

“Ready to go?” Glad lifted on his big hat, then felt his scalloped shirt pocket for his sunglasses.

“I’ve got to change.”

Glad lowered the glasses. “What happened?”

In the bedroom I swore under my breath as I took off my holster and stripped off the wet shirt and pants. I threw them into the shower and got another towel and dried off, then dressed in fresh clothes. I pulled on new socks and my hiking boots, cinching the laces fast and tight. The cold water still made me shake. My head and teeth ached, like I’d stuffed my mouth with snow.

“You all right?” Glad was waiting by the white unmarked car.

“I’ll drive,” I said. I began to breathe easier as I followed the gravel road along the fluttering aspen that hid the river, then out onto the pavement and the open valley between high rounded hills. I could still see the smiling silent face through the chill clear water.

“You fall?” Glad asked.

“Slipped.” I looked straight ahead. I started to tell Glad about the statue, in case he should see it. Then I didn’t. I felt the wet end of my holster through my t-shirt.

“Look—” Glad pointed. “Over there.”

Twenty yards beyond the barbed wire stood the buffalo we’d seen yesterday, when Blair had driven us to the cabin from the airport.

“Can you imagine killing one, with a bow and arrow? From a horse?”

“No.” It was six feet tall, with curved Pan’s horns above its wooly head.

“Pretty scary. But not like a grizzly,” Glad said. “And not hollow, with a guy inside.”

Why would anybody put a statue in the river? As a joke? Did Blair know about it? Who was Blair, really? Betty, Blair’s attractive, friendly wife, blonde hair, green eyes, had joked with me at the conference in Kansas City, good-naturedly, about how she knew just the girl for me—

We passed the steep brown mountain with pines along its crest where I’d mistaken the running stag for a rabbit under the sudden Big Sky. The airport came up on the right, then a Howard Johnson’s and I saw the downtown, one tall white building and beside it the tops of square, red-brick structures lined up against a bare hill.

“You haven’t seen it, have you Phil, except from the air?”

It was a long four-lane main street, at one end a bridge and snowy peaks rising in the distance.

“Looks like Tulare Street,” Glad said. “The skid row’s all mixed in.”

Young Indians and cowboys leaned against brick storefronts. Veteran winos in baseball caps sat on stone benches with brown bags and loop-handled fabric sacks at their feet. Trail’s End. Two-Timer. Grizzly Club. High Hat. The bars streamed past.

“I met Pete in here somewhere, before we went to Jim Sloan’s ranch—”

I saw a porthole in a black upholstered door, then a women’s store with bikinied mannequins on display, a yogurt shop, a rundown residential hotel called The Oxford, on a corner the Cattleman’s Bank of Montana built of black

granite blocks. A cracked plaster Palomino stood shackled to a lamp pole outside a saddlery shop. Next door peaks and blue pines were painted across a window, framing an interior of camping and hunting supplies. A row of rifles and shotguns stood in a 60-foot shadowed rack.

“The sheriff’s at the other end, across the river,” Glad said from behind his dark glasses. “I saw it last night.”

We went up on the concrete bridge, over the quick Clark Fork that 10 miles to the west passed by the cabin where I’d plunged in.

“Right there—” Glad motioned with his hand.

On the sidewalk, a man was picketing, holding up a turned sign. I pulled into the lot and parked at the end of a line of brown-and-white sheriff’s cruisers.

“Everybody’s here,” Glad said.

“Looks like it.” I switched off the key, again seeing the statue’s white face, feeling the dead stone coldness of her wrist. She was still there, right now, in the blue river. Ellen. And yet it wasn’t Ellen but someone else, like the dream—

“I feel kind of nervous,” Glad confided, turning in the seat. “Sort of like the first day on the job.”

“You’re a pro,” I reassured him, seeing my own face mirrored like pale mug shots in his sunglasses.

“That’s right,” Glad said. “We’ve seen it all, haven’t we, Phil?”

“I wish we hadn’t.”

Glad hesitated. “Phil, don’t tell anybody yet, about Jim Sloan’s bull.”

“Okay.” I wouldn’t mention the bull or the statue.

We got out, I locked the car, and we crossed the lot for our first assignment of the interstate investigative exchange, Glad in high-heeled boots and pulling the black Stetson down over his eyes.

The young brown-haired man in slacks and a shirt and tie stood at the curb in front of the sheriff’s office. He held up his sign to honking cars and angry-faced drivers in pickups who yelled and gestured with upturned hands.

We Have Met the Enemy and He Is Meat!

“I wondered who it was,” Glad said. “Coming, Phil?”

A Greek warrior crossed swords with a red T-bone steak.

“I’m right behind you,” I said, turning from the cartoon’s strange mask-like helmet. Over the front door the bronze letters arched—**Clarksville County Sheriff**—and I followed Glad up the steps and through the glass doors past our odd reflections, the tame suburbanite and the husky Roy Rogers.

Yellow linoleum stretched across the square room with wooden office chairs lining the walls. A framed picture of the governor was flanked on either side by rows of ancient sepia photographs, former sheriffs stern as frontier marshals—chiseled faces, steely eyes, drooping, threatening mustaches. They wore Western hats and string ties like Glad’s from the cowboy store in Fresno.

An attractive red-haired woman in her early 30s stood behind the counter, studying a sheaf of papers, turning the pages crisply. Behind her in a glassed-in room a gray-haired man sat before a bank of computers.

“Excuse me,” I said, when she didn’t lift her head. “Is Sheriff Blair in?”

She looked up quickly.

“Lieutenant Lambert?”

There were freckles across her slender, well-drawn nose.

Her tan was just slightly paler than her khaki shirt. A large, five-pointed star gleamed on her pocket. She waited, her face solemn and uncertain.

“Yes,” I said.

She smiled suddenly, showing even white teeth.

“Sheriff Blair’s expecting you.” She took in Glad and his outfit. “And you’re—?”

“This is my partner, Sergeant Glad,” I said. “Sergeant Rawlings—” I read her gold nameplate above the star.

“Well,” she said, “we’re happy you’re here. Sheriff Blair’s told us all about you.” She turned abruptly and pointed with a raised finger. “Down the hall. Third door on the left.”

The phone rang and she reached for the receiver. Spread out on her desktop lay a newspaper with black headlines:

“Night Slayer” Stumps Local Authorities

“No, I’m afraid Sheriff Blair’s in a meeting right now,” Dorothy said.

We stepped past open doors and rooms of empty chairs and tables to an office with two black filing cabinets, a large wall map, and an Army surplus desk stacked with piles of fat folders, then moved on to a closed door that said “**Squad Room**” and I thought I heard Blair’s muffled voice.

“Last night I put the statue in the river—”

I knocked, then turned the knob and stepped in.

My first impression was of “Twelve O’clock High,” where a nervous Gregory Peck stands smoking and holding a pointer as attentive flyers in leather jackets sit in rows and follow the bomb run from one German city to another, across the map like a theater screen.

“These four points between Two Pipes and Wounded Elk make a line, a radius, with Bentley, Big Fork, and White Bear falling within the circle, and Two Pipes the apparent center point,” Blair was saying. “The stars mark the attack locations.”

There was a scattered cluster of blue foil stars like teachers use to award good spellers. A man with long sideburns turned, staring at Glad, then looked around, politely coughing. Blair glanced from the map.

“Hi, Phil. Come on in. This is Lieutenant Lambert, from California. And his partner, Sergeant Glad. This is Slaughter, Foley, McAllister, and Rogers. You’ve met Ray.”

Mumbled greetings and nods answered our hellos as the deputies stared at Glad’s new outfit.

“Phil, let me finish this, then I can fill you in.” Blair turned back to his men.

“How many ranches?” Sergeant Bell asked. He was sitting close to Blair, a pencil in his hand.

“Thirty,” Blair said. “I want to check each one. By twos.” He looked at Bell, then steadily at the four other officers. “I don’t want any man isolated. We don’t know who or what we’re dealing with. All we know is that someone’s sick. I’m hoping Phil here can give us a line on what we may be looking at.”

Blair rubbed his forehead, then dropped his hand. “There’s always the danger this is a step along the way. Something strong is pushing whoever it is. Then there’s the people we’re supposed to be protecting. We don’t want any of them getting spooked, going off half-cocked and getting in the way.”

He put down the stick.

“Rogers and McAllister, you take Sandy Hill Road,

Foley and Slaughter Badger Butte. Bell and I’ll cover Blue Meadow.”

“When do we meet up?” Slaughter asked.

“Eight. We’ll have to pull long shifts, till this thing is settled. Any questions?”

The five deputies shook their heads.

“Use your radios, check in on the hour, let Dispatch know where you are. If you see anything, if something breaks, I want to converge in a hurry. And be polite, when you talk to people. Everyone’s on edge. They’ve got a right to be. Understood? Okay.”

As the men rose and moved toward the door, Glad and I waited for Blair, who was stuffing papers into a leather satchel like a saddlebag.

“Hi, Phil,” Blair said. “You get settled?”

“Fine,” I said.

“Good. You ready to roll?”

“Whenever you are,” I said. The tip of my holster was still damp against my chest. Did he know about the statue in the river? That Ellen had cut her wrists in New York?

“Let’s go then,” Blair said, meeting my eyes. “Daylight’s burning, like my dad used to say—”

Glad and I followed him back down the hall, then waited as he went into his office and slipped the satchel into the desk, locking the drawer with a chained key from the chrome reel on his hip.

“I want you to go over all this stuff,” Blair said over his shoulder. “But you can do that later. I can paint the broad outline while we drive.”

At the counter, Dorothy was still on the phone and waved at us as Blair signed out.

“Yes, Mrs. Perkins. I know that. Yes, you don’t need to tell me. Of course the sheriff’s concerned. No, like I said, I think your Great Dane is safe—”

Blair glanced at Dorothy and went out the front door past the gallery of his predecessors who doubted that Blair and Glad and I measured up.

We left the town and immediately the wild country started, scattered ranches and hills and cottonwoods. I watched the browsing cattle beyond the miles of barbed wire that wouldn’t protect them as Blair laid out the Night Slayer case.

“No tire tracks, the cattle cleanly butchered, no footprints, fiber, or other physical evidence at the scene,” Blair explained. “No scent the dogs can pick up—”

“We’ve checked the meat lockers in four counties, got an alert into the federal inspectors, highway patrol at all the truck scales,” added Bell. “The meat’s going somewhere.”

“That’s about it,” Blair said, looking straight ahead at the blue mesa above the green flat meadow. “Just the hooves and the heads left, the eyes burned out. And the genitals, when it’s a bull, laid out in a triangle.”

“I get the picture,” I said uneasily. As Blair related the sordid tale we’d driven through arroyos and open rangeland, past old two-story ranch houses, windmills and barns, wood corrals with horses, steel loading ramps for stock, and everywhere cattle in the pastures.

Someone had slaughtered 19 cows in a span of five weeks. We’d seen three pickups with gun racks patrolling among foraging herds. All the fences were tacked with No Trespassing signs. All the gates had double padlocks and

heavy chains.

“It’s a weird mixture,” Glad said from the back seat.

“Why do that, if you’re rustling?”

“It’s a cover-up of some kind,” Bell put in. “To point the finger at someone else.”

“Up here killing cows is worse than killing people,” Blair said. “Everyone’s gone nuts. They’re talking spaceships, corn circles, skinheads. Ghost dancers.” He shook his head, gripping the wheel. “Aryan Nation. All we need is a spark to start a race war. There’s people here still pissed about Custer.”

The light caught my window at an angle and for a second I saw my reflection in the half-lowered glass, and beyond it the fenced acres where brown, white-faced cows tore and chewed the sweet stems under the sunny Big Sky. *Night Slayer!*

If I’d learned anything, I knew that looks were deceiving, that a lawnmower could be a weapon, a third-grade teacher might sharpen a file with her fingernails to remove an unfaithful psychiatrist’s heart, an Eagle Scout shoot my father and 13 others from a library tower.

A brilliant attractive woman could leave her spent policeman husband, paint well and happily for a year in New York, have two successful shows and a love affair with a famous artist, then kill herself over a failed acrylic abstract of the green veins of plants—

In more than one mirror, I had taken myself for the prime suspect and the victim.

“What’s that, Jack?” Bell leaned over the front seat, pointing toward a lone cottonwood up ahead by the fence. Something twisted in and out of shadow, swinging from a limb.

“Jesus—” Blair hit the gas as I touched my wet holster, trying to make out the swaying figure among the leaves. It wore boots. Blair stopped the car.

“Thank God,” Bell said.

Murder the Mutilator!

It was scrawled in red on a square of cardboard pinned to the chest. A stuffed flour sack with painted black X’s for the eyes made the face. The dummy wore a torn denim shirt and leather gloves, old boots. The Night Slayer hung in effigy from a rope.

“Look there,” said Glad, “at his pants.”

From the open fly a bare turkey drumstick raised up.

“Get that thing down, will you, Ray?” Blair put a hand to his forehead.

Bell got out, looking up at the tree. “It’s awful high, Jack,” Bell said.

“Shoot it down!” Blair said with irritation. “We’ll pull up.”

Blair drove up 30 yards. Bell stood under the tree, glancing back at us, then stepped away 10 feet. He took his revolver from his holster and held it out with two hands as he aimed at the rope. He fired and the dummy fell as the shot echoed against the blue rocks ahead.

“What you want me to do with it?” Bell called.

“Get rid of the damn bone, then throw it in the trunk!” Blair pulled the trunk release.

Bell leaned down over the prone form, reached and tossed away the bone, then picked the thing up and carried it in one arm toward the car. The trunk closed and Bell got

in beside Glad.

“See what I mean, Phil?” Blair said.

“I don’t like it,” I said. “Any of it.” For a second, watching the thing turn under the tree, I’d been sure it was a man. Blair steered between tall, smooth turquoise cliffs like polished marble, stepping on the pedal as the road straightened toward a rock-scattered hill.

“This cattle thing is dynamite—”

No one answered Blair. He slowed as we crossed a one-lane wood bridge above a dry sand creek and I saw the perfect woman through the glassy current, she was about to speak, before we turned off the gravel road at an old cottonwood. A freshly painted piece of plywood siding was nailed to the trunk.

No Hunting!

No Camping!

No Fishing!

No Hiking!

No Peddling!

No Stopping!

No Nothing!

Understand?

Now Go Away!

“I think I get it,” Glad said.

We went over a cattle guard and followed a dirt road with yellow-flowering weeds like a stream growing down the middle. I looked out at the high tan grass, at the massive silhouette of a black, Indian-looking bull with rumpled neck and hump. It stood apart from a large cluster of smaller, cream-colored cows tending spotted calves.

“Black Angus?” asked Glad.

“Brangus,” Bell answered. “Part Brahma.”

“Like in the rodeo,” Glad said.

“My brother-in-law rode bulls,” Bell said.

“I know someone who builds them,” I half-expected, but Glad was silent, taking in the herd of 20 cows. Was young Sloan’s bull any stranger than the statue in the river or the man hanging from the tree?

“Broke his neck,” Bell said, as we passed a fenced yellow field of baled hay. “He’s in a nursing home in Billings. Twenty-five years old.”

The road circled a low hill, then headed down into a pocket, through two pine uprights and a wrought iron arch that said “**Brofferd.**” Another half-mile of grassland and I saw a tall locust tree and a house with peeling paint and then beyond it something that made me lean forward in the seat.

Whiter than the house, a hundred bleached skulls with antlers and jaws and glaring eye sockets stared in rows from the weathered barn’s front wall. Deer, elk, moose, ram, Rocky Mountain goat, what looked like fanged bear and cougar, bobcat and wolf or dog.

“*The Hall of the Mountain King.*” Ellen might have whispered at my ear. “*Burn it down and release them—*”

All that was missing was a human skeleton.

“It’s like a dead zoo,” Glad said.

In front of the barn a rusted hay rake and a cutter with raised disks edged with curving blades rested beside an old tractor. Red chickens pecked among hoops of barbed wire, disordered heaps of iron and pipe, a

punctured boiler tank, foil Christmas tree, the tall, slanted metal conveyor with birds’ nests in its shelves. A 10-foot ripper with a V-shaped tooth lay on its side like an overturned artillery piece.

A milk truck with open accordion doors sank on dissolving rims. Beside the bare iron seat, a heavy pole with a reel rose through a jagged hole in the roof, supporting a wide boom and a cable with a four-pronged grapple, like the hooks the Fresno Sheriff’s department used to drag the Mendota Canal for drowning victims.

“*A snapshot of Western Civilization?*” Ellen asked.

The scene resembled the wreck of a battlefield, matching Glad’s description of Jim Sloan’s vast scrap yard, and for a moment I worried a 12-foot black bull with polished horns and red eyes would roar and wheel from the barn’s open door—

As Blair stopped the car a husky white-haired woman in a blue housedress and spotted white apron came out on the porch.

“This’ll just take a minute,” Blair said. He and Bell got out.

“Morning, Mrs. Brofferd,” Blair called, putting a hand to the brim of his brown hat. “How are you?”

“Okay,” she said. She squinted over at the car where Glad and I waited. “Who’s that?”

I imagined winters here, the white flakes floating down, building on the porch’s tin roof and across the rusted tools, softening their spikes and aggressive knife-like blades. I looked away from Mrs. Brofferd and her porch across the field of junk and now the white skulls nailed to the barn blurred to lines of fading names on a discolored page.

“*The Book of Life?*” Ellen offered.

“He’s out at Moss Creek,” the woman was saying. “Since yesterday.” She held her large hands at her sides. “Fixing steers.”

“No problems?” asked Blair.

“Problems?” she asked.

“This livestock business,” Blair said.

“What you mean?” she said.

“The killings,” Blair said.

“Oh, that,” she said, raising a hand to her glasses. She pursed her mouth. “I hope not. It’s these kids, city kids with their dope. That methamine. Clyde put up the sign, but I said he was wasting his time, they couldn’t read it. Why would anyone do that, to a dumb animal?”

“That’s what we’re trying to find out,” Blair said patiently. He and Bell stood at the foot of the unpainted wood steps. “I’m stopping at the different ranches, asking for information.”

“No,” she went on, “I’m glad Clyde and I live out here where we do. Our daughter, Patsy, she lives in Great Falls? She’s after us to sell. But Clyde and me say, ‘Honey, we’d rather face a covey of grizzlies in the open, where a person’s got a chance, than have them living next door to us, just over the fence.’”

Blair nodded.

“Can you understand that music?” She made a face, as if she sucked the venom from a rattlesnake bite. “That MTV channel? I look at it, but I don’t understand it. It looks like some movie of Hades.”

“Just like home,” Glad said.

“Same thing,” I said. I let my gaze drift again toward the barn and its trophies, then higher, at the rusted running-horse weather vane that tried to make its escape.

“Will you have Clyde call me when he gets in, Mrs. Brofferd?”

“I will,” she said. “And don’t worry about me. I’ve got the dogs and I’m still a pretty keen shot.”

“Call me,” Blair said. “Please. You hear me, Mrs. Brofferd?”

A yellow Lab nosed at the screen door. “Can’t we, Hank?” Mrs. Brofferd turned toward the dog.

Blair and Bell walked back to the car. They got in and for a moment Blair stared forward over the wheel, before he reached for the keys. The screen door slammed.

“She killed a man,” Blair said. “Two years ago.”

“That old lady?” Glad said, as now Blair turned the car in a circle to go back up the dusty road.

I stared at the faded house, its empty porch, and the yard of rusting debris. “*Separation from others in a world of things*,” Ellen would remind me if she were here. “*Isn’t that what makes human life so ugly?*”

“Rustlers, she said,” Blair said. “The man was just a drifter, crossing her land. I thought the D.A. should have charged her with manslaughter.”

“You bring her in?” I asked.

“No,” Blair said. “She got some damn award from the Cattlemen’s Protection Society.”

I looked away at the dun hills as we passed under the arch of backwards rusty letters that spelled nothing. There should have been a squadron of vultures beating overhead on its way to land on Mrs. Brofferd’s roof. But there was just the dry grass and above it the high, blue, vacant sky.

“The mutilation is important,” I said. “I don’t think the cover-up angle works.”

“How come?” Bell asked.

“With defacement and maiming,” I offered, “there’s complete control of an object, the animal becomes both a slave and a mirror of human domination. That’s narcissism, self-love. The blinding? Did you ever see that movie called ‘Equus,’ where the boy blinds the horses out of some kind of self-identification?”

“Yes,” Blair said.

“Maybe the guy doesn’t want to be seen, or doesn’t want to see. He blinds the mirror, or himself. Murder can be a kind of suicide.”

“I don’t really follow,” Blair said.

“Say it’s sexual, but not just sexual. Say it’s really demented. Say it’s a distorted kind of love, but still love,” I said. “And guilt. You kill what you love, then take its body and eat it. There may be some religious thing going on. Like a sacrifice.”

“Devil worship?” Bell said.

“No,” I said quickly. “More like communion. But there’s a conflict of some kind. He may have a handicap, a physical deformity.”

“He’s so neat,” Blair said. “Neat as a pin. No tracks, Phil, nothing.”

“What about a helicopter?” Glad asked.

“A few ranchers have ‘em. Mostly private planes. There’s been no reports of anything like that flying at night. You couldn’t use lights. How would the guy see?”

“Infrared,” Bell said. “We had them in the Army.”

“Maybe,” Blair said. “It sounds risky. Now you’re talking a crack pilot, a Gulf War vet, a Green Beret or something.”

“Have you run that down?” I asked.

“That’s the survivalist angle, I guess.” Blair gripped the wheel with both hands. “It feels too complicated. If you want to rustle, why not come in with a ‘copter and lift the cows out? Why leave a signature?”

“I agree,” I said. “I don’t like the mix of skill and perversion.”

“I’ve been stumped,” Blair went on. “Made life tough on Betty. And on Ray.”

“When we crack it we’ll go on a drunk,” Bell said. “You can make it up to me.”

“I’ve quit eating meat, can you believe it?” Blair said.

I remembered the picketer’s drawing of the dueling steak and Spartan.

“It’s odd,” I said. “That’s what I was getting at. Food and the other.”

“You think it’s like Jeffrey Dahlmer?” Glad said. “Or ‘Silence of the Lambs’?”

“We don’t know what we’ve got,” I said.

“That’s it,” Blair said. “We don’t know. I got a call from the Freeman. Offered to form their own posse. They think it’s the Air Force stealing beef.”

“Hell,” I said. “Them again.”

“Terrorism crossed my mind,” Blair said. “Is this the start of something else?”

I didn’t answer. We passed the gold field of mown alfalfa and a hundred scattered bales— The clipped hayfield was littered with bodies, my father on his back without his plumed helmet and leather breastplate, his hand holding not a bloodstained sword but something small and blue. At the high castle’s balustrade it wasn’t Helen, but a man, the scene wasn’t ancient Troy. It was Austin.

The uniformed policeman had drawn his gun, then dived to cover Lisa Barlow as Charles Whitman chose his targets from the balcony of the high library tower.

Blair crossed the Brofferds’ cattle guard and drove for five or six miles along the unfenced gravel switchbacks as I tried to pick at the tangled skein I’d dropped on Blair from the blue and instead saw again the alabaster woman in the river and remembered Oedipus—the first detective—and the Sphinx.

“What walks on four feet in the morning, two at noon, three at evening?”

An alcoholic? Drunk, sober, amorous— I needed a Mycroft. Elementary, my dear Sherlock. I could give Norm Halleck a call at Fresno State, but then I remembered he was on leave in Southern France.

Now the car stopped and I looked up. Blair honked at the white-faced brown bull that ignored us. It stood still in the road, chewing, looking off to the side.

“Not too worried, given his current situation,” Blair said.

“He better guard his family jewels,” Bell said and I remembered the photo.

Blair honked again and the bull broke into a trot with lifted tail, veering across the road.

Don’t Do It!

“Look at that,” Glad said.

The warning was scrawled in whitewash across the

bull’s dark flank, like a veiled warning to Jim Sloan and his wheeled creation built to rescue Lucinda Olson.

“Christ,” Blair muttered. “It’s getting crazy.”

We drove on toward a tall grove and Blair slowed the car. From a red rock face, water fell into a narrow pool that fingered out in two streams among the trees. It was suddenly shady, cool.

“Let’s take a break.” Blair stopped in the shadow of a cottonwood with great arching branches.

We all got out, leaving the doors open. Blair approached the tree, then reached around the trunk and drew back a long tin dipper. He moved along the grassy bank of the first stream, then leaned and lifted the bowl to the red wall to wash it out.

“Drink?”

“Thanks.” I stepped over to take the ladle. I let it fill from the rock and brought the water to my mouth. It tasted sweet. I took a big cold swallow and handed the empty dipper to Glad.

“What’s next?” I asked Blair. His back was turned. With his fingers he traced the deep furrows in the cottonwood’s trunk.

“That’s about it,” Blair said, checking his watch. “There’s another place maybe 30 minutes up the road. After that we’ll take a loop that’ll take us back to town. One big ranch out there we might as well pick up. It’s on the way.”

“Web Olson’s?” Glad asked.

“Yeah,” Blair said. “How’d you know?” He stared at Glad.

“His name came up,” I said. “Last night in town.”

“I’ll add him to the list,” Blair said. “Him and his daughter.”

“Yeah,” Bell said. “Maybe Lucinda did it.”

“I heard she wasn’t real,” Glad said nonchalantly.

“You heard right,” Bell said. “She’s our local Sleeping Beauty.” He gave the dipper to Blair, who let it fill against the red rock, then drank.

“You fish yesterday?” Blair asked.

“I did.” The image of the statue resurfaced.

“Have any luck?”

“I got one,” I said, looking at Blair.

“How big?”

“Twenty inches.”

“That’s good! That’s good for that river.”

“The water’s nice and clear.”

Blair nodded. “It’s a good river.” With a flick he turned the dipper over and hung it on the tree trunk. We got back into the car and Bell and Glad began to talk about Fresno.

“Fry an egg—”

“That hot?”

I watched a distant vulture circle and turned to Blair.

“I don’t think so,” Blair said before I could ask. “They’d go right down, if there was something there.”

“Three,” Glad was saying. “And you?”

“My wife’s pregnant with our first,” Bell said. “You have any kids, Phil?”

“No,” I said, “I don’t.” It was the first time Bell had spoken directly to me.

“Are you married?”

“Phil’s single,” Blair said.

“You should introduce him to Beulah.”

Was that their nickname, for the woman in the river?

“You want to go out with Beulah?” Blair grinned.

“Should I?”

“You’d be missing a bet,” Bell insisted seriously. “She’s beautiful.”

“She’s attractive,” said Blair.

“She’s smart, too,” Bell insisted. “She’s not really cold.”

“She isn’t?” I waited for the punch line.

“No, she’s a schoolteacher. High school. She teaches English.”

“She’s smart,” Blair agreed. “And critical. She’s my sister-in-law.”

“Sounds sexy,” Glad said.

“Floats like a butterfly, stings like a bee.” Blair laughed.

“I think she’d go for Phil, all his talk about love and bulls and murder being suicide,” Glad said.

“Maybe,” Blair said. “She doesn’t like cowboys.”

“What does she think?” I asked Blair.

“Beulah Ransom? Beulah thinks a million things—”

“About the mutilations.”

“She doesn’t care who did it. She says it’s a symptom or symbol, I forget which.”

“Symbol?”

“For the death of man.” A smile was forming on Blair’s lips. “Sound like your kind of girl?”

Again I remembered the woman smiling through the clear water.

“You should get Betty to set them up,” Bell said. “Before Phil gets too lonely and starts prowling the pasture.”

Prowling the pasture.

“I got it.” It just came to me. Like that. Blair had done it, dropped the crystal into the solution, the liquid going solid and shattering the beaker. I’d taken a drink, from the river of memory. Under my random thoughts I’d been bothered by the helicopter, all the noise, the risk of attracting attention. It seemed obvious now.

Floats like a butterfly, stings like a bee.

“Got what?” Blair said.

“Those fork lifts, with the vacuum seals?” I’d seen them at work in warehouses, lifting thousands of pounds as silently they shot across the concrete floor without touching it.

“Like a hydrofoil? Wouldn’t they bend the grass?” Blair said.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“If the stalks didn’t break they’d pop back up,” Bell said. “There wouldn’t be a trace. I saw some in the service.”

“It’d have to be a big one,” I said, “with some sort of platform—”

Blair reached for the radio and called Dorothy, instructing her to have the other officers ask about modified fork lifts.

At the crest of the hill I saw down into a narrow valley where a ranch like a painted toy farm was centered in a flat, irrigated pasture. Snow-topped mountains rose above the suede hills beyond the green fields undiscovered by the Night Slayer.

“Now, that’s my idea of Montana,” Glad said.

He was right, it was a picture from a magazine. I studied the two-story, blue-shuttered white farmhouse, the red barn with white trim, and the blue silo. A lawn led from

the steps to a big tree that shaded the grass and half of the house. There was a split-rail fence and a long, tin-covered wood shed neatly filled with stacks of blonde pine logs. A red buckboard wagon with yellow wheels overflowed with bleached antlers like driftwood.

Blair headed up the long drive lined with silver poplars. The trees cast cone-shaped shadows across the road, their leaves flickering in the mild breeze. The blue silo was tall. The shiny red wagon went by.

“The Stones,” Blair said. “Good people. Viv Stone used to be in movies. They’re friends with Beulah. She comes out on weekends.” He lifted his hand.

“There’s her car—”

Blair crossed the neat barnyard and stopped the cruiser at the edge of the lush lawn beside the blue Saab 20 yards from the house.

“I’ll just be a minute. You’ll have to meet Beulah another time. We’ve got to get to Web Olson’s.” He got out, then leaned back through the moving shade of the honey locust.

“Listen, I forgot to warn you. When you see a drowning woman don’t try to save her.”

I felt relief like a wave.

“The Lady in the River!” Bell was grinning. “That’s right!”

“Who’s that?” Glad asked.

“It’s a big joke on guests of the county,” Blair said. “The first time I saw her I jumped in.”

“So did I,” I said.

“You’re kidding— I’ve been meaning to haul her out, before someone gets hurt.”

“She looks real?” Glad asked. “That’s how you got wet?”

“Some big-shot sculptor did it, huh Jack?”

“The guy who built the lodge clipped a picture from the paper, a girl at the prom 20 years ago. The old rancher thought she looked like a classic beauty. Only, as Phil knows—”

“Don’t tell Jack’s wife, or Beulah when you see her.”

“Why not?” Glad asked. “They jealous?”

I saw her smiling lips and eyes that urged me to enter the icy water, the gaze that captured the cabin’s first owner. Fingerlike shadows crossed the car’s hood as I heard the sudden leaves like the snapping of a thousand sails and thought of desolate Jim Sloan, his wheeled horned creation and his passion for Lucinda, Olson’s mythic daughter.

“He had a guy in Portland make a copy. He’d sit by the river and admire her. One wet spring the bank wore away and her statue fell in. She weighs a ton.”

“Copy of who?” Glad asked.

“Ask Phil. He’s already seen her.”

“When?” I turned toward Blair.

“This morning,” Blair said.

“You mean Dorothy, at the front desk?”

I hadn’t told Blair about Helen and the dream of Troy, about my father at the tower in Texas, Glad’s drunken story of Sloan and the bull, about the Sphinx and Oedipus. Or the two rivers by the red rock—one of memory, one dust—going different ways.

“We’ve got time,” Bell said. “Haven’t we, Jack?”

“Come on, Phil” Now Blair was grinning. “You might as well get acquainted.”

“With who?” I stared at Blair.

“She’s real,” Glad said. “The statue.”

“You said it was a story. About Lucinda— Now you’re saying Web Olson really has a daughter?”

They weren’t making sense.

“No—” Blair began to laugh.

“Jack’s sister-in-law. Like Jack said. Betty’s sister—”

“I know just the girl for you,” Betty, Blair’s wife, had said in Kansas City.

“Sure,” Glad agreed, looking toward the open door and the silver-haired actress with pretty face and figure.

Viv Stone waved to us through flickering light, a breath of wind rustling the honey locust leaves, and turned, calling to someone in the house.

“You ok? Phil?”

Now someone gripped my arm.

I felt the strong current push at my waist to take me to the sea, then half-hesitate, purl for an instant in a U, before the swift Clark Fork swept past and I went light-headed, half dizzy, uncertain on my feet.

At Viv’s shoulder she’d instantly appeared, raising a shapely hand, like a goddess summoned from a waterfall.

“Phillip Lambert?”

The changing light lit familiar lovely slope of brow and cheek and glinting auburn hair in gold and red between the flashing piebald shadows. I blinked and looked again. In green slacks the smiling woman who called my given name glided from the stairs.

“Beulah Ransom?”

“Yes, Phil,” she answered and I was crossing Viv Stone’s blue dappled rye to hold at last the woman in the river. ⌚



The Boy Who Used the Curling Iron

Eleanor Levine

My ex-girlfriend Liza spoke to me in a dream. She said I could be in the same room, allowed me three words, and I could talk through other people.

•

When I told my niece Tammy that I had asked ten boys to my Senior Farewell, she giggled, as she had been to hers the previous night, solo.

“I was so set on going,” I told her, “it was more important than getting into my brother’s pot.”

Tammy was not averse to being alone because she often heard Ellen Degeneres blathering on about bullying, gays and pit bulls.

•

After the Senior Farewell, we ended up at my ex-girlfriend Liza’s house. I was friends with her brother Marvin, who was in the social outcast spectrum like me, sorta between “no one knows who you are and no one really


gives a shit.” He and I and our entourage snorted Peruvian cocaine manufactured in Jersey City, NJ, on his dining room table.

Marvin’s sister Liza was snorkeling through obscure novels in her bedroom; she was a bleep, like it’s bleeping on your radio in the midst of a thunderstorm but you can’t hear it. The white ingredient was the storm; the bleep was Liza, the hot librarian. Who *coulda*, *woulda*, been able to concentrate on Emily Bronte with Liza reordering books?

•

Senior year I asked several boys to the dance, including twin Philippine brothers, one who styled his hair with a curling iron.

In 1980, we didn’t ask lesbian lovers to the prom. We wouldn’t think, after getting Macy’s or JC Penney dresses, that Ellen Degeneres could lead us, with a pack of depraved German shepherds, to gay liberation.



NELS HANSON’S fiction received the San Francisco Foundation’s James D. Phelan Award and two Pushcart Prize nominations. Stories have appeared in *Antioch Review*, *Texas Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Southeast Review*, *Montreal Review* and other journals and stories are in press at *Tattoo Highway*, *The Weary Blues*, *The Petrichor Review*, *The Milo Review*, *The Dying Goose*, *Works & Days*, and *Emerge Literary Journal*.

Ellen-like chicks were popular in my high school. Liza even flipped them over her shoulders during cheerleading practice; she was closeted, of course, and her closeted hormones bounced like Jiffy popcorn.

And Ellen D would not have spoken to me—there were too many zits on my face—she’d have needed a dermatologist to interpret.

I was the worm in the school puddle that you stomped on during recess.

I’ve never been cool; at the dyke bar in 1988, the sorted poontang ignored me.

If it had been hip to be gay in 1976, the faygelahs would have dumped a Slurpee on me.

I wanted a skinny boy for the Senior Farewell. No activist. No moustache. No sideburns coming down.

I’d shave my legs, use my brothers’ shaving cream, cause in our family, things were tight. We had detergent for shampoo, and hand me downs from a Dix Hills, Long Island cousin who dated Adam Ant. While Liza took ballet lessons in Manhattan and got drunk in an Irish pub with Bobby Sherman’s niece, I took public school violin lessons and played kickball in the street.

The first boy I asked, Hank, hung up. Hank exchanged baseball cards with my brother Earl, and I bugged Earl for his number because, I lied to Earl, Hank needed assistance with a book report on *Wuthering Heights*.

“Hi Hank,” I sounded like an Eskimo grabbing for meat at our kitchen table.

“Yeah...”

“This is Agatha...uuhhhh...”

“Why?”

“Well...”

“Would you like to go the Senior Farewell, I’m...”

“What’s that Mom? Listen....my Mom’s calling me... gotta go.” *Click.*

My second boy, Sammy Jones, was a porn star. A twink’s desire. *Or my desire. Or both of ours.* No muscles. Sammy hung out at our house playing marbles with my brother Harold, who also had a crush on him.

Sammy liked our roof because the pipes leaked; my father was more interested in writing fiction than his children or fixing pipes. This impressed Sammy whose father was a Nazi and a plumber.

Ten years later, against his parents’ wishes, Sammy married fat-breasted Jew girl Erica Horowitz at the Ramada Inn.

When Harold left their marbles game to pee, I quietly broached the Senior Farewell.

“Hi, Sammy.”

“Hi, Agatha.”

“Sammy?”

“Yes?”

“Would you like to go to Senior Farewell with me?”

In 1980, when dorky girls (these days they say I’m “intelligent”) asked “borderline normal” boys to the Senior Farewell—long before Anderson Cooper made bullying or homosexuality an acceptable topic—this was tantamount to committing social suicide. You have to understand, it was hard enough for Sammy Jones to breathe in the cafeteria (he had no physique whatsoever), but to take Agatha Schwartz to the Senior Farewell, well, no, even Anderson Cooper would not have prevailed with his entire CNN crew coming to our high school.

Sammy, hearing my Senior Farewell invitation, glanced over at Harold, “—*gotta go.*”

Six dudes later, including the paper route boy (who quit delivering for three weeks), a failed Eagle Scout (lived two blocks away), and a guy selling Spirograph sets (his uncle shoplifted them), I got a date.

Roberto, one of the Philippine twins, the less macho one, the one who used the curling iron, agreed to go.

“You like my hair?” he asked.

“It’s gorgeous,” I said, trailing his words. I love effeminate dudes, can fall asleep listening to them. Roberto touched his curls—he spent hours playing with his sister’s curling iron.

My mother had purchased a curling iron for me and I burned my shag haircut. I was never happy with my hair; only ecstatic when born-again Jackie Smith braided it like Bo Derek, which nearly caused a race riot in high school.

Roberto’s brother, Roberto II, was more distant, but with Roberto, I knew that although he’d prefer to wear my dress, and I his suit, he’d come.

“Would you go with me to the Senior Farewell?”

“Okay,” Roberto said.

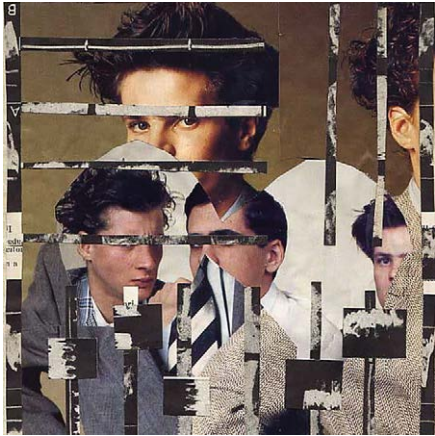
A week later, he said, his mother and twin brother made him bow out.

Liza had the opposite problem. All the boys wanted her. She couldn’t keep the young males away—they were ringing her pink Cinderella phone like it was the Jerry Lewis Muscular Dystrophy telethon.

I, on the other hand, would not have known what to do with penises, though my brother showed me his and his friend Bert asked me to give him a blowjob. When Liza broke up with me, she no longer sympathized with my revulsion toward “the Bert blowjob invitation,” and it was at this point that I knew, yes, she no longer loved me.

But alas, boys were not an army of ants crawling on my sidewalk. This was why the Senior Farewell challenge meant so much. It was comparable to applying to an Ivy League university. With my horrible SAT scores I was going to get rejected but there was no point in not applying for Roberto, Sammy Jones, sperm and Yale.

Perhaps I should devote some copy to my Liza. I didn’t know her in high school. I knew *of her*. She was a waitress,



like me, at the Blue Moon Pizzeria. She sued them for paying her \$1.65 an hour. She hated that there were cockroaches on the floor, and that when she got home she smelled like greasy oil even though her mother bought her expensive perfume.

Liza was on the math team and the reptile club. *She was stunning.* She had black hair, green eyes and bellbottoms. Her lips were so soft that when you kissed them, you kissed a million Maggie Thatchers during their first orgasm.

With boys, however, she didn’t have orgasms, or the possibility of them, which is why she left our school a year early.

Back in the secondary school days, however, we did not converse—it was like a vacuum stuck between our ears, unless I saw her smile between lockers, but that usually turned into a smirk.

We eventually rambled in each other’s brain like circuitous routes traveling undirected until she decided that my emotions were more in need of her than me. I’m like that sneaker hanging on the telephone line that looks inviting at first, but after five months is an eye sore—Liza had one of her blue-collar friends cut me down with hedge clippers.

We slept in each other’s beds, with her cats and my Jack Russell, unperturbed by the other’s odors, until we weren’t sleeping, and then she slammed the phone down.

In high school, I was in a play as Thurber’s Mrs. Walter Mitty, and she was student government VP with heightened estrogen levels near cheerleaders.

She read *The Jungle* 70 times. Jean-Paul Sartre as well, but in the evenings. Jane Eyre and Jane Austin inspired my panic disorders, whereas her choices were like Sylvia Plath gone on an acid trip.

We never spoke. *Nottttttttta word.*

I had a crush on her brother Marvin. He was like lilacs or cherry blossoms. It was even rumored, by the more jealous of our outcast friends, that Marvin had sex with a female prostitute in the Goon Motel along Route 9.

But you know boys, they didn’t see me. I was a cloud of nuclear dust that defense department auditors ignore. I sat on the tile floor with Roberto and his curls, while a stampede of students, including my brothers, walked by.

During the weekends at Great Adventure’s safari park, the largest outside of North America, I was a tour guide, and met my Senior Farewell date. His name was Alexander, and with or without gaydar, or a large CB radio antenna attached to your nose, you knew he was a *mo. Faygelah. Poofiah.*

I don’t know why Liza dated me. I have never been busted for shoplifting. Allen Ginsberg wouldn’t let me

interview him in person. My underwear is oftentimes not 100% cotton. Yet there she was, sleeping next to me. Her soft brown hair (dyed) and mine (grey) and my dog and her cats embracing us and me snoring. She told me how beautiful I was, that she would only leave me if I gained weight because it might cause a stroke, not that it would impair me cosmetically.

Liza was my love, the love of my life, center of the universe, Abraham’s competition for the idols and God, and then she wasn’t.

She deleted me. Just like that. *A blank screen.* She even called once, like she knew I had gotten over her for 30 seconds, but then we were back in business, the obsession business I call it, where I am hooked into dialing the number I seek not to memorize, or the drugs I seek not to do, which is quite similar to dialing the phone number.

But alas, let’s return to Great Adventure and the safari park where I worked as a safari tour guide and meandered toward the gay man of my dreams. He had a lisp. You know that lisp that makes all queens like discos and all discos like queens, even in Queens. Well, yes, he sloppily pronounced his words with the expertise of a woman who didn’t see a speech therapist in elementary school. He was handsome, although it was clear, clearer than the ocean is green, that he was a girl.

I met him while he swept rocks in Great Adventure. The economy was so good then they paid people minimum wage to sweep rocks.

“Hi,” I said to Alex, which is what I called him.

“Hi, Agatha,” he read my nametag.

“I need a date for the Senior Farewell.”

“Cool,” he said, staring at a prematurely bald bus driver. Alex had a crush on this bus driver, but the dude was into female ostriches, which is why he always asked for “the safari route.”

“Alex?” I vied for his attention.

“Oh sure, Agatha,” Alex replied, “I’ll be yuhhappy to...”

To prepare for the Senior Farewell, my mother took me to Steinbach. I was reluctant because I’ve never liked dresses. They are comparable to bras—I know they are there, and you need to wear them, but I didn’t.

Alex phoned the afternoon before the Senior Farewell.

“Agatha, I don’t feel like going.”

This was not going to do.

“What?”

“I have to go...” *Click.* Rotary phones did not permit my quick response.

I called him back...*slowly. It was like bowling,* you must wait for the dial tone, like pins, to come back.



No answer.
I called again.
No answer.
I called an hour later.
His dad answered.
“Hello?” A deep-sounding male *who would not have befriended Kevin Spacey in a man’s bar*, answered.

“Hello?”
“This is Agatha Schw—”
“What?”

He lived in Jackson, NJ, which was a cross between Louisiana and Florida, the more deserted areas that alligators, not Long Islanders, trespassed.

I wasn’t, however, calling to discuss my Hebrew origins, and whether he and his white supremacist friends approved. I was calling to discuss his son, who was supposed to come to the Senior Farewell, for which my parents spent \$100 at Steinbach in Brick, NJ.

“Alexander, er uh, Alex, he’s supposed to come with me to the Senior Farewell...he just cancelled.”

“Heeee did what—”

I couldn’t tell if he was surprised that I was a girl or that his son promised he’d go to a prom not as the girl.

“He was taking me to the Senior Farewell...called an hour ago to cancel; it’s tonight, and....”

“That little shit...I’m going to beat the crap out of him,” and according to Alex, Mr. Alex beat his buttocks blue with a hanger Alex used to drip dry his towels from a shower.

“It hurt like hell,” he said to me at the farewell table.

“I’m really sorry,” I grinned, glad Alex was not dead, but grateful his father had been the catalyst for my not staying at home to watch Larry Hagman and Barbara Eden dry fuck in *I Dream of Jeannie*.

I was 16 and am now 51, and things have changed not too rapidly. I am no longer attracted to men who look like women and probably more so to women who look like me.

When Alex and I got to the dance, they couldn’t discern the girl from the boy. Bert, who wanted me to give him a blowjob, said, “They thought you were hot, but were really impressed with him/her.”

The popular kids took turns touring our table. The salad

leaves, and the misfits who sat at my table chewing them, were not altogether redeeming. Some kids had artificial limbs, while others read Anne Sexton and smoked clove cigarettes with Comet during their suicidal moments.

Following the stare/dare and eat your salad dressing while the football players eek and geek and get repulsed by the zoo-like behavior of the most repulsive members of the human race, we took our wheelchairs and prosthetics to Marvin’s house, where we snorted cocaine with the said football players. Jersey City-manufactured Peruvian cocaine makes popularity as meaningless as it is on Facebook.

While we kids snorted, Liza—in her room—read and inhaled words from God. That’s why they’re such good friends and she attends those insufferable twelve-step meetings with the paranoid feeling that God may take back some of the words he has permitted to climb into her febrile

brain. They are buds, apparently, Liza and the Lord, and according to my records, she will never abandon him for me. I have tried reading the bible to get some exclusivity with her, but to no avail.

Last night I dreamt Liza dated my brothers.

“Your sister looks pregnant,” she told them. I was mounting walls, killing silverfish, trying to comprehend how she could go from me to the Neanderthals. Of course, they were much cooler and didn’t look pregnant.

My brother Earl, a swimming consultant, and Adrian, another sibling, were courting Liza. I was not a contender, nor permitted to speak with her. Kind of like: I am banned from her universe; I might as well be in the Sahara desert with members of the Jihad race.

I dance in my head where Liza is not. She comes and goes, and on occasion, I visit her in a nightmare. But for real bliss, I recall how many boys I asked to the Senior Farewell, and how eventually, I got one, with blue buttocks, to take me.





ELEANOR LEVINE’S work has appeared in *Fiction*, *The Evergreen Review*, *Midway Journal*, *Milk Magazine*, *BLAZEvox*, *Atticus Review*, *The Denver Quarterly*, *The Toronto Quarterly*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Prime Mincer*, *Happy*, *Penumbra*, *The Coachella Review*, *Gertrude*, *Fanzine*, *Lunch Ticket Magazine*, and others; and has work forthcoming in *Pank*. She lives in Philadelphia with her labradoodle Morgan.



Squirrels

Susan Tepper

After the squirrel attack, Russell felt leery about leaving his house. He’d have to go out soon. His habit of daily food shopping — his fresh meats and fruits and vegetables, the occasional fish or seafood, the bread, bought every day to insure freshness. He was practically out of food already. For dinner last night Russell finished the box of brown rice which he sprinkled with golden raisins to add bulk. The milk was gone and so were the eggs. A little Fontina still clung to the rind, he took it from the refrigerator, scraped it against his top teeth. Then grabbing the phone he dialed Stan at work. “I need to talk to Clara can you give me her number?”

His brother made a jerky-sounding laugh. “She won’t go out with you, she’s got you pegged a-hole for letting Maggie get away so easy. Besides...”

Easy! Nothing about Maggie had ever been easy! He

waited for Stan to finish but Stan had gone mute. *Easy* for him to say. His wife Tilda died. Fast and clean. One day keeling over at the sink.

“Besides what?” said Russell.

“Clara doesn’t respect you for staying on disability.”

What business is that of hers? he thought, looking down at his arm; the one not holding the phone. Short arms. He’d been born that way. Arms, that when fully extended, barely reached his hips. Russell flinched. Little squirrel arms.

“Look I don’t want to date Clara, I want her to give me a reading. That gypsy stuff she does with the cards.”

Catching his reflection in the microwave he decided everything about himself could be summed up in one word: tan. Not suntan-tan; nothing that exotic. Just slightly darker than beige.

“My disability is my own business,” he said.

“Gulf War’s been over a long time, bro.”

“Desert Storm.” He gritted his teeth.

People assumed it was the rifle gave him trouble. The rifle had been a piece of cake, Russell naturally suited to the M-16, his stubby arms becoming an extension of his weapon. It was the climbing got him fucked. He couldn’t hold on. The roads were sinkholes. Climbing up top a moving transport vehicle he’d fallen off, breaking his nose and most of the small bones in his face.

“Look, Stan, things have been getting weird for me lately. Like Clara said they would.” He could hear chuckling into the phone.

“Clara *is* good.”

With some more coaxing Russell got her number. She picked up quickly, her *hello* all summery, musical-sounding. Or was it those birds he could hear in the background? Those tweety-birds?

“It’s Russell,” he announced after making her say hello more than once.

“I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Really?”

They made an arrangement. She would come to him provided he pay twice her normal rate.

“If you can stop by the market and pick up a few things,” he added. Reciting his shopping list then agreeing on four o’clock.

Sometime after four-thirty he heard banging on his front door. He ambled toward it, looking out one of the large, diamond-shaped panes then gesturing palms up — a kind of shrug and shouting through the door: “I can’t open this, you see, you’ll have to *come ‘round back*.”

She had on a floppy black hat that looked like a car rolled over it. Her face, through the glass, turning red and annoyed. Red as the crushed-velvet cape that spilled from her shoulders. Clara held firm on his stoop, dug in. A shopping bag of groceries in each hand.

“Open up!” she yelled.

He laughed sheepishly, shrugging again, trying to explain through the door about the broken hinges; then he laughed once more as if to say *What can I do?*

“Eggs!” She let both bags go at the same time.

“Oh, god, please, no Clara.” Gingerly opening the door expecting the worst. She pushed past him into the house.

He went out and picked the bags off the steps. Then saying to no one in particular, “This door has problems,” went back inside closing it carefully.

In the kitchen he began putting things away, wiggling each egg in the carton to see that none had cracked.

“Let’s get going!” she shouted.

He continued to check for breakage.

“Quit fucking with the eggs, Russell.”

“How did you know?”

“My cards are getting cold.”

The hat off and tossed aside, her messy brown hair wasn’t much of an improvement, though Clara, herself, looked neatly arranged: the red velvet cape loosened at the neck and spread around her on the sofa. Russell squinted at her, rubbing his jaw. How dare Stan chastise him! A moment later wondering was Clara any good in bed? Stan had never said either way.

She had on something black and tight under the cape — leggings maybe; maybe a leotard. She took up that same

middle cushion where he sat after the squirrel attack; after Maggie left. Pointing he said, “That’s a dangerous spot.”

“Only if you don’t know what you’re doing.”

And she pointed back — a black fingernail wiggling that he should take the chair opposite her. The Tarot deck in a neat pile on the glass coffee table. Clara lowering her head to the cards.

He tried cracking a joke. “Those are some *gigunda* cards.”

“They’re *French* Tarot Cards.”

He whistled through his teeth.

She reached for the cards the red cape crushing around her like a lot of blood. My blood, thought Russell touching his neck. My missing blood, that is.

“Will you please sit down.”

Obedient, he lowered himself into the chair.

“Do your close friends call you Rusty?”

“I have no close friends.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Well why’d you ask, Clara?”

“It’s just one of those things.”

“You don’t have to be cruel, I’ve had a terrible time lately. More than lately.” He covered his mouth to cough. “A while.”

“Of your own doing. Here, shuffle.”

“Are you going to explain these cards to me?”

“Cut them in the direction of your heart.”

He blinked. His heart. Maggie had made that crack about his heart, about it being a failed heart.

He took the cards. “Like this?” He cut, fumbled shuffling, a few dropping onto the rug.

She gestured impatiently. “OK, OK, hand them back.”

“Aren’t you going to tell me what they mean?”

She was turning them over, one by one, onto the coffee table.

“No, Russell. No I’m not. That’s your trouble. You want answers, all the time, answers.” She stared at the cards, her mouth jammed in a crooked line.

This troubled him. This refusal on her part to explain. After all, he was paying her. He had a right to know. “What’s the point if you’re not gonna tell me anything?”

“You got your food didn’t you?” She seemed to be focusing on a particular card.

What’s the matter now? he thought. He coughed again looking toward his fish tank — mostly guppies. He should have asked her to pick up fish food. The expensive tropical fish were *finito*, having met their end around the time he met his end with Maggie. He tried smiling. “I *am* paying you, Clara.”

She shook her head the long silver earrings jangling. “You got the cheap rate.” She stifled a yawn. “Being that I know your brother and all. Stan.”

“Yes I know his name, Clara.”

She peeled off the rest of the cards till they made a kind of strange but interesting pattern across the glass. Bright card with exotic images. Nevertheless, Russell felt a bleakness settle over him; similar to a stretch of bad weather.

She leaned back into the sofa and crossed her legs. “In this world you get what you pay for.”

“Yesterday I got attacked by a squirrel. How do you

explain that?”

“Was it an American squirrel?”

“How should I know?”

“What kind of tail did it have? Did it have a typical bushy squirrel tail or was it a long skinny tail, kind of sick looking? Like it got chewed off by some other rodent.”

He gripped the chair arms. *Rodent* she said. He guessed it was. Still. Rodents he’d always associated with mice, or filthy rats spreading fear and disease. Plagues, even! He couldn’t answer about the squirrel tail; he couldn’t think straight.

“Well? Well? Well?” One of her needle sharp shoes tapped the edge of the coffee table.

Stalling, Russell gazed around the living room, focusing on the barometer — a gift from his mother. Possibly a wedding gift. He couldn’t remember. Stuck on *SNOW* all these years, technically it was useless.

“How does a barometer get broken? Could you at least tell me that much, Clara?”

Pursing her lips she plucked something off her knee, examining what looked like a white thread. “That particular barometer?” She stifled another yawn. “I don’t know.”

“I hope I’m not boring you, Clara.”

“Look — you have to take pleasure where you can find it.”

What? What’s she *grepsing* up now? “I take no pleasure in a broken barometer. If that’s what you mean.”

She rested her head back against the sofa. “You must’ve dropped it. Knocked it off course.”

“Does it have a course?”

“Everything has a course. God, you make me tired!

What color was that squirrel anyway? Gray or black?”

“Whoever heard of a black squirrel?”

“Look — there’s black ones and there’s gray ones.” Her voice sounding thin like the oxygen had been siphoned off. “I’m sorry I ever came here.” She rubbed her eyes and sat up straight.

“Why did you?”

“You seemed desperate. A real desperado.” And she made a laugh like rattling bones.

Russell stood up clenching and unclenching his toes.

“You should watch the anger,” she said. “The anger’s gonna do you in.”

He stared at her.

“OK. So I guess it’s your sneakers are too tight.” She laughed again, shrugging. “But you do squeeze your ass a lot. I noticed at Stan’s barbecue when you had on those Madras shorts, the way they got all pushed up in there. All squishy.”


“Clara you are not a nice person.”

“Hmmm.” Tucking her chin to her chest, she seemed to fold up in the yards of red crushed velvet.


Because it hadn’t gone very well, and because she had another reading later — some type of group thing at the Knights of Columbus — Clara agreed to shave her fee. He gave her thirty-five plus grocery money. Telling her to leave out the back way.

She gave him a phony-friendly wave. “Sleep tight.”

Russell slept poorly. At least with a warm omelette and toast under his belt. He dreamt about the squirrel who had the same face as Maggie. 🐿



SUSAN TEPPER is the author of five published books. Her current novel-in-stories ***The Merrill Diaries*** (Pure Slush Books, 2013) is an adventure in love and lust that spans continents. Teppar has been nominated for nine Pushcarts and a Pulitzer Prize. Find her online at SusanTepper.com





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Couching

Andrew Mangan

To call Lazlo's couch his home would be to assume that he ever left it. People leave their homes; to go to work, to buy groceries, to meet up with their friends. But Lazlo doesn't. He hasn't left the cushy, comfortable embrace of his red 1989 Lay-Z-Boy Reclin-O-Matic 3000™ since March 1st, 2007, or as he has kept tally in the brown leather notebook usually stored in the Reclin-O-Matic's™ multi-purpose armrest/cup holder/magazine rack/remote storage unit: three years, eleven months, and thirty days—soon to be a full thirty-one, and thus a full annual four. For Lazlo, the couch was his comfort; it has become his trademark.

So, yes: "Where does his food come from?" people might ask. Sam's Grocer down the street typically provided it, unless Lazlo was feeling adventurous, in which case he ordered delivery from Tan's Chinese or The Zebra Room, a Greek restaurant downtown. Sam—of Sam's Grocer—knew him from when Lazlo had worked at the store during his high school years. They had formed a bond, close and almost paternal, maintained and ossified through empathy on Sam's part, for him. Thus, when Lazlo took up residence on the couch and quickly saw how fast twice-daily delivery food was depleting his meager funds (plus a higher-than-average tip to account for Lazlo having them deliver the food to the couch and not the front door), he decided to cook at home, leading to Sam's deliveries and in turn to a purchasing spree from HSN—a comforting channel, he felt—or eBay or Amazon—less comforting, but still somewhat. Purchases included: Bennie de la Paz's Patented Home-Habashi Grill/Hotplate™, The GE Panini Presto™, and the 2003 GENY™ Industrial Microwave, because, really, who could tolerate a sub-1750-watt microwave? *It wasn't the 90s*, he thought.

Beyond this, his refrigeration needs were met by the Mint-Mark Mini Freezzz™ mini-refrigerator/freezer, left over from his university years, as well as the Reclin-O-Matic 3000's™ own built-in refrigerator/armrest/speakerphone/clock-radio. This all naturally led to Lazlo's long-delayed call to Sam for grocery selection and delivery; Sam—who'd never married, nor knowingly fathered any children—was willing to oblige for his old employee, despite his lacking comprehension of the whole staying-on-the-couch-forever thing.

No one really understood, Lazlo thought, sitting there in near darkness, too lazy to reach for the reading lamp's switch or the remote control for the overhead light. *No one really*. He thought that quite often, but less often than when it all had begun. Early into his fixedness on the couch, his friends stopped finding it funny or acting like everything was A-OK. Some advocated the laws of, quote, "social normalcy," of leaving the couch and the apartment; 'laws'

that some suggested earlier than others—David in particular. David would commonly call Lazlo and tell him to, quote, "go the fuck outside" or to, quote, "get the fuck off the couch, at least." Lazlo would laugh, and respond, "What's wrong with my life? I'm happy. I'm comfortable. I'm enjoying it. There's nothing wrong with me."

One of Lazlo's proudest achievements during this time was the notebook's calendric system: All of these days and symbolic hours, months and weeks, were tallied page after page via a numerical system he had developed to account for all seven days of the week, as the traditional four lines (||||) with a fifth line diagonally through (\\) just *would not have made any practical sense*, he had thought. Instead, his system worked by creating a square (□) with an X through the middle (⊗), with each line of the box equating to one 24-hour period. However, that only led to six—one day short of functionality. Frustrated, he improvised, drawing a line horizontally (|) through the six-lined box. This was how he kept track of the days: a seven-lined box. *This was practical*, he had thought. Not David or Alice or even Mark had been all that impressed with it, but he didn't mind. After all, only he could wholly understand. *Who else?*

Though, of course, he had known it was, for lack of a better term, *odd*, he loved the couch, loved sleeping on it, loved talking on it, watching TV on it, doing sit-ups and push-ups on it, lifting his PowerFlex XXL™ Adjustable Hand-Weights™ on it. He was physically healthy; his friends couldn't complain about that. But, they found other reasons, which he kept in a numbered list in the brown notebook, even though he'd memorized all of them by now:

- #2. "Lazlo, this isn't mentally healthy. It's agoraphobic. It's not a normal response to trauma."
- #9. "Lazlo, we miss you. We never see you anymore."
- #20. "Lazlo, you're going to get a blood clot from sitting there all day. Blood clots can kill you."
- #33. "Lazlo, you need to see the world more. There's so much out there (or, if they knew him better: You used to love doing that.)."
- #37. "Lazlo, you need get back out there, get a girlfriend, have some fun. Jen—"

No one ever brought up money or work. You did not need to move to be a blogger or a writer. Writers could be statues, gargoyles; journalistic bloggers could live on couches. Lazlo had proved this theory, had made it law.

More out of boredom than functionality, he also kept correspondingly numerated answers to these questions:

#2. "We've gone over this, you guys have had me checked out by a psychiatrist, a psychologist, a therapist, and even a priest. They all called me as mentally healthy as most others. Sure, I deal with things in a way many might consider 'weird' or whatever, but it's not like I'm agoraphobic. I'm not scared of the outside world. I'm just willingly choosing to not be a part of it." (They would usually groan or continue to argue or both. Typically, it was both. This was noted in the margins of the brown notebook.)

#9. "We've gone over this, you can come by any time you want. I'm always here for you." (No one would laugh at this after the second time that they had heard it, but Lazlo

would always say it with a comical inflection, nevertheless.)
#20. “We’ve gone over this, I still get a yearly physical. The Reclin-O-Matic™ caters to blood circulation, too. It’s ‘ergonomic’ and everything. I’ll be fine. It’s so comfortable.” (This would be met with blank stares. He knew they would not understand when he had begun, and had stopped trying to win them over.)

#33. “We’ve gone over this, I’ve seen what I want to see of the world. Dubai. Johannesburg. Berlin. Tbilisi. São Paulo. Gaza. I was an international reporter for six long years, guys. Anyway, if I want to see any more of it, they have the greatest hits on Discovery.” (No one had laughed at this either, not even the first time.)

#37. “We’ve been over this.”

He knew that his friends were patient, knew that he was not being the easiest on them, knew that they did not agree with his method or decision. He, too, knew how they varied in their conditions of understanding. David would never comprehend it, and would never even try. Mark acted accepting, but was always vaguely uncomfortable about it; he stopped asking questions after five full boxes. Lazlo’s parents were dead, and couldn’t understand because of that. But, unlike the rest, Alice tried to make light of Lazlo’s choice, but he always noted how she would blink hard after a joke, then abruptly stop smiling, because, after all, she understood more than anyone else.

Others had stopped talking to him altogether, whether they wanted to or not.

Those who could tolerate his decision still dropped by from time to time, at least; Mark visiting the most. He habitually called beforehand to ask Lazlo if he needed anything—groceries, vitamins, whatever. Lazlo usually needed something, but never took him up on the offers. He had Sam for that. And besides, if he asked, then it would show Mark, possibly the only entirely apologetic friend he had, that he was In Need, and that, of anything, was the last thing he wanted. He would have preferred death.

David visited, too, and despite valiant attempts to dissuade Lazlo from the whole thing, still wanted to see him. He thought Lazlo still deserved some level of sympathy given the loss he’d taken, though this didn’t stop him from peppering the most questions on Lazlo in the early months. Lazlo had made a memo of this, too, in the notebook. The first thing David ever asked (barely three whole boxes into the notebook) was how Lazlo planned on going to the bathroom or taking showers, but the efficient smallness of the apartment Lazlo lived in answered this. The bathroom was hidden behind a large vinyl curtain in the living room. Thick, black, and peculiarly sound-deafening, the curtain touched one end of the couch, and he needed only to move it and aim for Number One, and do a sort of backwards push-up position, with his feet in the couch and his hands on the toilet’s tank, for Number Two. His showers were by a more curious invention, more imaginative than the seven-lined box, despite the box’s rigid, statistical practicality. Here, he froze a mixture of Head & Shoulders™ Classic Conditioning shampoo/conditioner and Lever 2000™ Fresh Aloe soap shavings into an altogether different kind of bar, and thanks to the Reclin-O-Matic’s™ standard-feature water/stain-resistant stitching, he washed himself on the

couch, typically standing. A dab of water with a K-Clean™ Organic Kitchen Sponge from the bathroom sink and then a scrub of the soap-bar that he had yet to find a proper name for, and then another dab from the sponge. Rub. Rinse. Repeat. David hid his surprise behind more questions, more attempts at dissuasion.

The couch was positioned facing the door, a Samsung 32-inch Series 3 LCD TV in between. So, when Alice came by that night around 11 p.m.—without calling, using her extra copy of the apartment’s key—Lazlo saw her immediately. He was eating cereal, his favorite, Kellogg’s Fruit Loops™. He loved the mascot—the brightly colored, smiling toucan. How friendly and almost personable he was. In fact, even with the lights off, there was, for Lazlo, a comfortable, not-at-all grating, even somewhat familial and congenial sound to the room, whether it was from the sporadic, dependable clicking of the Series4 TiVo Premiere™ DVR or the lifelike animation of the Iwasaki Fake Artificial Aquarium Koi Fish Tank™ with its small, plastic robot-fish wagging their hinged fins and propelling themselves around the never-dirtying water. He would often watch them, the mechanical fish, for a solid fifteen minutes, half-smiling. But he wasn’t doing that now. No, currently, Lazlo was watching CNN with the sound muted, a retrospective special on Palestinian parliamentary elections and the subsequent post-election violence the year after—which was to say, almost four years ago. He had gotten away from the Gaza strip exactly a week early from the riots, when tensions were rising, when his editor ordered him back to their Portland newsroom; they needed him. He felt torn, but was reassured of certain things, and eventually persuaded to leave. *Everything would be all right*, he had thought. *Soon enough it would be over and we will*— He had never gotten to finish that thought. The phone call interrupted. Another one from his and Jenny’s editor.

When Alice saw Lazlo, with his cereal, on his couch, in 2011, she did not speak, and neither did Lazlo. They both knew the date. March 1st. They both knew why they were there, him on that couch and her arrival so late at night; playing parts written for them four years ago. No post-performance Q&A; no one had new questions or new answers; no need, for no one had forgotten. It was obvious like the sugar in his cereal, like the hooting pigeons on the window-sill, like the platonic solace they both sought after.

She sat down next to him on the couch, looking exclusively at him, as he attempted a smile and then continued eating his cereal in the disposable plastic bowl Sam had delivered in bulk earlier. She looked for a sign, a sign that Lazlo was not as fine as he seemed. She stared into his eyes, those watery, blue orbs behind his glasses; stared into his smile for a faltering second; stared at him because she knew him too well to know everything was all right, or that it would be.

Alice and Lazlo had met through a mutual friend, Jenny, though she (that friend) was never exclusively a friend to either of them—a sister to one, fiancé to the other. And, this was a little over five years ago, which meant that Alice had known Lazlo more on the couch than off it. Other friends that only knew him briefly beforehand were just vague recollections, names written down by Lazlo in the

brown notebook. Now, everyone that visited him, however routinely, was a friend for many more years beforehand, excluding Alice, of course.

Alice continued staring at Lazlo, noticing his features as they absorbed the blue luminescence of the television: his light brown hair, now appearing a dark blue; his cow-like champing of the cereal; his empty gaze forward, not looking at her; his heavy, thick-framed glasses that, which she now noticed, reflected the televised desert scenes. Alice immediately turned her head to see what he was watching. The tan of the sand dunes in the background, the children fleeing from fresh ruins, the beige Hummers, the Kalashnikov rifles worn like sand-tattered messenger bags her sister had consistently had with her, containing all her internationally vital work, the work she would rather die over than have given up.

Alice grabbed the remote from the armrest/cup holder/magazine wrack/remote storage unit, and shut off the television. They were now in the dark, and all she heard was Lazlo cease his eating (which she took for recognition of his transgression), and then him clicking on the reading lamp to his left (which she took for an apology).

They sat statically in the modicum of light. Lazlo with his feet planted on the hardwood floor, the floor he refused to stand on, leaning forward, putting the bowl of pink milk down on the coffee table, and then looking up to her. She flattened the anger from her face, and attempted a mutually conciliatory smile, but it did not work, and they both knew it wouldn’t. It hadn’t worked the past three years either. She laid her head slowly, gently in his lap and sobbed, scrunching the tie-dye blanket with which he had covered himself into her fists. Lazlo did not cry, but simply peered off into the middle distance. He was never, in fact, able to cry on these anniversaries of the day when he first decided to remain on the couch, and never move from it. Perpetually, he felt his tear ducts not work, not do their job or their duty. They were In Denial, contradicting the facts of the matter, stuck in Stage One. To Lazlo, though everything had changed, was not *all right*, he could not progress past this horrible Stage One—as others had—seeing it as fundamentally impossible. He had lost the race, was the sleeping hare in a field of tortoises. He often joked to himself, and others when they inquired further, that no wonder he had lost; he had not moved more than the length of the couch in the last four years! Again, they did not laugh. He didn’t either.

Eventually, Alice’s sobbing stopped, but not because she felt better—she couldn’t have, even if she had wanted to—but because she had fallen asleep. So, Lazlo, without moving, knowing how hard it was for Alice to find slumber on these

firsts of March, reached to the reading lamp, turned it off, and attempted his own search for slumber, sitting up, with Alice’s head in his lap.

Lazlo woke around 9 a.m. to find Alice’s body gone, but her handwriting present on a piece of paper, torn from his brown notebook, which was on the coffee table in front of him. It read:

Lazlo,

I could’ve been a prick and left this note just out of your reach, again, like last year, but that note is still there, so I figured I would be the nice one and leave it for you to actually read this time..

Anyway, I’ll call you later this week

–Alice

There was a postscript at the end of the note, longer than the rest of the note, significantly so, probably three times longer. But, it was scratched out, violently, epileptically. It was as if, after that first set of ellipses, Alice had intended to write more, a real note, but had decided against it, only to change her mind after she had already written her name—her sign-off—only to redact it once again, this time with a crosshatch of scribbles, leaving the text of the P.S. completely unreadable. *Alice was never really all that good with words*, Lazlo thought. *The communication gene must have skipped a sibling*. Lazlo dated the note (1 March 2011), folded it, and slid it into the front folder of the brown leather notebook.

After showering, then slowly brushing his teeth, Lazlo decided to have another bowl of cereal. As he ate through the fluorescent sugary rings, he looked up at the plump pigeons on his windowsill. Lazlo liked to watch them out of his window, them on their concrete stoop like hooting, lively gargoyles. Over the course of the last four years, he had named them, but he never told anyone this. *For obvious reasons*, he thought. *They’d only peg me as even more insane*. But he had done it; he had named them, all of the ones that landed; felt weirdly, but comfortably, connected to them. They would flutter up to his window and perch their chubby Portland pigeon bodies on the red, aged cement ledge, and stare toward him, through their reflections. But, Lazlo never thought they were looking at him, even if he wished they were. 🐦



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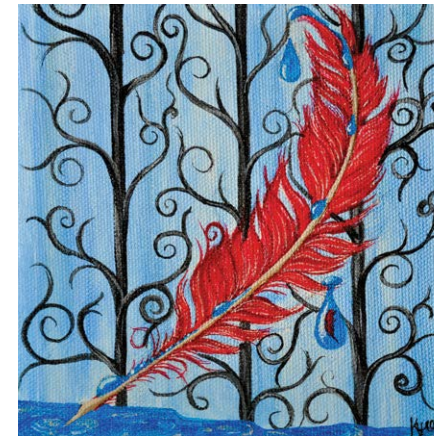
77 Mexican Hat Plants

Isabella Kerr

My mother filled our apartment with plants. Money trees, and climbers and Chinese Maples, green hangers out of pots and boxes, on the balcony and on the shelves and on top of the fridge and on the floor. Once we had 77 Mexican Hat Plants in plastic ice cream boxes growing on the window sill. For her they just grew and grew and that meant she had made something. I liked all of the plants but I also wanted to cut them into pieces with scissors. ↻



ISABELLA KERR... After spending three years slaving at the university of life, her degree will read 'King's College London'. Apart from getting everything she can published her dreams include; travelling the world in a 1965 Ford Mustang, curing world hunger and learning to mix the best martini possible - drinking piña coladas and getting caught in the rain is for the birds.



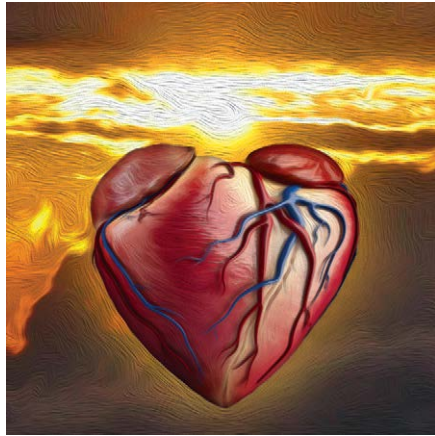
Waiting

Katie Darby Mullins

Redbird sat crouched on his perch, untethered despite his wings, because everyone knew he wouldn't fly away, wouldn't dare; after all, what would he have to fly to now that his mate was gone, now that his days consisted of plucking his bright red feathers out at the root and watching the people who passed him by at the zoo, never stopping to notice how stressed he was, how sad, never stopping to acknowledge that his scaly, chapped birdskin should be covered in beautiful plumes, never stopping to realize that Redbird sat on one side of the perch, leaving room for his lost love's ghost. ↻



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sunrise was magnificent

James Claffey

The Old Man is in the box with man-sized candles at each corner, his old school tie fresh from the laundry. When I am shown into the room, with its plush carpeting and flock wallpaper, the undertaker says, “Do you want me to come in with you?” A shake of the head and he shuts the door with a click behind me.

It’s just the two of us. This is not the same man I saw some ten days ago in the hospital bed, hooked up to drips and monitors, his chest falling and rising unsteadily. The skin where the cannula entered his vein is bruised and his hair is not plastered to his head with Brylcreem like usual. For a brief, glorious moment I am certain the corpse is not the Old Man, but some simulacrum, some heinous practical joker fucking with our lives.

The canopy is lined with crushed white velvet, awaiting closure. We’re all seeking closure, trying to understand how he can be dead.

“You’re late,” he says, feigning life. The dark roots of his hair are easy to spot now, the flesh sallow, his body mortified. Mam has steamed his trousers in the Kirby press in their bedroom, a sharp crease in each leg. Even in death he is a dapper man, all his life concerned with keeping up appearances.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I was over the Atlantic when you went.”

“I know. The sunrise was magnificent though. It was blazing through the window when I gave up the ghost.”

Under the shell of my heart the quadruple chambers are maimed from disaffection and our relationship has festered for many a long year. Always too busy to stand still and have a conversation with him. We belonged to different eras, different planets. A chorus of his sayings rattles around my head like an old funeral carriage on cobblestones: “I’ll be gone soon; sure, as long as you have your health; God be with the days; it’s a hoor of a day; you need something to fall back on.”

“Sssshhhh.”

I place my hand over his mouth, pinky finger on his lip. The skin is waxy and cold, and I am suddenly shocked into a realization of the Old Man’s predicament. 🗣️



JAMES CLAFFEY hails from County Westmeath, Ireland, and lives on an avocado ranch in Carpinteria, CA, with his wife, the writer and artist, Maureen Foley, their daughter, Maisie, and Australian cattle-dog, Rua. His work appears in many places, including *The New Orleans Review*, *Elimae*, *Connotation Press*, and *Word Riot*. His website is at JamesClaffey.com



Thirty-Two Mil

Gary V. Powell

Until the spring of 2008, Charlie Bettenheist had run the broker-dealer for a west coast bank, thirty-two million dollars his previous year’s bonus. Sounded like a lot to Joe Sixpack, but was only about a third of what the Wall Street boys brought in.

Thirty-two mill.

Most of the bonus shook out as stock options, could go up, could go down. Incentive comp. Still, thirty-two mill, not bad for a kid from the ’hood who’d put himself through college and borrowed to pay for B-school.

Bettenheist had no problem justifying the bonus. He’d made money for clients and shareholders. No one complained in 2007. Thirty-two mill, a drop in the bucket compared to assets under management, which had tripled under his watch. Okay, so a monkey could have made money in the run-up.

Still.

To celebrate, they’d left their son with the nanny and hired a limo to take them into the city, just him and Jenny. She’d looked great in her black dress and diamonds. She always looked great in black, her blonde hair and long tanned legs.

They ate at Spago’s, rack of lamb and filet mignon, drank Dom Perignon and Cakebread Cabernet, did the nasty in the back of the limo on the way home. Just north of Pasadena. she opened the moon roof and let fly her panties.

Sexy babe, Jenny. Yo, hot momma.

Most people remembered the financial crisis as a crash, a cataclysmic economic event, but Bettenheist had experienced it as a long, slow slippage beginning with a scandal over auction-rate bonds. Agents from the SEC showed up at his offices with subpoenas and search warrants. Kids with law degrees and buzz cuts. He watched from his corner office while they opened files, searched transaction slips, and read e-mails.

So, maybe his brokers had stretched the truth, maybe

they’d been overly optimistic. But ebullience had ruled the day back then. Besides, his was a sales’ business. Investors could read the tea leaves as well as his brokers. Investors needed to watch their own tails.

Caveat Emptor, right?

And, anyway, auction-rate bonds were *almost* as good as cash, unless the auction market totally tanked. Which it had.

Who saw that coming?

Following consultation with a high-priced lawyer on Wilshire, Bettenheist had agreed to resign and forego his severance in consideration of which the bank had agreed not to fire him.

For cause.

Bettenheist’s spacious home, upside down with debt, sat atop a high ridge in Malibu, overlooking a beach and the vast Pacific Ocean. To the north, the coast bowed outward on its way to Santa Barbara, where he’d once considered purchasing a winery. To the south, the blue sky and water dissipated into the gray, brown haze of Los Angeles.

Despite his age, fifty two, he remained lean and wiry as a teenager. Just back from a morning jog along the beach, drops of sweat clung to the white hairs on his chest and belly. He stripped naked, and left his shorts to dry on the railing. He raised his arms, and for no better reason than he felt like it, bellowed as loudly as he could, the guttural sound echoing across the canyon.

No one gave a shit.

He pushed through the glass sliding doors and entered the house. The upstairs balcony connected to the kitchen, dining room, wine vault, and great room. Down the hall two upstairs bedrooms shared access to a large balcony. Four more bedrooms, a rec room, and an in-home theatre occupied the downstairs. There was a lower balcony, too, but the view up top was better.

Across the way, a black and white Springer Spaniel, raised an eyebrow. He couldn’t believe Jenny had left the dog

behind. He didn't especially like dogs. The Springer's temperament made it as clingy as a junior high girl friend. The dog slid off the couch and waddled over. It sat and wriggled what was left of its docked tail, begging to be petted.

Cute, real cute.

•
Following his resignation from the bank, he'd met with his personal financial advisor, a slick Jew boy with an office in Woodland Hills.

Housing prices were headed for the crapper. Mortgage loans that should never have been made were resetting at higher rates, increasing the odds that the losers who'd taken the mortgages would default. The loans, bundled as derivatives, were sold and resold. Throughout the summer, leverage mounted on leverage.

Banks would be the first to fall.

To cut his losses, Bettenheist exercised his stock options, and then with a self-righteousness bordering on glee, sold his former employer's stock, already down twenty percent from the grant price.

By the time he paid state and federal taxes on the exercise and sale, the thirty-two mill dwindled to sixteen. Sixteen mill, not bad for a guy who'd worked himself up from the trading desk to Executive VP. A pretty good pile for a guy who'd nearly failed in The Biz, years earlier, before finding his rhythm.

The Jew boy put the sixteen mill into a couple of hedge funds ran by super-smart investment managers with degrees from Yale and Princeton.

Hedge funds, the only way to go.

•
Bettenheist enjoyed a swim in the pool before hitting the weights, first the free weights, then the expensive machine Jenny's personal trainer had insisted they buy. Drew, the trainer's name was Drew. He looked like Adonis with his blonde hair and sculpted muscles. He wore a diamond earring in his left ear and a tattoo on his shoulder. A heart with the name "Belle" inside.

What the fuck?

After working up a sweat on the weight machine, Bettenheist finished the last bottle of Gatorade.

He showered in the pool house, washing up with the last sliver of the same bar of soap he'd used for weeks. He towed off, shaved with a disposable razor, and brushed his hair straight back. Jenny had taken her fancy shampoos and facial creams. She'd taken the blower, too. It didn't matter. All that remained of his once thick head of hair were a few wispy strands.

He dressed in designer jeans and a heather-gray silk t-shirt purchased circa 2006 at Sax's on Fifth Avenue for \$200. He wore the Lucchese cowboy boots Jenny had talked him into on a trip to Austin years earlier. Twelve hundred and fifty big ones.

Alligator, man, alligator.

•
The day Lehman Brothers went down, Bettenheist hadn't strayed from his recliner. Glued to the Internet and MSNBC, he'd watched the splash and felt the resulting ripples, some of which reached his hedge funds.

Actually, it was more like a tsunami caused by the shifting of tectonic plates.

The super-smart hedge-fund managers, the guys with the charts and graphics and cocky attitudes, had never seen anything like it. They'd been riding skate boards in '87, doing high school girls in '91, shorting the market in '01.

A run, what's a run?

Their funds, already down big as foreclosures had sky-highed and oil prices broke a C-note per barrel, were heavy into credit default swaps. Which could go bad only if something apocalyptic occurred, like the failure of a major investment bank.

In a time when cash was king, the hedge funds and the whiz kids from Yale and Princeton came up short.

Bettenheist walked away with ten mill. Not bad, considering.

Ten mill.

A man could still live on ten mill, plus there was his deferred comp.

He fired the Jew boy who'd steered him into the hedge funds and entrusted his wealth to a wealth manager by the name of Noble Carpenter. He'd changed his name from Troy Moynihan to Noble Carpenter after being "born again." Noble espoused Christian values and good will toward all men. He dealt in socially-responsible investments.

Green.

•
Bettenheist conducted a final walk-thru of the house. The guest bedrooms had been rarely used. Each sported its own theme—African, Southwestern, French Provincial, Post-Modern. He preferred the cool, emptiness of the Post-Modern room, the stainless steel and ceramics, over the other rooms.

He could have lived in that room, that one room.

People in Afghanistan lived twelve to a room, snuggled up with their goats.

He entered the master bedroom with its vaulted ceiling and fire place, French doorway onto the upper balcony, and view of the sunset. A trace of Jenny's scent still lingered in her empty closet.. He sat on the bed and faced the sea.

He tried to remember the last time they'd made love. Maybe that early morning with the marine layer leaking through the open window, spooning and rocking together, his face buried in the nape of her neck. Maybe that gleaming, sun-splashed afternoon, up from the beach, Bettenheist on his back staring at the ceiling fan over her shoulder, Jenny straddling his hips and biting her lower lip.

At the end of the hall, he lingered in his son's room. The Fat Head posters were gone, the toys packed and shipped to Jenny's mother's house. His two older daughters from a previous marriage had played with Little Ponies and Barbies. The boy, Matt, dug toy guns and soldiers. One plastic soldier left behind in the corner of a closet struck a strange pose, leaning to one side and firing at an unseen enemy. Bettenheist pocketed it. Something he could return later.

Hey, buddy, look what Daddy found.

The daughters from the first marriage, adults now with kids of their own, neither of them called, except to ask for money.

His first wife: What did you expect, Charlie?

•

His former employer, the big west-coast bank, had eventually settled with the disgruntled auction-rate bond investors to the tune of eight-hundred mill. Dust off the top of the cash drawer, but by 2010, with the bank's stock sucking air, embittered shareholders demanded blood, and the board sought the return of half of Bettenheist's 2007 bonus. Although he'd admitted no wrong-doing when he'd resigned, a nearly unreadable clause in his employment agreement provided for recovery of his bonus, or "a portion thereof, as deemed appropriate by the Board, in the event of moral turpitude or illegality."

An article in Forbes cited his case as a prime example of "clawback." They even mentioned him by name, the bastards.

Bettenheist and the high-priced lawyer conferred.

The lawyer's choice of clothing was impeccable. Gray and blue Armani pin-stripe suits, custom-tailored shirts, and hand-made, hand-painted ties. His face tanned and unburdened by worry, teeth perfectly aligned and white enough to blind. In a rare moment of candor, the lawyer let it slip that he'd decided to re-focus his practice on bankruptcy and the fortune to be made in the economic melt-down.

Melt-down.

They offered the board two mill. The board conferred with its own high-priced lawyers. Negotiations ensued and reached a fever pitch.

Along about this time, Bettenheist and Jenny made a quick run down the Baja to get away from it all, mountains on their left, water on their right. The first hurricane of the season, still hundreds of miles at sea, churned up towering waves. Squatters on the beach watched their tents and lean-tos wash away. They walked the Ensenada highway, dazed and skeletal, shocks of black hair falling onto brown faces.

They, too, could live twelve to a room.

In Ensenada, children surrounded them, their grimy, little hands grabbing and snatching, hungry mouths open, tongues rolling. Teen-aged boys tried to sell Jenny fake gold jewelry and semi-precious stones. Someone keyed his leased Jaguar, leaving a long-white scar from the rear fender to the front bumper.

After dining at the best restaurant in town, Jenny fell sick, blaming him and the Carne Asada for her food poisoning, for dragging her down to this third-world shit hole. They fought in the hotel room. She broke an ashtray and tore the shower curtain down.

Then, while embracing the toilet bowl on her knees in her underwear, drool and vomit dripping from her chin, she confessed to fucking her trainer, Drew. Bettenheist claimed he knew it, knew it all along.

Yeah, right.

The fact that she'd betrayed him while he'd footed the bill for her tennis lessons and spa sessions and slick red Lexus coupe stung like nothing he'd ever experienced.

He wanted to drug her and sell her to Mexican border pimps.

Instead, he put a hole through the cheap-ass wallboard with his fist. It cost five-hundred dollars and his Rolex watch to work it out with the local authorities, who appreciated his situation and could commiserate with his anger, but had little sympathy for rich gringos with bad tempers.

Back in LA, Bettenheist's well-dressed shark had prevailed over the bank's sharks in the clawback negotiations, the board signing off for two and a half mill, plus the deferred comp.

The lawyer's fee came to thirty thou, but in an inexplicable show of sympathy, he agreed to handle the divorce gratis.

Said he'd seen it coming.

•
Bettenheist carried a suitcase and an overnight bag to his Jaguar, the one with the scar on the side from the keying in Ensenada. His credit failing by the time lease expired in 2011, he'd bought the car for its terminal value.

Cash, dude, cash.

The dog was a problem. If he left her inside, she'd piss and crap all over the house. If he turned her out, she'd likely die within days, run over by a car or unable to take care of herself after years of pampering. Or the coyotes would have her sorry ass. Putting her up in a kennel or hiring a sitter were expenditures he couldn't afford, given his precarious financial state.

In the end, he left food, water, and the dog outside. Like him, the squatters on the Baha beach, and the Afghanis and their goats, she would make it, or not. These were hard times, replete with hard choices.

So not owning the dog's situation.

He locked the custom-made, redwood front door, walked out to the circular drive, and stood under the palm trees he'd paid an expensive landscaping firm to install.

They'd lived in this house for eight years. Their son had been born while they'd lived here. They'd entertained friends and family here. Jenny had fucked her personal trainer here.

Bettenheist wanted to burn the place to the ground. Instead, he locked the door and left the keys in the lockbox for the realtor.

That bitch.

•
Despite the Wilshire lawyer, he and Jenny hadn't divorced in the wake of her Ensenada revelation. Didn't they own the house in Malibu, subject to a fat mortgage and a nearly-depleted equity line of credit? Even following the hedge-fund debacle and clawback, didn't over seven mill of Bettenheist's community-property bonus remain intact, most of it invested in socially-responsible assets under management with Noble Carpenter? Weren't they raising a young son, a son just starting pre-school?

A pretty damned exclusive pre-school.

So, throw all that away just because Jenny put her lips around some other guy's dick, a guy who, after all, looked like Adonis, and was probably laying half of the other wives in Malibu as well as Jenny, anyway? Or find a way beyond the pussy licking and dick slurping? Engage a therapist renowned for saving the failing marriages of movie stars, put in the necessary "hard work," to rediscover what had brought them together to begin with, and embrace the marriage for the good of themselves, the family, and their creditors?

So, they'd engaged the therapist. They'd undertaken couples' retreats to the Big Sur and indulged in a vacation on Bali. Hot stone massages and Tantric sex. They'd

read Dr.Zeus to their son and took him to visit military museums.

Bettenheist learned to say those three little words, again. He felt traction, notwithstanding an economy that threatened double-dip recession. He considered several business ventures, windmills and other “green” opportunities. He was on the cusp of and renewing his vows to Jenny when the raven-haired realtor made the scene.

In 2004, they’d paid twenty mill for the house. His former employer had written the mortgage, nothing down and interest only. The bank retained the loan on its books. A sweetheart deal, but fully disclosed, so the SEC and OCC had no beef. A sweetheart deal, until housing values took a beating and the shit hit the fan with the auction-rate bonds. The Forbes article hadn’t helped.

Early 2012, the bank, which had merged three times with other banks since Bettenheist’s departure, threatened to accelerate the loan, relying on another nearly unreadable clause, this one in the mortgage.

The realtor, totally professional at first, had listed the property for fifteen mill. After ninety days, the best offer, from an undisclosed couple, came in at nine point five.

Not the worst of it.

Rumors began to circulate about Noble Carpenter. Investigators revealed his investment advisory firm as a sham. The accounting firm that was supposed to have audited Noble’s books didn’t exist. Investors who tried to cash-out were stiffed.

One Monday morning, before indictments came down, Troy Moynihan, aka Noble Carpenter, looted his clients and fled the country, only to be captured at Heathrow Airport. The Reuter’s photo showed a surprised man with a fake beard and a brief case, surrounded by a posse of ridiculous-looking English Bobbies and a crowd of rubber-necking tourists. Another hour and the man would have been in Ireland, buttoned down in a stone farmhouse that had been in his family for three hundred years.

No one could have touched him

In a panic, Bettenheist visited his lawyer, who bitterly complained that another firm already had the class action lawsuit. The best he could do was assert a claim.

How much, Bettenheist asked.

Pennies on the dollar, the lawyer replied.

His tie was blue, light blue, an Armani that matched the hue of his Armani shirt, as if cut from the same cloth.

The next evening, Bettenheist and the raven-haired realtor sat shoulder to shoulder on the upstairs balcony of his spacious home considering comparables, Jenny and the boy at The Club. The realtor, tall and sleek with flashing brown eyes, wore short, tight skirts and five-inch heels. She

wore bright, red lipstick with matching nail polish.

Didn’t know Bettenheist’s fortune had been reduced to sawdust by Noble Carpenter.

She asked Charlie if he’d ever been tied up and dominated.

He said he wouldn’t mind giving it a try.

Six months later, Jenny asserted her claim for half of the marital estate, freezing his access to all but six hundred thou. The lawyer told him, not to worry, they’d get it back. But that was before Bettenheist told the lawyer about the raven-haired realtor.

•

Sleep had become a challenge following Jenny’s departure. Alone in the big house, a house in the throes of mortgage foreclosure, Bettenheist stayed up late and watched cable TV, extreme sports and jack-ass wipe-outs. Over a bottle of French Bordeaux he’d once paid over a grand for, he saw a man, a former life insurance salesman, win three mill playing Texas Hold ’Em poker.

Bettenheist read e-books and practiced on line. He learned that high-stakes poker was the one game in Vegas at which players had a sporting chance.

He chose “Rambler” as his handle for the on-line games. He had no idea why, except his grandfather had driven a car by that name.

Nash Rambler.

Bettenheist wore his Lucchese boots when he played at home on his computer. He didn’t bother with jeans or a shirt, just cowboy boots and shades.

Flyless lowrider briefs.

•

He settled behind the wheel of the Jaguar and fired the engine. He liked the feel and smell of the leather seats. Liked it that he owned the Jaguar outright.

Subject only to Jenny’s marital claim.

He wore his shades for the drive. The sun was in the east, and he’d have it in his eyes the entire trip.

On the back seat a briefcase held five hundred thou, cash.

Another hundred thou he kept on his person for spending money.

For as long as it lasted.

He cast a final glance in the rearview.

The dog watched from the yard, bewildered to be outside and alone. She squatted and pissed on a bougainvillea at the end of the drive.

Bougainvillea, his favorite flower. 🌺



The Neighbor

Holly Day

I open the door and there’s a tiny Asian woman standing on my porch. She’s almost swallowed up by her puffy, blue down jacket, her head so completely covered in her knit Peruvian hat that only her tiny face can be seen. It’s cold out, probably somewhere near or below zero, and her pink, freckled cheeks and tear-filled eyes speak of her discomfort.

“Do you now the man who lives back there?” she asks me in heavily-accented English before I can speak. “In the green house?” She waves in the general direction of my back yard.

“2012 Fairmount!” shouts her very American companion from the bottom of the stairs. The heavysset man seems to be a little older than the tiny Asian woman, somewhere in his mid-70s, at least six feet tall with a shock of thick, white hair. His jacket is slightly open at the neck, his head is uncovered, and he’s not wearing any gloves, making him either from around here or just too old to mind the cold. “2012 Fairmount!” he shouts again, also waving at the area behind my house.

I think for a moment, and without thinking, and way too casually to reflect comfortably on me, I say, “Oh, yeah! That guy! I think he passed away last year.” A look of anguish that passes over the woman’s face, but I can’t seem to stop talking, it just keeps coming out. “Last spring, I think. His wife’s still there, though, so you should talk to her about it, just in case I’m wrong.” There is nothing I want more than to shut the door in the woman’s face, although what I really want is to unwind time and start this conversation all over again. There’s a chance I might do it right if given a second chance.

“He died? How he die?” The little woman’s hands flutter upwards to cover her bright red cheeks as her obvious proficiency in English is briefly abandoned. Her tiny, brightly-lipsticked mouth hangs open in surprise. “How he die?”

“I don’t know,” I answer, shrugging. I really don’t. I don’t know many of my neighbors, and really only hear them mentioned in neighborhood gossip, usually when one

of them passes away or moves. There are a lot of old people in my neighborhood, and it seems like somebody’s always dying, or sick, or needs me to watch their dog while they’re undergoing some kind of treatment or going on vacation. “My husband is friendly with his wife. He helps out with the yard work sometimes, when she needs it.”

“Ah,” says the woman, nodding her head excitedly. “So your husband, he probably knows? He would know how the man died?”

“No, no. He just helps out with yard work sometimes. I think he cleaned her gutters out last fall. Because she was all alone, and he was worried about her up on the roof...”

“Ah,” says the woman again.

“Thank you!” shouts her American friend from the sidewalk. He’s got his hands shoved into his pockets and his own cheeks are turning bright pink. “Thank you for your help!”

“No problem,” I say, smiling, nodding, and shut the door. I run back to the bedroom, where my husband is in bed, reading the paper.

“What’s that all about?” he asks as I climb into bed and scuttle down beneath the blankets, trying to get warm.

“Some woman looking for that guy who used to live in the green house behind us.”

“He’s dead, right? Didn’t someone tell you he died?”

I thought it was you, I think, a sinking feeling in my stomach. I thought you told me he had died. Instead I ask, “Yeah. Was it Minnie? Did Minnie tell me that?”

“Hell if I know. I let his wife borrow the lawnmower last summer because she said theirs was broken.”

“I wish I could remember who told me he’d died. I think it was Minnie, but I’m not sure.”

There’s another knock at the door. I jump out of the warm bed and run to the front room, just in case it’s some important package I need to sign for, or some kid selling candy, only to find the same woman from before on my porch again.



A lawyer by background, **GARY V. POWELL** currently devotes most of his time to writing fiction and wrangling a 12-year old son. His stories have appeared at *Pithead Chapel*, *Newport Review*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Prime Number*, *Carvezine*, and other online and print publications. In addition, several of his stories have placed or been selected as finalists in national contests. Most recently, his story *Super Nova* received an Honorable Mention in the Press 53 2012 Awards Contest. His first novel, *Lucky Bastard*, released in December 2012 is available through Main Street Rag Press at mainstreetrag.com/GPowell.html

"I'm so sorry to bother you again," she says. "I came all the way here from Taiwan to find Bon." I think that's what she says his name is, except that I've never heard my maybe-dead neighbor's name before, so I can't be sure. "His mother, she's 92, and she's dying. She hasn't seen or spoken to Bon for 15 years. I came out here to find him and tell him his mother's dying."

"Oh," I say. "I'm so sorry." I can't shake the horrible feeling that we're not talking about the same person at all.

"You say your husband was friends with them? With Bon? And his wife?"

"He just helps out with the yard sometimes. Just little things. Like the gutters."

"Do you think your husband could tell me anything about them, about how Bon died, anything I could tell his mother back home?" The woman looks so eager and hopeful that I almost call my husband out so that he can tell her all about what it was like to lend the lawnmower to "Bon's" widow, about any possible pleasantries he'd exchanged with "Bon" while working out in the garage, anything at all to make us sound like we're the sort of people that talk to our neighbors.

"He's not home right now," I lie. "I don't know if there's anything he could tell you."

"Thank you!" shouts the American from the sidewalk, pointedly. He's rubbing his bare hands together like he's really cold, really agitated. He wants to get out of here as much as I do. "Thank you for your help!" I wonder if he's an expatriate who's come over from Taiwan as well, and not some sort of tour guide for the woman at all, and that's why he doesn't know how to dress for the cold. Sometimes, tourists come out here in the middle of winter and make a big show of not wearing hats and gloves on their first couple of days so that they can say they're tougher than regular Minnesotans.

"I'm sorry to bother you." The woman carefully begins to make her way down the icy steps, and I make a note to get more cat litter at the store later on to put on the porch and sidewalk below. "We came all the way from Taiwan to find Bon," she says. "His mother is dying, and we thought he should know."

"I'm sorry I can't help more." I shut the door. I go back to the bedroom, climb under the blankets, wait for my feet to warm up. I'm just starting to get comfortable when I hear the door again.

"Really?" grumbles my husband from his side of the bed. I sigh and pull my feet back out. Some days, you just can't win. I'm not sure what I was expecting to "win" today, but whatever it was, I'm not getting it.

"I'm so sorry to bother you." The tiny Asian woman's

been crying. Her eyes are bright red as though she's been scraping at them with her woolen mittens. "Can you call your husband for me and ask him how Bon died?" she asks. "I leave for Taiwan tomorrow, and I would like to know so I can tell his mother."

"I really think you should talk to his wife, and not me," I say firmly, determined to not be this woman's only source of information about the possible passing of my neighbor. "She would know better than my husband how...Bon passed away." I slur the man's name a little when I say it, just in case it's really "Bob" or "Non" or something entirely different. "I think she's probably there right now."

"She doesn't work?" gasps the woman, as though I've suggested something truly outrageous. Again, I suspect that we're talking about entirely different people, her "Bon" and my neighbor that died. The little old lady living in the house behind us is at least in her late 60's, if not '70s, and I can't imagine that she's had a job for years.

"I don't know. I think she's probably home. You really should try talking to her before you call Bon's mother, though. I don't really know anything about it."

"She doesn't work," repeats the woman, shaking her head in apparent wonderment, beginning the treacherous descent down the icy steps once again. I wonder how old women in Taiwan have to be to officially retire, and decide not to ask.

"Thank you!" shouts the American from the sidewalk. I smile at him, trying to be friendly, but he just scowls back as I shut the door.

"You guys figure out it?" my husband calls from the back bedroom as soon as it's safe.

"Yeah," I say, because I want this to be over. "I think so."



HOLLY DAY is a housewife and mother of two living in Minneapolis, Minnesota who teaches needlepoint classes for the Minneapolis school district and writing classes at The Loft Literary Center. Her poetry has recently appeared in *Borderlands*, *Slant*, and *The Mom Egg*, and she is the recipient of the 2011 Sam Ragan Poetry Prize from Barton College. Her most recent published books are *Walking Twin Cities* and *Notenlesen für Dummies Das Pocketbuch*, and her novel, *The Trouble With Clare*, is due out from Hydra Publications late 2013.

ARTISTS & STORYTELLERS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE



RICHARD KOSTELANETZ *Pages 6, 30, Back Cover...*

Individual entries on Richard Kostelanetz's work in several fields appear in various editions of *Readers Guide to Twentieth-Century Writers*, *Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia of Literature*, *Contemporary Poets*, *Contemporary Novelists*, *Postmodern Fiction*, *Webster's Dictionary of American Writers*, *The HarperCollins Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*, *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, *Directory of American Scholars*, *Who's Who in America*, *Who's Who in the World*, *Who's Who in American Art*, *NNDB.com*, *Wikipedia.com*, and *Britannica.com*, among other distinguished directories. Otherwise, he survives in New York, where he was born, unemployed and thus overworked. — *photo credit: Leonid Drozner*



IRA JOEL HABER *Pages 3, 18-23, 28-29, 47-50, 65...*

is a sculptor, painter, book dealer, photographer and teacher. His work has been seen in numerous group shows both in USA and Europe and he has had nine one man shows including several retrospectives of his sculpture. His work is in the collections of The Whitney Museum Of American Art, New York University, The Guggenheim Museum, The Hirshhorn Museum & The Albright-Knox Art Gallery. His paintings, drawings, photographs and collages have been published in over 100 on line and print magazines. He has received three National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships, two Pollock-Krasner grants, the Adolph Gottlieb Foundation grant and, in 2010, he received a grant from Artists' Fellowship Inc.



KYRA WILSON *Pages 2, 58-59...*

is an artist residing in Vermont with her family, and has been painting for over 20 years. Kyra tried going the expected career route in business, but ended up working in an office with flickering fluorescent lights, zero windows, way too many spreadsheets, and people with suspenders. She escaped, and embraced color and movement as her passion. Creating in Oils, Acrylic, and Watercolor, she works in a predominantly fantasy style, but visits the contemporary and even abstract realms on occasion! Kyra's work can be found at **KWilsonStudio.com**



DAVID SIMMER II *Lead Artist & Art Director, THRICE Fiction...*

is a graphic designer and world traveler residing in the Pacific Northwest of these United States. Any artistic talent he may have is undoubtedly due to his father making him draw his own pictures to color rather than buying him coloring books during his formative years. He is co-founder and art director of Thrice Fiction Magazine and blogs daily at **Blogography.com**



RW SPRYSZAK *Editor, THRICE Fiction...*

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I wonder if I would ever fall in love again, and again.

COMING SOON

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