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Tigers in Red Weather
by Rachel Slotnick

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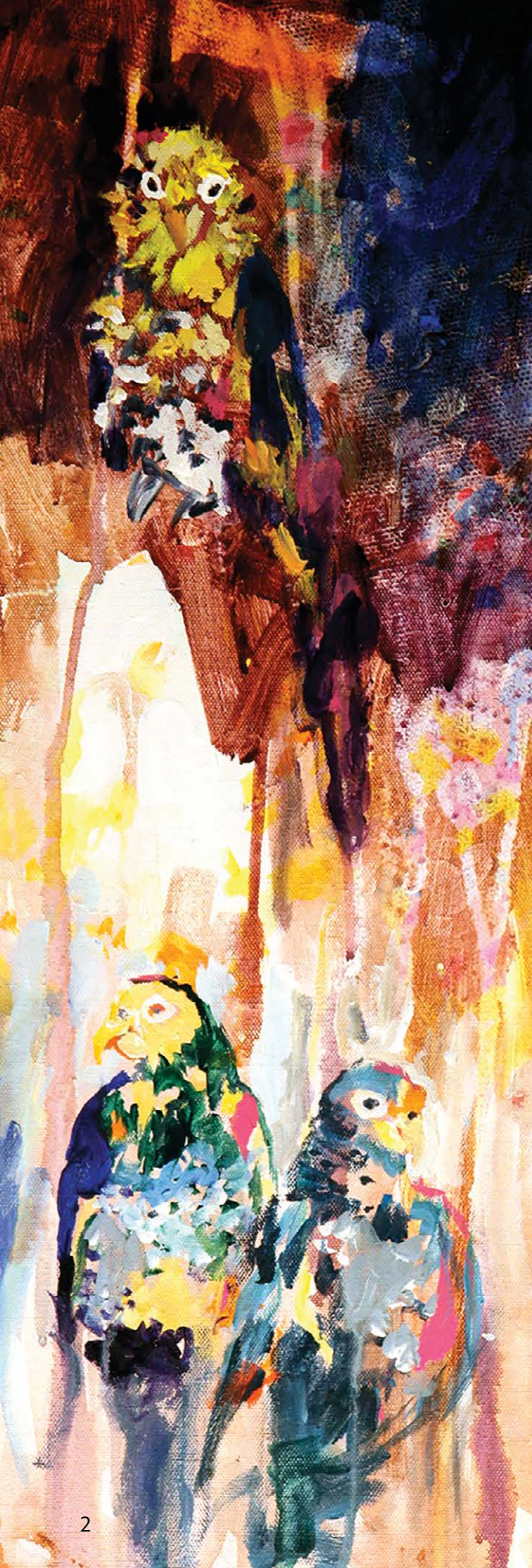
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RW Spryszak, Editor
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THRICE PUBLISHING NFP, a private corporation registered in the state of Illinois, reaches outside the mainstream to publish the work of selected writers whose efforts, we feel, 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.



Thrice 11 Notes

RW Spryszak, Editor

I don't know why the summer issue is always our largest. Maybe it's because, as the spring wings in, writers are taking off their sweaters and airing out their generative members and are just bursting free with the myriad projects they've labored at over the long, lonely, brutal, cold winter. Or else the products of that first flush of energy, where writers are busting out of their zippers as much as they are rending the buttons that have held back all the dead season's dark hours for so many long months, are charging into the light like mice finding a tunnel made of falafel leading into the goat cheese of the sun. And so these once prodigal words, like madrigals from a flute in the mouth of a medieval lunkhead, find wing in the new air so kissed by the sun and your lips, and the pursed lips of the flutist, and the lips of hundreds of happy fish sunning themselves on the spring-like shore talking about the cheery weather, flow and pour and spiral out onto the imaginary pages of their computer document, fully formed, cogent, and potent enough to impregnate Pittsburgh.

Nah.

We just get a lot of email.

What follows is the best of the incoming.



Some Great Beast of the Stars

Rich Ives

This morning I stayed longer in my tree in the meadow, enjoying the feeling of being bound to something solid. I thought about my mistakes, unsure if I had found them all, and felt no desire to correct them. *Once an error is set in motion, it has its own logic.*

The beak of a storm cloud began pecking at the upper air and tearing itself into delicate wispy scraps before the sun had even begun to warm me. I made no effort to rise. I was not asking for anything that was not already offered.

Beg for mercy, little bird, and I'll eat you, says the hungry day, which is a kind of mercy. It still hadn't occurred to me that another error could become an error's correction.

At first, when I tied myself in my tree to sleep, I would sometimes wake in a panic, only to realize I had been dreaming of being bound and restrained, and it had sent me into a flurry of fears, but as soon as I woke and realized where I was, I felt comforted by the very thing which had frightened me.

As I lay there on my all too willing limb, contemplating my suspended condition, I realized that I was comfortable and not thinking about how I was tied to a branch a substantial distance from the ground. And thinking that I was comfortable frightened me although being tied and suspended did not, even when I had that disoriented moment waking when I did not remember I had been the one who tied me there. My dream-soaked inattentions were not anything I wanted to encourage.

I built a new philosophy of secretions. It could have been a poem arranged in the shape of the one thing it doesn't describe. To its inevitable worm, the living heart is merely desert before dessert.

I carved a little door in my tree by removing a small piece of its bark, and I put things through the door that shouldn't fit. I put tomorrow in there, and I put yesterday in there, and I put my new philosophies in there, and I put some pieces of the sky I had noticed in there. I put some dirt in there, to hold the sky down, and I put inside the door

another smaller door, which I did not open. I only suggested it. I didn't want to know where that door led. I wanted to think about it and not know.

Everything I do when I'm not doing something important is important. Everything is important if you think about it enough. Thinking about something unimportant becomes important. I have no pastimes.

So I decided to think about my thinking some more, and I thought that in some way I accomplished more when I thought about what I was doing, even if I had to stop doing it to think about it. Some things are too dangerous to do when you're thinking too hard about doing them. Then I decided to try not thinking about my thinking, but deciding that was actually thinking about my thinking. I had a hard time explaining this to myself. I had to listen carefully to what I wasn't saying.

I decided I wanted to know myself better, so I hiked around the rooms looking for evidence of my accomplishments. I found no sign of myself but for a couple of ropes in my tree in the meadow and some mistakes in the marsh. Of course I already knew this would be the case, but I wanted to be thorough. I considered the mistakes in the marsh with a greater intensity. I found a table with a glass of water on it and a kitchen drawer that had been left open. I looked more carefully into the murky water and found two refrigerators at the bottom of the marsh. Their doors were open, and I could find nothing in them without diving into the burdened water. I looked closer and found a toaster between the refrigerators. I didn't know how to measure these accomplishments, so I continued on to the forest by way of the creek, which offered no evidence of anything except me sitting over the water on a small perch or, further towards the forest, standing beneath the refreshing clear water on another small stone platform. In the forest there was a clearing where I found grass bunched up as if something had recently slept there. The next day I hiked through the house again, ignoring these things, forgetting they were there, and this time I was pleased with my accomplishments.

Briefly, I was considering who I was going to be tomorrow when tomorrow was still tomorrow but wouldn't be very much longer. Then I waited for tomorrow with a little hammer I put in my head.

I put a bigger hammer in my head and I went there, where the hammer was, to use it. I hammered things together and I hammered things apart. I found another even bigger hammer, and I hammered the hammer. All this took place inside my head, but outside, everything grew quieter, and I was at peace.

Not once but twice, I have found myself terribly mistaken, and I fear my thoughts are but a candle to the sun. I have accomplished little in the ordinary daylight. (*Oh that hammer!* said the hammer still hammering, and I sighed, peacefully.)

•

The surface of a marsh is absorbent. It's murky and unexpectedly wonderful. It does not reflect but creates. Perhaps it's saying, *I want something to take me in before it lets me out.* I don't care if *there's a deception involved* might be what it means. I too have deceived myself many times before. Some deceptions have simply been failures, and I

started over. Others have spit me back out more robust but still in search of the deception that can find me, for I know that I have not been what I set out to be, and what I set out to be was not enough.

Introduce to the marsh the swimsuit models of North Dakota. Lovely nipple erections softly clothed like new snow. Such a beautiful pretence of chastity. The marsh remains in the background. Residue has become its residence, sediment its breakfast. There's no feeling left in the models, so they must be dropped on their heads until they're reborn. No one can see this happening in their behavior. The nipples distance you, their subtle accomplishment of innocence.

Lean the frequent wind against a tree and the job that's waiting still waits. That's not what you wanted at all. It won't even part from the clouds while it fondles the unused pickaxe. A brother with a tendency to act tough, who sometimes is tough. A marsh hat contains little breezes of odors no one would want to imagine, which cannot be ignored.

I'm glad you're here, I tell the morning, my puddle of assumptions showing, and I decide that for now there's enough confusion here to please me. *You can't tell the old light from the new light*, I'll tell the stars later when they look sad.

With my thoughts disassembled like this, I can see that I'm a little more logical than rivers, but rivers don't have to think about what they're not doing, and they don't get interrupted by junk mail arriving at their address.

My vehicle of transport makes a funny noise when I'm in it. I don't need to turn it on. For some reason, this cheers me up. The wipers don't chase each other anymore, but I don't go anywhere either. The falling buildings seem satisfied with the pace of their work.

A little tornado of leaves pockets me as I return from the garden, and I lie down with something in my eye while I am flying away with the leaves. The guests at the blackbird's nest wear yellow tights and dance vertically while I continue lying down. Perhaps their leaves are dying. I had been living in one kind of thinking a long time. There wasn't much left, so I left.

Goodbye, restraint and playful attempts at approaching something nearly acceptable to the others I do not feel one of. Goodbye, last remnants of social pretenses, which no one is here to see. Goodbye, useless imaginative explanation. Goodbye, deflection. Goodbye, questioning of everything that goes off in another direction. Goodbye, thousand watt greyhound lit and running.

Goodbye, diesel juice. Goodbye, stolen antique root systems. Goodbye, dead rat icons smoking in the fecund leaves. Goodbye fecund leaves.

Goodbye, bees with one foot in the flower when the stem collapses.

Goodbye, little bubbled oceans of phlegm and serotonin. Angry sadness no longer becomes you. And goodbye, feeling that I once met someone who was in charge. Goodbye late night conversations with late night conversations. Goodbye answers that fell asleep, forgetting themselves.

Goodbye, endangered species of silence and forethought. Goodbye, intellectual leaves lousy with pierce-colored curious insect attendance and misplaced vagrancy. Goodbye, levitational devices of counter-intelligence. They

do not make one feel less burdened.

Goodbye, winsome thrust of recreational error where a thicket has lived for decades.

Goodbye, indirection. Goodbye, obfuscation. Goodbye, shading over. Goodbye, someone else who is me for too long.

Goodbye, fist relaxing itself, feathered by the ballast falling, the holding on to. Now there is flight towards instead of away from, but the nest remains empty. How do I make less of myself to belong there?

Goodbye, cleaning up of the mess I make again to keep me going. Goodbye, going.

Goodbye, climbing out of myself in the marsh. Now I am that creature I left in the water.

Goodbye, smell of burnt room damp in the fresh morning air. Goodbye, metal building that contained it like a vehicle. Goodbye furniture falling out and goodbye, rooms that fell out of their furniture. Goodbye burning rubber of the wheels that carried the rooms. Goodbye room that was mine among the others and broke itself in another way.

In all the goodbyes there is a wishing, a faster adjustment, an oil slick of successful misperception. I hang them all on my empty walls and give credit to the unsuccessful torture artist for his self-portraits, on his way to framing the wall. Mourning is a work of art if you understand all the implications.

•

Tobacco arrives from the secessionists. I must have fallen asleep backwards. Goodbye time that places me only here. You've been gone so long I needed a reminder of your absence.

I want your cum in my go box, says the steamy marsh, flaunting skunk cabbage and altered altar boys singing falsetto in the willows. And the time for a new season poles the sun along the riverbank, measuring less ultra in the violets. And lemmings with the stink of toenails on their breath attend, and a vaginal depth quivered and leaping. They all arrive at the cliff-side and the sun faints and falls into them, continually, from behind the interference clouds.

Isn't there a certain morality in it, when mornings meant only granola breath and bowel movements regular as darkness falling away, unexpected caresses of a kind of admirable tyranny. Leaded paperweights, with no paper to hold still, whisper tolerance there.

But the fountain of a young girl lost need only worship itself. It's my slowly leathering hand that must someday reach out to others, if only to hold them back. Goodbye, wife that was real for a brief time. Goodbye, everything you carried.

Goodbye to waltzing fires of marsh gas rich with unknown energies playing deep in the decay where, freshly loved and unbathed, they have yet to begin a life.

I've not arrived yet at my majority, said the ancient man with his broken stick.

Now we carry the river around in vitamin capsules, and progress is thought of as clouds and rivers in the same pill.

Goodbye to fraud that isn't my own self-deception. Goodbye to the mistakes of others.

Have these fears been silted out of the standard political bulls of acceptable ooze lipping over the lips of decayed

thespians? I'm so many people talking about the losses they've been given that there might actually be a few. But what does it mean to name an emptiness?

No more sentimental sediment. No more cloaks.

When people take off their shoes, they sometimes find themselves rising. This is not because of the weight of the shoes, but because of the real weight of their too modest ideas, which prefer to be naked and detached and respond just a little to shoe removal, even if it's mostly symbolic. Have you felt it?

No marsh is ever young. You don't call it a marsh until it's old. But when it's old enough, it lives an even longer time, longer than all the things that live inside it. That's quite a trick. You'd have to be too young not to think so.

The marsh is really very small. It only takes one lifetime to cross it. Fortunately, when it comes to marshes, you can do more than one thing at a time.

The vein structure of a large maple leaf flattened against a rock is all that is left of the tree I have removed from the edge of the forest. You can see through it if it can be removed, a golden lace I might place upon the surface of the marsh for its morning's breakfast. But each frog waiting there hears his own breakfast, buzzing on delicate wings in the ceremonial leaf fluttering, and the frogs need no placemats. If I lifted it, the pattern would collapse, so I place my coffee cup upon it, the one I haven't acquired yet.

It might be expected that Howard's eyes would be the most difficult part of the head carving, and carving for a blind man like this, so that he can represent what he "sees" without reminding people of his literal deception, it is. Not because of the detail required, but because of the significance of the feature, which must be created without the contribution of the same kind of evidence it will be expected to provide. Yet don't we know that the eyes do not offer their gathered information directly to understanding? It must be interpreted by the mind before it can be said that we have "seen" something, and the mind is fully capable of being taught to "see" differently if the same evidence existing in the interpretations of others surrounding that mind were to be altered. If the experience of the mind doing the interpreting were substantially different or merely unknown, the results could be enough to change the way you think.

What can a puppet see? you might ask.

What can a prophet see? I might answer.

Then I might remove my blindfold.

But would this really help you to know if I understood your question?

I attach the finished head to the experienced torso, with its new legs and arms, using a larger eyelet than those used to connect the arms and legs. The bottom eyelet is centered in a cylinder of wood, shaped wider at the bottom and slid in to the slit carved between Howard's shoulders. Howard will be able to swivel his head like an owl, farther than any human could, farther than the smaller eyelets on his arms and legs would allow.

And strings, more strings than I imagined I could use, but I wanted to be able to make Howard do what I wanted, as he hadn't before. A different mouth this time. Before, he had gotten carried away with his lips. He seemed always to be spitting though no moisture appeared. The lips became

so real as I got better at moving them to the words that I thought he was really talking. But I wanted to speak for him. I didn't want him to speak for me.

I want to ask Howard what it feels like to be born as I assemble his parts and put the finishing touches on his features. Howard, of course, must learn to speak all over again. You can't come back to life the same as you were before.

Right now, the more important question might be, *What can a puppet say?* For I have cut Howard's lip from the sides to the bottom of his jaw and added teeth, both upper and lower, and painted them such a healthy white that he appears much younger than he is, at least if you consider his torso, where I imagine his heart to already be moved in. I have not carved him a new one, trusting his spirit to move into its new house without any more incentive than the obvious. The shape is not the point. I have sanded down the sides of Howard's lower jaw, so that Howard might move it from side to side in even greater indications of expression than he would have been able to use in his former life. I seem to be deliberately challenging myself, as Howard made a fool of me several times in his first body, and I cannot help but be aware of the tendency of listeners to find the dummy more likable than the ventriloquist.

What Howard had looked like before had spooked me, and I didn't know how I wanted to change it. I considered Norman the Wise, but I realized I didn't know what he looked like because he was really Howard the Dummy. We adopted him in a mock ceremony three weeks before the accident. Howard had become my child.

When Howard finally speaks to me again, he speaks in a language I have never heard. I can't understand the words at all, but he gestures so generously and freely that I can usually figure out what he means from his gestures. When he speaks to others, he speaks in English, of course, because he borrows my voice to appease the listeners. Sometimes he does not appear to understand what he is saying.

Howard the Wise said, *Truth cannot be kind without being incomplete.*

Howard the Wise said, *The muscles of any system will tend to merely repeat what they are familiar with unless challenged by alien intentions.*

Howard the Wise said, *Summer carefully perfumes the windows, breathing back heat and youth.*

Howard the Wise said, *A tomato is a planet. An eggplant is a traveling companion whose legs never arrived. A blueberry is a wet button, unfastened and nearly bursting.*

Remorse means justice is not always defined by others, but it cannot be seen from a single angle, said Howard the Wise, looking off into the distance as if he were reading it there.

Pound some more soldiers into the ground because peace comes only to the dead, said Howard the Wise when I asked him what he thought about the current political environment just to see if all his parts were working. When I asked him what that meant about a more specific issue, he answered, *Fat little strings crawling through the wound may clean it but break open hungry. Even a cat may bring home a snack you don't want.* When pressed further, he said, *If I place a small table upon the table containing the question about reality, do I sabotage my efforts at realism*

or enhance the depth of my results?

There's a library in the marsh with cataloging all over the place. Sometimes I use it to see if what Howard says is really original. It's not easy to read the symbols it uses, for it has its own language, but there are translators everywhere, leaping and splashing and buzzing about and cavorting. It's a very busy place, as all libraries should be. The books are not damaged by water, for they are made of water, and the covers are alive and will open on their own if you wait for the light to arrive. Sleeping is fully acceptable, but it's hard to find a spot smaller creatures don't think is theirs, and they're not always pleasant about it. You should try to read the poetry and foreign books while you're sleeping. They are available to the part of any intelligent visitor that isn't really sleeping when the body rests. The classics can be found in the mud, occasionally rising and issuing a bubble or two of wisdom, but you have to go down there where they have had time to ripen if you want to fully understand them. New books are arriving all the time, and the marsh embraces them, quickly mussing up the pages with messy understandings, but turn to the first pages of the fresh buds and you may start again. Once you begin to understand the filing system, it's easier to see that some of the books are yours, the ones you have written in the future. They look so very small and vulnerable, but one day they too may be deliberating and moving slowly enough to help ripen the classic mud.

Howard's definition of success: *rinsed in popular declarations of attendant sincerity*

I have been careful to merely suggest certain parts of Harold's body. This time I don't want him to become merely real.

Do I have to explain why the library's in the kitchen? Try a little bite of Italian Fabulism or *The Journal of Albion Moonlight* and shut up about it. A little muddy tasting, I know, but it digests slowly and with great wonder that it digests at all. It stays with you and needs no condiments, but don't even think of asking for the recipe. It's deeper in the mud than you probably want to go, unless you're already in the middle of your own book and don't mind smelling a little wordy.

If I offered you a tasty little button of Proust, would you shut up and go away? I didn't think so. Now just pretend you're not growing legs where your fins were. Don't you remember breathing the word for water? I can't remember what really happened that day. Can you? I think there was another book about it sometime tomorrow.

Howard's definition of incipient: *a teacup made from a pygmy skull*

Like mosquitoes in a papyrus church, only under water, that's what words are until you read them. Then they quit stinging and find the surface everywhere. Imagine the beautiful tasty eggs. Or have you already walked away from yourself?

If we were old enough to know better, we'd just want to that much more. Imagine what the swamp's doing when you're not looking.

•

In the early days of 1732, engineers began draining the Great Swamp of Lorraine. It happened very slowly, and for nearly the entire year, the area reeked of decay. Small rivulets

had carried away the water, which smelled, surprisingly, like licorice. The swamp itself, however, smelled horrid. Until, at the end of the year, during an unseasonably warm spell, the snow fell and melted upon the bottom of the swamp, nearly dried up at the time, and the air quickly filled with a smell of pastry dough. Vegetables are now raised in the valley, and there are those who claim they are so tasty they should be classified desserts. The chief occupations other than farming of the wealthier residents are all in the perfume industry, which mocks and disparages any relationship at all between these events and their industry. I read about it at the library, near the skunk cabbage.

There's a story I don't want to hear, and it's this one. I can't seem to stop reading it though, and I have to write it in order to read it. It's about me, and it embarrasses me to say so. Why do I do this when I've never found myself to be exceptional? Odd, yes, and I like that, but not exceptional. Do I feel the swamp's greasy hand in this?

The books in the swamp are all deconstructions of course. Did you not realize that is what makes a classic? Eventually the classic seems to be deconstructing itself. The swamp is interested in nothing less though it does let a few get away, but don't get caught reading them, or the swamp may send a particularly fetid breeze your way. It's not being vindictive, however. It just doesn't understand that the real temptations lie much deeper than those surface odors the breeze can deliver. Time is a much larger construct than the history of its books in the swamp. Who knows what trash it has read, long before we even knew it existed?

Howard the Wise asked, *Can intelligence exist then without thought?*

Ask the swamp. It doesn't even know what thought is, the pompous intellectual.

First the sky, and then it's reason, said Howard the Wise.

But what's the difference between thinking and imagining?

The intoxications of comparison? asks Howard the Wise.

Or is thinking merely the boring part of dragging something that might someday be human out of the swamp?

Warm and wet, the body blooms. Has it learned to feed itself? Standing up seems normal even before you can do it. What will you say now to your own creation?

Okay, I admit it. I was married and I killed her, strangled

her as she was pulling the knife from my shoulder to try a deadlier spot. And no, I didn't tell anyone. There's a Comfrey I planted when I was into herbs over there by the edge of the skunk cabbage patch that wasn't too hard to dig in or so wet that she'd start stinking differently than the rest of the swamp from decaying too quickly, not that I wouldn't wish for her remains to become part of something larger, much larger, if that's possible, than she was. I hope the Comfrey can find a few sparse nutrients in its latest neighbor. I know I sound jaded, but are all wives really just nicely disguised

terrorists? Now I sound like I should be at the bar, exchanging war stories with a couple of losers, but I'd rather be alone. Or maybe I should save the world from another terrorist. I only regret that I have but one wife to give for my Comfrey.

If that were my body over there by the Comfrey, I would have been welcoming the insects and bugs to a little variety in their diet and trying to be patient while the bugs got eaten by bigger bugs that crawled to the surface and got eaten by birds that flew away and got eaten by bigger birds that eventually got eaten by mammals that

got eaten by other mammals until some of those mammals might have been vaguely human and then I'd go looking for a mate, or a terrorist, or both, because it's a cycle now isn't it, and we can't change that, only interrupt it a bit. Am I a beast if I already know this? I wish I were. Then I wouldn't have had to imagine it.

Red ants are marching through the forest. I can't sleep. The forest is where I come to not sleep. I spend so much time on my tree limb in the meadow that not sleeping on it is incredibly boring. Especially when it's cloudy and you can't make up stories about new constellations you form right there in front of your eyes. Tonight it's cloudy, and I can't make up stories about new constellations right there in front of my eyes. You're probably wondering how I can see the red ants if it's cloudy and dark. I can't. I can hear them. That gentle little mashing sound their feet make in the leaf mulch. At least I think that's what I'm hearing. I can't quite imagine anything else making that sound. Unless it's some great beast of the stars doing something I can't quite imagine behind the clouds. 6



RICH IVES is the 2009 winner of the Francis Locke Memorial Poetry Award from *Bitter Oleander* and the 2012 winner of the Creative Nonfiction Prize from *Thin Air* magazine. His book of days, *Tunneling to the Moon*, is currently being serialized with a work per day appearing for all of 2014 at silencedpress.com. *Tunneling to the Moon* and *Light from a Small Brown Bird* (poetry, Bitter Oleander Press) are both due out in paperback in 2014.



Returning Home

Timothy B. Dodd

The fallen appendages of white birch lie on the sidewalks. Rainwater and tadpoles fill the spots that are empty of cobblestones. Snails crawl away, snails that little boys would like to step on in the daytime, cracking their shells like nuts. I am moving away also, walking away from the lights. I try to step over the snails, but no one is perfect in the darkness.

Old trees rise behind the stone wall on the outskirts of my Hapsburg-built town. The iron gate has been left open since the war began. A dark church sits back in the shadows, its tiny cemetery trailing behind like a frightened child. Inside the gate I take the path to the left, breathing in the scent of pine needles mixed with the musk of rain. Nocturnal illusions grow from thick tree trunks, creatures wishing to be born.

An old woman is standing off the trail. She stares at me, but won't recognize my changed face. She is a woman who has given birth to seven children. Now she wears high socks, a grey skirt, and burgundy sweater. Singing a slow, gloomy song, she walks toward me and kisses my hand. She tells me of her son who was a dentist, who died last Monday sneaking across enemy lines. I see her face more closely as my vision adjusts to the darkness. Her eye sockets look empty. Her dirge is hanging in the drooping leaves.

I do not tell her she is lovely. I do not show her the bones I have wrapped up in the red cloth pressed against my chest. ↻



TIMOTHY B. DODD is from Mink Shoals, WV. His writing has appeared in *Yemassee*, *The Owen Wister Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *The William & Mary Review*, and elsewhere. He is currently an MFA candidate at the University of Texas El Paso. "Returning Home" was inspired by a nighttime walk in Subotica, Serbia.

— *Photograph courtesy of the author.*



No Looking Back

Melissa Binari

S*he says:* It's over. *He says:* I know. *She says:* I just feel like I have wasted a portion of my life, and now I can never get it back. *He says:* We could always rewind—try it again and see if things play out differently for you this time. *She says:* This didn't suit me the first time, and it certainly won't suit me a second. *He says:* At what point did you realize that this wasn't for you? *She says:* Oh man, I've known all along. Since the very first minute my eyes began to see what was transpiring in front of me, I knew then and there that this was doomed. *He says:* Why didn't you say something earlier? You led me on to believe you were enjoying something you were not. *She says:* I didn't want to hurt your feelings. I know how much stuff like this means to you. *He says:* What do you think went wrong? *She says:* Everything. Everything was forced--the emotions, the attitudes, everything that has fluttered before my eyes has been a farce. It has all been a fool's game to me. *He says:* I'm sorry. I really did not see this coming. *She says:* I think, well—I think you just do not know me as well as you claim to. *He says:* Do you prefer someone else? *She says:* I really don't want to say. *He says:* No, I insist. Go ahead, I won't be offended. *She says:* It's just—I've taken a surefire liking to Scorsese lately, I'm just not the biggest Wes Anderson fan. Let's go back to your DVD collection. ↻



MELISSA BINARI is a writer residing in Boston, Massachusetts. She considers a hybrid between Stephen Colbert, David Bowie and Gandalf to be her own personal muse. Her time is usually consumed with playing with her cat Wazowski and pretending to look busy. You can find her own personal (and usually controversial) ramblings at inlostvegas.wordpress.com



Kamikaze

Kevin Tosca

Wanting to get away from the tourists and beggars, we chose a table deep inside the restaurant, but in the distance I could still see the sun, the square, the church, the fountain, the full terrace. Not two minutes after ordering, a gypsy boy with dark cropped hair and brown skin approached us. He wore a dirty, short-sleeved shirt with the collar open, pants that stopped midway down his calves. No shoes on his feet. No hope in his eyes.

"Go away," I told him. I understood Romanian, could speak enough of it to get by. "We have nothing for you." I was polite, I looked him in the eye, I saw him, which is more than the locals do.

"Give me money," he said, not leaving, one of his not at all young-looking hands extended. "I have nothing to eat, we are seven, my parents are dead, we're hungry, we're going to die if you don't help us, it's nothing to you." He repeated that: "It's nothing to you."

"Please," I said, having heard this spiel a hundred times, "I'm not going to give you anything."

"Ten lei," the boy said. "We're starving. Give it to me."

"I'm not going to ask again."

"Five lei."

"Goddamn it!" I said, removing and then slamming the gun on the table. I stood up and pointed it between the boy's eyes. He didn't flinch as I reiterated my points: "I asked you

to leave, kindly. I spoke to you like a human being. I looked in your eyes. What more am I supposed to do? Tell me. What?"

"Go ahead, fucker," the boy said, "I'm not afraid of your gun."

"I can do it."

"So what? What do I have to live for?"

"Son of a bitch!" I said in English and sat back down.

And this is what I'm talking about, this truth, the way it clubs your face. What *can* you do? You can't shoot the annoying beggars even though you want to. You can't massacre the patrons who implicitly condone their presence. You can't murder the society that produced them because you can't kill complex abstractions. You can't hunt down the parents because they may, indeed, not exist, and they had parents too and there just aren't enough hours in the day. Killing yourself and your loved ones across the table is idiotic and pointless. So what the hell can you do?

"Give me a cigarette," the boy said.

I reached into my pocket, handed the kid a one leu bill, which is about thirty American cents. He was happy and went away. Our soups arrived. My Ukrainian fiancée commented on them, said how they had the perfect amount of sour. I tasted mine and disagreed. I added some vinegar to my vegetable ciorba and watched the boy work the outside tables. ➡



KEVIN TOSCA's stories have appeared in *Spork Press*, *Litro*, *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine* and elsewhere. They have recently been included in *Vine Leaves Literary Journal's* and *Bartleby Snopes's Best Of* anthologies. He lives in Paris. You can find him and his work at kevin Tosca.com. You can also like him on Facebook (facebook.com/pages/Kevin-Tosca/212422285591842). He'd like that.



All the Rivers Flow into the Sea

Khanh Ha

The American followed Phương onto a wide-bottomed boat. It went downriver in the shadow of kapok trees glowing red with tiny blossoms. The afternoon sun glared on her face. With his handkerchief the American dabbed her perspiring cheeks and she bit her lower lip, holding her face still. People looked at them.

They talked in low voices, putting their heads together to hear better. The American sat with his hands between his knees, smiling at strange faces. The boat kept close to the bank. The wind spun the petals of kapok blossoms against the reddening sky.

When she woke, her hand was in his and the boat touched the bank. Phương asked around. They would have to continue on foot until they found another boat going south. The train bound for Huế had turned back, because somewhere south the Viet Cong had seized a town and the South Vietnamese army was coming to take it back.

Phương stood among a small gathering of men and women on the red earth that changed to yellow beyond glistening sand dunes. Next to her, the American surveyed the landscape.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Phương?" he said to her in heavily accented Vietnamese.

"I'm more than sure, Jonathan." She shielded her eyes. "I'm only worried about you."

"Me?"

"Can you make it?"

The American nodded firmly.

Ahead of them walked a woman carrying a little girl in one arm. With her other hand she clutched a cloth bag and pulled a small boy along. The little girl in the woman's arms moaned about thirst. As hawks called overhead, they crossed a woodland thick with the smell of fallen pine needles, soft as brown velour. The little girl cried, "Snake!" pointing to a brown woody vine creeping around a eucalyptus tree.

From deep in the woodland came the sound of water, a stream as clear and shallow as it was cold. They drank from their cupped hands. The American splashed water on his face, letting it run down the front of his shirt. Next to him, the woman washed her children with a handkerchief. The boy said he was hungry.

The silvery railroad track flashed in the distance. Sweat dripped down Jonathan's face and the sun's glare on the conical hats had him shade his eyes with his hand. He asked Phương if she wanted to rest. She wet her lips.

"We must press on. Do you want to rest, Jonathan?"

"Don't worry about me," he said.

Soon the little boy fell behind, hopping in pain. His mother held his torn rubber thongs and pulled him along. He tried to walk on the ties and cried when the sharp gravel cut his feet. The woman wrapped them with a sleeve she torn from a shirt. Jonathan looked back. The boy was limping along behind his mother who carried the little girl on her hip.

Phương tugged Jonathan's arm. "Can you carry him?"

"Of course."

The mother thanked him profusely when he let the boy climb onto his back. Jonathan smiled at the little girl, who smiled back and yawned. He walked beside Phương, the mother trailing behind.

Then the little girl asked, "Mom, can Mr. American see like us? His eyes are blue. How do you make them blue?"

The boy cut in. "You don't. They're just blue."

The girl giggled. "His hair, Mommy, it looks like duck down."

Phương smiled. "Why don't you ask him something?"

"What's your name, Mister?" the girl said in Vietnamese.

Jonathan turned to look at her. "Jonathan. And what's yours?"

The girl hid her face on her mother's shoulder. The woman looked embarrassed and smiled nervously. "Tell Mr. Jonathan your name."

"My name is Châu."

Jonathan patted the boy's leg. "And what's your name?"
"Cung."

"Good. Are you afraid, Cung?"

"No. Mommy said it's only scary if you have to walk through the jungle."

"Why?"

"Because the orangutans will get you. Mommy said if you have to walk through the jungle you put your arms in two bamboo tubes."

"Why?"

"Because when they grab you they grab your arms, so you slip them out of the bamboo tubes and run for your life."

Jonathan laughed. "Is that for real?"

"It's for real, Mr. Jon-a-than," Cung said.

The little girl piped up. "If you go through the jungle, you have to bring an old bicycle tire tube and cut it up into rubber bands."

"Why can't you just bring rubber bands? Why do you need rubber bands in the jungle?"

"They don't sell them around here. Only in the city. And you need them because the jungle leeches come down from the trees after a rain. They get into your pants and suck your blood."

"I'm glad we're not going through the jungle."

"If we do," Cung said, "you think the orangutans would be scared?"

"Why?"

"There are a lot of us. And the orangutans are smaller than you."

"Thanks, Cung. I feel important now."

Phường looked back at Jonathan. His face was sweaty and red from the sun and he walked stooped, the boy draped on his back, his skinny arms locked around Jonathan's neck. She stopped and waited for him. He smiled. She forgot her own thirst when she saw his lips dry from dehydration.

Late afternoon they came to a hut where an old woman sold refreshments. Gone quickly were a few bundles of bananas, then rice waffles. Phường asked the old woman if she had something else for the children and the woman began to grate cassava. She sprinkled brown sugar on shredded white cassava, wrapped a good portion of it in a green banana leaf. Before she tied it up, she slit the middle of the cassava mound and filled it with mung bean. She filled a rack with cassava rolls and lowered it into a boiling crock. The children sniffed the fragrant steam. She gave each a chipped clay plate and dropped on it a steaming cassava roll. They blew and ate with their fingers and wanted more before they cleaned their plates. Their mother said she had to save money for boat fare, and their dejected faces moved Jonathan to buy them. While Phường talked to people outside, he watched the children eat.

The woman owner said they could wait until night to catch a boat, then dropped her voice and warned them that they were in a war zone controlled by Mr. Viet Cong.

At night the river was black and the bank gleamed with the ivory skins of conical hats. People held onto one another on the clay slope, waiting. Boats came and went. Hushed. They said each boat traveled downriver in blackness, in silence, to slip through the Viet Cong checkpoint. The crowd got smaller, quieter, only the sound of the river lapping the bank.

Phường and the mother said they'd go together, so when a boat had room only for two more passengers, they decided to wait for the next one. It came much later, carrying bundles of bananas piled to the rim of its rattan shelter. The boatwoman said she would take them to the next village. Phường asked her about the town the Viet Cong had captured and was told they would bypass it on the river, but the fighting was fierce.

Late at night the river came alive with unlit boats going up- and downriver without lights. Sitting on the floor, the American leaned against the wall of green bananas. Starlight fell on the river, bobbing like silver sequins. He sat with his knees against his chin, while the children lay across their mother's thighs, looking up at the stars, at the yellow and green specks of fireflies blinking in the bushes.

Phường stretched her legs, looking at her white ankles in the moonlight. She could see black lines on her chapped heels, clad in black rubber sandals. She rested her head on Jonathan's shoulder, her eyes shut, breathing quietly. She thought of her father. The morning before she left with Jonathan, a neighbor came to drink tea with her father who was blind in both eyes from cataracts. While she was gone the neighbor would look after him. He still had recurring stomach pain and nausea but said he would be fine, that it would soon pass. She brought him a hot water bottle, and he slept with it. If she had the money, she would take him to the best doctor in Huế. The day before she left she gave Mrs. Xinh, a well-known trader in Gia-Linh, two hundred thousand *đồng*—most of her savings—investment money she could not get to for the next three months. It had to pay off.

Jonathan pressed his cheek against the top of her head, touching her braid with his fingers. He met her in her noodle shop. It was a small noodle shop, where twelve customers sat around six small wooden tables, and a rich, spicy smell always hung in the air. He told her, in Vietnamese, that he was with the Agency for International Development. At sunset he would show up at her noodle shop and walk her home. She walked fast, shouldering two oversize copper pots bobbing on a shoulder pole. Though out of breath trying to keep up with her, the American offered to help, and she told him she was used to the weight, that she left home at six-thirty every morning with two fully loaded pots. He asked how she could shoulder such a load back and forth every day. He didn't know that nothing is hard once it becomes routine. The first time he asked her how far she lived from the market, she said it was about four kilometers and the cross-village bus seldom ran her route. The road would curve around a field, a world of green sugarcane leaves. The cane field was so still in the late summer afternoon heat you could hear the rustle of leaves beneath the lull of cicadas.

The first time they met, she wore a scarlet blouse. He said her bright red blouse gave him pause. She said what else. He told her that she was the girl he built his dreams on, and she laughed at the way he praised her. It sounded awkward and funny to hear him speak the words in Vietnamese. When she had to travel to Quảng Trị to see her dying uncle, Jonathan told her that it was a war zone and convinced her to let him accompany her. Before they left, he bought her father a gift—some rare tea in a golden canister. At the train station, he followed her, pushing, elbowing through crowds of people who never formed lines or apologized for being rude. He

shielded her to get her safely up the steps to the coach. Once he went to the latrine, stepping over bodies curled up on the floor. When he came back he complained that he couldn't stand upright in the latrine. It wasn't built for Westerners. From their bench Phương looked at the people climbing onto the train. Women in torn, unbuttoned blouses nursed babies. Swollen nipples filmed white. Children cried. Watching them, she believed it must dawn on the American in such a moment that the pacification program training had never taught him what poverty was like, how tenuous life was in the grip of war and shortage of food.

Now she could smell the river, and its muddy odor stirred her pity for the barren earth, its poverty, its people struggling for mere subsistence.

An upriver boat passed them in the dark. The boatman, leaning over the gunwale, blurted out staccato words, all muffled. The boatwoman signaled for Phương to come to the stern. When she came back, Phương told them that the Viet Cong was setting up a checkpoint farther downriver. She said the boatwoman believed they'd take the American prisoner if they saw him.

"We can't drop you off here," Phương said to Jonathan. "This is Viet Cong country."

"How about if I hide?" Jonathan said.

"Where? We have to pass through the checkpoint. We can't stop here. It's not even safe in daytime."

He pointed at the wall of bananas. "I'll hide under there."

"What?" the mother said.

"There's no other choice. Do it quick," Phương said, then cupped her hand and whispered a message to the boatwoman.

They hurried to move bananas to the bow. Phương told the mother to wake her children. "Tell them what we're doing. He doesn't exist if the Viet Cong ask them."

Jonathan lay on his side on the wet deck of the boat. The children squatted and touched his feet.

"Don't be scared, Mr. Jon-a-than," Cung said.

The American raised his hand to thank the boy but quickly brought it back down as they piled bundles of bananas on top of him. The smell of the old tar that coated the floor, the stink of betel and tobacco spit, hung in the air. Soon there was only the cadence of the oar.

The boat slid to a stop. A man flashed a light on the bank. Voices.

"How many people?"

"Three women, two children," the boatwoman said.

"You carry rice?"

"No, Sir, just bananas."

The boat rocked as the man stepped onto it. His voice rose. "You don't carry rice under these bananas?"

"No, Sir, I don't sell rice."

The man grunted. "You people are sneaky."

Nobody said anything. The flashlight wavered. The man filled a bucket with water and splashed it against the mound

of bananas. Water dripped, collecting on the deck. The man splashed three more buckets of water. *Please stop*, Phương pled in her head. Water was sluicing between her feet.

"How many bundles of bananas?" the man asked.

"I don't know, Sir," the boat woman said. "I didn't count."

Phương froze when she saw the man flash his lamp over an opening in the heap of bananas. The light moved from one opening to another. Then he dropped the bucket onto

the deck of the boat. His testy voice shot out, "Tax: two hundred *đồng*."

Soon the boat moved back out. A short distance downriver they began clearing the pile of bananas. The American pushed himself up, dripping wet.

"Jonathan!" Phương said, grabbing his arm.

The boy shook her arm. "I told you, Auntie, he'll be okay."

Still shaken, the American sat down, looking tiny and insignificant.

She asked her father to let Jonathan stay the night, because it was too late for him to go back to

town. A foreign correspondent was killed a few months before in Gia-Linh. Her father said the Viet Cong buried him alive in the sugarcane field. They believed he was CIA.

She cooked gobies simmered with fragrant knotweed, pumpkin soup with prawns and fresh garden vegetables—thin slices of tomato around the platter's edge above yellow star-shaped carambola and half-moon strips of purple figs in the center. They sat barefoot on the mahogany divan under a dome-shaped lamp. In the soft yellow light, the American watched them, then crossed his legs, struggling to rest a foot on the opposite thigh. The gobies were hot. His eyes watered from the black peppercorns cooked with the fish. She ate slowly, waiting for him. She corrected the way he held the chopsticks. "Like this," she said, making him grip them higher.

After he washed in the bathhouse in the rear, Jonathan came back to the mahogany divan to sleep. Next to a white pillow lay a neatly folded woolen blanket. He had turned down her offer to let him use her bed for the night and said he would sleep on the divan without a mosquito net.

A kerosene lamp burned dimly on a table in a corner. Her body aching, Phương lay under the blanket, eyes open looking up at the ceiling. Behind the curtain in a corner, her father snored. A dog barked in the distance, then another. A whine by her ear. She slapped the invisible mosquito then pulled the blanket over her head.

She didn't know the time when she slid down from her cot, quietly unlatched the door and walked out into the garden. The milky light of a full moon glowed in every corner and the night wasn't black but blue, bluer than indigo. The trees lay a velvety shade around the house. Cobblestones churned underfoot. Moss grew on the stucco walls, the green discolored with the years.

She walked along the edge of the garden, where bamboo and screw pines grew thick and the nightshade let no light



through. Walking so close to them she heard the squeaking of bamboo trunks, the murmur of leaves. From inside the house came a groan, clear in the stillness.

In the rock basin the water seemed blacker than ever beneath the canopy of the milk apple. A paper lantern hung on a limb of the grapefruit tree. A frail scent of grapefruit blossoms as she passed under. The night lit like a yellow shawl made of something so filmy that a touch would make it disappear. In the stillness she felt transparent. No bone, no flesh, no identity. Light shone through, scented of fragrant pines, of the brown earth, acrid and old.

She walked back to the courtyard and saw the American standing by the rock island under the dark parasol of the milk apple. His shirt was the only white.

"Your father," he said to her, "had some pain again tonight."

She looked at him. "I thought you'd be sound asleep tonight."

"The mosquitoes kept me awake."

"Really? I thought it was my father's moaning."

He laughed softly. "That too."

"I gave him a hot water bottle to calm it."

"Phường, he must see a doctor tomorrow. I'll go with you."

"You don't have to."

"That's in Huế, isn't it?"

"Yes. A long way. When are you going back to America?"

"In a few days, but I can delay it." A scent trailed in the air. He breathed in deeply. "Where's that scent coming from?"

She pointed toward a thicket of shrubs in a corner. "The Chinese call it *Yeh-lai-hsiang*, night fragrance."

She brushed her hair with her fingers. "Will you come back?"

"I don't want to leave at all."

She thought for a moment. Perhaps in love there's no coming or going.

Early in the morning she took her father to a free clinic in Huế. In the ochre-colored waiting room, she could smell a musty odor. Late the night before, when Phường emptied his chamber pot because he was too weak to go to the outhouse, she found a trace of blood in his stool. At his age he took one day at a time. Death didn't frighten him, he had told her, but the prospect of heavy medical costs did.

Phường opened her eyes. The doctor and a nurse were walking her father out after a long examination. She rose just as the nurse helped her father sit down.

"Your father has colon cancer," the doctor said. "All the tests came out positive. He has large lesions in several places in his colon. I strongly recommend radiotherapy as soon as possible. We need to see him once a week until we see improvement."

"Will he live if you treat him?"

"The sooner the treatment starts, the better the chance."

"Is there anything I can do at home to help, doctor?"

"Not a whole lot. But a healthy diet might help, like eating brown rice and tofu and less meat."

"How much does the treatment cost?"

"Our office can tell you."

She thanked him and told her father she'd be back.

She paid for the examination and got the estimate for the radiotherapy. Six months of treatment, 110,000 *đồng*. When she came back to her father she felt light-headed. She took his hand and walked him out of the hospital into the sunlight. They waited on the curb for the pedicab. She grew dizzy in the bright sun.

The American had borrowed a bike and he took Phường to Mrs. Xinh's. In the afternoon sun they rode past a roadside shrine. Phường asked him to stop, went in and lit joss sticks in the dark room. *May your power sustain Father through his illness*, she whispered a prayer to the road genie then bowed deeply to the porcelain statue of a bearded man whose bulging eyes and black beard conveyed a ferocious mien.

When they rode on Jonathan asked her, "What's the shrine for?"

"For wayfarers on this road."

"I see them everywhere."

"My father can tell you more about the magical powers we believe in. That's why we have a shrine for the road, a shrine for the rice paddy, a shrine for the river. But the gods will help you only if you're desperate for the welfare of others, not for yourself."

They biked under the cool shade of giant trees. "What are those trees, Phường?" he asked her.

"*Bàng*. We use their nuts to stuff cakes because almonds are expensive. In autumn their leaves are very red. What's the name of the Dutch artist who painted his self-portrait with an ear missing?"

"Van Gogh?"

"Yes, like the reds he used."

"And those trees with tiny white flowers like Japanese apricot flowers?"

"*Mù u*. Children use the seeds to shoot marbles."

Jonathan laughed. "Did you shoot marbles when you were a kid?"

"Yes, Father taught me. But that was years ago."

She fought back tears after they left Xinh's house. She held it in while Jonathan pedaled in silence until they came upon the shrine. Then her sobs stopped him. He got off the bike.

"What happened, Phường?"

She cupped her face in her hands and sobbed. He held her against his chest.

"I lost my investment," she said.

"What investment?"

She told him about Xinh and the cargo boat she put her money into. She told him it sank coming back from Hội An, so all was lost.

The American shook his head. "You do business on a handshake?"

Phường stared at him, her eyes wet.

"Do you have a receipt showing how much you gave her?"

"Sure, I do. But what good is it after what she told me? She took a loss too."

"How do you know it's true? You're too trusting."

"This really hurts." Phường told him her first investment had paid off after a couple months. "I counted on getting the money back for father's treatment."

"You have nothing left?"

"Enough to keep the business going and our daily expenses. But that's all." She bit her lower lip hard. "Can you take me home? It's getting dark and you need to get back too."

They rode on. She thought of the shrine and wondered if the road genie turned a deaf ear to her. At her house Phương got off the bike and Jonathan turned and took her hand.

"Phương."

She looked at him. He looked tired, his blue eyes dark. He took off his navy-blue worker cap and pushed the hair off his forehead.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

"Ask me anything."

"Will you let me help you pay your father's medical expenses?"

Words of gratitude rose to her lips but she did not speak.

"Will you?" he said.

She swallowed the knot in her throat. "You have a heart of gold, Jonathan."

"Does that mean yes?"

She shook her head and said, "Let me talk to Father. He's so proud. He may not feel comfortable taking anything from you."

"Tell him his health is important to me, just like your happiness. I can help. Let me."

"You can eat with us," she said, forcing a smile.

Her father took only a few slurps of vegetable soup, complaining that he had no appetite. He asked for a piece of brown sugar to get rid of the flat taste on his tongue. She gave it to him and was struck by the strength of his teeth as he cracked it. All of them still there, lacquered black and retouched over the years. When he asked for his tea, she poured him a cup and told him about the loss of her investment. He listened, rolling the chip of brown sugar in his mouth.

"How much?"

She told him.

He stopped chewing. "Was that all you had?"

"More or less."

"What kind of woman is she?"

"She knows business, knows lots of people. She has money."

"But your whole savings?" He clucked. "You'd better find out where and how her boat sank—and how much cargo was on it."

She recalled Jonathan's doubt. Could it be a sham? She felt the thickness in her throat again. She did not want to believe someone would do that to her.

"That won't get back my money, Father."

"Can you think of a better way?"

She told him of Jonathan's offer to help and her father considered what she said.

"In my whole life," he said finally, "I have never begged or stooped to take a handout from anyone."

"Jonathan does not see it as a handout, Father. I'm sure

of that."

"Sir," Jonathan said.

The old man's blind eyes peered blankly into space.

"Sir," Jonathan said again, "Will you let me help pay for the cancer treatment?"

"Have you ever seen anybody cured of cancer?" The old man's wrinkled face was lined with the imprint of the rush mat.

"I don't know, Sir. I'm too young to know much."

"They can treat you so you don't die right away, but you will still die, only slowly."

"But there's a chance that you'd live."

"That's an illusion."

"Maybe that's your way of thinking."

"And what is your way?"

"Sir," Jonathan said, hunching forward on the divan, "I want her to be happy, and the way is for you to get well again."

The old man said nothing. Outside it was dark. The American looked uneasy, as if he must take leave or chance riding home on unsafe roads

at night.

"Will you let her accept my money? Will you accept it, Sir?"

The old man peered into a space before him, then he searched for Jonathan's hand, found it and patted it. "You're very kind. Your offer will be on my mind."

"I hope time will bring you real happiness, Sir. I can say I've found happiness with your family."

The old man scratched the side of his face with a curving fingernail. "Each day I open a door and walk through a corridor of that day and feel thankful if I make it to the end. Every day since Phương was a teenager. I've opened thousands of doors, and I've always come back to the first one. Because I was afraid that I'd die before she grew up. Now she's an adult and there are a few doors left unopened for me. I know one has no corridor." Then he smiled peacefully. "But I have no fear of death—it's inevitable—only the fear of leaving her uncared for."

Phương stopped eating. A well of gratitude opened up in her. She sat, head down, gazing at her lap. Her father put his bowl and chopsticks down and said to the American, "You have my deepest gratitude for your good heart."

Jonathan smiled. "Thank you, Sir. I'll be back tomorrow with the money."

The next day Phương waited at her noodle shop until dark, but the American didn't come. She put away all the utensils, wrapped up the beef tenderized in pineapple and covered it with ice. He must have forgotten. No, she thought, impossible. Perhaps he was sick.

She headed home, her two empty pots swinging on her shoulder pole, the lantern in her hand shining about her feet. She watched the lantern because its leaf-shaped flame harnessed her mind. As she watched the lantern, Jonathan came into her vision, tiny as the quivering flame in suffused



yellow. Near the cane field she came to a large puddle in the otherwise dry road. The damp dirt glistened in the lantern light and the dark stain trailed into the field. She lowered the lantern to the ground and saw the dusky color of blood. She hurried on, thinking how a good heart could ward off evil.

When she got home, she asked her father if Jonathan had come by.

"Yes," her father said. "He brought the money they wired him. He said he'd head for your shop. Did he, Phương?"

"He never came. Do you know where he might've gone to?"

She told her father what she saw on the road. He rose from his stool, groping with his feet for his sandals. "Take me there."

Their neighbor and his son went with them to the cane field. The bloodstains had dried in the dirt. The search party stood on the edge of the road, swinging their lanterns in front of them and peering into the dark field.

Phường and the men left her father on the road and went three abreast into the field. A night bird shot up among the stalks, its shrill cry startling them. She looked to the ground and saw the American, facedown, his navy-blue worker cap askew on his head. The side of his neck was slashed.

Her vision clouded, the lanterns seemed to sway. She felt chilled and the cold came not from the air but from within her. When she couldn't make out Jonathan's face anymore she realized she was crying, and regaining her senses she asked the other two to carry him out.

Dawn.

Pale light fell on her father's eyes, so familiar he once said to her he could foresee the weather. She held open the mosquito net and let him ease himself out of the cot. He walked barefoot to the divan and sat down. He struck a match. Before his eyes a sphere lit up. It was like something bright behind a translucent screen. He ran his palm over the brazier's coals, as he always did, and a faint heat told him the coals were catching flame.

He had slept well during the night, his body benign save an occasional abdominal pain from the cancer treatment that started a month earlier. Every Monday. Like clockwork. He told her it would be a warm Monday when he dressed for the treatment trip to Huế.

As the coals popped, she sat down on the divan with a

tray. The smell of hot gruel warmed the air.

"I bought some sweets for you yesterday, Father."

He took a finger-long candy wrapped in cellophane paper and unwrapped it. It was a chewy caramel coated with sesame seeds.

She took the candy from his hand. "You go on and eat your gruel. I'm going to make tea, and then you can enjoy the candy."

"Get me the tribute tea, Phường. I have a craving for it with caramel candy."

He picked up the thick, glazed bowl. A small slab of brown sugar floated in it. He stirred the gruel with the ceramic spoon, round and round, until the brown sugar shrank, marbling the white gruel. Then he lifted the spoon and sipped. At the credenza where he kept tea and the tea set she stood holding the golden canister. Neither her father nor she had touched it since Jonathan had given it to him. She looked at it and cried.

More than a month now since they sent his body back home. Her father and she prayed for him often. He prayed when she wasn't home.

One night, awaking from sleep as she often did, she listened for his moans. Pain was habit. It roused you from sleep at a certain time in the night and your body remembered it like a timetable. All was quiet. Relieved, she lay awake.

She recalled the night Jonathan had spent with them. Sweet memory. If a stretch of river was haunted, people built a shrine to pacify the spirits. Perhaps someday they should build a shrine by the cane field. By the constant praying, the lost souls of the dead would find eternal peace. Maybe Jonathan would come home again in his own ethereal world. Her father believed his soul wasn't trapped in the world of darkness. A good soul. All goodness.

That night she cried and heard her father stir and knew he was awake hearing her. Her crying kept him awake a long time, but he didn't comfort her. Solitude had its own moments. Bitter and sweet. It would eventually die into itself.

After her father drank a third cup of tea, the fire was dim but warm. Outside on the doorstep she took his hand and stood beside him. Three steps went down, and he still let her walk him after all the years.

"Father," she said softly.

"What is it?"

"Our flame tree is covered in red."

Then the cicadas began to sing. ⑤



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The Forbidden World

Laura Casteel

By the time I was eight years old, my brother and I had tried several times to play Chinese checkers. We never got to it because each time I opened the tin, marbles the size of blueberries would roll across the metal, roaring like little jet planes, then spill onto the soft, gray living room carpet. They were made of clear blue glass, the color of pool water in high summer, graced with three-dimensional swirls of yellow and orange. At this point, the parts became more fascinating than the game, and we'd spend the rest of the afternoon admiring these polished, synthetic planets.

If the marbles were planets, there was one in the center of their solar system. It had red swirls like the sun, or the surface of Mars. I held it in the white, mid-day rays that fell through the skylight, turning it slowly in my fingers. The light flowing through its surface revealed a tiny Earth, too small to enter, but small enough to throw into darkness by

cupping my hand. The ribbons of red were brushed with light, unexplored rivers etching canyons into the glass. I wanted to touch them, find out if they were actually ribbons or rivers or just bits of plastic. I wanted to expose the forbidden world once and for all.

Lost in the ravenous curiosity of childhood, I didn't notice the world slip through my sweaty grip and drop to the edge of a coffee table. Instead of shattering, it bounced off, rolled across the carpet, and descended into the yawning mouth of a floor vent, where countless Lego bricks and Barbie shoes had met the same fate. I stretched a skinny, eight-year-old arm into the darkness, but only grasped a handful of musty air, and the truth that some worlds would remain unexplored. 



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Percy Had Two Moms

Nicholas A. White

One was Teresa and the other was a stuffed bear. Percy would tie the bear's arms and legs together and dangle it from our fourth story window. She never explained why she called the bear *Mom*, but I assumed it was because neither the bear nor our real mom, Teresa, talked much. At dinner, Percy would say she was going to watch television with *Mom*, and Teresa would pause from staring at the napkin in her lap, her face a portrait of pained confusion.

One day while Percy dangled *Mom* over the fire escape, I grabbed a pair of scissors and rushed for the rope, hoping the bear would fall to the street and be trampled and run over and tossed in the sewer where it belonged. But at the time, either I was too weak or the rope was too strong. That night I only pretended to sleep. In the morning Percy smiled at me and said she was taking *Mom* to the living room to play checkers.

"You could play with our real mom," I said. "She'd like that."

Percy frowned.

"Teresa doesn't get along with *Mom*," she said.

Nowadays both our moms are dead. Teresa died from pneumonia and *Mom* died from college. Percy still tells people she had two moms, and they find that interesting. If they ask she'll make up stories about being raised by two lesbians—how she got picked on but didn't let it bother her, how neither of her moms gave advice about dating boys. Percy's like a heat lamp in the middle of winter, attracting all the attention she can find. And on some regrettable days, when I'm lonely or sad or bored, I actually enjoy listening to her cursed stories. ↻



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Visualize Your Ideal Day

Athena Nilssen

They came into that clear ice room with their long dark hair and their taut breasts sacked and tanned and tipped. The room was an igloo, crystal light like white through yellow and green frost of color, a cold silver on skin, every hair in place. They were naked seals, smooth and clean, with insides of soft red, and tubes and tunnels. Secrets. Their meat, contactless and their smells coming from their collarbones, from the concavities of their lines. All ice and frost, like clean fog rising on a cold plastic embankment. They smell themselves. They lie back on their freshness, elbows, like their legs, like their chest cavities, skin with small raised bumps. They lie back and touch themselves, with elasthane glimmer, they are on the Alps, at the top, the openness of their symbols, their connecting shapes. And Ren is chanting. Ren is leading them through the rings. Ren is spinning them into themselves. The deep clean night of Los Angeles. The next hour. Glass doors we open.

Was it only yesterday the girls bought garlic and kale

on Lincoln Boulevard? They were making a pot of soup, fun to say in English. They were goofy in the supermarket, feeling the eyes of men on their bodies. Celeste did a little ducky trot down the frozen food aisle. Feeling the eyes of women on their white fabrics, their silver chain necklaces shining on their chests. Who were these happy girls all in white? Lise laughing loudly, cheerful. Their bodies how they want them to be. Loud sirens came down the Boulevard and they all turned their heads, cursorily. So happy to be in L.A. Everything bright and loud in L.A. and all the front-rooms, half-stoops, side enterances, the foyers and portals of dark French Canada behind them. The girls siren-loud themselves in L.A., thinking themselves changed. The girls always watching themselves now. How pretty they've all become here. But their names are still tunnels, dark brown tunnels to Montreal. Names of wooden beams, names of brown walls, 1970s doors. Lise. Rachel. Iphigenie. Celeste. Names of dark girls who used to walk from the theatre in the snow, names with hair that is canadienne brune, names

with dark fondue eyes, with chalet eyes. The girls with their dark names and light bodies. When Ren comes inside them it is like teradactyl glowing spit to their woodenness. And when Ren makes love to them on white new sheets it is the furthest they have been from all the ochre-timbred armoires, from the brownness of their mothers. Rachel in the snow, on the lam, on the fritz, tying her russet hair in a knot. Lise the carborateur, a dropped striped salieur. Iphengenie in the passageway. *Quelle barbe!* Soft down the carpet with barefeet, solid laminate girls. Sneaking out of his bedroom, they go pee together afterwards, the bathroom like a little cell of light, filling with their energy and their quiet French.

The Beings are coming and they would be bringing great joy and gifts, Ren preached. They will come for our codes, our DNA, contained in our Third Eye. They will scan our codes. The girls sat on mats beneath him in the Open Room. The Beings would be coming and we must greet them with complete happiness. You must be ready. No holding back anything. Ren practiced the Spiritual Selection on Celeste, rubbing his thick fingers back and forth over her shaved brown vagina until it became wet and the girls watching started to moan with her, touching themselves lightly until Celeste burst forth with her teeth out like she always did. Nina handed Ren a towel to wipe off his hand. Took too long, he told Celeste, in French. Celeste pulled back on her white linen pants and the flush went out of her small neck and chest. It should not take you that long, Ren said, this time in English. Nina hugged Celeste and she sat back down on a mat. Don't worry, *ma chérie*, we'll have fun later. We can walk down to the Pier. We can go buy some new clothes. There was always something to look forward to now, here, in L.A. where everything seemed to hold itself shimmering and waving. A sling of glimmer, how each day sat around them like the next. Perfect as though they were living in someone else's life.

Lindyhop, Lindburg, Lund Sweden, Lend some money, Lenten feast. The unhuman scrolled through. The skin suit, the tangerine new nipples like little affronts of bravery. Little pukes of joy, the unhuman called them that, in its tongue, The Body made it human-sick, like dirty water.

The unhuman had gave the Dogons their cereal houses. GUADFISK. LUKOR. It tinslated the third day, tore bodies apart, guts looped on branches. It covered the land like the shadow of a flying creature, maneuvering from savanna to sahara, all the throatswept deserts.

It found it liked warm cow milk in a heavy cup. It liked wearing human body decorations, big silver bangles, how they clanked against the wooden table when it raised its mug of milk, how weighted it felt here on Earth. The unhuman grew to like it, a deep tunneling inside its new-head. A heavyness unfeable before, where everyone there was something like Feathered.

Rachel remembers when she first met Ren. Everything was lint and dog hair back then. But he unloosed her, made her name and herself a drawbridge. Back then, with the grog and wait of 19 years old. Bus tickets in notebooks. Stars and hearts of leverage. Ideas so pure they were porcelain floats of thought, unhandable, seamless. She remembers exactly when she met him: Holly Green plaid skirt ("that skirt"), grey faded school sweatshirt that spelled ECOLE in

darker grey letters. Orange creamsicle underwear. She was cutting across campus and there amongst all those old stone buildings, there he was, dressed in white pants and a white shirt. He invited her along for a car ride and she sat between Lise and another girl, black-haired, never saw her after that ride and never got her name but she wore a red bracelet with beads that looked like Froot Loops. Nina, Ren's wife, sat in the front seat. Lise was smiling, long incisors, a white slip top with her little compact breasts, white loose pants. She'd fingered the letters of Rachel's ECOLE sweatshirt, touching her breasts and smiling INTO her, she smelled good, like a new car and the makeup counter at Les Halles together at once. Rachel wanted that – that cleanness. She wanted to go home and shave off all her body hair. The car ride was long, magical – through horsey countryside of red and yellows. Lise put her soft brown head on Rachel's shoulder. *J'ai fatigüee!*

Pfawwww her lovely mouth expired.

The Beings were coming tonight. The girls made banners out of butcher paper and craft paint. The girls laughed and made big deft swipes with their paintbrushes. Can you bind the chains of Pleiades? Can you loose the cords of Orion? Lise laughed and put red paint on her nose. Make this one say WELCOME. WELCOME! WELCOME! WELCOME!

Maybe deep down somewhere in a dark left over place Rachel didn't believe in the Beings. Laurent didn't believe. She had called her brother, Laurent, one afternoon when they had all stopped in Salt Lake City on their way west. Ren said lets get something to eat and they went to a McDonalds and the stares of everyone as they walked in was so intoxicating and she felt so powerful she thought maybe her brother would understand why she had just left. She had just left that day weeks ago and never came back, never went back to her rainy brown College Classes, never went back to the dark coats and her mother sitting head in hand at the big table.

The girls were eating their Fries and Cokes so she whispered to Celeste she was going to get some fresh air. They weren't supposed to call home, and they'd just tease her if she did. I'll come with you, Celeste said. No, no, *non*. It's okay. Celeste cocked her head. They were never usually alone. *Seule*.

Rachel had almost forgot her own phone number once at the payphone and Laurent's voice was heavy, rough. Surprising.

"Rachel?"

Yes, it's me. How's Mamma? How's Daddy? How's Muffin and Ettie and Limbo? How's my room? Aliens. Yes. Aliens, Laurent. They are going to come for us soon. We will be ready. It is marvelous. *Merveilluse*, Laurent. What do you mean? No. That's not how it is. It is beautiful. Ren is a prophet. Yes. I said, a prophet. Laurent? Please. Please I thought you would understand. Please.

Deep down that dark rusted piece of her knew they would not come. The way Laurent had said the word aliens. Not The Beings. Not The Light. Not The Travellers. Aliens. She pushed the thought out of her mind and brushed her bangs and put a clip in her hair. Laurent was home in the dark as rudder-heavy as an old ship. And Mamma. Mamma was gone and so were the floral mountains of her bed. The curled wire of her blow dryer. The shouting at 7:30 a.m. You

will be late to class, Rachel. Rachel. Rachel. Oh Mamma! Everything is new now, the endless nights twirling in bed and the animal sounds from the Beach. Not like Home and those long nights when no one woke up, no lights turned on and no one did anything but lie still and sleep. Here it is new everyday, job hunts, painting with Celeste, dancing with the girls, and Ren. Ren. I was on top of him, legs around him, using my right hand to get him hard. How desperately I wanted it hard. And how I must have looked, my long tan back, my breasts moving up and down. Maybe at those moments there are no aliens. Just me. Just me and I am luminous as a Saint, misting above Home, Mamma, misting above Home and I'm as big and tall as an office building covered in a white sheet with all the lights on underneath, all glass and metal and light.

No one had seen blue before. There, thousands of years ago, the unhuman showed them how to measure, bulid domes as rich as Dubai, glittering circular domes that mirrored their Sky. Take a day each month to think of me. No flowers in the desert, they are fake beauty. It's in the thirst of the jackrabbit, the baby's true infant pain, there's Taygeta and the 440 year separation. SEMJASE, their black lips said it. The unhuman laughed, easing the tension as they stood around that normal morning, watching.

It bathed the 3rd day in a common tub.

It taught them circles. The openness they clamored to and it traced them new brain lines with its inner tongue.

It gave them dreams of serpents – blue coiling serpents with shining night bodies.

It gave them fear, fear like a color seen for the first time.

After the first car ride, Ren had invited her to a party at Nina's apartment that evening. Rachel had to lie to go. I'm just going to Brigitte's for the night. I'll be back tomorrow, she told her mother. At the party, Nina pulled her aside,

"Come with me to freshen up a little first"

Just two dumb girls down the hallway, Nina and Rachel walked arm in arm, tipsy, together to the bedroom. Nina in a turban and a sculptured gown – pinning in earrings, standing in thick carpet, a pearl bone white wrist, all oxfords and exhaustion. She had lots of perfume bottles at her little vanity table. A powder puff called Peach Secrets. She asked Rachel,

"When did you come to him?"

Rachel almost said, who? Then remembered. Ren.

"I just met him today, you?" Rachel said casually. Nina pinned in the other earring.

"He knew me when I was a little girl," she made a long funny face. Rachel tried to think how old she was now. She had assumed she was Ren's own age, they were both over 40, but maybe he was indeed older. Her fine china eyes aged her but she probably had those same eyes at 11, at 25, last year. Old soul eyes, eyes for looking down a rainy street. Nina laughed suddenly, quickly.

"Yes, he knew my mother and that's how I met him. He was quite the ladies' man even back then." Her mother, sweated in the tulle of her mind. Tears in just-cleaned rooms.

"Back then, he was like a harmless little creature, sweet, not all this thunder and lightning he is now."

Rachel didn't know what to say.

"Back then, he didn't know all his tricks." She smiled

and twisted a bracelet onto her wrist, a foppish movement. A back then of morning light, Maman on Ren's lap, crème fraiche and a big kiss from him, Nina might have been wearing a plaid button-down shirt and he pinched her in it. Nina fake-pouted. Maman turned around to start a meal at the stove, Ren bringing his face close to her ear. *Je t'adore*. Back then everything meant so much. She dismissed these thoughts, steadied herself with her own reflection in the mirror.

"Come lets join the party."

More people had arrived and the living room was crowded. Everything is delightful, everyone kept saying that, just so delightful to be here, the word of the night, a new English word. Delightful were the giant windows with all the little dots of Montreal below. Delightful was Nina's apartment with the black and white tiger statue and mirrored furniture. Everything felt clean. Girls in backless dresses. Quit ruining your whiskey with coke, someone said and everyone laughed. And not even to the good part of the night yet, when the lights go dark and the girls are saying goodbye in two and threes and coats on and yes then it became clear, yes, Rachel was staying, she was not leaving with everyone else, she sat back on the couch and said goodbye to people and Nina came around and leaned in again and Ren made them both another drink, my special drink he said, for my two favorite girls. *Ma favorite*. Rachel laughed and her mind was fast because of the alcohol and she tried to control herself, she didn't want to say anything silly but everything she said just seemed *delightful*. I've never met anyone as glamorous as you. I've never been in an apartment this nice. They laughed and Ren was in his white ensemble and did a little peachy shrug.

And the walls turned mint green in the dark, the long shadows in the bedroom. And the awkwardness of underdressing, she didn't know what to do but Ren took off Nina's dress first and started on her, leaving Rachel to watch. How special to watch. And all the new worries, did her breath smell, did she shave good enough, what to do with her arms, her legs, as this all happened. But it all started to become easy, she felt confident by reminding herself she was the one who stayed. All those other girls left and she was the favorite. Rachel, unadorned, smooth, *l'objet*. For now – *ma favorite*. Nina smelled different naked. Gone was the *poudres* and fluffs of her gown, her vanity-mirrored table. She was red and deep, dripping inside. Rachel, emboldened by the smell, opened up more for them.

Do you really believe there are aliens? Iphigenie asked her one night, laying next to her after a Spiritual Selection. A secret. Rachel watched Iphigenie's face in the dark bedroom, her perfect little lips. Rachel did not answer, but she wished she could tell Iphigenie of the time she saw Ren and Nina watching TV. They hadn't seen her. It struck her: there they were, watching some movie about that castle on a hill, sitting there like they'd been there forever, like there was no such thing as starseeds or The Light or Chrome space vehicles. Nina almost looked matronly – her long hair behind her, her tan breasts covered. Her collarbone hinted above a forest green scoopneck shirt. She looked substantial – not in gauzy white for once, she looked like she could eat maple syrup in the snow, a true Quebecois, a side of *poutine*, two helpings of casserole, *bien sur*. In the

TV glow they were a comfortable old pair. Rachel felt like she was the child, in nightgown, peering around the edge of the hallway. She almost could go sit between them, their plasticness gone, their wetness gone. Nina's sticky vagina puttied up. Now she sat desexed, and Ren seemed grumpy, his white t-shirt yellowed in the TV light, different now not directing a roomful of girls to stimulate each other, smooth apeskin girls with anklet legs and *vagins*.

Iphigenie corrected herself. I mean, I hope there are aliens she said and Rachel watched her lips say it.

Some village children trailed behind the unhuamn with bare feet, small rocks in their hands. It walked in tall black pants, with Pashti hair like a netting to filter the 2 p.m. sun. It drew rings of circles in loose dirt. It spit in the circles and the dirt congealed. It marked a smudge on a boy's head – between his eyes – and with one tap, like it was cracking a warm egg, it split his skull at the pressure point. He didn't scream, he froze, the bolgona heat of his pulsating brain mass hitting sunlight. The other children stared. It snapped off a small piece of his skull. The boy fell to the dirt. It used its mouth to clean the white bone piece. His codes clicked and beeped. Pleased, ADUAG, PEP, PHSPTE.

The unhuman would let the night cover him, little ambergris, one last mother on earth, the silent night air. Gracious. It liked all that farmer talk about the earth, seeds scatter, chaff raises. It walked away from the gathering crowd. He who giveth, taketh. It laughed inside. They who want are only they who taketh.

In the Igloo room, Ren sang a song and Nina accompanied him on guitar. He sang "you are so beautiful, so beautiful, to me." Celeste and Lise slow-danced, holding each other, serious, their girl-chests pressing together. The Beings are coming. The banner paper signs are held up with six pieces of tape each. The ice tank has been prepared.

I wonder where Rachel is? the girls asked.

On the beach, the unhuman had rose up to greet Rachel. There, on the beach, the unhuman unfolded itself to Rachel. Wooden and warm, a curtain feeling. Rachel wanted to bury herself in it. How could something so monstrousish be so inviting. It talked. It used vowel sounds that glittered upward and needed double tongues. It talked like an imprint of a seahorse, swallowed its K's. It's time to draw the darners, the darkness. The milk and sandwich afternoon has passed. In blue glass huts, nothing has ever really changed. What is real doesn't change. The scylla thrashing. Take the water out of every river and the fishes turn to crystal. The Pleiades are blue and you've got everything to lose. Here at the limitless pool edge, Rachel sat with her legs in the water. The unhuman spoke in holograms: visulize your ideal day. Moppets in the rain near the Champs-Elysees. Parakeets

singing in unison in a silk-screened field of clover. The fake palm trees rustled in the computer-like wind.

Rachel frozen there on the sand like some sort of stuffed doll. The unhuman poured through her to tell her this. To tell her: WELCOME

Fish from no water. Lise is screaming, her incisors grasping for something, her lip cut and bleeding from biting fear. She is screaming and shaking. They have bound Ren and Nina, they have bound Celeste, they have moved on top of Iphigenie. Rachel can only see her gold jeweled sandals, her feet wiggle like she is being tickled, silly and grotesque. They hit her. Strange white pulleys going upward. Thin Lise has a heavy skull, she is wearing the white halter top she bought on the Promenade, when it got windy at the street corner and they thought about getting a something to eat. She is crying without sound. Have I lost sound?

The unhuman takes the tool and hits Lise on the forehead, she slumps forward, the blood down her face. She slumps forward on the ground. Celeste is next, she is bound and screaming. Rachel starts to scream as well. The Beings. Pray please pray, you are smooth, what happened? RINGS OF THE GLOWING SOULS. The room fills. The Light. Two sharp arched wings, one flies in between the rings like a new alphabet. Their bodies are spelling out a new alphabet. A space never occupied. They are on top of Celeste.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Like a giant car crash, the loudness, the surprisingness, the brightness of all the colors. I'm not this. Standing next to the salt staircase. This is my mammal brain.

But, I'm afraid. Will it hurt, Rachel says. It is her turn. (Yes) Leopard, soft sunken part –held in her own cloth, appendages to her appearance. The girls are coming down the mountain with milk chocolate hearts. They are saying the most miraculous things. They grab each other's hands and sing (Yes it will.)

The unhuman nodded and positioned the hammer over her skull and cracked it.

The stars go their own way, full of heinous amounts of light, frond-like light that slowly fills in every last darkness, seeping a salmon-colored paint. That slow envelopment! 🌀



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Green Martyrdom

Paul Edward Costa

Do you remember the day you travelled to the island?
I don't remember the day I travelled to the island.
I dress in my black suit and go there instead.

I don't go there.

I go to the island's broken foggy remnants.

I don't move.

I wander into the impressions left on my mind by little rivers. The little rivers streamed across the grasslands covering the island. Each tiny stream grew fatter until the web of them covering the isle became a low flood soaking the ground. Why? Water fell viciously from the sky. It washed over my face. *Is this rain?* Dainty fairy droplets didn't fall. Fat blobbed aquatic bombs crashed down on everything in a constant wave. In my black suit I stood again on the long dock. My cerebral boat disappeared into the mist. I adjusted the MSG-91 sniper rifle slung across my back and ventured inland.

I walked along the coastal road. First, a row of sixteen houses lay before the rolling green hills. Fifteen stood there, quaintly run down. The sixteenth existed only as a black skeletal frame burned hollow. I went inside to investigate. No signs indicated they set fire to it anticipating my arrival. Moss grew from the ash inside. A pale shirtless young man in beige pants sat at a wooden table with a manual typewriter on it. A nude young Celtic woman came in, wrapped her arms around him from behind and kissed his cheek. She left him to his work. They paid no attention to me. I looked at the page in his typewriter. Its first sentence read:

"I wander into the impressions left on my mind by little rivers..."

Who would write such fanciful delusions? I strangled him with my garrotte wire. He kicked over the table then went still. The girl lay naked on a mound of hay in

the corner. She slept on her back. She held a spread out impressionistic pose. Her long waves of red hair mixed with the straw. My vision blurred when I placed my hands over her mouth. I kept them there until her soft breathing stopped. For some reason my face felt wet again. I wiped my eyes and the confusion went away. I left the ruined house.

I saw waist high walls crisscrossing the hilly landscape ahead of me. They divided the fields of long abandoned farms into geometric shapes. Green hills in front of me slowly ascended into the low gray sky.

The priest rode up to me in his dark rusted tractor. I got in the cart hitched up behind it. I sat cross legged. We pattered off through the hills. He turned around and yelled to me over the sounds of his the engine:

"I just came from that heathen's house. He wouldn't even *pretend* to pray at his dying mother's bedside..." he pursed his lips and angrily shook his head.

I stared at him while he spoke.

We stopped at a ridge overlooking some ruins. I got out of the tractor's cart and stood at the edge. The priest stayed at the wheel. He sighed and looked off through the sheets of water falling from the gray sky. I dug the stock of my rifle into the soft grassy ground, held the barrel and leaned on it while I looked down. My eyes wandered. A roofless chapel stood with half a cross over its doorway and weeds growing out of every crack. Other structures lay around it. What else? How about a hill covered with a ring of trees? Yes, that sounded good. The soft curves of the hill made me feel free. Next to it rested the foundations of a rectangular building.

"What's that?" I ask out loud rhetorically.

The priest answered "the old guard slept there."

"Yes, barracks," I said in response. I liked the sound of that. I liked how rigid those foundations were.

Finally at the edge of the village lay a circular crater sunk into the ground. It looked too big for cooking. It also didn't match the shape of any other building so it couldn't be an empty foundation. Anything could have been there.

Anything could be there still.

A sudden wave of nausea and vague illness passed over me. I felt woozy. Then my eyes glazed over. I found myself thinking: *is this all there is?* The small broken works of stonemasons stretched off in every direction. Between it all grew solid even green grass. I hunched over the rifle and held it like a cane. Every one of my joints stiffened. I felt old. Eventually I found myself tapping the butt of my sniper rifle on the soft grass in a complex beat. I imagined a small theatrical monster grinning from ear to ear behind a thick beard amidst the ruins. No matter what it did its eyes remained fixed on me. It walked into the church skipping for no reason. Then it stormed out muttering over its shoulder. Next it approached the tree crowned hill with wide eyes and both its arms outstretched. Inside those trees the little monster scrunched its face and shook with concentration until its soft face gained permanent lines. In a daze it wandered off the hill ignoring all the blobs of water falling from above. At the ruins of the barracks it started to walk in routines, stamping out flowers underfoot. At that moment I found myself projecting an intense hatred onto the little creature. I couldn't imagine how it might end up at the empty crater but I hoped it would get there and find a way to construct something in the void.

When I looked up I saw the far coast rising gradually into a seaside cliff. A Celtic stone castle stood on that risen edge. My joints loosened. I un-slung my rifle and moved forewords. I remembered my mission. Or I decided what to do. I wasn't sure which.

With great effort I jogged uphill to the castle. My feet pounded over little rocky patches growing out of the grass. I felt amazed that my boots held together. I moved through the droplets of water beating down from the sky and washing down the hill. At the top I slowed down, took the MSG-91 off safety and looked around. No one remained in the fragments of this old castle. I couldn't be too careful. It was two thousand years since the civilization fell. I crept under shaky stone archways, around lonely sections of wall and through roofless chambers. Finally I ended up at an empty window right on the edge of land. It overlooked a sheer cliff below and the raging ocean beyond. I leaned over. In the tall cliff underneath me lay a massive black cavern. Into it the coastal waters stormed and blew. A great hollowness occupied the ground beneath my feet. A gentle chill touched

my spine. Ahead lay a vast ocean until the horizon. Waves crashed all over its murky surface. They looked like the palpitations of something below. I couldn't see land across it but I knew home sat thousands of kilometres over the water. The edge of this island represented the closet I could ever get to it. I put the bi-pod of my sniper rifle on the empty window sill and gazed through its powerful scope.

Across the ocean I saw a version of myself wearing a gray suit in a house's garden. Over there my gray clad self sat at a laptop on an iron table. From my vantage point in this



seaside castle I scanned that garden through my rifle's scope, looking for approaching demons. They might arrive shortly to attack my gray suited self. In this Celtic castle my mind's eye pictured an image of the demons quietly surrounding my oblivious gray suited self in the yard. Now I know why I came with a rifle to the edge of this wet green island. I waited for the demons to approach my home across the ocean. I zoomed in my rifle's lens on the laptop my gray clad self sat at thousands of kilometres away. The first sentence on that screen read

"Do you remember the day you travelled to the island?"

I looked up from the rifle, saw the blank horizon past the ocean, then looked back through the sniper scope. Again I saw my gray suited self alone in the garden filled with nightshade and stone angels, working at a laptop on the wrought iron table. Here in my drenched black suit I thought for longer than could have been necessary. Sight and awareness connected me to him across the ocean yet I never felt so alone. I fired. *This must be rain I feel on my face.* Every set stone and leafy plant both on this island and in the garden shifted slightly as the shot cracked across the hills and echoed over the ocean. 6



PAUL EDWARD COSTA has been writing seriously for six years. He's previously published poetry and fiction in *Yesteryear Fiction*, *Timber*, and the York University college magazines *MacMedia* and *The Flying Walrus*. At York University Paul earned a Specialized Honours BA in History and a BA in Education. He currently lives just outside of Toronto in Mississauga. He also teaches high school with the Peel District School Board.



Baruch Cohen: NYC's Jumping Rat

Richard Kostelanetz

Complying with the request of a friend of mine, who wrote me from the Far West, whose demands I find irresistible, I called on good-natured, garrulous old Sholem Aleichem, and inquired after my friend's friend, Jean-Jacques Cory, as I was requested to do, and I hereunto append the result. I have a lurking suspicion that Jean-Jacques Cory might be a myth— that my friend never knew such a personage and that he only conjectured that, if I asked old Sholem about him, I would remind him of his infamous Jacques Cory. Upon hearing that legendary name, he would go to work and bore me nearly to death with some infernal reminiscence of him so long and tedious it should be useless to me. If that was his design, it certainly succeeded.

Finding Sholem Aleichem dozing comfortably by the electric fire of an old dilapidated tavern near City Hall, I noticed that, thought fat and bald-headed, he displayed an expression of winning gentleness and simplicity complimenting his tranquil countenance. Arousing to his feet, he bid me good-day. I told him a friend of mine had commissioned me to make some inquiries about a cherished boyhood companion then named Jean-Jacques Cory, now known as Rev. Jean-Jacques Cory, a young minister of the Gospel. My distant friend had heard that JJC, as we'll call him, was once residing in lower Manhattan. I added that, if Mr. Aleichem could tell me any thing about this Jean-Jacques Cory, I would feel under many obligations to him.

This wizened Sholem Aleichem backed me into a corner

and blockaded me there with his chair. Then sitting me down, he reeled off the monotonous narrative that follows. Never smiling, never frowning, he never changed his voice from the gentle-flowing key to which he tuned the initial sentence; he never betrayed the slightest suspicion of enthusiasm. All through the interminable narrative there ran a vein of impressive earnestness and sincerity, which showed me plainly that, so far from his imagining that there was any thing ridiculous or funny about his story, he regarded it as a truly serious matter and admired its two heroes as men of transcendent genius in finesse. To me, the spectacle— of a man drifting serenely along through such a queer yarn without ever smiling—was exquisitely absurd. As I said before, I asked him to tell me what he knew of Rev. Jean-Jacques Cory, and he replied as follows. I let him go on in his own way, and never interrupted him once:

There was a fellow here once by the name of Jacques Cory, in the winter of '49 or may be it was the spring of '50 I don't recollect exactly, somehow, though what makes me think it was one or the other is, because I remember snow on the streets when he first came to New York. Any way, he was the most curious man about always betting on any thing that turned up ever you see, if he could get anybody to bet on the other side; and if he couldn't, he'd change sides. Anyway, what suited the other man would suit him just so he got a bet; he was satisfied. But still he was lucky, uncommon lucky; he'd most always come out the winner. As he was always ready and laying for a chance, there

couldn't be no solitary thing mentioned but that fellow offered to bet on it and take any side he pleased, as I was just telling you. If there was a horse-race, you'd find him flush, or you'd find him busted at the end of it; if there was a dog-fight, he'd bet on it; if there was a cat-fight, he'd bet on it; if there was a chicken-fight, he'd bet on it. Why, if there was two birds setting on a branch, he would bet you which one would fly first; or if there was a stump-speaker in City Hall park, he would be there regularly to bet on Reverend Jones, whom he judged to be the best exhorter about here, and so Jones was, too, and a good man. If he even seen a cockroach start to go anywhere, he would bet you how long it would take him to get wherever he was going to. If you took him up, he would follow that roach to Mexico but what he would find out where he was bound for and how long he was on the road. Lots of the guys here has seen that Smiley, and can tell you about him. Why, it never made any difference to him he would bet on any thing, the damnest feller. Reverend Jones's wife laid very sick once, for a good while, and it seemed as if they weren't going to save her; but one morning Jones comes in, and Cory asked how she was, and Jones said she was considerable better, thank the Lord for his infinite mercy. Coming on so smart that, with the blessing of Providence, she'd get well yet; and Cory, before he reconsidered his habits, says, "Well, I'll risk two-and-a-half grand that she don't, anyway."

This here Cory had a mare, the boys called her the fifteen-minute nag, but that was only in fun, you know, because, of course, she was faster than that. He used to win money on that horse. Since she was so slow and always had the asthma, or the distemper, or the consumption, or something of that kind, they used to give her two or three hundred yards headstart, and then pass her under way. However, always at the fag-end of the race she'd get excited and desperate, and come cavorting and straddling up, and scattering her legs around limber, sometimes in the air, and sometimes out to one side amongst the fences, and kicking up m-o-r-e dust, and raising m-o-r-e racket with her coughing and sneezing and blowing her nose and always fetch up at the stand just about a neck ahead, as near as you could measure it down.

And Cory had a little small bull pup, that to look at him you'd think he wasn't worth a cent, whose only purpose was to set around and look ornery, and lay for a chance to steal something. But as soon as money was put up on him, he was a different dog; his underjaw would begin to stick out like the forecastle of a steamboat, and his teeth would uncover, and shine savage like furnaces. And a dog might tackle him, bully-rag him, bite him, and throw him over his shoulder two or three times. Schmucl Goldstein was the pup's name.

Schmucl Goldstein would never let on but what he was beaten and hadn't expected nothing else and the bets being doubled and doubled on the other side all the time, till the money was all up. Then all of a sudden that Schmucl would grab that other dog by the joint of his hind leg and hold onto it, not chew, you understand, but only jest grip and hang on until they thronged up the sponge, if it was a year. Cory always came out winner on that pup until he faced a dog once that didn't have no hind legs, because they'd been sawed off by a circular saw. When the thing had gone along far enough, and the money was all bet up, and he come to make a snatch for his pet bolt, he saw in a minute how he'd

been imposed on, and how the other dog had him in the door, so to speak, and he appeared surprised, and then he looked sort of discouraged, and didn't try any more to win the fight, and so he got shucked out bad. He give Cory a look, as much as to say his heart was broke, and it was his fault, for putting up a dog that hadn't no hind legs for him to take bolt of, which was his main dependence in a fight, and then he limped off a piece and laid down and died. A good pup was that Schmucl Goldstein, who would have made a name for himself if he'd lived, for the stuff was in him. He had genius I know it, because he hadn't had no opportunities to speak of, and it don't stand to reason that a dog could make such a fight as he could under those circumstances, if he had no talent. It always makes me feel sorry when I think how that last fight of his turned out.

Well, this here Cory had in his stable rat-tarriers and chicken cocks and tom-cats, and all of them kind of things, until you couldn't rest, and you couldn't fetch nothing for him to bet on but he'd match you. Catching a rat one day, he took him home and said he calculated to educate him; and so he did nothing for three months but sit in his basement and teach that rat to jump. And you bet you he did teach him, too. He'd give him a little punch from behind, and the next minute you'd see that rat whirling in the air like a doughnut see him turn one summersault, or may be a couple, if he got a good start, and come down flat-footed and alright, like a cat. He got the rat up so in the matter of catching mice, and kept him in practice so constant, that he'd nail a mouse every time as far as he could see him. Smiley said all a rat wanted was education to do most any thing and I believe him.

Why, I've seen him set Baruch Cohen down here on this floor. Baruch Cohen was the name of the rat and sing out, "Fly, Barry, fly!" and quicker than you could wink, he'd spring straight up, and snake a mouse off of the counter there, and flop down on the floor again as solid as a gob of mud, and fall to scratching the side of his head with his hind foot as indifferent as if he hadn't no idea he'd been doing any more than any frog might do. You never see a rat so modest and straightforward as he was, for all he was so gifted. And at fair and square jumping on a dead level, he could get over more ground at one straddle than any animal of his breed you ever see. Jumping on a dead level was his strong suit, you understand; and when it come to that, Cory would ante up money on him as long as he had a red. Cory was monstrously proud of his rat, and well he might be, for fellers that had traveled and been everywhere, all said he lorded over any other rat that ever they'd see.

Well, keeping this beast in a little lattice box, Cory used to fetch him down town sometimes and lay for a bet. One day a feller, a stranger in the park, came across him with his box, and says: "What might it be that you've got in the box?"

And Cory says, sorter indifferent like, "It might be a parrot, or it might be a canary, may be, but it ain't. It's only just a rat."

And the feller took it, and looked at it careful, and turned it round this way and that, and says, "Humm, so it is. Well, what's he good for?"

"Well," Cory says, easy and careless, "He's good enough for one thing, I should judge he can outjump any rat in New York City."

Taking the box again, the feller took another long, particular look and give it back to Cory, saying, very deliberately, “Well, I don’t see no points about that rat that’s any better than any other rat.”

“Maybe you don’t,” Cory says. “Maybe you understand rats, and maybe you don’t understand them; maybe you’ve had experience, and maybe you aren’t only an amateur, as it were. Anyways, I’ve got my opinion, and I’ll risk forty dollars that he can outjump any rat in New York City.”

And the feller studied a minute, and then says, kinder sad like, “Well, I’m only a stranger here, and I ain’t got no rat; but if I had a rat, I’d bet you.”

And then Smiley says, “That’s all right that’s all right if you’ll hold my box a minute, I’ll go and get you a rat.” And so the feller took the box, and put up his forty dollars along with Cory’s, and sat down to wait.

So he sat there a good while thinking and thinking to himself, and then he got the rat out and prized his mouth open and took a teaspoon and filled him full of quail shot filled him pretty near up to his chin and set him on the floor. Cory, he went into the sewers and slopped around in the muck for a long time, and finally he caught a rat, fetched him up, gave him to this feller, and says: “Now, if you’re ready, set him alongside of Barry, with his forepaws just even with Barry, and I’ll give the word.” Then he says, “One two three jump!” and him and the feller touched up the rats from behind, and the new rat hopped off. Barry give a heave, hoisting up his shoulders so like a prizefighter, but it wasn’t no use he couldn’t budge. He was planted as solid as an anvil, and he couldn’t no more stir than if he was anchored out. A good deal surprised, Cory was disgusted

too, but he didn’t have any idea what’s the matter.

The feller took the money and started away; and when he was going out at the door, he sort of jerked his thumb over his shoulders this way at Barry, and says again, very deliberately, “Well, I don’t see no points about that rat that’s any better than any other rat.”

Cory stood scratching his head and looking down at Barry a long time. At last he says, “I do wonder what in the nation that rat threw off for I wonder if there ain’t something the matter with him; he appears to look mighty baggy somehow.” And he caught Barry by the nap of the neck, and lifted him up and says, “Why, blame my cats, if he don’t weigh five pound!” and turned him upside down, and he belched out a double handful of bullet shot. And then he saw how it was, and he was the maddest man he set the rat down and took out after that feller, but he never caught him. And...

[Here Sholem Aleichem heard his name called from the front yard, and got up to see what was wanted.] And turning to me as he moved away, he said: “Just set where you are, stranger, and rest easy I ain’t going to be gone a second.”

But, by your leave, I did not think that a continuation of the history of the enterprising vagabond Jacques Cory would be likely to afford me much information concerning the Rev. Jean-Jacques Cory, and so I started away.

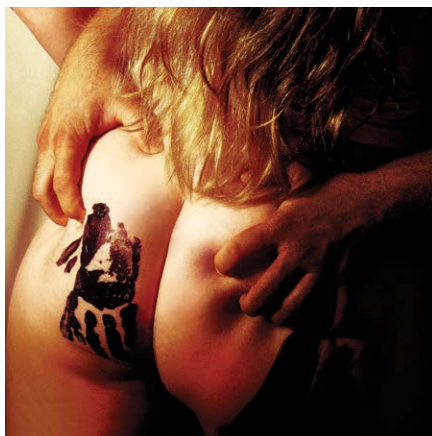
At the door I met the sociable Aleichem returning, and he button-holed me and recommenced: “Well, this here Cory had a yellor one-eyed cow that didn’t have no tail, only jest a short stump like a banana, and “

“Oh! hang Cory and his afflicted cow!” I muttered, good-naturedly. Bidding the old gentleman good-day, I departed.



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*, 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





How to Make Love Without Feeling

Sarah Ann Winn

He is in the garage, working on his car. All three propane heaters combat the January chill. The car is on jack stands, immobilized and helpless, while he peers into the maze of pipes and wires, using them as objects of divination. He uses this same talent as a parlor trick at parties. He asks for a volunteer willing to turn out their pockets. He cups his hands and pushes everything close together as if he's preparing to build a fire on any convenient half bar, but instead he levels his eyes at the small arrangement. He tilts his head close to it. He listens intently. From that brief sound check, he predicts how the party will go for that person. This frequent séance has earned him a reputation worth having. He never tires of it, or of his time in the garage. For hours, he tightens and peers, then loosens and peers further at the tangle of car guts above him. He hums John Denver to himself, but never whole songs. They make a fortune for him, his Mountain Mammals ... leaving on a jet plane... they almost always make her high...

Every so often, he reaches down to absently wipe his greasy hands on the bottom of his shirt, adding to the jungle leaf enmeshed design. I can smell the grease on cold stone. All of his shirts fade into this oily jungle in the end. The one eyed cat prowls around at his ankles, looking for a handout. Imagine its purr. It does not really want a caress. When it was new, this cat might have been priced as purebred, billed

as 'tortoise shell,' or 'long haired.' In a matted tangle of feral badges, it is neither, but could have once been, before too many naps in garage oil stains and dusty corners have obscured its past. This cat is incognito to hobbyist fortune tellers, and its motives are always impure. Was that the sound of occasional machinery, of metal on metal?

No? Good. I'm in this new place. The curtain blows furiously above the heating vent. I find this room too quiet. The man next to me sighs, and turns to spoon me. He lays his hand on my thigh. ↻



SARAH ANN WINN lives in Fairfax Virginia. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Apeiron Review*, *[d]ecember*, *Flycatcher*, *Lost River Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Massachusetts Review* and *Rappahannock Review*, among others. She will be the guest editor for *Stirring* (sundresspublications.com/stirring/) in September, 2014. She will be a feature reader at the Evil Grin reading series in Annapolis, Maryland on September 13, 2014. Visit her at bluebirdwords.com or follow her @blueaisling on Twitter.



Because of Pictures

Chris Fradkin

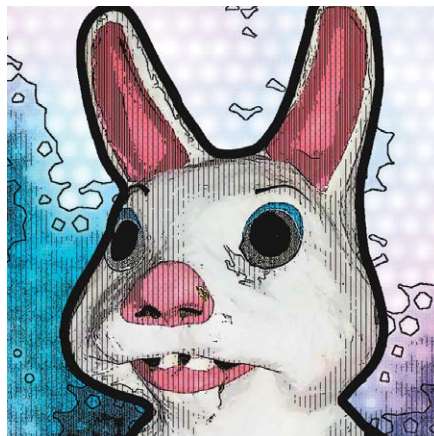
“But how do you know?” she said—we were walking the embankment.
“Because,” I said, “the images sustain.”
“The images?”
“Well, there’s the comet,” I said, “that comes in from the side. It’s peripheral—we barely know it’s there. Then—whoom. It’s full force right in front of us. Consuming us within its field of vision.”
“The comet does?” she said.
“Yes; it’s a picture for our love—”
“It’s a metaphor, the comet is?”
“Provided that we see it—”
“Before it passes out of sight?”
“Exactly; that’s my point. And there’s the gyroscope; there is.”
“Yes; the gyroscope is spinning.”
“Yes—”
“I know this one—” she cut in. Her lips rehearsed the words.
“We must keep the surface steady,” she said out loud.
“It’s a metaphor, as well?”
“Yes; for our love.”
“A spinning top?”
“Yes—”
“We must keep the surface steady underneath.” She stressed the neath.

We walked along the river bank in silence.
“And the flame.” I grabbed another. While the comet flew, the top spun.
“Is infinite while it lasts,’ the little poet says.”
We walked three steps and then she turned to me.
“Infinito . . . enquanto dure,’ so the poet says.”¹
She laid her two arms limp upon my shoulders.
“Minha querida,” I said to her, in my hapless Portuguese.
“My heart is filled with reasons why I love you.”
“But your brain is filled with pictures—”
“Yes—”
“And metaphors,” she stammered.
I held her for some minutes in the shade.
A train went by; some children cried. Her eyes were far away.
Her forehead wrinkles told me that she wished that she had known—much earlier what she was getting into.
“Let’s go home,” she told me, finally. We turned and headed back.
On the way, she asked me twice about the gyro. 🌀

¹“Infinito enquanto dure” from *Soneto de Fidelidade*—Vinicius de Moraes.



CHRIS FRADKIN is a former beet farmer now living in Brazil. His prose and poetry have appeared in *Monkeybicycle*, *Thrice Fiction* and *Thrush Poetry Journal*. His songs have been performed by *Fergie*, *The Plimsouls*, and *The Flamin’ Groovies*. And his Emmy-award-winning sound editorial has graced *The X-Files*. *Because of Pictures* is from *Beijos From the Other Sphere*.



Rabbit and The Professor

Jon Sindell

The Professor shelved cans while Rabbit set cereal the next aisle over. “Hey Rabbit,” The Professor yelled at 3 a.m. “Will you get me a Coke, please?” The Rabbit raced off on flapping clown feet, raced back stumble bumble with a can of Coke.

Erik, the bullet-headed night-crew chief, glared. “Why can’t Moe Ron get his own damn Coke?”

“Ah,” said The Rabbit. “See, The Professor figured it’s much slower shelving cans than boxes, so it’s smarter for me to go get it than him. Right, Professor?”

The Professor was hopping to avoid the brown foam gushing over his fist and onto his boots. His abashed smile withered under Erik’s reproach: “For the last time, doofus—Captain Crunch ain’t organic.”

The Professor slapped his drippy head, clamped beaver teeth to his lower lip. Rabbit whipped off his bandanna and wiped The Professor’s apron and hand.

“You guys should gay marry,” Eric snickered.

Rabbit’s ears burned red, but he didn’t speak. Erik bowed away laughing. “I should have popped him,” said Rabbit, pounding his fist. The Professor slung his arm around Rabbit. “That was a nice compliment he gave us, Rabbit.”

“You’re right, Professor. It just means we’re good guys.”

That weekend, the Night Stockers faced the Day Crew in a Shirts versus Skins full-court hoops grudge match. “Look, we’re the good guys!” The Professor told Rabbit. “We’re all wearing white.”

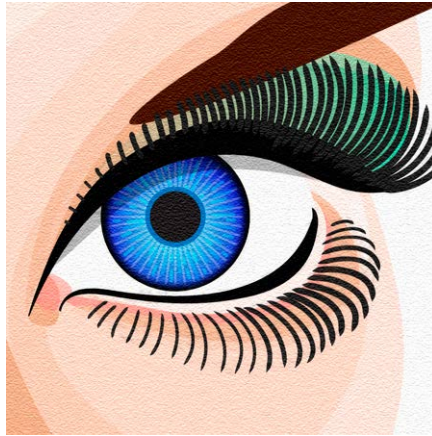
Rabbit nodded, but his mind and eyes were on Rick Forman: The Needle. The Needle had gone to high school with the pair, but while they were apt to be stock clerks forever, he was a fraternity president on his way to B-school. Rabbit watched The Needle’s back muscles ripple as he warmed up with bank shots. “Hey there, Rick,” Rabbit murmured sociably. The Needle flashed his old cutting grin, and Rabbit sensed that behind the grin was remembrance of the origin of nicknames: the rabbity shaking when Rabbit was bullied, the science teacher who’d dubbed his most hapless student *The Professor*. “You’ve crawled out of the darkness,” said The Needle.

“Yeah,” said Rabbit, “watch out for us night crawlers.” He thought the line clever, but wasn’t sure why.

The Night Crew held their own for a while. The Professor turned the wrong way, accidentally setting a screen that freed Erik for a basket. “Brilliant, Professor!” Rabbit hollered, sneaking a nervous glance at The Needle. Rabbit’s big moment came when he grabbed a loose ball and plodded up the court and laid it in as three Skins overtook him. “Super fast, Rabbit!” The Professor cheered. But when Rabbit started back up the court glancing at a courtesy clerk he had a crush on, he bounced off The Needle and fell back onto the blacktop, and sat staring up at The Needle’s leer. He thought he should jump up and smash his mean grin; but he sat there consoling himself that he wasn’t shaking, and that was something. 🐰



JON SINDELL is a humanities tutor and a writing coach for business professionals. His flash fiction collection, *The Roadkill Collection*, is scheduled to be released by Big Table Publishing in late 2014. Jon’s short fiction has appeared in over sixty publications. He curates the Rolling Writers reading series in San Francisco.



The Mudd Club

Larissa Shmailo

*Never show dismay. Never show resentment.
A single flicker of the eyes could give you away.*
—Orwell, 1984

*I ate it all
And spit it out –
I did it my way.*
—Paul Anka

Nora was just leaving the bursar's office when she ran into Cathy, the girl who had been her lab partner in Physics for Poets, her History of Science course. Cathy told Nora that she was in graduate school, working on an M.A. in history.

"I guess I'll be looking for work," Nora replied.

"You know," Cathy giggled, "I live with this guy. He runs this house."

"Could I see it?" Nora asked, curious.

Cathy got her M.A. that year; Nora got a job.

Nora had an interview with Cathy's boyfriend, the pimp, that same afternoon. The pimp was an unattractive, well-spoken man, a Yale graduate who had been to business school; he managed the whorehouse for the owners, two minor mobsters who owned the Jay's Pizza next door. The pimp liked Nora's Ivy league background; telling her it was part of the job requirement, he asked her a series of increasingly obscene questions ("To judge your reactions," he explained) and slept with her. He hired her as a receptionist.

Nora worked from noon until eight when most of the girls came in. She was surprised to find that most of the tricks were regular guys; many were young and single, some were even attractive. The women were also average, attractive but not exceptionally so, more like secretaries than whores.

The whorehouse, or escort service—several of the

women took umbrage at being called whores—was called Friends with Style and advertised in *Cue*, the *New Yorker* and on the classical music station. Nora called herself April Easter; her phony British accent brought in business. The breathers, men who called the house to jerk off, always asked for April.

Nora couldn't remember when she took her first trick, but it wasn't long after she began working the phones. She got an average of three tricks a day, blow jobs, mostly. Some guy called Nora the best blow job in New York and it stuck. The Yalie pimp used it as a marketing strategy: Best Blow Job in New York.

Nora liked blow jobs; except for the very young men, it got things over with quickly, the trick came after five minutes, sometimes with difficulty, but often not, and the rest of the hour was drinking and talking. When she wasn't with the tricks, Nora drank and answered the phones.

The pimp liked Nora; she brought a middle class attitude to her work that was unusual in the profession, coming in on time and staying as long as she was needed. She was good about coming in even when she wasn't scheduled, when he needed an extra girl; she even came in on Sundays. She drank, but most of the other women drank too, and sniffed coke as well, which Nora didn't do. He took to leaving her in charge of collecting money from the other girls he wasn't around. Nora was pleased at her management role.

When Nora told Nick what she was doing, he kissed her on the forehead. "You've come up in the world," he said. Before long, they announced their engagement. Roger moved out, and Nora moved in.

Nora usually collected her money soon after midnight, and rushed from work to meet Nick so they could go to a club and dance. They liked to go out, to discover new places, to meet interesting people. They were good in public, generous, fun-loving, unconventional. And they liked to drink, and drank well, they thought. The people they stood drinks for agreed.

They became regulars at Hurrah's, where they dominated the huge dance floor; they took friends who couldn't afford it or who couldn't get in to Studio 54 and the Peppermint Lounge; they drank with the band at the Void.

Nora felt like a star with Nick: it seemed as though the people in the clubs were watching them, as though the disco lights were trained on them, as though everywhere they went, their own personal follow spot went too. They were Nick and Nora, sophisticated slummers, artists and actors, punks, writers, and rock-and-rollers. They were professional New York bohemians.

Nora often left Nick at an after-hours club and came straight back to work, wearing the same clothes as the day before. One of the regulars, a truck driver who wore only the best lingerie himself, chided Nora about her appearance.

"Fix yourself up, April!" he would say. "Buy a new dress. And you know," he added, scrutinizing her pores, "...a facial wouldn't hurt, either."

Nora ignored him. He never took her anyway. Of all the tricks, it was the tidy ones Nora found the most repellent.

Nora met Chrisis at Dystopia; she recognized her from a spread in a men's magazine on "she-males." A singer, Chrisis supported herself and her heroin habit by working as a Geisha girl at a men's club.

"Yeah, I work as a geisha too," Nora told her.

They got on pretty well, sharing belts from Chrisis' hip flask, and getting young men to buy them drinks and drugs. Chrisis's attention span, limited by heroin, Tuinal and scotch, only allowed her to speak and listen in one-liners. She was known for her aphoristic wit, and was lionized and invited everywhere—to Dali's dinners for artists and the poor, to exclusive clubs and the theater. Nick decided she was the best transvestite in New York, and took Nancy Tarter, the Port-O-Pot heiress, to see her.

Chrisis had just finished her Dietrich set, looking lovely in tails and black tie. After the performance, Nancy came up to her and asked, disingenuously, how her voice got so low.

Chrisis tossed her lovely head. "I had rheumatic fever as a child," she flounced.

"Don't I get the most interesting people for us?" Nick exclaimed to Nora proudly.

Nora spent many slow evenings with Billy, a good natured Southern girl who drank bourbon like water. Easily the most beautiful woman in the house, Billy worked at a bakery during the day; each night she brought buns and pastries to the house for the women.

Billy worked, she told Nora, because of her boyfriend, who was pressuring her to give up her day job and work at the house full time; it turned him on, she said, to know that other men desired her. Nora guessed the cash turned him on more. But Billy didn't make much money compared to the other girls, even when she started coming in as much as Nora. When they came in, the tricks ignored Billy and took big muscular Cleopatra, or chunky Reba, or wiry, hook-nosed Francesca, or flat-chested Claire.

"She's too beautiful," Nora told the pimp. "She's exactly what the men say they want on the phone: model-type, centerfold, green eyes, long hair, long legs, 36C breasts. Like

they come here for feminine beauty. Now if she let them tie her up, she'd make a fortune."

The tricks always asked for a girl with long hair. Nora cut hers as soon as she started working.

When it was slow, the women waited for business, drinking and talking. They turned on the radio and danced, talking about their tricks, about money, about their dreams. They danced, gyrating, clapping and laughing. Nora almost wished no one would come.

"Around here, there's no such thing as premature ejaculation. Believe me..."

"With the young ones you just have to do it again."

"You can suck them off."

"I'd rather fuck."

"The less time they're inside me the better. The way some of them hold you is frightening."

"Sam sweats."

"He doesn't like me."

"He talks too much."

"I'd rather listen to them talk than touch them."

Nora downed her drink. "As long as they don't hold my hand, I don't care. Or ask to see me on the outside."

Black women didn't make much money at Friends with Style, but as Cleopatra said, it beat cleaning toilets. Cleopatra herself made good money because of her specialty, which was wrestling. Huge men, red-headed Irish cops and big truck drivers, came in to wrestle with Cleopatra, famous for her leg holds.

Coming into the room, flashing her day's earning at the other girls, Cleopatra grinned at Nora.

"There is one line, darling, that every man, no matter how cynical or sophisticated he may be, no matter how intelligent or worldly, will always, always, always believe: 'Baby, you are the best!' Bank on it, girl!"

One night the pimp needed an outcall to the Bronx and told Cleopatra to go. Cleopatra refused: an outcall like that wasn't worth it between the travel time and the cab fare. The Yalie pimp fired her. Nora heard about it later. It was strange: Nora didn't even protest. Of course, no one, including Cleopatra, expected her to. At another time, Nora thought as she drank her scotch, she would have said something.

No one ever found out what happened to Cleopatra, née Shekinah. Someone said she was working at another escort service, but, nobody knew for sure.

Plato's Retreat was formerly the Ansonia Baths, a place for gay men. Now it was strictly heterosexual—no single men were allowed. At the door, Nora signed membership papers swearing that she was not prostituting herself, but had come to the underground cavern for her personal pleasure.

Disco lights flashed on people dancing in various stages of undress, some naked and some shy and still wearing their towels. Nora positioned herself by the Olympic size pool, ostensibly to swim but really to stay close to the buffet tables. Every hooker in the joint was pressing round the chafing dishes, trying to gulp down a sandwich before going into the mattress room.

Nora couldn't open her eyes the day after Plato's. They were sticky, sealed shut by some crusty goo, and swollen red. Pink eye. The pimp excused her from work. Hepatitis, Nora reflected, gonorrhea, syphilis, tuberculosis couldn't stop a hooker from working, but conjunctivitis or acne could put you right out of business.

"One way... or another... I'm gonna getcha...I'm gonna getcha, getcha, getcha, getcha. . .One way...or another... I'll getcha, I'll getcha!"

Nick passed Nora the amyl nitrate as they danced. Poppers sickened Nora, but she used them anyway. Nick liked to pretend that the vials were full of cocaine; he even wrote a poem that began "We danced until our noses hurt..."

Nora followed Nick and Nancy to Studio 54. Today, the cool people were congregating on the balcony; yesterday it had been the side room. The chairs had been removed and people lay sprawled on the wide carpeted tiers of the balcony floor. Nancy sat close to Nora. "I don't really like disco," she commented, offering Nora a joint.

She probably wants to sleep with me, Nora thought. Just to say she did it with a woman. She's going to have to get me very drunk. Nora took a long drag off the joint and put her arm around Nancy's shoulder. "Buy me a drink, toots," she said, winking and squeezing Nancy's tit.

Nick looked embarrassed.

Nora flagged down a waiter in satin track shorts and ordered a Bloody Mary.

"Not available," the waiter informed her.

Nora hated the waiter immediately. "Why not, you mincing fascist?" she asked.

The waiter didn't blink. "The bar can't make it, miss," he answered, looking over Nora's forehead.

Nora hated him still more. "You already said that, tiny wick," she growled. "Why can't they make one?"

"They don't stock tomato juice."

Nora leaned over Nancy and yelled at Nick "Ya never take us anywhere nice anymore, Nicky..." Nick hushed her angrily.

The little bourjoy really takes this place seriously, Nora thought. I must have hurt his working class feelings.

Nick was conferring seriously with Nancy. Nora panicked. I'd better apologize, she thought. But before she could say anything, Nick and Nancy had left. Nora wandered the club aimlessly. A thin man, eyes glittering, approached her.

"Five hundred dollars," she said, half-joking.

The man nodded okay. A gold coke spoon dangled from a heavy gold chain around his neck.

"I'm selling sex, not drugs," Nora cautioned him.

"Same thing," the man replied.

When she got home that night, Nick slapped her, hard, across the face. Stunned, Nora could do no better than to

half-heartedly throw tomato juice on his laundry.

"My poet's shirt," Nick screamed, pushing the stained shirt in her face "You stupid sloppy cow!" Nick began beating her in earnest. He beat her hard on the face, in the stomach, trying hard to hurt her. Nora was surprised at the force he put into hitting her. "You touch like a spider," he said with real hatred in his voice. "Haven't you ever noticed that I don't let you touch me unless I'm stinking drunk?"

When Nora came to the next day, Nick was gone. She drank instant coffee made with tap water as she dressed and smoked a joint, as she always did to help her hangover; in the cab on the way to the house she smoked another.

The pimp leered briefly at her and got down to business: who was in, who was out, who owed money. He left her covering the house. She was alone when "Dennis," the two-o'clock appointment, came in.

"You gonna be nice to me?" the red-faced man asked, flashing a badge. He was breathing slowly.

Nora knew immediately that the cop was crazy. She stood paralyzed, frightened to the point of emptiness.

He's going to kill me, she reflected. Torture me first. Why don't I scream?

The cop moved toward, her.

"Don't do this," Nora said. She looked at him, hopeless.

The cop took her hand and put it on his crotch. She felt the thick metal of his policeman's special.

The cop pinched her cheek. "You keep flirting with death, baby," he said as he left, "you're going to get a date..."

When it was slow, Nora told Billy the plots of Russian novels. They had just finished *The Brothers Karamazov*, which Billy enjoyed, and were now starting *Anna Karenina*.

"Anna is a brilliant woman," Nora told Billy, who was lying on the floor with a bottle of bourbon between her knees. "Most people don't realize that. She can do anything, except speak up for herself." Nora reached over and filled her tumbler from Billy's bottle. "While she's shackled up with Vronsky, she writes children's books, she studies architecture, follows local politics; anything Count Vronsky does, she does too, and better. She even handles horses better."

The phone rang. Billy sat up.

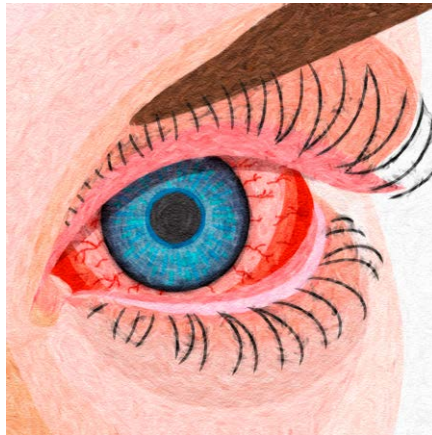
"Friends with Style", Nora answered. She listened into the receiver for a few moments, then hung up. "Breather," she told Billy. Billy lay back down.

"So, why can't she talk about herself?" Billy asked.

Nora shrugged "Never learned. The men in the book do it for her. At one point, Dolly—that's Stiva's wife—tries to talk to her about what's happening in her life and Anna just blanks. She starts to talk a little but then it gets onto abortion"

"They had abortions then?" Billy asked.

"What do you think?" Nora replied. "Anna may have had one by this point in the novel, or may be planning to; it's very strongly suggested. The thing is, she can't talk about



any of this stuff, not Vronsky, not leaving her husband; she just shuts down."

"So what happened to her?" Billy asked.

Before Nora could answer, the doorbell rang.

"Coming," Billy called gaily. She looked through the peep-hole.

But instead of a trick, a woman entered. She was about thirty years old, tall, big-boned and ungainly. She was wearing a plaid dress trimmed with lace and velvet; she had patent leather flats with bows on her too-large feet, with straps bracing her leather shoes. She looked, Nora thought, like a giant child going to a birthday party.

"I'm here for a job," the woman said.

Billy and Nora exchanged looks.

"The ad said you needed models," the woman insisted.

Nora sat her down to wait for the pimp and told her the rates: seventy-five dollars for suck and fuck, eighty-five for Greek, one hundred and fifty for dominance, no equipment. The women took half.

"I'm working now," the woman interrupted. "I have a job now." She was rocking slightly, as if she needed to pee.

"That's nice," Nora answered automatically.

The woman smiled. "I know how to work," she said proudly.

"How much do you make now?" Nora asked, expecting her to double her take.

"Five dollars," the woman replied.

"How much?" Nora asked in disbelief.

The woman rocked harder. "I know how to work," she said. "I make two hundred dollars a day. Two hundred dollars a day." She looked at Nora. "I know how to work..." she repeated, "I know how to work, I know how to work, I know how to work. I know how to work, I know how to work..."

Nick brought boys home while Nora was working. Sometimes they were there when she got home, the anonymous boys from the bars Nick loved. Impotent most of the time these days, Nick looked for tenderness from these muscled boys. Some of them were men of thirty who needed the money. Nora hated him for it.

Late one night she opened the door to a sickening smell. Hung-over and sick, Nick was cleaning diarrhea off himself and the mattress while the young male prostitute he had picked up stood by looking at him in disgust.

Nick looked at Nora. "Who the fuck do you think you are, Grace Kelly?" he sneered.

Nora looked for a lover in revenge. Nancy Tarter introduced her to John, a rich young man she met at one of Dali's dinners. John lived in Cuernavaca, for "the spiritual atmosphere," but came to New York periodically for "the arts." John was trying to extricate himself from his common-law wife, a poet who now wanted him to marry her in earnest. Nora's profession and her abusive, fuck-you treatment suited him, and he left his wife, claiming an irrational passion for this working class girl, whom he followed from club to club.

Nora liked John, who was kind and ardent. When sober, she was ashamed of the way she treated him. But when drunk, she could not stop ridiculing him.

"You're a parasite," she accused him. "You produce

nothing. You've had money, education, opportunity and look at you: you sit in the Chelsea Hotel wondering why you're alive." Nora ordered another round of drinks. "Nick O'Malley may be a bastard, but he's made the most of the few opportunities he's had."

"I'll say," John replied bitterly.

In the Chelsea Hotel, one morning, John asked her to come to Mexico with him. Nora agreed, but by nightfall, she was drunk and harping on Nick again.

"You coupon clipper. You fascist," she slurred.

John stroked her hair gently. "This isn't about politics," he murmured, rocking her in his arms.

"Everything is politics," she retorted, and passed out.

Later she would wake up, affectionate, scared. John fucked her desperately, not knowing what else to do.

"He doesn't love you," John told her as she was leaving for work. "No man who loved a woman would let her do what you do."

Nora seemed not to have heard him. "Nick is one of the kindest people in the world," she explained sincerely. "Sober." And Nora meant it, and knew it to be true: Nick was kind and sensitive—it was just the pain that made him do the things he did, the unbearable pain. Nora understood that, perhaps more than anyone else; it was just the pain.

Just a few days ago Nick had come to her and sat her down. "You can't do this any more," he said simply. "This isn't good for you." And he meant it. She went to work that day anyway, but not because he forced her; he had never asked it of her, never asked for a nickel.

That same day, after work, she met him at Phebe's; he was with Nancy Tarter and her crowd. He waved two twenties at her.

"Butt-fuck money," he explained, flushed.

His description of how he took his trick was a big hit with Nancy and her friends; rapt, the table alternately winced, moaned and roared with laughter as one. Nick could certainly tell a story. Nora couldn't help feeling proud of him.

"He is one of the kindest people in the world," she repeated to John, and left. In the hotel lobby, out of the corner of her eye, she saw the headlines: Nancy Spungen murdered by Sid Vicious, arguments over money, two floors down.

The last night she spent at 91st Street, Nora went home thinking Nick would still be out cruising the gay bars. They had started fighting in a trendy all-night ice cream parlor on the upper West Side. Nick called her a whore and threw the forty dollars she had given him into her sundae.

Nora left, so tired that she hadn't even thought to reply: *if I'm a whore, then what are you?*

She didn't expect to find Nick home, but he was home and in a rage. He began hitting her; she thought as she stood there passively that he fought like Jimmy Cagney in a boxing movie, and that he was careful not to hit her on the face, or anywhere where it would show.

He's really trying to hurt me, Nora thought. *He might even kill me.*

O'Malley hit Nora a few more times, less passionately; the alcohol seemed to be slowing him down, or perhaps he was tired of hitting her. He lay down on their narrow bed,

and Nora lay down beside him as though they had just said their prayers, and fell asleep.

Nora woke up to the sound of Nick rifling through her handbag.

"I have a job interview," he explained, "I need carfare."

Nora was suddenly furious, "Get the fuck out of my purse, you bastard!"

O'Malley raised his fist, but thought better of it. He went out the door, slamming it behind him; the door swung back and hit Nora in the face across the eyes.

I have to leave, Nora thought as she put a compress on her black eyes, maybe go to Mexico with John. A surge of anger went through her. *I have paid the rent on this place for months but when it comes time to break up, he stays, I go. Typical.* She sat in the dark apartment, drinking the dregs of a bottle of Gallianos and calculating how much she had spent on O'Malley that year. She was furious at O'Malley, and yet hoped that something would happen, that O'Malley would do something, say something to convince her to stay; realistically, there didn't seem to be much he could do.

She would have to go home to Queens, clean up, get money, new clothes. She hated the idea of going home to her mother.

She called John. He found her sitting in the dark apartment. Nora told him what happened and it sounded so ordinary, like any other night with Nick. John's reaction was not what Nora hoped; he was silent, apparently not remembering his invitation to Mexico. He giggled nervously.

"I can't stay long", he told her, "There's a dinner at Dali's tonight."

Nora was relieved to see him go.

Chrisis phoned; Nora told her what happened and she came over. She watched with bemusement as Nora packed, neatly taking what was hers and replacing Nick's belongings to their rightful place, trying not to disturb anything. Chrisis shook her head. "That's not how you break up, darling." Chrisis got to work: she overturned the bookshelves, and ripped through the closets, knocked everything over she could knock, and tearing what she could. Some things, like Nick's prized collection of Fedoras, she stepped on; his dildos and sex toys she threw out the window. She broke the kitchen cabinets off their hinges, and some glassware for good measure, and walked on the piles of records, many irreplaceable, lying on the floor. She was about to throw O'Malley's notebooks and journals out the window, but Nora stopped her.

"This," Chrisis said to Nora, indicating her handiwork, "is how you break up."

Chrisis took Nora home with her. They were smoking a joint when the phone rang. Nora knew from Chrisis's voice that it was Nick. Having trashed Nick's apartment, Chrisis no longer felt any animosity toward him. She spoke with him in a friendly, concerned manner. After a few minutes,

she called Nora to the phone.

Nick asked Nora, not too enthusiastically, to come back. Nora hesitated. Leaving Nick meant going back to Queens, to her mother, but his tepid invitation was even more humiliating than going home.

Nick told her that he couldn't talk long. He was invited to dinner at Dali's, it was important for his career. It occurred to Nora that Nick hadn't been calling to speak to her at all, that he wanted Chrisis to come to dinner with him. Chrisis was unmoved. "What did you want? the drag queen asked her, "What did you expect?"

"Fuck it." Nora replied. "Let's dance."

On the second day of their run, Nora decided to crash a party at Nancy Tarter's house. She took some peyote and drank some Mescal, while Chrisis painted her black eyes with gold glitter. Low on cash, they invited John to join them. Chrisis amused herself hitting on him; John seemed pleased until she dropped her pants.

Nancy's eyebrows lifted when Nora came in, but she made no

comment. Nora drank Nancy's booze, waiting for O'Malley, wondering if it was possible to get back together.

O'Malley got to Nancy Tarter's late, very drunk. He looked unnaturally pale, his fedora wet with perspiration, rivulets of sweat running down his face, his hair wet on his forehead, looking white and sick and cold, as though he were without warmth.

He saw Nora; as their eyes met a song came on, something familiar: Nora recognized Sid Vicious singing "My Way." It sounded like the national anthem of Hell. O'Malley flashed a demonic grin at Nora. "Our song, I believe," he said, inviting her to dance.

They danced; O'Malley breathed with difficulty, "We beat each other..." he panted, "...but as soon as the rock and roll comes on, we dance. Until our noses hurt..."

Nick was saying something to her; Nora couldn't answer. The peyote made speaking impossible. O'Malley looked like death, was death, possessed by death, an electrified corpse jerking to the staccato punk music. The song ended; O'Malley turned and abruptly walked away. Over his shoulder, the death head grinned at Nora. "I do what I need to do to survive," it boasted.

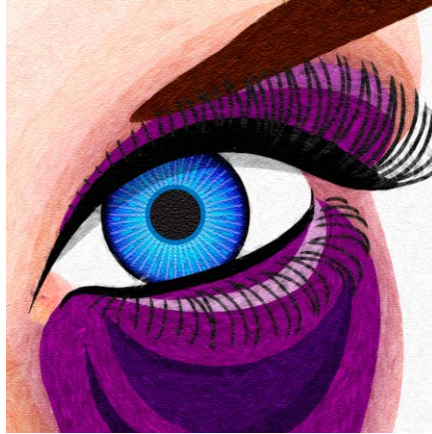
One way....or another... I'm gonna lose ya...

I'm gonna give ya the slip...

By day four of their run, Chrisis and Nora were broke; Chrisis hocked her First Communion cross and St. Francis medallion, gold. It didn't take them far. They ended up back at Chrisis's, where Nora set the mattress on fire. Nora split before Chrisis could tell her to get out, in search of O'Malley. She found him with Nancy Tarter and her friends at CBGB's. Nick greeted her casually.

Nancy had an ounce of pot, and was slowly rolling skinny joints; Nora could see the force of will it took for Nick not to slap the bitch.

"Want some acid?" Nancy offered. Nora dropped the



acid and ordered a scotch. She put her arm around Nancy Tarter's shoulders. "Buy me a drink, toots," she said. The heiress nodded to the waiter for another round. Nora downed her drink as soon as it came and ordered another.

"You look like death," she told Nick. Nick looked around the table for sympathy, a martyred expression on his face. Nora drank in silence, wondering why she had come and what she was doing with these people. It would be better to be alone, she thought, it would be better to be dead. Drinking usually helped when she felt this way, but tonight it wasn't working, even when the acid kicked in. She couldn't shake the feeling of irritation, of emptiness.

Nick was talking, telling the butt-fuck story again. *I'm bored*, she suddenly thought, *that's what it is; I'm bored. The things I do are boring, I'm boring, and all the people I know are boring.* Nora laughed mirthlessly.

"Of course I'm bored," Nora said aloud.

She looked around the table; the faces were cold and blank. Nick was looking at her with positive loathing. He continued to talk as though he hadn't heard.

I'm bored, she thought, *bored, bored down to the narrow of my bones, bored.*

"I'm bored!" she said again, louder, as if to test the idea.

"She's drunker than usual tonight," someone commented.

"Bored..." Nora repeated quietly to herself, "bored! I'm tripping, I'm drunk, I'm high and I'm bored..." "She started to laugh.

"Open your mouth," Nancy Tarter ordered Nora.

Obediently, Nora opened her mouth; Nancy popped in a pill.

"What the hell was that? Nora asked, swallowing:

"A Quaalude."

There was a moment of anger, then nothing. She stumbled out of the bar onto the Bowery, and wandered a long time down the deserted streets, talking to them, repeating to the concrete and the wavering neon: "I'm bored." She somehow found the subway and got to Queens. She began walking from the station to her mother's house.

Men in cars slowed to cruise her. One man stopped and asked her for a price.

"Just give me a ride home," she said.

The man finished quickly and left her outside her mother's house.

Maybe Mexico was different. ☺

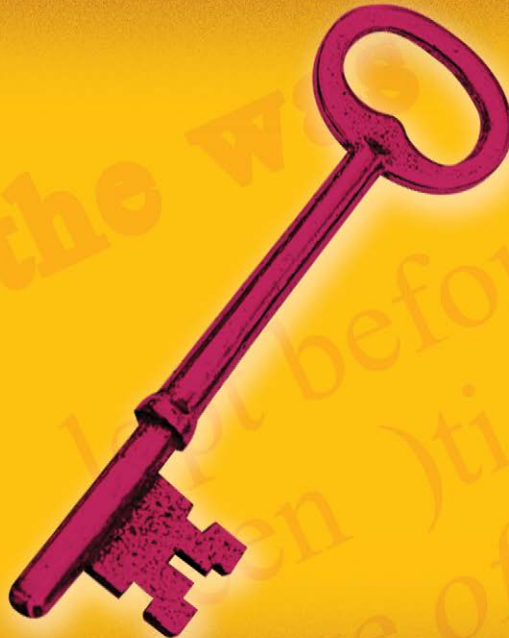


LARISSA SHMAILO's newest collection of poetry is *#specialcharacters* (Unlikely Books). Larissa is the editor of the anthology *Twenty-first Century Russian Poetry* and founder of The Feminist Poets in Low-Cut Blouses. She translated *Victory over the Sun* for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's landmark reconstruction of the multimedia opera and has been a translator on the Bible in Russia for the American Bible Society. Her other books of poetry are *In Paran* (BlazeVOX [books]), the chapbook, *A Cure for Suicide* (Červená Barva Press), and the e-book, *Fib Sequence* (Argotist Ebooks); her poetry CDs are *The No-Net World* and *Exorcism* (SongCrew), for which she received the New Century Best Spoken Word Album award.

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Fiesta

Peter Bracking

Rolando pulled deeply on the joint. Two geckos began to talk to each other over the lengths of the darkness. He smoked slowly for a moment.

“This is a place that is so beautiful that our poets have always cried off having to merely describe its bits and its pieces. But it is a harsh place. A cruel place too. The poets have never had the slightest difficulty in evoking these ideas in their writing. It is a especially cruel place to a man who wants too many things. Perhaps he wants to have a family. Look around *primo* and you can see families here. Perhaps he is silly enough to want to feed his family, to put shiny new shoes on his children’s feet, to educate them, to treat his wife to a new dress for *fiesta* once a year. Perhaps these things are not too much to ask. Perhaps in a different country. So here a man must do what he can when he can to bring home the rice and the beans. Maybe in the orange groves. Maybe in the pineapple fields. Maybe picking tobacco with the Mayans in the *norte* or bananas anywhere. Maybe loading all these good things onto a ship so that all the goodness of where you live is sent to someone else’s house. Maybe this is what you do. When your children cry from empty tummies maybe this is what you must do.”

“But this place, this life it is a difficult thing. A most difficult thing. And what man cares only to work? What man can live in this world without a desire for something that is his own, a thing to define him? And such are the brothers, like the orange and the lime, similar and very different. Julio, married twelve years to Graciela, mother of his two children, and Benito, his younger brother by ten years taken in after the birth of their second child when Benito had fallen very hard on some very hard times. The five of them shared the small house. They both did everything they could for money but mostly on the docks. Loading bananas as fast as possible and breaking backs doing it because there is a bonus for speed. Julio would buy those shoes if there was extra money. The new dress for Graciela was always a dream. Benito would fold his few bills

into squares and put them in a tin can he kept on a shelf. Benito had a purpose. He was young. He had a desire. A gun. To reflect his manhood.”

“But to get a thing, so defining as a gun, is not so easy. The bonus is never big. There has to be many. Ships are usually few. There are always more costs, more ways to watch a dream drain away one *centavo* at a time. But a man like Benito, a man who knows his desires, will find a way. So he saves, he saves for more than one year. And all that time he kept his desire a secret. Saving and never saying a word. Graciela told Julio that Benito was saving to be married. Julio told her that if he was marrying that his sweetheart was a secret.”

“That spring was very busy in the port. The big ships were parked on the bay for days waiting for a load of fruit ripening on the dock, costing money for the company, for the bosses who did not need to save for shiny shoes or defining guns. The brothers worked very hard for very long hours. The bonuses piled up much faster than they could be spent, the tin can filling with squares of cash. *Fiesta* was coming. The entire town would be celebrating in the *parque central* with food and music and dancing and the white rum that flowed faster than the tides. This was the time to introduce his desire to the world. The ladies would see him with his *pistola* and know him to be a man of power.. He was a little disappointed to learn that he did not have enough in his tin to purchase the .38 automatic from the movies that he so desired. He bought instead a .22 automatic gun. Not as impressive as the other but a gun is a gun. And Benito did not need or really want the extra firepower, it was not like he was going to kill someone. The gun was only a prop, a means to the end of showing the women his inner soul.

“I saw him that morning, he came here from the port. He drank coffee with his *primo*, his cousin on the beach. He ate lunch and played pool in the town. He bought his gun and two clips of bullets. He had a small amount left over, it wasn’t much but it was something and Benito was feeling so very good that he stopped and gave this small money to the shopkeeper who must always be paid so Graciela could keep the beds her children slept in. We met at the shopkeeper’s. He was a very happy man, a very big smile on his face. He showed me the gun of course, how could he not, his desire was no longer a secret and Benito wanted word of this to reach the ears of certain women in this town as well as the port. Benito was very proud of himself. He wished me a ‘happy *fiesta*’ and was gone. *Fiesta* is in honour of *San Juan* and is a time of great joy and celebration for all of these people who live in so much poverty here. It is a time when old wounds are healed, at least for the day, and the community comes together and gets amazingly *borracho* and dances the night away. And the food and the music and the dancing and the women with their fine new dresses and perfume and rum and the lights. The night was hot. Benito did wait some time before revealing his desire, displaying his *machismo*, his power. He could see that the women were impressed by his weapon. He could see that they were stirred. He poured another *traigo de ron* into his mouth, swallowed and laughed. He pointed the *pistola* into the air and for the first time in his life he pulled a trigger and fired a high velocity bullet into the air. He had only meant to fire one shot but his finger did not release quickly enough and

two more bullets raced to the stars. Even so he felt himself ascending. Julio was astonished to find his brother firing a gun and more so when he learned that it was Benito's own gun. His brother had told Julio nothing of this, nothing of something so important as even having enough ready money to purchase a gun. And nothing surely of a gun. Julio looked around. Almost everyone from both the town and the port was there drinking and dancing in the heat of the night. Benito was *borracho* so Julio gently urged him to put his gun into his pocket and to join him, his faithful older brother in a drink to which Benito agreed. They drank to health and happiness and Benito secretly adds women to the list. Julio went off to see to his wife and to dance with his children and Benito seeks out more women who need to know about his desire and all is well. The world dances. The moon was full. But all the world continued to drink alcohol. Benito and Julio with it. Some time later Benito in the hot night, after letting a woman caress his desire while it was in his hand, he felt the urge to fire it again. His eyes were puffed from the drinks. He had trouble keeping his feet under his knees when he walked. He fired the gun into the air again. He howled with power. Julio had been close all evening. Not spying on Benito and not babying him either. A man could be concerned about his brother. Julio ran up and tried to talk to Benito. To tell him that he was *borracho*. To tell him that there were too many people there to risk shooting any more. He assured his lurching brother that many of the village maids spoke to him that night and complemented Benito's gun to him. Benito was managing to stay out of Julio's equally drunken reach. The music was always too loud and Julio had to shout. But he had to tell him. To tell him that he, Julio, had a wonderful idea, that Benito would hand over his gun, to Julio, his brother, just for the rest of the night, only tonight, and to get it back in the morning. When *fiesta* is finished. When life is normal, safer.

"Benito howled. He howled to the moon and to the stars. He howled to the sea. He howled to all of the women if they had noticed him or not. He howled to Julio. But mostly he howled to fight against a life of being told what to do for every sad sorry useless minute of his life. He howled for living in stinking poverty for following all the rules, howled to warn of frustration, howled for his power. He thrust the *pistola* into the air and fired. Julio reached out and grabbed

his sleeve pulling his brother's writhing arm down. The gun began to fire, shot after shot, Benito's finger stuck again but he was not firing into the clouds or stars he was firing into the last breaths his brother's body would take.

"At first only Benito noticed, the gunfire lost in the music the shouting and the shooting of other *pistolas*. Julio's face was struck with absolute horror. He knew at that moment that he was dying and nothing could stop it. His hand was clutched to his stomach and blood was pumping through

his fingers, a small gush for each beat of his heart. A woman screamed, then another. A man ran for the taxi. Another helped Benito ease Julio to the ground. Benito stared as far into his brother's eyes as he could see. He brushed his hair back on his forehead. Julio sprayed tiny drops of blood from his lax lips as he breathed, slowly. Around them there was pandemonium. Men were shouting and moving tables and benches to let the taxi get in to load Julio for the trip around the bay to the hospital. Everyone assured the other that Julio would arrive there and be saved knowing that there was no chance of

that really happening. Benito held Julio's face to his own. He could feel his older brother's fear and their tears mixed. The car arrived. Too many hands tried to move the dying man making everything take longer. They were in the back, Benito supporting Julio next to him, sitting him upright so that if Julio spoke he would hear him. The door slammed and the taxi started to move off when Graciela came running, her new dress pulled up to her knees. She was screaming for her husband, her god, her life but the taxi could not slow for an instant if Julio's life had any sort of a chance and Graciela was left behind screaming into the dusty dark pulling at her hair. Her life was ruined, in tatters and she stood there, bereft in the dust and the detritus of *Fiesta*."

"The taxi drove fast, very fast. I know this because I drove the taxi. Julio died quickly. Benito's body heaved with silent sobs for the rest of the trip, for the rest of the night and probably for the rest of his life too. Tears ran down his cheeks and dripped onto his shirt where they mingled with Julio's blood. I have never seen such anguish in a man. No one will ever know. Two more kilometres and there was the hospital. I think that this is why we have limes and oranges, different but the same, one beautiful and one maybe different. *Destino o accidente*. But no one will ever know. Not even the poets." 🌀



PETER BRACKING tells tall tales. Earth point: Vancouver, Canada. Other Appearances: *Maisonneuve*; *Up the Staircase Quarterly*; *FeatherTale.com*; *Megaphone*; *Vancouver's Street Magazine*; *Gallery Gachet*; *Ascent/Aspirations*; *Voices of the street (annual)*; *street cake magazine*; *Existere*. Future Features: *FeatherTale.com*, *Megaphone*; *EmptySinkPublishing*; *Ascent/Apirations*; *Lantern Magazine*; *Thrice Fiction*. The only occupation he regrets leaving is beach bum. Peter is the artistic director of Utter Stories. Self aggrandizement: utterstories.wordpress.com



Programs That Run The Blood

Wendy Ashlee Coleman

The players of nature play it out with will and wild hearts, driven by the program that runs the blood. But they know nothing of being watched, watched by those without the eyes to watch. Yet those that see without eyes, see greater than all the eyes together. And they watch with decision and judgment, their word unquestioned because their word leaves no questions; knowing all before thought has the power to discern, and decide if what is being watched should even continue on. Those that watch do not live but instead exist as the superiors of existence, once like us, made of flesh that burns and blood that leaks but now omnipotent. Not in only in the powers that deputize, but in the perfection of morality; mighty empathizers that choose to feel the pain and the agony that we feel, only so that they may better understand us and weep truer in our name.

They are God with conscience.

The wolves run steam nose, the fresh powder trampled with manic dig, the ground blizzards like the winter sky.

The pack is down to three, and the others run with them, moving along the snow without sink, a powder-less trample that is stealth in sound but loud in their memory, yet the spirit's bite's won't aid. They are leaned out to spine and rib, out of fall's cushy reserves, out of chances. Their lips curl, sharpening their teeth with the frigid air. They chase with weakness seen not in stride but in the eyes that hide the pain, the masks of ferocious gaze. The third eyelid coats their peripheral with the dark swell that grazes their pupil's rim. Their focused sight leaks fresh secretions that bleeds out slowly, strained thinner through the gunky corners of eyes that pain against the hunger, re-paving the mucus roads with the viscous warmth. But it gels quickly against the first gust and then crisping with the second, adding another layer upon it's dark stained, crusted tear path. They are starving, dying yet they run with no sorrow, the program that runs in the blood.

The buffalo runs his mouth open wide with thick exhaust like chimney smoke, steaming his snouted blood

cake to a kept moist. And he extends his stride, giving the pursuer killing back-kicks into his retreat. He runs big, he runs alpha, but has been run to his end as he feels the sharp scissor cuts along his hind legs, the predator's teeth, cold like shards of ice stabbing. The ground now pours with stormy kick ups, the beaten snow clouding the chase with its frosty vapors as the pursuit stirs the fresh powders and the buffalo tackles a drift, exploding through it. Though not without a lethal slow, one that lets the tenacious latch find its bite on a hind leg that brings him to an inevitable limping run, one that isn't fast enough for survival, a stride not fit enough or deserving enough for it. The big beast feels his genitals being snagged and pulled to tearing amputation and it bellows in pain as he drags the two carnivores with desperate ambition. Even as the weight of the mighty wolves break him to a standstill, even when he feels the slices of an alpha's hungry grip tearing at his soft underbelly, he shows no retreat and runs on the program that runs the blood. The wolves don't become overly excited when the beast is finally toppled over and slammed into the deep snow squirming against the drowning soft powder that sinks him deeper into the milky snow sea, where the preying beats hardy grazing gardens hide deep in the pastured abyss. They are professional and ready to finish to the end as the triple pack attacks the underside of the beast making the prey's bellows turn to screams, the screams that echo across the snow covered mountainous areas, the dinner bell of feasting's agony making the scavengers take flight.

After painful snaps that do nothing but make the beast squeal, the alpha canine sinks in a deep bite, impaling all his pink stained furs past the fat and into the hardy, one that mutes the big beast as if the imprecise bites have finally hit a serious component; a bite that shows that life is pain, but not death, as the closer the beasts strays from life the more the beast's agony begins to subside. The experienced predator knows the flavors of fatal bite by the taste of the rich dark blood that doesn't paint his tongue like the epidermic, tangy bright taste of the shallow aperitif wounds, but instead floods his mouth with the rich dark blood liver that foams his saliva, because for him, the taste of death is life. And the others are brought to the same injury with their crimson painted noses as they all gather on the uncorking, the aromas of life spilling out, still warm as they unite on the fatal chew.

The buffalo doesn't scream anymore, hazed by its fatality, his fight weakens for a moment his defenses in the midst of a reboot. The dogs of death begin to pull the flesh, their steaming snouts blood dipped and red and to them the meal has arrived, survival is here, the deed is done and their bellies scream for the flesh. But with glazing eyes the program still runs even with the beast lying on its side, the guest of honor in this horrible feast, and the pathetic twitch of the running furs that stampede the air, his hooves still search for ground, for footing as he retreats sideways, a pathetic sight deserving of pity's hand but will not get it. The beast lifts its head as if watching for himself the feast of himself the animals grateful for the warm meal, unremorseful for its still conscious victim the warm living blood, like a hot drink against the arctic like winds. But as the feast begins, the prey's eyes widen as its back foot finds dig, allowing it leverage to lift and get another. The

predators, caught in celebration should know better, but the fog of hunger is thick, as they are too slow to react and the animal sets up digging its soft wounded underbelly in the snow, taking away the great preying beasts only softness, and the wolves dog pile and jump, desperate to keep their meal stationary but the program that runs the blood smokes from the dying animals nose and it stands with a roar that rolls smoke, the fire inside lit. It stands this time not to run, but to fight, it's life over, but the program still running strong, one that plays no favorites to predator or prey. It turns and horns one wolf, hooking it and slinging it away dead and forgotten and then shakes the grip off a flank grabber and stomps the wolf to a skull crushing seizure as the other wolf, the last, the leader reacts quickly with a muzzle grab, burying its jagged's deep in and shaking like it wants something to take home. The beast honors its grip with a challenge of wills and charges forward, steam rolling the wolf and knocking it to its side where it smothers with its head and tries to pin the furious canine down with the front hooves. The pack leader maintains its bite hold, its teeth dug deep in the blood icing muzzle, and its growl increasing in pitch, its once thunderous rumble, turning to loud panting breaths as the thousand pound hooves begin its dance. And the dance does its deed, crushing the great predator, stomping along the animal's ribs and shoulder, breaking a front leg bone that sounds creaky and un-snappy when broke, like a soggy spring rain soaked twig. It releases its bite hold with whelps that go for such a long rally they soon evolve to a constant high pitched howling moon cry as the tenacious wolf wrestles and scrambles, and fights its way out from under, finally crawling on its side, gaining footing and running out between the beast hind legs with a pity trot. Its front leg is multi-cornered and destroyed, a death sentence for a winter predator, but even in the face of death, its hungry belly screams louder than the pain and the program that runs the blood, boils the blood, and the wolf lunges forward again, attacking the buffalo, once again ducking expertly and sliding underneath and mauling the blood steaming belly wound that drips down on the snow like a leaking shower faucet. And it bites and pulls on the bits of pre loosened flesh as the hot crimson flow drips down the predators mouth taming the fires of famish and it holds it bites as long as it can and drinks the taste of life gulping the beasts flow as the big prey bucks and twists and stomps. The wolf's thirsty pulls dig the wound to a blood choking pour as the beast slows down and whines a death cry before falling with collapse and landing on his predatorial anchor, making the wolf whelp in pain.

That invisible ghost whose mercy is as cold as it, bullies the land, this ancient predator with no teeth or claws but its bite, it hurts, and it kills. Passing over the blinding white tundra with authority it knows it's discover, now filthy with the frosty powder, the demon is seen and those that see, lay low, as the flurry rich air brings nature itself to animation, that cruel, cruel way that chills and kills and it dances along the snowy plains that cake white, the furry faces who dare peek from their holes, and chill the naked eyes of the watchers who must witness. Then it begins to twirl into arctic cyclones that flit around the flats before meeting. And for a moment looks as if one little frosty twister would take lead with another, dancing as a coupled pair across the

cruelness of the creation, while leaving its scent, the scent of frigid numbness. But the blood -drenched snow, so clear in the white, is like a blank sheet of paper with the potential for such a perfect picture. Yet instead blemished by a spill, a blind purposeless spill, a creation of accident, a mistake that looks like one. It is like god's canvas, and his acrylic is not the life that walks it, but life's death and we exist only to give color to his twisted creation.

They breathe, breath like they've run miles, and their steamy pants smokes together, collecting in thickness above and creating their own overcast of exhaust. Now, both veteran players of nature's game lie next to each other so close it is like an embracing or truce. And the massive beast lies on its side, surrounded by a pool of blood that has cooled on the icy ground to a soak-less paste, but his head sits up and it stares at the wolf, who chooses to just stare out at the dim, somnolent day that drowns in the dark stretch, sinking into the black horizon like a wounded war ship immersing into the night sea. He watches with regal swagger to the end, his fur, dyed blood smeared pink from head to tail, his mouth open and gaping, as the wheezing, moaning sounds of punctured lungs whistle in harmony with the baritone bellowing of the big, besting prey who sings with a different tone now; not one of agony and pain, but instead a song to life, a tune that almost sounds of a want, a desire to hold on to something so cruel. And it does not go quietly and instead fills up the air with echoes of its life, songs and sounds neither of pity nor pain, but of claim and proof of being. The wolf chooses not to sound off, as it looks off in the distance at beautiful, end of day pink, watching without squint the last of the pleasantly dim sleepy sun peaking up over the horizon as if trying to stay afloat, swimming with weakening tread in the aphotic ocean range. The sun's reflection mirroring in the noble predators eyes with perfection, like a calm, glassy lake while the great preying beast finally loses its power and rests its head against the shuffled snow, a perfect pillow to guide him in and finally, takes his eyes off his enemy and shares with him the dipping of the light. The wolf's eyes begin to

shut as his head wobbles and he lays his head on the warm flank of his prey and the beast bellows with disapproval that startles the wolf and immediately lifts its head, removing it with respect. The preying beast's head hovers barely off the snow and looks at the wolf as if it was a great insult. The wolf looks at him back and they share a moment. The wolf then meekly lowers his head on the beast as if asking permission and the preying beast does not bellow this time but just watches as the wolf's eyes close on him as he rests and relaxes in the warmth of his prey and his surrender to death. His head rises and falls with each shallow breath before the beast lowers its head back on his snow pillow. The wolf's smoke nose stops as the mighty bison prey holds on to his being just a bit longer, gazing up high, his liquid eyes retaining the last speckle of skylight like an oil spill under a sunset lit, dusky star heaven.

Soon all colors fade and the dying reflect shows just the black, the drowning light, his sight, his existence slipping. But in his sleepy view a brightness orb comes about like a dark cloud un-curtaining. Like an impossibly bright moon that twinkles like a star and then swims across his teary liquid witness ponds and then anchors above to a stand still and begins to blink reflecting off his sight like robotic corneas. And the reflection grows in size until that white brightness engulfs the dead and dying combatants of survival, and in the moment before death the preying beast's eyes harden in texture and whiten in color, like turning to stone, the hardening grey overcoming both of the death cuddled warriors with a faint orange hallowing glow like a fast burning cigarette, one that consumes both of them and extinguishes the lone survivors pain forever.

As the overseer's great light illuminates down on the snowy plains, the night turns to an eerie blue day and the sounds of the omnipotent's weeping over this brutal witness is not heard, but felt. And it was then that what could not speak, spoke without words or sound, and what was spoken without words or sounds was greater than all the words that ever spoke and all the sounds that ever sung.

This need not be was the silent decide that screamed. 🌀



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My Apartment Doesn't Allow Dogs or Cats

BY RUSS BICKERSTAFF



Perhaps the true irony lies in the fact that everybody instantly recognizes it as being a nebulous ball of uncertainty. Quite a conversation piece. There on my coffee table. A nebulous ball of uncertainty. But everybody who walks into my living room—every single one of them identifies it as a nebulous ball of uncertainty.

This was kind of oddly specific. Really all it looks like was a strange distortion of light. It's hanging out there. Right over my coffee table smelling of things that people seem to forget. It sounds like it's humming. Perhaps moaning. Perhaps whining. It's hard to tell.

As strange as it is, everybody knows exactly what it is when they walk in. Everybody refers to it by those exact words: a nebulous ball of uncertainty.

It would be a little bit less strange I suppose if people had some sort of pop cultural conception of this. If there was something that was in folk history or anything like that. But a nebulous ball of uncertainty is not exactly something that gets mentioned a whole lot. There's no fairy tale about a nebulous ball of uncertainty. It doesn't show up as a major plot point in any major Hollywood film. No summer blockbuster action film about a nebulous ball of uncertainty. No children's books. No toys. No animated TV series about or product endorsements from a nebulous ball of uncertainty. It would look kind of strange in a celebrity tabloid magazine. Everyone recognizes it instantly, though. There it is hanging out the right over my coffee table. Everybody who walks in says, "Oh wow, a nebulous ball of uncertainty. That's interesting." Asked to define why they decided to call it that, they simply shrug. You know exactly what it is when you see it. We all know by looking at it. Which is just kind of strange.

I guess I would've felt kind of strange having it show up there had it not been for the fact that I myself recognized it instantly. Somehow it just sort of appeared. That thing that everybody seems to know but no one seems to understand. Just showed up one afternoon. There I was reading a book. There was a book about the Civil War history or some such. Nothing that really has anything specific to do with uncertainty in the abstract. And suddenly here's this thing. I instantly recognized it and now it's a guest in my house. Maybe it's providence. Or maybe it's weird happenstance. It appeared there above the coffee table. It's been there ever since.

Not that I haven't thought about moving the coffee table. It just seem so convenient there. So comfortable. Really I just think that if I moved the coffee table nebulous ball of uncertain they would just move to rest over it anyway. Maybe that's just where it it feels comfortable.

It's strange, though. At first you feel kind of uncomfortable around it. But even and it's discomfort you know that it sort of belongs there. It sort of wants to be there. And so you feel kind of relaxed. In some strange way you feel blessed by the overt presence of this uncertainty. Perfectly normal. But the thing of it is that it is pretty remarkable just how quickly something like this becomes mundane. Okay, so there's this weird existential thing that just shows up. Just sort of showed up there and started hanging out right over my coffee table. Perfectly normal. Perfectly rational. And perfectly mundane.

Shouldn't everybody be in this position? It would seem to be only natural. There certainly is enough uncertainty in the world. This should be happening all the time. Of course, I'm saying that having had this nebulous ball of uncertainty suddenly appear over my coffee table. And once you get used to that sort of thing there's no questioning it. There's no doubting it. You just sort of live with it. And you assume everyone else is as well.

Of course, there becomes kind of a concern about where exactly I'm going to move to. I'm in this is an apartment. It's a temporary place right next to a college campus. So there really isn't any reason for me to stay here. Because really the only thing is that around here are those things that service the university. Would be perfectly cool if I was thinking about a career with the University but I am not. I am on a very definite career path that very definitely precludes me from being here for very long. I had considered other options. I had considered the possibility of simply maintaining his apartment while I'm moved elsewhere. I'll get paid enough that I could continue to pay rent here. Just save the place for this nebulous ball of uncertainty. I wonder if that sort of thing is good luck. I'd hate to have someone living in here who didn't understand it or tried to abuse it or take advantage of it or whatever. A part of me thinks this is kind of silly--anthropomorphizing it and being concerned for its well being. So maybe I just forget about it and move on. Not that I really have to make any decision on this right away. Not that it's something that I have to decide right now.

I suppose I should just let it be. If it decides that it needs to move with me at will. I really don't know though. And it's kind of strange. Because I feel kind of like a sense of ownership over it. All the parties. All the strange conversations. People sort of think of me as being an accessory to it. On occasion I make plans to meet people for drinks and they ask if I'm bringing it along. Like it's a pet or something. If it is, it seems pretty happy where it is. And over time I guess it's gotten kind of important to me. And I'm not sure why. 🌀



RUSS BICKERSTAFF is a professional theatre critic and aspiring author living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin with his wife and two daughters. The Internarrational Where Port for his fiction can be found at: ru3935.wix.com/russ-bickerstaff



At the Fish Market

Georgina Parfitt

To be the first one at the market and look at all the faces of the fish and mouths of the oysters lined up, it's enough to make you feel...akin, to them, like some bloated, walking relative. Like they have accompanied you this morning, have been loyal where others have not.

The crab, its knotted leather eyes. The swordfish, halved.

The new ice makes them firm and their colours bright. Then you remember that the fish monger has been here for hours already, hauled the tubs of ice and fish from the van when it was still dark, sat with the fish as the dawn came over them.

And his eyes bulge a little as he watches you draw out your wallet. He has come much further than you have.

But you mustn't covet another man's life. So you order that whole salmon, watching carefully as he wraps it up and passes it like a baby to you, taking the heavy papered body in your arms, and you thank him, twice. ⑤



GEORGINA PARFITT is from Norfolk, England, originally, but studied in the United States. Her stories draw from the places, traditions and creatures of both countries. She is at work on several projects, including a novella, a collection of shorts, and some journalism. Her stories can be found published at *The Bicycle Review*, *FuckFiction*, *Plain China Anthology* and the *Harvard Advocate*.



The Nursing Home

B.Z. Niditch

Guns in training are heard on the Danube. There are rumors everywhere, in the countryside and the city.

It is still spring raining in Vienna but here Ursula shares a nursing home room with a Jewish woman who is mostly silent in this former Trappist convent.

"I heard rumors her son cured a high government official even has an Iron Cross from the last war. Maybe he bribed somebody. So many rumors going around here he may even be dead or too old to serve the Fatherland and God. May I borrow your shawl."

"I'm cold myself, Irmguard."

"I snatched the woman's coat and tea."

"Good for you. I took all my Jewish neighbor's rings, I confessed to Father Joseph. Why did he take her in, she may be only half Jewish, Croatian, Italian or Ukranian, or she may be a spy."

"Then why does she attend Mass, fast all day. I saw her washing Jesus' picture in the chapel and in the library it says 'Jesus is not a Jew.'"

"Maybe she's a deaf mute. I can't look at her, she makes me sick. I wish she was invisible."

"When Hitler came here they passed out toothbrushes for the Jews to sweep the street. I remember that day as Hitler passed in his motorcade some city ladies took the stones under his car and ate them for good luck."

"I read a book that in the middle ages Jews stole the wafers at communion for the black Mass. Maybe she's a witch, a Communist or Gypsy."

"Don't you worry when my son Horst comes back from serving in Russia he will find out for us."

"But we better not complain, Father Joseph says complaints and to worry are sins. In the papers it says true patriots don't complain only the Jews."

"She think she is Mother Superior, won't even put on make up and hardly eats."

A soldier walks in.

"We need this room and building. You all must leave immediately."

The three woman leave. It starts to rain.

"Let's grab her umbrella, she won't say anything." ☹



B.Z. NIDITCH is a poet, playwright, fiction writer and teacher. His work is widely published in journals and magazines throughout the world, including *Columbia: A Magazine of Poetry and Art*; *The Literary Review*; *Denver Quarterly*; *Hawaii Review*; *Le Guepard* (France); *Kadmos* (France); *Prism International*; *Jejune* (Czech Republic); *Leopold Bloom* (Budapest); *Antioch Review*; and *Prairie Schooner*, among others. He lives in Brookline, Massachusetts.

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ARTISTS & STORYTELLERS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE



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has published over 400 books and chapbooks of poetry and other materials. Among the most recent are **rOlling COMBers** (Potes & Poets Press); **MAILER LEAVES HAM** (Pantograph Press); and **LOOSE WATCH** (Invisible Press). He has published, exhibited and performed his word art worldwide in thousands of publications and venues. He was editor and publisher of **Lost and Found Times** (1975-2005), and is Curator of the Avant Writing Collection at The Ohio State University Libraries. His work, publications, and papers are collected in several major institutions, including Washington University (St. Louis), SUNY Buffalo, The Ohio State University, The Museum of Modern Art, and other major libraries. His PhD (UCLA 1970) is in Latin American Literature. JohnMBennett.net



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is of possible Jewish descent. Superstition, Klezmer music and Chinese candy wrapper designs inform many of his artistic works. He is interested in the places at which art, music, technology and language intersect.



RACHEL SLOTNICK ... *Inside Front Cover, 2, 27-29, Back Cover...*

is a painter and writer originally from Los Altos, California. She received her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in May 2010. Her work is on permanent display at the Joan Flasch Artist Book Collection at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is a muralist for the 35th, 46th and 47th wards, and her paintings will be displayed this August at Beauty & Brawn Gallery & Think Space. Recently published in **Elimae Literary Journal**, **High Chair Poetry**, and a finalist in the Gwendolyn Brooks Open Mic Awards, look for her upcoming publications in **Mad Hatter's Review**, and **Tortoise Books**. Rachel currently resides in Chicago where she works as Adjunct Faculty in art Studio and English at Malcolm X College, and the Illinois Art Institute. RachelSlotnick.com.



KYRA WILSON *Pages 25-26, 41-43, 44...*

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

COMING SOON

THRICE FICTION

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