

# THRICE

## FICTION™

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*The Gang* by Alvaro Tapia Hidalgo

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RW Spryszak, Editor  
David Simmer II, Art Director

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

# Thrice 20 Notes

RW Spryszak, Editor

## Boats Over the Great Falls

Do readers challenge themselves? Once a pattern and affinities are established, do active readers jump in to things that they haven't tried before? A genre or a style or a writer in particular? I don't know the answer to this question but I have my suspicions. I've known a small number of readers who do consume a broad range of work. But most readers, I think, seem to settle on a comfortable track.

There is certainly nothing wrong with having a favorite author. That's not what I'm talking about. I mean – if you've never read science fiction, would you try it out? If you are a crime scene person, would you give Victor Hugo a shot? If you are a fan of romance novels, do you think you'd ever try the poems of Dylan Thomas? That's what I mean.

I think the answer is going to be 'no' more than 90% of the time. I don't have any data besides personal observation, and my sampling is small. But, intuitively, this would seem right, wouldn't it?

Why is it though, I wonder.

Since 2011 the readers of **Thrice Fiction** have made themselves known to us. They like the good, traditional stuff. They like the occasional oddball material. And they like to see new writers. They don't go in for young adult unless it has a hard edge or says something in a new way. They don't go for much in the way of sentimentality, unless the writing is truly beautiful. Just so there's not too much of it. And that's been our general drive from the publication end.

But I've been chomping at the bit, sometimes to my own detriment, to really go off and try some wayward beat. To not only listen to a different drummer, but stuff him in a bag and drop him in the river just to see if he floats. Then throw rocks at him. But only blue ones. Every ten feet. For poetic reasons.

I have to check myself whenever I feel like this. Because that isn't everyone's cup of tea, so to speak. And since we've already established a core readership after all these years it would be a bit of a bad idea to throw the whole thing over the edge and go nuts.

So **Thrice** has been kicking around an idea of an annual production under a different masthead that would put all the outsiders into one great big box and present it to the world. This wouldn't take one thing away from what we're doing. The magic of **Thrice Fiction** is more than just the writers and the artists, but the whole list of production values we use, and what that makes in the end.

So if we do it, watch for some announcements. And if we don't, then just keep doing your yoga and eating pomegranates. Act like nothing happened and all this will go away.

But if you are interested in hearing more, or participating in something like this then do the following.

1. Teach yourself about what is called "Outsider" art and literature.
2. Dig into the web's vast archives and look for old mailart zines from the late last century as well as the Dadaist and surrealist publications up to the 1930s.
3. Then drop me an email at [bob@thricefiction.com](mailto:bob@thricefiction.com) with feedback on what you've seen.

I want to hear from you, not to make changes to the flagship steaming happily along through the straits of Magellan, but concerning a small launch about to motor itself past the edge of the known seas.

Talk to me.

RW



## The Stranger

Morgan Christie

I want there to be a mysterious stranger at my funeral. Standing in the back wearing a black fedora with a red feather and a brown trench coat. Brown because he will stand out amongst the sea of black, and red because it will suggest lust, passion, or love. I want him to be tall, over 6'2, that way he'll be taller than my husband, brother, and Doug. He would arrive late and wouldn't hold the door as it closed, he'd let it slam. Then he would stand beside the back pillar as all the seats would be taken, and even though everyone would be staring, he'd be looking straight ahead, at my casket. I want him to be one of the last to view my body. He would touch my hand, gently, and then he would look at my daughter. He would look at her but only for a second, just long enough for her to notice, and no one else. She would remember his face; his high cheekbones and strong jaw, smooth skin and tempered eyes.

I want her to look for him at the reception, but discover that he has gone and that no one saw him leave. Then she would find her Uncle and ask if he saw the man in brown with the black fedora and red feather. My brother would look at her over his plate of pie pieces and tarts, and he would lie, "Nope." She would leave and he would start scarfing down the sweets. He would gobble them up in less than five minutes and when the plate was empty, he would see his reflection in it. They'd be using the silver. He would stare at the cream in the corners of his mouth and then he would remember that time when he was seven. When he took the last two cupcakes that our mother was saving for our father, when he lied and

said that he saw me eating them after he snuck the crummy plate into my bedroom. He would remember the beating I took that day, not because of the cupcakes, but because our mother said I lied about it. He would remember the day he became a liar. A skillful liar that would go on to pretend to have graduated from college, marry a sweet young woman, cheat on that woman two weeks after their marriage, father a son by the young escort he'd been sleeping with, leave his wife of seven years and their infant daughter for that escort, try to start a new life with the young escort and son that would also end in divorce because he cheated on her too, call his second wife most every day after she left and tell her she was a dumb bitch, not be able to deny his adulterous ways in court because the escort wasn't such a dumb bitch after all, gain forty pounds and have to move in with his estranged sister. A liar that would cringe at the sight of his reflection because it reminded him of how much he loved sweets, and that he didn't know how to get his cravings under control.

I want her to look for Abigail and Doug next. She would find them sitting on the love seat with the torn under bottom, as I would not have had the chance to have it reupholstered before my death. She would ask them if they saw the man in the brown jacket and black fedora with a red feather. Abigail would say, "Yes sweetheart I did, but I didn't recognize him... Did you Doug?" Doug would shake his head and then excuse himself to the back porch. He would light a Camel and take a long, hard drag. He would blow streams of smoke from his nose and remember the way I used to love when he



did that, “can you breathe fire, too” I said. “Of course,” he’d answer, “all dragons can”. “So you admit it,” I whispered. He smiled. He would blow more smoke and remember the first time he kissed me in his and Abigail’s coat closet. He would remember the way I ran my fingers around his streams and the way I looked at him. He would remember the way he took hold of my wrist, pinning me against the guest’s coats at Abigail’s 40th birthday party; the way his lips felt against mine, soft and warm and gentle and firm, the way I pulled him closer. He would remember finding me attractive when Abigail first introduced us in college; about wishing he had met me before her. I want him to think of the last decade of my life then, the way he cheated on his wife and I cheated on my best friend, the way we never got caught, the way his eyes widened when I told him that I would leave, that he should too, the way he said he couldn’t do that to Abigail, the way I said what about me, the way I looked at him when I said he would have to choose, the way he looked at me when he said her. I want him to remember the last time I kissed him, how it felt as soft and warm and gentle and firm as the first time. Then he would think of stranger my daughter asked about and remember the way he touched my hand and how angry it made him, because he wanted to be able to touch me that way, but couldn’t. All he could do was blow smoke streams and think of dragons.

I want her to find her father last, sitting at the dining room table with a half empty bottle of Brugal and ask if he saw the man in the brown jacket and black fedora with a red feather. He would stop pouring his rum and glance at her, “Yes.” She would wait for him to go on and when he didn’t she would ask, “Do you know him?” He would continue filling his glass, “Why?” She would say, “I’ve just never seen him before, wondered how he knew Mom...” He would take a sip and say what he knew he shouldn’t, but because he is who he is, he would, “He was her first lover.” My daughter would frown, “What?” He would repeat himself, “He was her first lover.” Then he would smile, “Gotcha!” He would let out an echoing belly laugh that would ring through the house and make everyone that heard it uncomfortable. She would look at him in disgust and leave the table. He would pick up the glass, feel its cold against his fingers and he would remember the time he picked up that old lead pipe. When he took it to his younger sister’s teacher after his sister told him what the teacher had been doing to her. He would remember striking the man thirteen times, a good strong blow for every year his sister had been his sister, being hauled off to juvy in his last year of high school, not getting many visitors until I came, how shocked he was to see me because we never spoke at school, the way I took his hand and said, “You did the right thing”. He would remember thinking that was no way

to start a healthy relationship, that it was just the thrill of it, but not acting on it, and instead saying, “You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.” He would remember how we got married as soon as he got out of prison and I finished college, how I would parade him around and the looks people gave him; he’d remember how proud he was when he told me he finally found a trade, the way I forced a grin he knew to be fake because it looked nothing like the first day I went to see him in jail. I want him to rub his fingers against the cool glass and remember how disappointed I was when I realized he was just a boring man with a moral fiber that made him violent that one time, to remember the way I would provoke him, try and bring the boy with the lead pipe to the surface, when he knew that he would never be enough for me when I realized that boy wasn’t coming back.

I want her to go to the bathroom and lock the door behind her. She would splash her face a few times. She would bend over the sink and feel her eyes begin to swell. I don’t want her to think of the time I bent her over that same sink and stuffed a bar of Ivory into her mouth because she repeated *shit* after hearing me say it, or the time I laughed and told her not complain about constipation, that it hurt more going in then coming out, or her eighth birthday when she saw Mr. whoever from up the street follow me into the bathroom and not retreat in embarrassment, or when I was gone the summer her period started, how she figured out what to do without me, or when she brought her first boy home and blushed when I whispered for her to open the top two buttons on her blouse. Instead, she would stand in the bathroom and remember my laugh, the way it made her smile. She would think of how much my laugh reminded her of her own, that she loved that it did. Then she would look up and stare into the mirror. She would stare long and hard and she would examine her face. Her high cheekbones and strong jaw, not so smooth skin and mildly tempered eyes. I want the thought to cross her mind, but only for second. 🌀



**MORGAN CHRISTIE**’s work has appeared in *Hippocampus*, *Aethlon*, *Blackberry*, *Moko*, as well as others, and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She is currently completing her Masters in Creative Writing.



# C’ain’t

Gabriela F Jiménez Carrillo

How are you gonna explain how you grew up to a person? How are you gonna describe growing up in an inner city suburban neighborhood with a rag tag group of kids? Without sounding cliché? How are you gonna describe getting into fist fights outside a stash house over low income problems, coming home all messed up, having to come up with a rule that says you can’t each hit each other in the face and in the same sentence have to fess up that you wouldn’t have even made it unless you all loved each other as fiercely as you did?

Like your love for each other was only ever topped by how much y’all hated everyone else. For not being you. How ‘you’ was never one person. It was an army. You filled up house parties like they were five million dollar an hour clubs. Your local dope man and dope fiend were your Jay-z. Your Kanye (back when he had a soul and rocked polos). How are you gonna explain that to a white person who can only think of brotherhood in regards to blood—in regards to not wanting to acknowledge it?

How are you gonna tell em in that same breath that you’re proud of your hoods! But you wish they didn’t exist. Hell you wish a homie would get you to confess that.

How are you gonna tell ‘em everything you did had a consequence. Except for everything you did that was an action—a verb—a movement. Far and hard as you ran away. That as long as you were moving nothing could ever catch you? (You’d laugh and admit ‘Homie you know that shits absurd.’) How you gonna tell a thin haired white girl about the camaraderie felt in elementary school bathrooms—“Here lil cuz, lemme get those edges down.”

About sharing one book in a whole class and not learning shit; about sharing a blunt and learning everything there ever was to knowhow are you going to tell em with a straight face that your love for each other got you out?

Although no one made it in a way—because every one

who lived there knows they owe everyone everything—and you either paid or you **PAID**.

How you gonna tell ‘em bout the girls dumped in ditches whose mothers refused them funerals, the boys who played runner to the big leagues serving life in county? How are you gonna tell ‘em?

How you gonna tell that y’all got an eighth grade education but y’all graduated just the same—how your girls ain’t your girls no more? How your boys are the men their daddies made them?

How you gone tell ‘em bout the girls who got swept and folded like billfolds by Romeos in wrap around tinted black Escalades? How they ended up knocked up and on their ass at their mama’s house? How they get child support handed to them by their man’s runners in brown paper bags (the lucky ones at least)?

How sometimes instead they get black eyes? Constantly looking behind them at the super Mercado, at the park while swinging junior softly, at their jobs behind a bulletproof glass at the cash ‘n’ go? How they paid the steepest price for the police order they lifted on their man? For talking on him?

Or the ones who swing poles and wash the money in the laundromat slipping Hilda the attendant a hundred to keep quiet. To not say anything, dodging questions from El Padre on Sundays?

Or how many in the yearbook got ‘Rest in Peace homie’ written next to their face? How they were always too much? Too much, too much?

How they bit the bullet, they drowned their sorrows, hung from a rope till they choked? How they Latina mamis sob because they can’t take confirmation? How they gotta lie and lie and lie and hope they get to heaven? Or about the mamis at the other end of the aisle who knew the new car, the paid rent was too much? Always too much.

Who looked the other way at the powder, the glass, the



dabs, the smell? Who looked the other way at the gun under the pillow, the extra locks? Who looked away so much they pretended they were blind but that third eye is wide open now that su hijo lies dead?

Or the ones who became the Romeos in the loaded and blinded cars? The ones with the pretty easy crybaby girls in the clubs hanging off their leather arms? Making grands off the running, the actions, the verbs. Owning entire cities without ever buying properties? Knowing they won't rest till they're dead? How they aren't thinking about it right now. Not ever. But knowing.

How are you gonna explain there only ever was one out of the hundreds of you that got away? Went to Harvard law, Graduated Valedictorian. Brown, Published at 23. Juilliard, dances front stage. How they couldn't put one single foot in the hood now? It wouldn't be prudent? It wouldn't be safe. We are still proud of you. How they are not us anymore. How they're too good for us now. Too good for the cracked warm leather of the Crown Vic. Too good for the bare bones of your locked up body.

How are you gonna tell 'em people still do right around here? Get married, bring life. How that in and off itself is a dirty sin. How these good people's good kids gonna be a second generation first. Lawyers and doctors; with houses in Maine. Vacation homes on the south side of France, cheese and wine nights on yachts. If a stray bullet doesn't claim and destroy each and every dream. How are you gonna tell 'em you stay up nights praying for other people's good kids?

How you gonna tell 'em about the ones inheriting families; bringing up siblings like bumps on there spine? Back breaking labor to put the smartest one of them through college, to make sure no one else has to die, putting babies in the military and bodies in shallow graves once they return? Raising nieces and nephews with the same last name?

How are you gonna tell em that there's them and then there's *you*?

How all of you came floating through the same ocean but now you're just a little droplet with a hurricane inside of you? Smothered by corporate? Realigned by politics? How sometimes when you get too drunk in a too short dress in a too crowded bar the Romeos posted in the back with curls of billowing smoke and bad attitude can spot you?

How sometimes when you're angry, *really angry*, a cop stops your racially ambiguous self and you forget yourself? Buck tooth, hair tangled suddenly your tongue remembers itself before you can; "Man I ain't do nothing! I ain't do nothing to no-bo-dy! I ain't saying nothing, if I ain't charged you can't hold me for nuh-thinnng!" Pouting harder on every word, drunken heel slamming onto pavement, your socially acceptable white friend apologizing

for your behavior. Mouthing 'what's wrong with you??' over her shoulder apologetically.

How are you gonna tell someone you've spent days scrubbing at yourself in your bathroom—trying to be different, to forget, to get better, to recover? Self inflicted punishment: you cut your accent out of your tongue. You held your staccato and stopped rolling your r's. Stop daydreaming of getting on your knees in dimly lit cars to peels of smoke and the taste of hennessy mixing with something filthy—bitter?

How sometimes your boyfriends too right, too courteous, too gentle? How he doesn't wear enough leather? How he doesn't sweat near death anxiety into your sheets so he could never smell as good? How you shouldn't be used to having your throat gripped for looking too long at someone else? How the hand on your knee should be damn near painful? How after three months you kick him out no with no provocation?

How are you gonna explain that 'how you grew up' with the way your tongue only knows the word reformation? Not confession? That you, yourself, have been at times and all times a runner, a crybaby, a girl running from her man, a good person?

That lately—you feels plural.

The one at the office, the one at your mamas house, the one smoking cigarettes and lying about it inside the confines of your cheap ass car.

"C'ain't."

Not gonna admit it to anyone but yourself, and the smoke. And you don't need to. 6



# Normalization

Zeke Jarvis

And so we were almost out of the meeting, I mean, everyone was looking down at the table, and then McFee actually asks if there's anything else. I mean, he could have said, 'Well, if there's nothing else,' and nobody would have said anything." The man in the blue suit opened the door for the woman in the black dress. She went through without replying. He continued, "And so of course Fisher had to bring something up. I mean, you give him an opening."

They approached the baby wall, and the man raised his voice, trying to be heard over their cries. "Fisher lives to hold us all hostage, you know? If he's at his desk, then people might find out how little he fucking does, so he has to eat into everyone else's time, too."


The woman still didn't reply. She looked up at the large clock above the wall. It would take them about fifteen more minutes to reach work. She brushed a few strands of hair back behind her ear.

"Yeah," the man said, reaching the wall. "Fisher doesn't

even do nothing. He keeps everyone else from doing something. That's literally all he does." The man stopped and looked at a few of the babies on the wall. The section of wall where the man and woman stopped had mostly whole babies. Fresher. The man ran his fingers over a couple of white babies before stopping on a black one. He grabbed hold of its left leg and pressed a button, said, "Fucking Fisher," and leaned back. The blade swooped down. The baby screamed as the leg popped off.

Meanwhile, the woman had moved down the wall, more towards the babies who were already missing an arm, a leg, or both. She stopped in front of an Asian baby with no arms. It looked lethargic, barely holding its head up. She had just grabbed hold of its right leg when the man said, "You really want that?"

The woman looked at the bottom of the wall. There were bits of hair and bone. She shrugged and pulled the leg, then touched the button below the baby. The baby let out a bit of a whimper, but that was it.



**GABRIELA F JIMÉNEZ CARRILLO** is a temper tantrum and headache writer based on the outskirts of Chicago. She likes to make noise, paint and drive around her neighborhood with the windows down. She's been previously published in *The Broke Bohemian*.



The man and woman went to the ovens. The man put on a little sauce and sprinkled some garlic powder on. The woman simply used salt and pepper. They walked along the oven, watching the leg move along the conveyor belt, browning behind the glass. “I think McFee is starting to go a little senile, to be honest. He has no control over things”. The woman watched the skin start to crackle a bit. When the legs reached the end of the conveyor belt, the man and woman slid their legs onto the paper plates sitting at the oven’s end.

The woman brought the small leg to her mouth and blew on it before taking a nibble. The man walked with her, quickly drawing up to and then slightly ahead of her. He took a bit of the leg, and he chewed on one side of his mouth while talking out of the other. “Next time that prick Fisher talks at the end of a meeting, I’m just going to look over at McFee and tell him that I have to go.”

As they reached the end of the baby wall’s building, there were a couple of menials sweeping up bones and skin. The woman glanced at them quickly, but the man kept walking. They walked out of the building and out into the courtyard. There was the usual group of wastrels lying outside the door. “You’re killing babies,” the first one said, though it was hard to know if he even was really looking at the man and the woman.

The man spat on the wastrel, and there was probably a bit of baby in the spit. The woman looked down at her leg, a few nibbles missing. “What do they expect us to do?” she said.

“McFee and the managers?” the man asked. He stuck the leg’s end into in his mouth and pulled it out slowly, tearing some of the meat off.

The woman pulled a small strand of meat off and put it

in her mouth. “The wastrels,” she said.

The man snorted. “They want us to be lame and sad like them.”

The woman gagged a little, but she kept chewing. “Really, though, what are we supposed to do?”

The man sighed and chewed. “We’re supposed to eat and go to work. What else would we do?”

The woman swallowed, and she kept walking. The man took another bite. He wiped his mouth with the back of the hand holding the leg. There was still a little bit of sauce on his left cheek.

The pair walked past a group of officers. The man nodded to them, and the woman looked at the ground. It was difficult to tell if the officers even really noticed. They walked over to the wastrels and started administering a typical beating. A couple of the wastrels ran off, but most of them just sat and took it. The one who had spoken to the man and the woman held up one hand, but when he got clubbed in the head, it looked like he started to have some kind of seizure. The officers continued to beat him.

The man seemed to not notice. Instead, he looked up at the sky. “Decent day out,” he said.

The woman peeled back the skin a little and bit into the meat. It pulled off easily, and it was very tender.

“Too bad we have to spend it all inside, in fucking meetings,” the man said.

The woman chewed for a bit, then said, “Yeah, sometimes it’s hard just to make it through the day.”

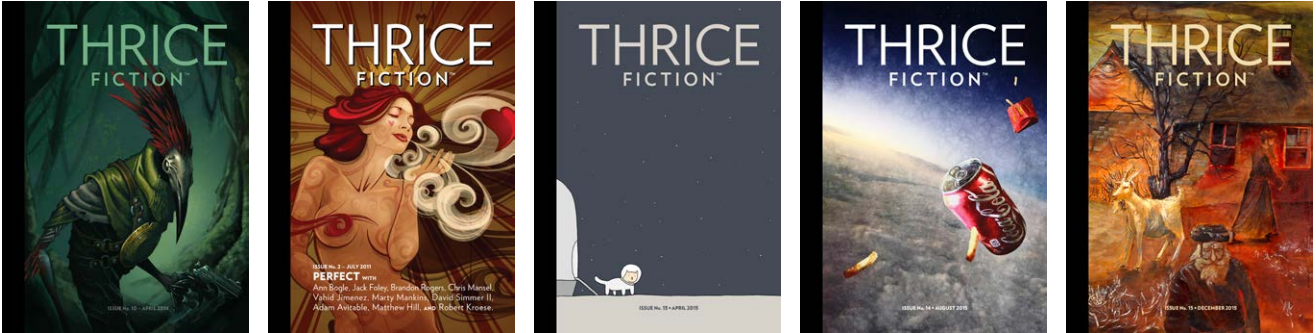
The man finished the meat from his leg, then he tossed the bone into the gutter. “Well,” he said, “We’ve got to do what we’ve got to do. No sense getting worked up about it”.

The woman nodded. 6



**ZEKE JARVIS** is an Associate Professor at Eureka College, where he edits *ELM*. His work has appeared in *Moon City Review*, *Quail Bell Magazine*, and *Posit*, among other places. His books include *So Anyway...* (a collection of introductions to poems that don't exist), and *In A Family Way*. His collection of short stories, *Lifelong Learning*, will be published by Black Magic Media in 2018.

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# In Silence

## June Calender

Total darkness was blindness. Silence was deafness. Only skin sensations and inner body sensations remained. Her body was lying supine on the mat-covered floor. Her feet tilted slightly outward while the heels, calves of her legs, thighs, buttocks rested comfortably. The knees were relaxed; there was no tension in them as there was no tension in the small of her back; it did not touch the floor. Her upper back and the back of her head rested comfortably. Her neck was not tense. Her hands lay on the outer half of their backs; the fingers were slightly curled inward. Her lower jaw and mouth were relaxed; her eyes were closed, the lids rested serenely over them; her forehead was relaxed. All this she had accomplished after she took four steps into the black space after closing and barring the door. She crawled to what she assumed was the center of the room, then lay down. She had perfected physical relaxation three years ago and could tick off the segments of the body as easily and automatically as she could recite the alphabet. When her body relaxed she

turned her awareness to her breathing.

Air entered slowly, of its own accord flowing into the right nostril a little more forcefully than the left. As the air moved into her lungs her ribcage expanded slightly, the air pushed the diaphragm up minutely. For five seconds her breathing was at stasis, then the diaphragm began to contract, the ribcage also contracted, the air flowed out as gently as it had entered. After another five seconds of stasis a new inflow of air began the cycle.

Five years of daily practice had enabled her to maintain this quietude for twenty breaths ... on a good day. For twenty breaths, about three minutes, she could relax completely into silence, into emptiness, into peace in which no chattering monkeys rudely interrupted. But one ancient monkey, the Watcher, counted the breaths in the accented voice of Roshi Arai. Roshi had said, “Just breathe.” Watcher-Monkey had been reluctant to allow even two breaths. He insisted she could not live without his attention. They had had the conversation over and over. The first time she gained



those three minutes he shrieked in terror, a horrifying cry of pain. No matter how hard she tired, she could not gain another minute, let alone her goal of long enough to savor the peaceful emptiness with no awareness of the monkeys. Her three-minute sips of bliss were not enough; she was thirsty for nothingness.

She had come into the dark silence to finally imprison Watcher-Monkey for longer, an hour, even fifteen ... even five minutes. Yet he watched, unseen, counting, controlling. As the gatekeeper, on the twenty-first breath he would push open the silent gate and one or another of the troop would chitter breaking the silence.

*More, please, Hanuman, more today, here in the special place.*

We've waited too long already, insisted a second monkey. The gate was ajar.

She had lost the battle.

Lost what?

*The challenge. The control. The peace.*

It's an illusion, you know.

*I had it for twenty breaths.*

Illusion. A simple pause.

*No, the scent of peace, like the scent of a rose I cannot see.*

Master told you all is illusion.

*I understand but do not understand; those minutes of utter quiet were real.*

The rose of enlightenment can never be yours.

Enlightenment is illusion, squeaked another monkey.

*YOU are illusion.*

We are all real. Even in this room where no one can see, no one can hear.

We are here. Not one, we are many.

Many, many, chattered many.

*You are the before and the after. Roshi said, "Before enlightenment, chopping wood. After enlightenment, chopping wood."*

"Enlightenment" is an illusion of emptiness like this empty room. Where you are there cannot be emptiness.

*Because you invade.*

We live here as surely as you do.

*But I will gag you. I may even kill you. Then I will hold the rose of enlightenment.*

Control is an illusion. We live as long as you live.

You have wasted five years in an impossible quest, believing in an impossible goal.

You are chasing a chimera.

*Stop! Stop! You always do this to me.*

Because only life is not illusion.

Why entomb yourself?

Why this artificial emptiness when you can never be empty?

Why are you so stubborn?

*It is practice. Roshi recommended it because I cannot get past three minutes.*

Pah! The poseur.

*He is a holy man.*

So he says. Huh!

*I have seen his aura.*

Everyone has an aura.

*Should I chuck five years of practice?*

Better sooner than later.

*It's a defeat.*

A victory.

*For who, you?*

For you.

You have given that old man your life.

*To find meaning, peace, enlightenment.*

Pah! Pah! Pah! There is no meaning except your life.

*I've been trying –*

To please an ignorant old man. Your ur-father.

*To gag you, all of you, every last one of you.*

So go drown yourself in the lake.

They always came like this, the monkeys, their words spilling like marbles, tumbling down wooden stair steps, letting her answer but going on and on and on. They were there when she sat on the cushion in the meditation hall. She could drown their voices by chanting, although eventually they would whisper, your knees ache; you're getting chilly; the left side of your nose itches. Sometimes when she played Ping-Pong they sat on the sidelines quietly, maybe they even slept. But when she was alone, at night trying to fall asleep, in the middle of the night when she awoke from a dream, they clung with strong little fingers, grasping her hair, her ear lobes, pinching her bottom, wrapping their arms around her legs, sitting on her shoulders, their whispering mouths near her ears. They seemed to have come now from all the corners of the room although now she could not see even the hand in front of her face as she rubbed her forehead. They were inside, behind the bones of her head and they were swarming all over her, playing games with her now that she allowed them to chatter, argued with them. They loved it! They could argue for hours, often did. She asked Roshi when they had joined her life.

Very early, he said. When you were a little child learning to talk, listening to your parents talk, mimicking what you heard around you. She had never known they were separate from herself until Roshi explained that they could be quieted with practice, that that was the very purpose of practice. She felt empowered knowing that. Soon she realized that she was neither enlightened nor empowered but enslaved by the tug of war between the chattering monkeys and the quiet voice of Roshi Arai. If she hadn't understood their invasiveness, their domination what would she do? Chop wood? Well, teach French to eighth graders. Only that. For five years she had worked to free herself from the whole simian tribe. And she had gain three-minute increments. Only. All the retreats, the evenings of sitting, the investment paid only a three-minute dividend. Here, in the dark, she had thought she might gain control, get that chatter out of her mind, sweep all the serious-faced, little, furry gang out of her awareness.

*You aren't really monkeys.*

We are not an illusion.

We are real no matter what you call us.

Call us fleas, mice, parrots, internalized voices, memories, dreams, aspirations, good sense.

Call us rationality, reality, anything you please.

*I don't want you. I don't need you.*

We are you.

*Roshi says ego is illusion, the cause of all suffering.*

We are your mind.

*Mind is brain.*

Brain is real. You are a vegetable without it.

*The enlightened ones live without ego.*

Pah! A shell sitting in the lotus position, doing nothing. That is a rutabaga, an eggplant, a massive, stinking duran fruit of ego. Living is real.

*Living is suffering.*

And joy, and beauty, and happiness.

Swinging from trees, eating bananas, laughing, loving and being loved, telling jokes, swimming in the lake, chanting.

Playing Ping-Pong, teaching French. Suffering happens too. And death comes.

*Stop!*

Never, never, never, never.

She rolled onto her stomach, brought her right arm up crooking it to make a pillow for her forehead. A sob erupted, a subterranean bubble of magma; and then tears began to pour, lava dripping from her eyes onto the mat. Silence became sobbing which filled the room. She began to gasp. Wracking gasps for air that was unable to penetrate deeply enough into her chest to give her the strength she needed to start again, to roll over and relax once more, breathe for three minutes, or maybe more.

More. That was what she had come to do. One failure was not the end. She could try again and again as she had been trying for these five years.

She sat up, brought her knees to her chest, wrapped her arms around her knees, put her head down and began to rock back and forth still sobbing, imaging a mother's arms holding her. But she had no mother – and no father – not here, not anywhere in the world for over five years. She let her head fall back, her throat opened and she heard a howl. Her own howl, like a wolf calling to other wolves that were far away. She howled, gasped, howled. For a long time she howled, louder sometimes, softer sometimes. A wolf alone in a snow covered forest, perhaps the only wolf for miles

around. All the other wolves had been trapped, poisoned, shot. She was alone in a cold, silent forest where the sun fell in shards that burst into glittering crystals. The glittering was beautiful, the light danced like a living thing. The howls dissolved like the ripples on the surface of a pond long after the stone sank into the muddy bottom.

The light stopped dancing as the watery surface became calm. The light was her aura, a sunny glow, warm, peaceful, an ember surrounded by the ashes of her life. She rolled onto her side, lay curled like a fetus and fell asleep.

When she awoke a chorus sounded a long last tone. She rolled onto her other side and opened her eyes to see the red digital numbers on her bedside clock radio. There were none. Then she knew where she was. She sat up, taking the meditation posture and began to breathe slowly. The Watcher-Monkey was near, all his clones sat shoulder to shoulder around her in a circle, a satisfied smile on their tiny faces. She sat a long time, knowing the monkeys were there but they were silent with her, waiting.

Did she say it, or did they say it, or did she say it in unison with them?

Chopping wood, teaching French ...

She stood, took several steps holding her hands out before her. Her palms met the wall. She moved along the wall feeling its surface with her palms until she felt the seam that indicated the door. She felt upward until she found the bar that she had placed in its slot. She pushed it up and then pushed her weight against the heavy door, which opened little by little.

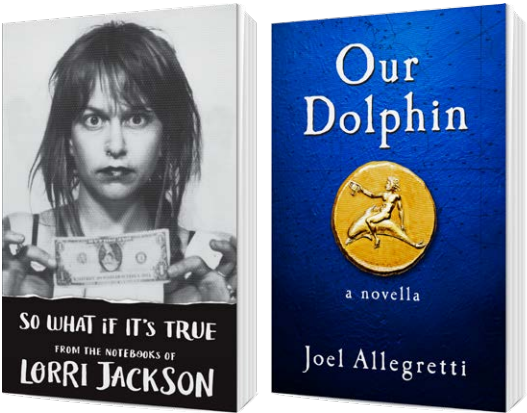
She was blinked in the grayness of a dim interior hallway. Her eyes began to adjust. Evening perhaps, or morning. She didn't care. She began to hear chanting in the distance, imagined the practitioners on their mats in the main hall. Morning? Evening? Never mind. The time had come to go away, to teach eighth graders French, chop wood, live her one precious life. 🙏



**JUNE CALENDER** moved to Cape Cod after a twenty-plus year careers in New York City as an off-off-Broadway playwright. She was invited to three national conferences, including The O'Neill. Her works were seen as far "off" as Alaska, California and Wisconsin. She now teaches writing skills at the Academy for Lifelong Learning housed at Cape Cod Community College and edits their annual anthology of student writing. She is finishing a much researched biography of a traveler to Tibet.

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# The Cost of Four Nickels

Jim Naremore

The clattering sound of the front door being pushed open drew Garland out from the back of his shop to the showroom. He wiped paste off his hands with a dingy white rag and blinked hopefully behind his wire-rimmed glasses.

The stillness that usually lay like a drop cloth over the showroom had been stirred by a tall, thin woman in a long emerald green wool coat. A frail little girl, who Garland thought might be eight, tucked in behind the woman, presumably her mother. As she clung close behind the shield of her mother's heavy coat, diffidence was evident in the girl's body language and on her delicate face. The glance she flashed up at Garland faded as quickly as it came.

But as always happened with children when they entered the showroom, even the most timid couldn't help but release the butterflies of their attention out into the shelves of his store. The girl blinked with wide curiosity at the dozens and dozens of strange creatures and lovely simulacra around her.

"Can I help you?" offered Garland quietly, running his hand through his hair.

"I hope so," said the woman, and she reached back and shoved the girl out in front of her. "Come out here, Juliette."

Now that she was exposed, the little girl pressed awkwardly back into the folds of her mother's coat. She clutched, with the gossamer fury of a child in love, to a doll almost half as large as she was.

"Juliette has broken her doll," said the mother, rather flatly.

As the mother was speaking, the door clattered again and swung open. Another woman, younger, wearing a black military jacket and a fiery scowl. The showroom was split down the middle by the shadow of the buildings across the street so that half the room was overcast light and half was deep shade. The younger woman slipped into the showroom and retreated into the dark half, where she smoldered.

"Ah," said Garland, looking at Juliette, "what's happened?"

"Her arm," said Juliette, gently lifting the doll's right arm.

"Well, then... Come here, and let's have a look."

Garland brought a tall metal stool from the back of the counter and gestured for Juliette to climb up. As she sat the doll on the counter and clambered up onto the stool, Garland looked back into the shadow of the room at the new customer standing there with her arms folded across her chest. She pressed deeper into the dark shadow when a police officer appeared on the sidewalk outside. He regarded the contents of the display window with the accent of a smile on his face, framed under the backwards gilt lettering "*Loneliness: Dolls, Puppets and Marionettes*"... then moved on.

"It's not ready yet, Samantha," Garland said to the

woman in the shadows.

"You said that before. We don't need it to be perfect," said the woman with a tone that caused Juliette's mother to turn in her direction.

"It will be," said Garland, trying to focus on the task at hand and smiling at Juliette.

"I can wait," said Samantha, and she began running a lazy hand over the dolls and puppets on the shelf nearest her in the shadow.

Juliette now sat properly on her stool with a poised and mannered posture and her hands in her lap, her lustrous brown hair tied back with a light blue ribbon. Her doll lay before her on the counter. Garland pulled a work lamp over, switched it on, and looked at his charge without touching it.

"What is her name?" asked Garland, focused on the doll.

"Don't you know? My mother said you made her."

Garland smiled. "I made this body. I remember it. But I didn't make her. You did. The body is just a box, and it becomes whatever we put inside it... Remember? 'It's love that makes you real' the Skin Horse tells the Velveteen Rabbit."

Juliette lit up at the name of her favorite story.

"All the dolls and puppets in here have what I call 'waiting names.' Those are names I give them while they are waiting for someone to fill them up. Her waiting name was Veronica. But you tell me what her real name is."

"Jophiel," said Juliette.

"An angel's name. So, we have an angel with a broken wing?"

"A boy at school grabbed her and tried to take her, but I held on. Her arm ripped." Juliette's eyes looked up at him from her pale, delicate face and filled with something inexpressible. "Can you fix her?"

"I hope so. May I look at her?" asked Garland before picking up Jophiel.

Juliette nodded.

With great care and delicacy, Garland lifted Jophiel and felt her shoulders. "May I see her shoulder?"

Again, Juliette gave her permission.

Garland carefully removed Jophiel's lovely black overcoat and her peach satin blouse and folded them neatly on the counter. Jophiel's head, hands and feet were made of wood; a single piece for each that Garland had carved by hand. He worked off photographs to create the faces for his dolls, and he was always secretly pleased when someone would recognize something in a doll's features that reminded them of a famous person, which happened fairly often, given Garland's skill. Jophiel bore a striking resemblance to Jessica Chastain.

Her body was a smooth white muslin sewn and shaped over a set of plastic forms for her bust and hips, which were laid over a wire armature, all stuffed with sawdust. Her arms



and legs were each made separately of the same materials and wired and sewn onto the body. Jophiel’s right arm had been mostly ripped free, and the wire was snapped.

Garland examined the rip closely. “Yes, I think we can make her as good as new. It shouldn’t take too long.” Then he slipped back behind the curtain into the workroom.

He returned with a shallow tray: spools of thread and needles and fine pliers and a roll of wire. He also had something under his arm. Another doll. He sat the tray down and took the doll, looking closely at its face with a strange knowing smile, and handed it to Juliette.

“When Jophiel was still Veronica and she lived here in the shop, she had a friend. His name is Castagillian,” Said Garland indicating the new doll. Juliette looked at Castagillian. He was smaller than Jophiel, and dressed in a grand red military jacket and black boots. His body was of a soldier, but his face was a soft grey cat’s.

“You hold Castagillian while I fix our beautiful patient, and I’ll tell you a little of their story.” Garland adjusted his work light, picked up the fine pliers and began to ever so gently work on Jophiel’s shoulder.

“When Jophiel was still Veronica, she lived in a big house with all her sisters. She had many, many sisters, and they all slept together in a huge grand bedroom on the top floor of their big house, each in a separate poster bed. Each sister had her own armoire and her own dressing table and her own nightstand, but for all the girls, there was but one mirror. A big old wooden framed mirror that leaned against the far wall of the bedroom, and had done so since anyone could remember.”

As Garland spoke to Juliette, her mother and Samantha slowly rotated around the shop in a dance of non-acknowledgement, backs to one another, swinging slowly from light to shadow and back again.

“Every morning and every night, all the sisters would fight and jostle and argue with each other over time in front of their one mirror, so they could comb their lovely hair, or straighten their lovely gowns, or admire their lovely faces. All except Veronica, who was the youngest and the smallest, and who was always being pushed or pulled out of the way by one of her older sisters and had to wait until last for any time at all.”

As Garland worked on the wire in Jophiel’s shoulder and told his story, Juliette gazed deeply into the cat’s face.

“Poor Veronica sat on her bed and watched as each of her sisters went before her in the mirror,” continued Garland, “and as she did, she noticed something strange: the reflections that looked back out of the mirror of each of her sisters in turn were odd. Oh, they looked exactly like each girl, they did exactly what each girl did, they behaved exactly as reflections ought to behave, but there was the finest little sense of sadness in the faces in the mirror, a look that wasn’t present on the faces of the girls who were so taken with their looks or their clothes or their hair.”

Garland finished with the wire and took up a needle and thread. “For days, Veronica watched, and the more she did, the more she noticed the sadness in the mirror. Finally, one night, when her sisters were all in bed, and all was quiet in the house, Veronica crept up to the mirror, carrying her candle. Now she could look closely and well at her own reflection without the busy distractions and bullying of her sisters.

“She held up the candle and looked deeply into her own eyes. They were surely her eyes, but they seemed so sad. She reached out and lightly put her hand on the glass. Her reflection did the same. When their fingers met, Veronica gave a gasp! She could feel the sadness. And it was another person’s sadness, not her own! A sadness and a fear and a plea!

“Veronica didn’t know what to do, but she knew she must do something. She stepped back just as her reflection did, and flung her heavy brass candlestick at the glass. The mirror burst into thousands of tiny pieces!”

Juliette’s mother stood at the window looking out into the street, paying no attention. Samantha watched Garland from the farthest point from the window.

“All of her sisters leapt out of bed in shock. ‘What have you done, Veronica!’ they all shouted in dismay. ‘You’ve broken our only mirror!’ And they started to scold Veronica and call her wicked names. But then they looked at the wooden mirror frame, and they all stopped. For there, standing where the glass once was, was a young man in a red coat and black boots and the face of a grey cat.

“He stepped out of the mirror frame and reached down and picked up a piece of the broken mirror glass with a great sadness, then he bowed low to all the sisters and to Veronica especially.

“‘I loved this mirror,’ said the cat, ‘it was my mother’s and it was all I had left of her. It’s a sad loss.’ He said his name was Castagillian, and ages ago an evil ogre had cast a spell on him that had trapped him in the mirror and forced him to assume the appearance of anyone looking into the glass and to do exactly as they did, and that only someone with the eyes to see beyond themselves and the wisdom to understand things other than what they see would be able to free him. There! All finished!” And Garland held up Jophiel, good as new.

Garland handed Jophiel back to Juliette, who examined her friend and was more than satisfied with the results. Before she handed the doll back to Garland, she turned her over to look at her back.

“I found this,” said Juliette, pointing to a spot on Jophiel’s back, there was something under the muslin. “What is it?”

“A nickel,” said Garland rubbing his finger over the coin sewn under the white fabric of the doll’s back. “There are four right together inside Jophiel. You mustn’t remove them!”

“Why?”

“It’s a secret. But every doll and puppet gets them. Leave them inside her. It’s good luck.”

Garland replaced Jophiel’s blouse and black coat and smoothed her hair and handed her gently back to a thrilled Juliette. She looked lovingly at her friend and then hugged her to her chest.

Juliette’s mother stepped up the counter, opening her purse. “Thank you,” she said, “how much for the repair?”

Garland smiled, putting away his tools and thread. “It was only a little thread and a few minutes work. Having such a kind audience for my story was wonderful. Juliette, do you have a nickel?”

The girl shook her head ‘no.’ Her mother went into her purse and handed one to her.

“Then that is a perfect payment. I will put it here in

this jar. For new dolls.” And Garland took the nickel from Juliette and dropped it into a glass jar full of nickels on his counter.

“Thank you, sir.” Said Juliette, and she held out Castagillian to him.

“I think Castagillian would like to come home with his old friend Jophiel. Why don’t you keep him?”

Juliette looked shocked with happiness, then she looked up at her mother.

“Oh, no... We couldn’t...”

“Please. That Castagillian is really only a study. A model I’ve been using. I’m making a life-sized Castagillian for the City Ballet’s spring performance. Please take him. He’ll be loved and happy.”

After a very pleased Juliette and her mother left the shop, Samantha approached the counter.

“Garland, that woman and her daughter? They were probably supporters of the Fascist.”

“You don’t know that Samantha,” said Garland as he began straightening marionettes on a shelf. “And even if they were, what of it? They deserve a kindness as much as anyone.”

“A kindness they are probably not willing to extend to us.”

“The girl was very sweet. There was grace and intelligence in her.”

Samantha waved a dismissive hand in the air. “Is the puppet finished?” she asked.

“Almost,” Garland said.

“Garland, we came to you because you are the best artist in the city. And because you are an old friend of my family. We don’t need art now,” said Samantha gesturing at the beautiful works surrounding her on the shelves in the showroom. “We need the puppet, as it was requested, by this evening. Please. It doesn’t have to be perfect. You know it’s part of the rally tonight. To call attention to the fact that the Fascist is nothing but a puppet.”

Garland smiled at her. “It will be done in two hours. Come back then. And it will be perfect, whether you want it to be or not.”

Samantha smiled back and gave Garland a hug. “Thank you, Garland. My mother sends her love.” She looked out the window as a police car slowly rolled past.

“Stay safe, Garland.”

“I am safe.” He replied not looking at her or the window.

Samantha sighed and exited the shop like a troubled exhale.

Garland slipped back into his workroom, rolled up his sleeves, and sunk his hands up to the elbows into a tub of paper maché paste. The warm sweet smell filled the room. He finished laying the last strips of paper maché over a life-sized, and very lifelike, torso. He went to a rack at the back of the shop and lifted down two finely jointed arms without hands, and two long jointed legs of the same paper maché, and began working to attach the limbs to the body. When he was finished, he cleaned the paste off his hands again, and used a blow dryer to dry the wet material.

“And you, sir,” asked Garland, addressing the headless and handless body lying on his worktable, “what shall your name be? And what is your story? You’ve made without

a head, but no matter. We’re all missing something, and a head isn’t the worst thing you can be without.”

Garland stood back from the table and considered for a moment. His eyes kept falling to the one problem with the figure: his hands. This particular job was rushed and Garland hadn’t had the time to properly craft the hands the way he wanted. They took time.

He pulled a wrapped paper parcel out from under the worktable. From the parcel Garland removed a dark suit and tie and a white shirt and black dress shoes, all recently purchased from the thrift store down the block. He carefully dressed the paper maché figure, just as an undertaker would dress a body for a funeral. When he’d finished, he stepped back and again looked at his work. It was a beautiful job. Only the hands.

Garland looked around his workshop. His eyes found his nearly finished life-sized Castagillian, hanging quietly in the corner from a hook in the ceiling. Castagillian’s hands were perfect. Garland had worked for three days on each of them, sculpting them out of blocks of balsa. Castagillian’s hands were like those of a religious icon. Garland had, in fact, used photos of hands of Buddhist sculptures and Orthodox iconography. He walked over to his ballet marionette and reached down to lift the figure’s hands.

“Castagillian, my friend... Lend me your hands. I need them. I will make you new ones, I promise...” and Garland carefully removed the hands from his marionette, carried them over to his prone paper maché figure, and attached them. The fit was perfect. He then carefully sat the headless figure up so it was sitting comfortably and casually on the edge of the worktable, hands folded in his lap, legs dangling off the edge.

“I think your name is Hugo,” said Garland as he straightened the figure’s suit and fixed his tie. “You like oranges, and going into florist shops to smell the smells. You sit in the café and have coffee every morning and read the newspaper, and watch the people coming and going, and wish the world were different than it seems to be. You attend the theater when you can, and you enjoy your books. You work in an office, where your job is to help people navigate the byzantine.

“You think often of your mother, she died years ago, and you hope you were a good son to her, even though you have your doubts. You go the movies alone, and sometimes lapse into a reverie that you are in the films you watch. A hero. Someone of great consequence. And then you walk home alone to your small apartment and lie in bed in the dark and think about the future and you wonder and hope and despair and pray into the darkness.”

Garland put his hands on Hugo’s shoulders and took a deep breath of fine azure consideration. “And your life is full of the same quiet moments and the same strange and lovely arabesques that make up each of our lives, and the hopes and fears and wonderments and yearnings are the same as everyone’s, but you feel alone, and as if no one could possibly understand, just like everyone.” Garland took a flower from a bouquet on the counter in the showroom and put it in Hugo’s lapel. “No. That can’t be your story. It’s mostly mine, I’m afraid. And I shouldn’t give it away. What shall yours be?”

He adjusted the fit of Hugo’s coat. “Hugo, you seem



dressed for an event. Or, I think you may be waiting for someone.” Garland pulled a chair around and sat down across from Hugo, and he considered him thoughtfully for a moment.

“You go every Tuesday morning and every Friday afternoon to wait outside customs at the airport. That is when the flights come in. You see you have escaped a war. A never-ending war is being fought in your country. When you were escaping you were separated in the chaos from Irina.

“Irina is why you are lonely now. Because Irina was what made you unique. And the purest form of loneliness is to loose who you are, to the point where you see your reflection and you do not know who it is. Without Irina, it isn’t you.

“And so you wait at the airport twice a week, hoping that Irina will get off one of the planes that bring fewer and fewer refugees each time. You have had no word for months. But still you wait, breathless each time, until the last person has filed out into the arms of family. Or lovers. Or hustled off to some business, and you are left as alone as you were to begin with.”

Garland stood up and stretched and looked around his workroom. “But Hugo-who-waits, what about your face? You do not have one yet. We can try a few together, perhaps? While we wait for Samantha? Which shall it be? Maybe a face like Castagillian’s? A sly and heroic cat who could wait for Irina so stoically?” Garland walked over and brushed Castagillian’s fine whiskers.

“Or are you a young man, handsome and perhaps naïve? And perhaps that naiveté is why you wait? While everyone else looks at you with pity, or sneers and shakes their heads at you because they believe you’ve been made a fool, or are in a delusion. But still you wait.”

Garland walked over to a marionette of an old knight: Don Quixote. “Or maybe you are old? And Irina is old as well, and the lines on your faces are the well-remembered paths and tracks of your lives together? And you wait because, in your age, the past and present and future have all become intertwined and mixed up and are now all one in the same?” Garland worked the control mechanism on Don Quixote, and he waved his sword fiercely in the air.

“Could you be injured? Wounded? Missing an eye or an ear, with a terrible florid scar running across your face as a memento of the war you escaped? Is that your story?” And he paused and laughed to himself.

“No,” said Garland, “I think you are just a man. Not old or young. Not handsome or disfigured. Just a man. Simple and plain with the same simple and plain and miraculous life we each have. You should have a head with no features. A blank. Or a mirror for a face, so that we could each see ourselves in you.

“But, Hugo... that is just your waiting name. Tonight I suspect you will be someone very different. But, I do have something important for you. Both you and Castagillian. You wait.”

Garland took the jar into which he’d placed Juliette’s nickel from the showroom. He walked over to his life-sized Castagillian marionette.

“Someone once said that a soul weighs twenty-one grams. The weight of four nickels. So here, Castagillian. I give you your soul. Use it well.” Garland tucked four nickels into a pocket inside Castagillian’s red coat.

“And for you, Hugo, a soul as well. Remember it.” And he put four nickels into the inside-jacket pocket of Hugo’s suit jacket. “Perhaps I’ll make an Irina for you next?”

Garland sat listening to the silence in his showroom, half thinking he could hear the sounds of breathing coming from the shelves. A car would pass on the street outside, and its headlights would sweep the wall and animate the dolls sitting there, sending their shadows dancing and spinning and finally coupling together in the darkness, and he remembered all the waiting names.

At 4:50, the door clattered open again, and Samantha entered wearing the same jacket and determined face she’d worn that morning. She fixed her eyes on Garland.

“Is it ready?” she asked hopefully.

“Yes. Come back and see,” said Garland, and he led her back into the workroom.

She walked up to Hugo, still sitting quiet and alone, without his head, on the worktable. She smiled.

“Garland, this is amazing.”

“I’d be happy to make a head for him, like I told you. It could be anything, and it wouldn’t take a long time unless it was something very special or particular. I could even do the Fascist.”

“No, Garland... The head is done. We had someone else make it.” She said, working the arms and legs on Hugo.

“Why?”

“It was for everyone’s protection. Especially yours. This is political, and you know how dangerous it is to be political now. Had the police found you making a puppet Fascist, you’d have been detained. You’re an immigrant. This way, you were just making a body. But thank you again, Garland. Can you help me get it into my car?” and she held out an envelope of money to him.

“You see how it attaches? Those hooks and eyes?” he finally said. She nodded. She and Garland wrapped Hugo up in newspapers and carried him out to Samantha’s Volkswagen. Once they had him loaded in the back, Samantha got in and leaned out the window.

“Garland, you should come to the rally. The Fascist needs to see the people in the streets, now more than ever, you can feel the weight of this regime.”

“I don’t want to get involved.”

“You are involved, Garland. Even if you hadn’t made this puppet. Everyone is involved that lives here now. Immigrants like us doubly so.”

“I’m against the Fascist, too. But I’m afraid. Take care of Hugo.”

“Who?”

“Never mind. Be careful with him please.” Garland said, pointing to the newspaper-wrapped body in the back seat.

And Samantha drove away.

At ten o’clock, Garland, against his better judgment and bundled in a long coat and scarf with a hat pulled down almost over his face, emerged from the front door of his apartment building. He walked quickly, keeping to the shadows, afflicted by the sharp chill and the wind and the inescapable air of antagonism. He made his way rather furtively and indirectly towards Independence Square.

Two blocks from his destination, he saw the glow in the

sky and heard the noises: shouting, drums, singing, a clamor of nervous energy, speeches being made over bullhorns. Garland found a doorway that afforded both a shadow in which to hide and a view of the happenings in the square.

Hundreds of people: old, young, male, female, children, even. They were all gathered together waiving signs and crying slogans against the regime of the Fascist. And there, above the crowd in the middle of the square, rising like the figurehead of some ship above a sea, was Hugo. He had become an effigy of the Fascist, mounted on a long pole held up by two men, swaying this way and that, a placard strung around its neck. A perfect simile of the Fascist’s head, done of what must have been wax, leering and contorted, was attached to Hugo’s neck.

Garland hated the Fascist, but he kept thinking about his one-sided conversation with Hugo. It seemed to Garland that here was Hugo, caught in a vast misunderstanding, not of his own making, being tagged and labeled and derided. Hugo looked frightened and bewildered attached to the head of the Fascist. The head, mounted and steady on the pole, ducked and bobbed and swung purposefully, but Hugo, swinging freely on his hook and eye mountings, seemed caught in the wind under the head, at the mercy of its movements.

It was then that the police moved in.

The doorway into which Garland shrank was a deep outdoor foyer, and he was hidden well inside it. A flood of police officers rushed past him up the street and onto the plaza-way that surrounded the square. Other officers appeared from all the streets that emptied into the plaza and square. In short order, the crowd was surrounded by police in riot gear: shields and helmets and rubber truncheons.

An order was given over some unseen loudspeaker to clear the square. Panic ensued. Rocks and bottles. Fireworks. Or gunshots? Screams. People racing down streets and alleyways with police in pursuit. Fires. A nauseating, rolling wave of human fear that could be smelled over the scent of tear gas and gasoline and wet pavement. And as Garland watched, terrified in his dark corner of the doorway, the effigy of the Fascist burst into flames.

The next morning it rained a hopeless drizzle. Garland

went to open his shop. Someone had thrown a stone through his Window. Glass lay scattered among the upset dolls and puppets on the floor. He slowly unlocked his door and saw his shop ransacked. “Die fucking immigrant scum” was spray painted on his wall. Counter protesting thugs.


In shock, he picked up a piece of his window glass: part of the word ‘Loneliness,’ and slipped it into his coat pocket. He locked his door again and walked aimlessly towards the Square.

He was surprised to find the Square had not been cordoned off. Signs of the riot were everywhere and police were in force, but the Square was open and a team from City Sanitation was cleaning up. Garland walked into the middle of the Square and found where a pile of ashes and melted wax had yet to be touched. He reached down and found the charred remains of a balsawood finger that had once belonged to Castagillian. He picked it up and then brushed at the ashes with the toe of his shoe. He found four nickels lying there, looking up at him from the pallid remains like Juliette’s eyes: inexpressible. He

stood in the grey rain, in the middle of an ashen and beaten public square, looking at the ground, looking for a measure of meaning.

The following Tuesday morning, a young woman got off a plane. Her name was Irina, and she exited customs and stood in the concourse, unsure and looking around her, as if she expected that someone might be waiting for her.





**JIM NAREMORE**’s debut novel, *The Arts of Legerdemain as Taught by Ghosts* (Belle Lutte Press, 2016) was awarded an Independent Publisher Book Award in the category “Best First Novel” in 2017. His short fiction can be found in numerous journals on line and in print, including *Emrys* and *The Offbeat*. He writes at the behest of all those people milling about in his head who all seem to want something from him.





# Black Water

Rosalind Goldsmith

**I**t started this morning, no big deal, now it is. I turned on the tap in the bath for a shower – wanted the water to drench clean the cant and rave of the night, the shock of dawn. Again, no sleep. Turned on the tap, ready to put my head right under that clean slam of water, before flipping the switch and transforming the frack into a stream of cleansing rain, and with it: hope of all hopes: wake me up, please just wake me up.

Turned the tap to full blast. Water jetted out clean. Then, next minute, turned black – pure black. No smell, no change in viscosity or density. Black pooled round in the tub and eddied down the drain.

Without the shower, went to work. I work in an law office downtown. The morning was catatonically normal, afternoon just the same. Always, around three, I lose the thread. What I mean is: I lose the thread of what I'm doing. It's not just fatigue, it's – oh, what am I doing here really? Earning money? For what? To pay my rent so I can get up tomorrow and earn more money to pay my rent? And that malicious circle starts eating its own tail until the space it circumscribes begins to shrink. And if I'm tired anyway, then the minutes blur under the light and the walls stretch away from me, and my fingers don't work on the keyboard – they just lie like uncooked sausages stuck to the ends of my hands. I don't answer messages I should, and I sit in front of the screen and stare, hoping I don't get noticed.

And that's what it was this afternoon, at three exact, I lost the thread, and the work I was doing became moot, became one big question: What is the square root of a cat, exactly? The screen splintered into magnetic fodder, words on the page flat lined into black strips against doc white. And what was that? What was that at the edge of the page? Nothing good.

The spooks from last night – a smiling girl – her golden hair – shards of glass, ax-broken spines – began to rise up and dance in the pit that was my head. I had to get up, get away from my desk. I'll get a drink, I thought.

I get up from my desk and go to the office kitchen. Turn on the tap. The water rushes out – then goes black. Again black. Here, as there. No difference – only more shocking here – here, where nothing is ever out of place, nothing

ever misspoken, nothing ever misused. Order triumphs every single day, and productivity soars. Yes, everything was normal here, no matter what was happening outside or at home. The office was my kind sanctuary – until this afternoon.

In the office kitchen, I filled a glass with the black water, held it, took it back to my desk. I sat looking at it, then drank it down. I drank it, I drank the black. It slipped and snaked down into me and curled up in my stomach. There was no taste to it, none. I drank it all down. Had no reaction. I thought it might scorch my intestines but I was wrong. Nothing unusual happened. I can live with this, I thought.

At 4:00, Amber, the office manager, sent me home. "You look awful," she said.

"I am not unwell," I said.

"Go on home and get some rest," she said.

And here I am, sitting at my kitchen table, "getting some rest". Hungry as hell, would boil an egg if I dared, but I won't – won't turn the tap on. I have sleeping pills. I'll take two, swallow them with juice, and they will pitch me into nightmares that are at least recognizable.

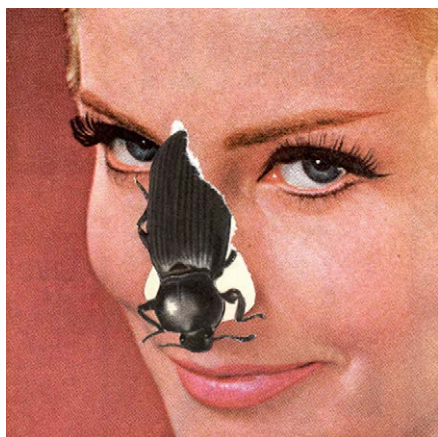
I'm getting hungrier, thirstier, and I can feel the black water in my belly begin to curdle and split and slowly leach out through the walls of my intestines. Still no reaction. And if I had one – pain or nausea – what then? No doctor can diagnose this. There's no cure for this.

The light is going outside my window, no big deal, it's dusk and that's what happens at dusk. But in my belly I can feel the black water rise, drift out to my skin, then seep out through my pores. It floats away from my body in ribbons, I see it as smoke, it is black smoke and the smoke whispers out through the kitchen window and dissolves in the dark of night, and the night presses its back up against the window, the night wants to get in, and in my belly I can feel the black water rising up to meet it, rising up, then resting back down, and pooling, and rising up again, and sinking down, breathing as I breathe. 6



**ROSALIND GOLDSMITH** lives in Toronto. She has written radio dramas and a documentary for CBC and a play for the Blyth Theatre Festival. She had also done translation/adaptations of short stories by Felisberto Hernandez for CBC radio. She began writing short stories several years ago. Her stories have appeared in the *Danforth Review*, *the Quiliad*, *Flash Fiction Magazine* (July), and *Litro UK* (print).





# The soft and silky thread

Steven Cline

Metal springs scrape the inside of your soul.  
 A slight fragrance the color of amber.  
 Why salivate so completely?  
 Overpowering Presence.  
 A sense of the lost and abandoned triangular lighthouses.  
 Feel it. The soft and silky thread.  
 You understand now. Beyond words and pictures—beyond thought.  
 A purring plasticine container of formaldehyde threatens.  
 Back up. Yes, this is best.  
 Continue on now. It is getting larger.  
 Please continue stirring the absconded mammals for a full 2-3 minutes. From out of the pot there will float a long and slender carrier pigeon: crush it with your hands and stir the foamy pickles.  
 The star shaped entity hovers over—watching. If you please him there are great and wonderful riches ahead.  
 He is a jealous mammalian flesh occupier.  
 Tear the nose off your face, under it you will find the hidden insect. If you let him speak he will tell you the great secrets. He has lived since the beginning of reality and works hurriedly towards its end.  
 The end of the world has already come and gone. We are left here—thinking. 🕒



# Fudge

Steven Cline

Next to me, I hear a tapping, but no one is there. Reality unfolds like an origami sphere.  
 Speeding up now, the walls grow vegetative histories filled with death and wonder. My mind drifts from the body and bounces off the walls in a hyperactive deposit of sense and nonsense. A family of white cocoon mice stands on the windowsill, staring at me with wise and unending eyelids. One of them points towards the fan, which is singing a delicate and gentle song for its offspring—the closet. From within the closet, soft white fudge melts and slowly fills up the room. 🕒



**STEVE CLINE** creates collage, zines, and written works and also helps edit and organize a surrealist journal & small press called Peculiar Mormyrid. Steven currently lives in Cartersville, Georgia and works as a Graphic Designer.





# The Estate

Adam Ross

Last evening I happened, by chance, to awaken from one of my now too frequent slumbers in time to see a new moon risen or, more likely, the old moon hung again. In the space between *its* self and *my own* the wind *howled*. It has been many, many days since I have ventured even a little from this spot at the blurring and watery edge of my estate, huddled, in all probability, not far from where it all began in those recessed and recessing, those distant, those first and unsavoured hours.

My ears are pricked up to the cracks of cold air which burn my little feet; its temperature menacingly *other*, threateningly *at odds* with my own.

The water, graying blacks and blackening grays, licks at the whiskers of my cheeks and, less frequently, touches barely and for a moment the dried edge of my lip. No longer do I catch either fleck nor glint of another's eyes on that far shore, nor the thin line of shore itself limned once, twice, a thousand times by the stark pale of celestial lights.

It was ever with great difficulty that I could shout across this body of water at those who *at least appeared* to be on the other side and, even in my youth, shouting was something that was hardly in my nature to do. The water itself was a mystery in that I could never quite recall if it were a river *separating* me from the world of others or a moat, built of my own hands, precisely to *separate*. I have certainly, it is true, made my own *scrapings* at its edges (indeed that has been the bulk of my occupation in life, such as it is, was and ever has been) though they have been decidedly inconsistent in their intent. Sometimes I grow fearful of being perceived too clearly and undertake them in order to bolster my crumbled ramparts; at other times, I frantically scratch them away with a view to perceiving more clearly that which at least *appears* to exist on the other side. In each case, though, the impact is slight in the extreme and yet, somehow, the expanse has only ever seemed to grow and grow and grow. Possibly *they* are making scrapings of their own on the other side.

Suppose after all of this that I could somehow, that I *must*, cross this now vast, forever vast, body of water. It is an absolutely vexing thought and one on which I have feelings deeply mixed (all the more so because I increasingly know, or at least suspect on some level, that it will happen, must happen,

and that it is not in my power to stave off this departure indefinitely). What would it even mean for me to find myself outside of my own bounds; outside this place that *at least* is known to me, which lends me my very *definition*? I say that this estate of mine defines me because I find nothing, or very little, of substance *within* myself. What little fragile ball of light may exist there does so precariously, to be sure, and only in relation to that which is *beyond* myself but *within* my estate (i.e. my *gatherings*: the turrets and walls, the packed and suffocated mounds and trenches of soil and decay and of dust). It is at the edges, yes the very edges, of these that *I am*; that I am delineated and given form and beyond that is perhaps another, *somewhere*, but between is, always is, that *terrible* water and that *terrible* wind. Lacking my surroundings what happiness could mount within me, what anger rise, what nostalgia gnaw lightly at my stomach and spine. The moment I am gone from *here*, I am probably gone, *period*, and it will be another thing which takes my place and *stirs the air*.

Yes, that time is coming and fast. When I first took to this, assuredly my last and final spot, I lay down and the barrel of my chest pressed hard against the ground and, as such, I lay above it or more precisely *upon* it. Over days and nights, nights and days, the rhythm of my breath dug gently into sand and soil until I no longer lay *above* it but rather *embraced by* and *dug into it*. Now my body has wasted away such that gaps have formed between my self and the sand and soil; stale pockets of belching air un-belched. If I feel stirrings of life it is only lower down, at my crotch, where form weeds from my waters; my new and last progeny and heirs (the old ones I do not know or, at least, recall).

Now it comes, inevitable, at last. Now a breath, now a rattle or a rasp, now a chill and unknown movement, now a stilling of the winds, now an end, one perspective overwhelmed and lost, now one light among many returns to darkness, millions following soon, now another flickers to life, but dimly, bravely, still more lie in rest waiting to awaken; now a last glance sidelong through a fogging eye at the watch, hands still fidgeting, but the hour is broken; now is born a child who takes in breath and reaches out with little hands, closer to the *last* than the *first* of man;

now youth, now youth, now youth



**ADAM ROSS** currently lives and works in Portland, Oregon, with his wife, Michelle, and two dogs. Although continually engaged in reflection and imagination, writing is a passion he has engaged only intermittently, when the ember of a particular idea won't extinguish but turns slowly to flame. He was last published in 2009 in *Failbetter*, who published his short work *A Parable of Pikes*. That work was written while working for a professional services firm in Dubai just prior to the great recession. This is his first completed work since then.

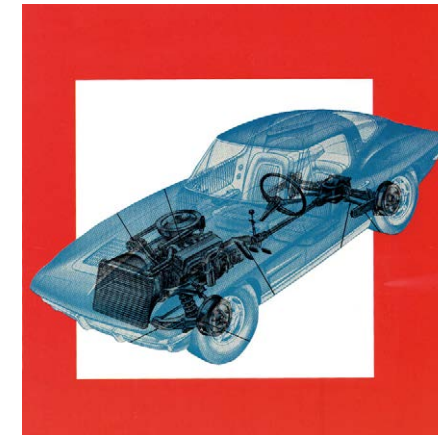


## RENUMBERING

EIGHT  
EIGHTEEN  
ELEVEN  
FIFTEEN  
FIVE  
FOUR  
FOURTEEN  
NINE  
NINETEEN  
ONE  
SEVEN  
SEVENTEEN  
SIX  
SIXTEEN  
TEN  
THIRTEEN  
THREE  
TWELVE  
TWENTY  
TWO



Individual entries on **RICHARD KOSTELANETZ**'s work appear in *Readers Guide to Twentieth-Century Writers*, *Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia of Literature*, *Contemporary Poets*, *Contemporary Novelists*, *Postmodern Fiction*, *Webster's Dictionary of American Writers*, and *Britannica.com*, among other distinguished directories. Otherwise, he survives in New York, where he was born, unemployed and thus overworked. He can be found online at [RichardKostelanetz.com](http://RichardKostelanetz.com) and his eBooks are available on Kindle at [amzn.to/udj8TI](http://amzn.to/udj8TI) — photo credit: Leonid Drozner



## The Shoreham Vehicle

Kenneth John Holt

### The Vehicle ~

'Feather tips, painterly brush strokes. I know this technique. I've watched a man do the same thing on television, and now by observation, even I know how to do it. What escapes me this late in the scene is the movement. The details are shifting. I can see them. Silver streaks upon green, motion blurred, swaying to one side. The silver and the green trade place against a black backdrop.'

'Wait. These are not feathers at all. They are the tops of trees along Laurel Canyon and I'm traveling upward. This is where I am. I have just entered the divide from Sunset. Isn't it wonderful what a person can see with only one eye while the other keeps him on a canyon road?'

### Shoreham Drive ~

"It's a living picture."

"It's framed in. I think it is trapped."

The truth is out there, somewhere out there with the lights. Sitting at a kitchen table, six stories up, is the perfect way to view the truth from a window. The sugar cube she rested on her tongue has dissolved, leaving her sucking after it. It must have been an hour ago now; it is no longer there, but the sweetness is still with her. The chemical finish creeps forward, filling her mask, and keeps on, through the wine they both sip. A half bottle remains.

The living room he sees through the doorframe to his right is far more comfortable than the kitchen. He knows this. It is the obvious thing. What draws people to a kitchen besides when food is coming from it? 'We always end up in the kitchen even though the living room is far more comfortable' he thinks.

### The Vehicle ~

'I feel something in the wind, and not just with the top down driving along the canyon road, but also, from when I was stopped on Sunset. My hair is whipping now and it was whipping then while at the light. And that smell is here. Is it fire? There certainly is the hot wind of October pushing

all of life around, and I, too, remember Diane's hair at the window. But, what of the smell? I must get through the canyon before the fire catches up with me.'

The one eye goes from the feathered treetops to a white circle on the windshield. It is there, and then it is not. The appearance of it is out of sync with the radio. There is no discernible rhythm to its arrival. The image is shot onto the glass by a machine gun, and then, at last, it stays awhile. It holds steady and German reaches out. He grabs at it with his thumb and forefinger, as he believes it to be there, but it is not actually there, and his heart jumps when he feels nothing but smooth glass beneath finger pads. That he can be confused linking what is perceived to what is real keeps his pulse racing. The white circle fades a few times during his attempts to capture it before it leaves altogether. He tries an easy laugh to make things right, and it is at this time, looking over the windshield, the likeness shows again. German understands he tried to control the full moon in the space of his fingertips as it beat onto the glass from when the high trees of the canyon allowed him its view. Watching the curves, the second eye keeps him on the upward road.

### Shoreham Drive ~

Diane is standing at the kitchen window. The sill of it reaches mid-thigh and the height extends to just below the ceiling. She can no longer see the surrounding frame while standing so close but German thinks a person could straighten up atop the ledge and fit within a window of this size. She takes hold of the latch and opens the first pane into the kitchen, the second one follows. The seasonal wind of the living picture whips Diane's hair around. She appears to be a part of it as seen from the kitchen table. German rises, wanting to approach her; he wants what she has, but instead turns toward the comfort of the living room. He hadn't realized it before now but the needle of the turntable was only playing the inner groove. 'For how long?' he wonders, and takes in the face of his wristwatch since it is the only thing a person can count on while the sweet chemical taste



lingers on the tongue. It goes round and round, barely producing a sound, just as the needle quietly circles the inner groove of the record.

German picks a good one and heads back toward the kitchen. A rumbling begins and the music comes onto them.

**The Vehicle ~**

It takes both eyes to handle a curve like that and there are plenty of them through

Laurel Canyon on a night’s drive from Hollywood to Studio City. German downshifts to take the next hairpin and the rumble returns. His gold Sting Ray is tuned to perfection and is at one with the canyon road. The rumble grows to a stomping that he can feel in his chest. He senses something running beside him but refuses to take his eyes off of the path. He hits 3<sup>rd</sup> gear and races it along a brief straightaway. He is very fast in his car but is unable to shake the stomping beside the Sting Ray. His one eye threatens to drift, and, in doing so, captures an impression in its disobedience. German tries for 4<sup>th</sup> but can’t risk the bend ahead. He downshifts again, sending the engine screaming high, and pitching the rear end, yet managing the hard right widow-maker.

There are only headlights upon trees, and from the car, flashing hill-banks showoff distant stilt houses at this deep point within the canyon. For the briefest moment, German believes he has left the stomping thunder behind. Perhaps it has fallen into the ravine while racing the Sting Ray, leaving him alone, but his heart’s quick pace keeps him in shallow breath.

**Shoreham Drive ~**

*Her night it came ...* played on from the living room.

‘I don’t like the way she is looking at the window.’ German thinks to himself.

And then he is lost in a memory. He sat indoors with his mother, watching his toddler son. Outside was the dog, separated from them by the veil of the front screen door. His dog. The one he had raised up from a puppy. His big old dog, standing tall in the leg, was leaning into the screen of the door. Grandmother saw something German missed. The big old dog was stretching higher, making sure he still stood taller than the newly walking boy child. German was negligent by his inexperience. At this point in life, he mistakenly overestimated his influence on a beast. Even one molded from the very beginning can never be trusted.

“I don’t like the way that dog is looking at the baby.” Grandmother said.

And she was right. He could tell she was right that very

second and wondered how

he could have failed to catch something so crucial. The following day he took care of the beast so it would never need be thought of again.

“I don’t like the way you are looking at that window.” German says to her.

“What window?” Diane asks.

“Come over here with me and I will show you.”

She stays a moment longer. Her hair is like fire blowing in the wind from the open scene. It mixes with the bright lights of the living picture beyond it and German distinctly hears a siren in the distance. It is approaching, getting closer to them. He goes for her hand. They step backward together, and from German’s vantage, Diane agrees that the living picture remains trapped within its frame. She accepts his pull on her and is led by him through the doorway, into the living room, from where the music plays.

*Unto a burning sun ...* spoke the tune.

German is compelled to check the face of his wristwatch. It makes sense for him to do so.

“Must you go?”

“It’s time for me.” he answers, “The watch helps me know what is real.” as he opens the front door. Diane closes it behind him and the window returns.

*She mused and turned with grace ...* went the letter of the verse to the lady’s advance.

**The Vehicle ~**

The creature is running in tandem with the gold Sting Ray. German moves fast but

doesn’t try to lose it. He knows better than to fight the shadow that you yourself have given permission to be. A glance is taken with the one eye while the other times the crown of the hill. He can see it. It should be terrifying, but he laughs. This new laugh is not the easy laugh that was earlier put to good use. It is not the one German employed when he meant to make things right after believing the white circle was there, but it was not actually there, when only smooth glass slipped between fingertips. This is the full cry beyond one’s control.

*And flew ...*

The moon’s circle chatters through the trees and returns to the same place on the windshield. German scans the dial on his wrist. The second hand reassures him in its precision as he hits the crown of the hill, catching air.

**Shoreham Drive ~**

“Has it happened?” Diane asks.

*Like a prancer, an angelic dancer ...* answered the comfort of the living room. ➡



# The Pale Wild Priest

Jim Meirose

Ayahuma bark, dieta—Franklin had been through a long apprenticeship long ago, but it had failed. Ever since then to be alone so long was hard. To be alone so hard and long is fatiguing; back down where he had been they still tell the story of Franklin Thompson, the unknowing experiment of the Amazonian ayahuasca shamans, who to this day laugh about how they created a forever lost man who walks and walks and talks, forever looking. Looking at that old picture they pulled from the rot-pile to give him something to live for; the woman whose door is all protected by masses of hallucinogenic spirit men who wait for Franklin to come knock. To really make contact with a plant spirit requires time. After he returned to the states, Franklin passed through years of empty time breezing by him and through him as he walked the streets seeking; the moment of time moves a dot on the line that came to be when the universe was created. The dot on the line brought him to the thin door of the next place, where there’s a death

stench, but, maybe not, but; maybe no. Don’t wonder, don’t think, he started again; engulfed in the smell of concrete and mold and rotting wood, he shook his head hard and knocked for the first of many first times on the old flimsy door with the great E sign nailed up. The spirit men piled against the other side of the door writhed to snaky life and began to form.

He knocked—on and on—

No one no no one no.

Rhythm of knocking—knocking and knocking; until, the plant spirits combined to seep all at once through the door becoming a pale wild priest facing Franklin. The priest’s hand rose, and he began a sermon; the first word came just as Franklin’s next knock, already started, went right into and through the sudden priest’s chest; through, as though he was formed of water or priestly mist, and Franklin’s fist pounded through the priest into the door; but because the pale wild priest encased the fist, the priest absorbed the sound of the knock, but Franklin just went on



**KENNETH JOHN HOLT** is a writer of fiction working from his native city of Los Angeles. He attended private schools before embarking on a twenty-year career in filmmaking that had him travel the world. Interests include religious and philosophical studies along with art and music. Holt began submissions in June of 2016, and in addition to *The Shoreham Vehicle* appearing in *Thrice Fiction*, he has been selected as a finalist in two fiction contests: New Rivers Press, with the story *Spring Beneath Silence* soon to be published in their 2016 American Fiction Anthology, and TulipTree Publishing (humor category), with *A Beer In Bastille* currently published in their *2016 Stories That Need To Be Told* Anthology.



knocking again and again, because priests don't just appear like this, and knocking should make a sound. The sound built up, encased in the priest, that transformed the harsh sound to rich sermon words smoothly flowing out the pale wild priest's lipless mouth, slimed out and over covering the whole of Franklin's face; but since this could be and not somehow at the same time, Franklin just came knocking into the flowing sermon, generating word after word after word.

You're looking for a way back into your Mother, said the priest. We know that, you know that—everybody knows that. Everybody, including Pat. This is Pat's apartment. You'll say you don't know that, but you do, and she knows what you want to do to her so she will never ever let you through the door how many hundreds of thousands of times you come back—

Though the door stayed closed as Franklin knocked and knocked and knocked through the priest, generating the sermon, the door cracked open a bit beside the priest, and a glistening great brown eye looked out straight into Franklin. No flesh formed around it, no face held it. It looked to be just an eye, detached and belonging to no one at all, disembodied, and floating in the dark all around it in the room. A golden chain held the door from opening further as the pale wild priest quieted a moment, to clear the way for words that abruptly wept quavering from the eyes.

You again? Said the shaky, sexless eye. You again? I said not to come again. Why have you come again? Same reason? Same song? Same whistle? Whatever?

I—I've not been here before, said Franklin. What same reason? What song? What whistle?

The door slapped shut leaving no answer. The priest restarted the sermon, as Franklin once more pounded, crying over the priest, Open up! Open! I need to show you something I need to. Open!

You see? Said the priest. She knows what you want to do to her. She'll never let you in. She knows you mean the end. She knows how you are driven. Like a knife through rotting meat.

What? What do I want to do with her? I just want—here's what I want!

Franklin pulled a small tarnished antique silver frame holding a cracked yellowing old picture of a pretty young woman, pushed it in the priests face, and said with attempted calm, I just want to ask if she's seen this woman! My Mother, it's my Mother. I have lost my Mother! Here—I will knock despite you, you aren't even real—I got no time I really got no time I got to find somebody to look and see if they can help me find my Mother. Get away!

Franklin began once more knocking through the priest, forcing out again, much more sermon, saying, I know, I know. This is what you come here every time for—

There've been no other times. You are not real! I will not listen!

Pummeled by Franklin's fist the priest went on, saying, Listen—you think you understand everything but you're foolish, and dreaming. Here's the truth—here. You see, if when it is time to die we are still young enough that our mothers are still alive, if we can find her we can get back inside all the way in and curl up in the womb we came from,

forever. It's the best death. To end up where you came from! The door in our Mothers we all get squeezed and pulled and strained out of, is the place to return to at the end. If she is still alive, that is—so it's important to die young enough that our Mothers will still be living and breathing to be reentered—

Franklin pounded the door repeatedly with all his might, and yelled inches from the priest's face, shut up your poison! Shut up shut up your poison! I just need to know have you or not seen her—or the woman in this apartment, the eye thing. It tries to trick me be but it can't I know that eye belongs to who lives here; and he pounded the sermon back at himself, unwavering.

—we can all get back to the opening we came from, and squeeze back in it, and if we can do it we will have eternal rest. And will be saved. So in being able to find that womb, lies the turnaround back to the past, to slide back in when we get there. But, if when it is time to die we find our mothers have passed away, we will curse and weep and howl knowing we waited too long, lived too long, and there is nowhere to die into, safely. The door is dead rotting lost in the dark of some moist humid dig of a grave, where no one's ever placed any marker. So since there is no place back to the womb again, we become wanderers. Can't die really, but must. Might end up anyplace in the end. Sad very sad; wanderers looking for Mothers someplace, we walk looking asking and showing pictures and books and letter and diaries which someone back before memory begins has given to us—like that picture there, no, that's not your Mother. But you might hope so; if you stop hoping so you will die alone, maybe never to be found again.

The priest paused for breath just as the door cracked open again, and the eye reappeared, saying, and why are you pursuing me? Every time you have come I have slammed the door into your face for the last time but it seems there's never a last time. I—

Franklin leaned to talk around the priest, hand out, saying, But, no, please, I've not been here. What is your name please tell me your name!

You very well know, liar. You ask me every time. My name is Pat. Got it this time? I'll not tell you again. Go away. Don't come back. You are stalking me I will call the police and I—

Other times! What other times? There have been none! And I am not stalking!

The door slammed back shut; hard enough to make a spray of old paint chips fly right out through the priest. Franklin needed to clear this up, this couldn't be left this way, so he began knocking as hard as he could with closed fist right into the priest's nose, soundlessly but for the sermon he was forcing from the priest out all over himself.

—what will happen to you, I see it in your eyes, I feel it in your voice, what will happen to you, is you will find a pseudo-mother that you can escape into and die inside. It will of course kill the woman, you are much too large. You will rip her apart and shred her to bits; but you'll tear into her and wear her like a costume all hidden inside, just like you were before taking off the mother costume that day you were born—isn't this why you are here stalking Pat?

The door reopened, with just a slit showing, just a sliver of Pat's teared-up red eye.

The priest said, and you will destroy her! You will burrow in and push and push until she will explode into a spray of flesh blood and bone—a spray that cannot speak. Cannot deny she was your Mother. A spray of fresh red death is all she'll be.

Ignoring the priest mist fanning out, Franklin cried out to the eye, saying, Pat—Pat—why do you say you have seen me before? Why?

—you mean her harm, said the Priest. It is as I said—

Shut up, said Franklin. Shut up—Pat, Pat, listen. I mean you no harm, and I am confused, but this, he said, raising the picture to the eye—I need to know if you have seen this woman is all I need—I need to find my Mother before she dies! Please help!

For the last time, I have not seen that woman. I have had it with you. I am over the edge with you. I will make sure I never see you again—maybe you never had a Mother at all. Maybe you're just some creepy weird creature from some lonely wild ice-cold place.

But I've never—

Go away go away go away go AWAY!

The flimsy door slammed, latched shut, observed a moment of silence for something terrible that was about to happen; and a shot, a single gunshot, sounded beyond the closed door. Franklin's eyes popped, he tore his hair, and slammed his fist through the priest into the door, producing a discernible crack.

What was that? Was that a shot? What has happened? Hey! Hey, in there! Open!

He slammed the priest's face now with the flat of his hand, but the priest just said, there. There. I hope you're happy now.

Happy? Happy why!


She'll not see you again or hear you again, and neither will I. Good-bye.

The Priest melted slowly back away gone into the old worn stained splintery door as Franklin pounded at him, shouting at him not to disappear, shouting at him to explain all this, until, at last, totally spent, he turned and leaned back against the doorsill into the last thin words of the priest hung there fading, saying, You better go. Go right now. It's over, you caused it, and if you stay, when they come, you will be punished. Go!

Punished? Punished for what? I don't know for what!

Go! Came from the dark wood of the door, and Franklin stood in the moldy musty dim hall all alone. Yes, he had heard it. There had been a single gunshot. And what he didn't and couldn't know was it was just the latest in the whole series of single gunshots he had heard before, but

remembered nothing about. As always, Franklin thought to force the door, and see if Pat was all right, as he usually did, but instead flew down the stairs and out onto the street, afraid that this time might be the big time. Someone would have heard the shot, yanked up their phone, and punched in calling the cops. So, he turned and flowed through the disembodied stench of the hall and the damp of the air all piling up behind, all powerful, that pushed him out onto the street like he was a steel piston; and he felt born somehow, born again, born again, yes, he had been given another chance; he rushed quickly from the building door, melted away to nothing quickly; only as nothing could he ever feel truly gotten away, clean, safe, from this place. The dot of the timeline picked what was left of him up, and started to take him to the next place he'd go, to ask, to find, his Mother who just had to be alive, he knew she was alive, she was in the picture, in the picture; and his hand went in his pocket touching her and at last all memory of what had just happened was utterly totally gone. And the shamans laughed and laughed and laughed some more, thousands of miles away, and wondered just what their creation may have been up to today—but, no, it had been a long time. Years and years. By now, he was probably just dead and gone. Nothing no one could last long that way. Cheap toys played with hard, wear out fast. Thank God there's a world of them; box of them; toy box. 📦



**JIM MEIROSE's** work has appeared in numerous magazines and journals, including *Calliope*, *Offbeat/Quirky* (Journal of Exp. Fiction pub.), *Permafrost*, *North Atlantic Review*, *Blueline*, *Witness*, and *Xavier Review*, and has been nominated for several awards. His eBook, *Inferno*, has been published by Underground Voices. His novels, *Mount Everest* and *Eli the Rat*, are available from Amazon. *Mount Everest* has been adapted to a play by a leading west coast playwright. [JimMeirose.com](http://JimMeirose.com) to know more, also for information on work available for publication or in progress.





# The Tale of Talker Knock

Steve Carr

**T**alker Knock was told much of this after he was brought into the world. He believes it is worth hearing about if you take the time.

In the large room with the great stone fireplace in which a fire roared beneath a huge black pot, the three brothers, Mesh, Logi and Jessup Knock, sat in their hand carved birch rocking chairs and whittled figures from pieces of pine. As the shadows cast by the flickering fire danced on the walls and ceiling, the sounds of the crackling of the burning logs beneath the pot and the ticking of the walnut grandfather clock in the corner along with the squeaking of the chair rails on the bare wood floor filled the room.

The brothers didn't talk much, being men who believed they didn't have much to say worth hearing, and Mesh and Logi being advanced in years and both with long gray beards figured that they had said anything worth listening to when they were much younger and their thoughts were still fresh with the uncluttered experience of being old. As it was, the lives and experiences of the three brothers were displayed on the numerous shelves that lined the walls and on what available wall space there was to hang mementos of their travels. Looking about the room on the shelves were sailing ships in glass bottles, leather bound books with foreign titles embossed with silver and jade lettering on the bindings, large and small painted ceramic and clay vases from the far east, well-polished sextants, ornately decorated platters from European castles, African ritual masks on ivory stands, and whalebone, sharks teeth, and conch shells were on display. On the walls hung the heads of a lion, buffalo and polar bear, and a wheel from a sailing ship that sank in the waters in the arctic, a kimono worn by a Geisha in Japan and monkey paws hanging from hemp from the jungles of the Amazon. These things on the walls and shelves had not been the collected treasures of just Mesh, Logi and Jessup alone, but had also accumulated from generations of Knocks going back many, many years before any of the three brothers had been brought into the world.

After hours of the brothers saying nothing, when the pendulum of the grandfather clock brought the hands of the clock to the hour of five o'clock and the entire clock shook as it chimed, Mesh said, "It's time for the evening meal."

The brothers put aside their whittling and wood carving knives and unfinished whittled figures and rose from their chairs and went into the kitchen to get bowls and spoons. The kitchen was even larger than the room with the fire place and with the exception of a large square chopping block in the middle and a sink beneath the window that looked out at the herb gardens and orchards behind the house, the entire room was floor to ceiling shelves lined with labeled jars of all sizes and varieties.

At the base of each wall of shelves was a hand carved oak

footstool for reaching the upper shelves. Over the chopping block hung garlic strung together on thin ribbons and dried lemon grass, sage, parsley and other herbs tied and hung in bundles and root vegetables hung by their roots or leaves on varying colors of homespun yarn.

Entering the kitchen, Jessup pointed to a broken jar on the floor and said "a mouse has been on the shelves again," and bent down to pick up the broken glass and looked at the label and stuck his finger into the fine light beige powder and put the powder on his tongue and swallowed. "It was our last jar of amchoor, so we will have to order more from India." Logi handed Jessup the whiskbroom and dustpan and as Jessup cleaned up the glass and scattered spice, Mesh and Logi picked up the bowls and utensils and went back into the room with the fireplace. After dumping the glass and spice into the trash Jessup walked around the kitchen looking at the jars on the shelves to make sure everything else was in order. The spice blends from the adobo to the Syrian za'atar were perfectly aligned and alphabetized, as were the curries, salts and sprinkles, chilies, exotics and peppers. The jars of spices arranged by continent or region: Africa, Asia, Black Sea, Caribbean, Europe, India, Latin America, North America, and Middle East were also as they should be. The jars of canned fruits, pickles, and relishes also were fine. Satisfied that the mouse had caused no other damage, Jessup joined his brothers just as they were ladling bubbling hot soup from the black pot above the fire into the bowls. The fragrance of cloves, cumin, Indian yellow curry, and lentils wafted in the air. Jessup accepted the bowl handed to him by Logi and sat in his chair and started to dip his spoon into the bowl as Logi sat in his chair.

"I have an announcement I must make before we eat," Mesh said, standing in front of the fire with his bowl in his hand. "My time has come to an end," he said.

The two other brothers nodded sadly but knowingly. Jessup divided in three the loaf of sesame and walnut bread that he had baked earlier that day and had kept warm by the fire and gave a third to each of his brothers. As soon as Mesh and Jessup sat down the brothers began to silently eat their supper.

On his knees in front of the large steamer trunk Mesh put the rusty key into the lock and heard the mechanism inside click. With Logi and Jessup at his side, Mesh pushed back the top of the trunk, which gave a human-like sigh as it opened. The scents of seawater, pine forests and fields of wildflowers floated out of the trunk filling the attic where they were with those fragrances. The brothers leaned forward looking into the trunk, seeing the only item in it; a very large leather bound book with the word Knock in large embossed gold lettering on the front cover. It took all three brothers to lift the book out of the trunk and place it on a



Persian rug in front of them.

“You get the honor,” Logi said to Mesh.

Mesh unbuckled the straps from around the book and then slowly lifted the front cover. Music from a hundred sitars combined with the same number of violins, ten pianos, five lutes and a dozen harps drifted up from the book and flowed into the attic. Jessup who had never heard or seen such a thing in all his life despite his many travels, and being the youngest of the three and had never partaken of this ritual, fell back on his backside his mouth agape in astonishment.

“Take hold of yourself, Jessup,” Mesh said. “The entire Knock book is yet to be revealed.” Mesh turned the page as Jessup got back on his knees.

An ocean of turquoise water flowed within the border of the page, and seagulls soared above the water, their screeches and cries echoing all around. Whales breached the water’s surface and whale song lifted upward as a school of chattering dolphins rose from and then dived back into the water. On the horizon of the water beneath a pure blue sky a ship with snow-white sails drifted from the left side of the page to the right then disappeared into the border. Sea spray shot up from the page wetting the faces of the brothers and the air in the room became as balmy as that on a tropical island.

Mesh turned the page. Rain dripped down from the tall trees that formed a canopy above the jungle floor, where elephant ear plants, ferns, palms and moss glistened from the water. Red, blue and mixed color macaws screeched and chattered as they flew from branch to branch. Spider monkeys and rhesus monkeys cavorted in the tree foliage. Banana plants lush with batches of low hanging plantains dotted the jungle landscape. In the distance a rising plume of smoke shot out of volcano spilling over with fiery lava.

He turned the page again. Great sand dunes across a vast desert were being swept by winds as a caravan of camels with Arabian riders trekked across the shifting sands. There was an oasis amidst the dunes with palm trees that towered over a crystal clear pool of water while harem girls lounged along its banks while fanning themselves with palm leaves.

Page after page Mesh paused to let them absorb the scenes being seen on each page. It wasn’t until near the end of the book that the first portrait of a person appeared, the portrait being a three dimensional image of Mother Knock, the sole matriarch of the Knock clan. She had all the Knock facial features, kind almond-shaped eyes, an aquiline nose, high cheeks bones, full lips and a square chin.

“As you know she was the creator of us all,” Mesh said with reverence. “She gave us the great recipe.” He turned the book to the last page and took out a yellow parchment paper and gave it to Logi. “This is the recipe. As each of us was created from it, so shall your next brother be who will come after me.” He closed the book and buckled the straps and the three of them laid the book back in the trunk and closed the lid and locked the trunk.

Logi carried the parchment down the stairs and sat in his rocking chair and by the light of the fire read aloud to his brother Jessup the ingredients listed in the recipe, the required measures of each, and the order in which the ingredients were to be added and mixed and the method for cooking.

Mesh had silently retired to his room.

In the middle of the night Logi and Jessup carried oil lamps into Mesh’s bedroom casting light on all the objects on the shelves and tables in Mesh’s room: a giant globe on a cherry wood stand, a hundred whittled figurines of animals and birds, three microscopes of different sizes, display cases of butterflies pinned to black velvet, drawings of the human anatomy, dozens of books on science and medicine stacked on top of each other, and several dozen taxidermied birds of as many species. They went to Mesh’s bedside and there in the middle of Mesh’s Native American blanket was about two cups of mixed spices in a pile. Logi handed his oil lamp to Jessup and then scooped the spices into a porcelain bowl that Mesh had placed beside his bed on a tile from the Alhambra. They left the room and closed the door behind them and placed the bowl by the fireplace, then sat in their chairs and whittled until morning.

Sunrise came with the chirping of sparrows at the sole window in the room where Logi and Jessup had spent most of the night. At their feet were the shavings and chips from the wood they had been carving. They set the figures and tools on the table by their chairs and stood and stretched.

“I’ll prepare the pot according to the recipe,” Jessup said.

“I’ll get the proper wood for the fire as the recipe instructs,” Logi said.

The pot hung on a iron rod that swung outward and Jessup pulled it out and with effort lifted the heavy pot in his thin arms and carried it into the kitchen and placed it next to the sink. He turned it on its side and turned on the water in the sink. After rolling up the sleeves of his hand woven green cotton shirt he placed a natural sea sponge under the running water then began scrubbing out the remnants of the last evening’s meal. When he was satisfied that the pot was clean he went to the shelves and began to scan the labels on the jars. He soon found the jar of honey and took it to the pot and poured some in and with his freshly washed hand smeared the honey on the entire interior of the pot. “Honey for sweetness of nature,” he said aloud when done. He put the honey back on the shelf and then took down a bundle of dried sage that hung above the chopping block and cut off a handful of leaves and put them in a marble mortar and took a marble pestle and ground the sage into finely ground powder. He then smeared the sage onto the honey. “Sage for wisdom,” he said aloud. He then did the math in his head to determine how much water would be needed based on the recommendations in the recipe and poured it into the pot. He carried the pot into the room with the fireplace just as Logi came through the front door with his arms full of branches and limbs from apple, cherry, lemon and orange trees in the orchard. Logi placed the wood in the fireplace and Jessup attached the pot to the rod and swung it over the lumber. Logi lit the fire.

Then from the kitchen came the sound of breaking glass. Logi and Jessup ran into the kitchen. On the floor was a dozen broken jars of spices, the contents all of the jars scattered and mixed together. Logi looked up at the shelves and saw a mouse running behind more of the jars and then disappeared. Jessup had picked up several of the jars and looked at the labels.

“These are spices in the recipe,” he said. “Now what do we do? The recipe says this must be done within eight hours of the passing of our brother. That doesn’t give us time to get these spices.”

“We will do without and hope for the best,” Logi said.

When the water in the pot began to boil, Jessup tilted the large Mayan bowl filled with one-quarter teaspoon to a full teaspoon of every spice they had on the shelves, minus the ones that had been spoiled when knocked to the floor by the mouse, and poured the spices into the water. Logi stirred the pot seven times with a large wooden spoon from a tomb in the Cheops pyramid. Jessup then poured in the spices that once were Mesh and Logi again stirred the pot. The pot of liquid suddenly stopped boiling and the flames went out beneath it. Jessup stepped back not knowing what would happen, but Logi, having witnessed this when Jessup was brought into the world, inhaled the scent of a newborn baby and looked into the pot. There a boy infant with all the Knock features even at that age, looked up at Logi and smiled a toothless grin and began to talk as if he had been talking for many years.

“We shall name him Talker and he will carry on the spice of Mesh,” Logi announced as he reached into the pot and lifted the child out and cradled him in his arms and began to hum a sea shanty.

To say that Talker Knock was an unusual child would be an understatement, and as each year passed he prattled on endlessly from morning to night, much to the consternation of his two brothers. Talker wanted to discuss everything, from the origin of each content in every jar to how fruit grew from the trees in the orchard. Before the age of ten he had read every book on every shelf in the room with the fireplace and also all the books left behind by Mesh. While his brothers silently whittled, Talker drew maps of the known world on large sheets of parchment with sticks of charcoal while learning and speaking the language of every country he outlined on a map. Logi and Jessup learned to take this all with their usual silent aplomb.

“This is what happens when the recipe is not followed,” Logi said.

The one thing that truly did concern the two older brothers was that while Talker had a love for learning and

endless curiosity about everything within the house or in the orchard and gardens, he refused to venture out further.

“Every thing I need to know and see is right here,” Talker said.

“There is a big world of adventures to be had out there, Talker,” both Logi and Jessup told him numerous times speaking from their own experiences. “Knowledge alone does not make you whole.”

When he reached the age of sixteen and the time for him to leave the safety and comfort of his home and venture out into the world came around, he could not be persuaded by his brothers to go any further than the front door. He retreated to the room that had once been Mesh’s but was now his, and painted on the ceiling the positions of the stars and planets with complete accuracy. He taught himself how to Tibetan throat sing, oil paint in the Impressionist style and do calligraphy. “What spice he did not get before he was brought into the world, he must be made to go out and discover it for himself,” Logi said to Jessup when the two were alone.

One evening as Talker sat in his room and diagrammed the body parts of a caribou while talking to himself non-stop, Logi and Jessup placed a burlap sack on the floor and put in it a sextant, compass, binoculars, silver and gold coins, a change of socks, and a written invitation to return home once he had seen the world. They tied the bag onto the end of a short pole and went into the room and dragged Talker out, gave him the bag, and opened the door and shoved him out and closed and locked the door. For several days afterward Talker tried to talk his way back into the house, speaking through the heavy wood door, but Jessup and Logi refused to let him enter.

On a sunny afternoon when billowy white clouds floated across the baby blue sky, Logi and Jessup looked out the window and saw Talker walking down the path toward the countryside with the burlap bag on the stick propped up on his shoulder.

“Experience is the true spice of life,” Logi said, and Jessup agreed. ➡





**STEVE CARR** began his writing career as a military journalist and has had nearly sixty short stories published internationally in print and online magazines, literary journals and anthologies. He has stories scheduled for publication in *Fixional*, *the Unbound III – Broken Chains* anthology by daowen publications, *Centum Press Volume III Anthology*, *67 Anthology*, *Rhetoric Askew’s Anthology: Adventure Gone Askew*, *Wilde Stories 2017 Anthology* by Lethe Press and *Night to Dawn Magazine*. His plays have been produced in several states including Arizona, Missouri and Ohio. He was a 2017 Pushcart Prize nominee.



The image shows three electric fans on a wooden nightstand. Two are large, black, and positioned in the background. A smaller, yellow one is in the foreground. The fans are set against a textured, brownish wall. The nightstand is made of dark wood and has a small, round, yellow object on its surface.

# CATATONIA

## BY E.M. STORMO

The boy sat up in bed and prepared for his first catatonia. It required a stiff pose like his father, tree-backed and pretzel-legged, to keep from falling over.

His mother sat outside the door. She could tell it wouldn't happen tonight—his catatonia. The way she described it sounded like a foreign place you take a trip to, the Kingdom of Catatonia, which isn't a bad way of thinking about it, but when the boy asked her about the people living there, she told him too much discussion could guide the experience the wrong way.

His father stressed the physical aspect for the boy's safety, the importance of proofing the house, while never saying what it was they were proofing for. The wall-to-wall carpeting also covered the walls and ceiling. He maintained the house at a hemophiliac's level of comfiness.

His mother didn't highlight the obvious dangers, although she reminded him daily that it would have to happen this year, but when the boy asked her what would have to happen, she made the mistake of giving it a name, a destination, which is the wrong way to think of it, and this place had already been built up into an exotic country, long before he got the chance to visit. Catatonia, a city in the desert, always night and always hot, so hot the ground sweats as it waits behind the eyes. His father instructed him to look backwards, but the boy fell asleep before he could get there. He rocked in place, hands stuck into the hoops of his legs to stay upright. It was a clever method, but wrong.

At night, she unlocked his limbs and tucked him in. He asked her if he'd been to Catatonia. She told him, tomorrow night. He requested an ice cube before bed, drawing her hand to his forehead to show her how hot he was. She said okay and adjusted the fans on his nightstand. He adjusted it some more, but it didn't help. He asked for two cubes, pointing to his mouth and rubbed his belly, both hot. She was in the habit of spoiling the boy considering her husband's childhood.

When the father was the boy's age, he fell all over the house, and they didn't have soft carpets or electric fans in those days. He used to wake up overheated in the kitchen with bruises on his head. His parents didn't understand what was wrong with him. They didn't know what a catatonia was, but supposedly, the great-grandfather was famous for sitting in one spot for days, so the condition wasn't unheard of. That is how it was branded to him, as a medical condition. It was better than a place. And it was always better to think of it as a place, rather than an entity. That was the worst way to think of it. A cousin also had

catatonia and he thought of it that way. Catatonia ran in the family and everyone agreed it was better to have them early, for having them too late could change a man.

Watch your father, he told the boy, and seconds later his eyes rolled back and he was gone for a few hours. Sweat poured from his head. Fire shot out with each breath. The boy adjusted the fans and waited on the carpet. The father came to, panting, but stopped himself when he saw his son still sitting there. She had an ice bath already drawn.

The boy fell asleep later that night sitting in the catatonic pose, and his mother unlocked him in the morning. His legs were sore for the next night's attempt, and he fell off the bed in a way that would've broken his neck on any other surface, but the carpet's ergo-fibers conformed to the shape of any falling body. It's impossible to hurt yourself and retains that homey feel, rather than the padded asylum aesthetic most catatonic families opt for. The boy made several attempts and they all ended with him on fire, upside-down in a soft corner of the house. After each failure, he negotiated with his mother for more ice. He was up to seven cubes for his limbs, belly, mouth and head, before they switched to baths. His parents thought it skipped a generation and did them all a favor by sparing the boy, until one night, he excused himself from dinner and was gone for two days. All catatonic parents know this image well, both satisfying and terrible, of the red child with ghost eyes, surrounded by fans oscillating in patterns only mothers understand.

The boy's eyes rolled back. He yawned a flame. It took him another ten minutes to move his body again. When he did, his tongue stirred first, circling around his mouth, and nudging the lips open. He smiled at his mother, then turned to his father. The boy asked him a question. Is the snake god? The father gasped. He backed into the hall but tripped on a fan wire and tumbled down the stairs. The boy rephrased the question to his mother. Is god the snake? She ignored him and drew a bath with extra ice.

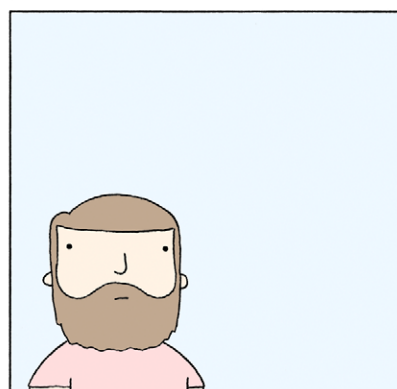
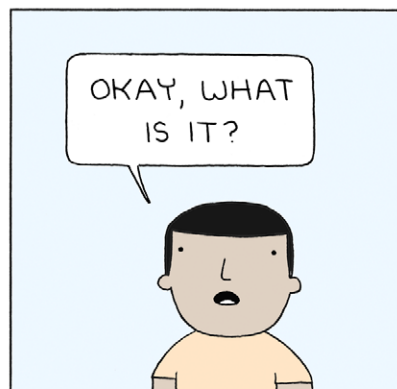
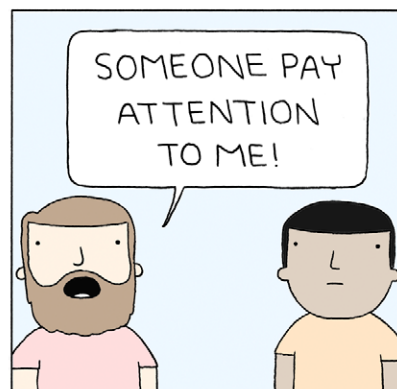
The boy sat up in the bath, thinking wrongly about his experience. She rubbed a cube on her own face to hide her tears. He adored the way she cried, like ice. A mother's icy tears, a testament to the great snake. The father pretended to be catatonic while asleep at the foot of the stairs. He dreamed of a place where the people had no need for soft houses, satisfied by the long carpet of desert and the cool steady hiss. 🌀



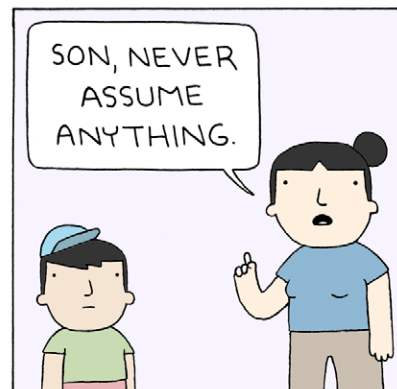
**E.M. STORMO** is a fiction editor by day, writer by night, and a teacher and promoter of musical literacy at all times. His recent work has appeared in *The Conium Review*, *404 Words*, *SPANK the CARP*, and elsewhere.



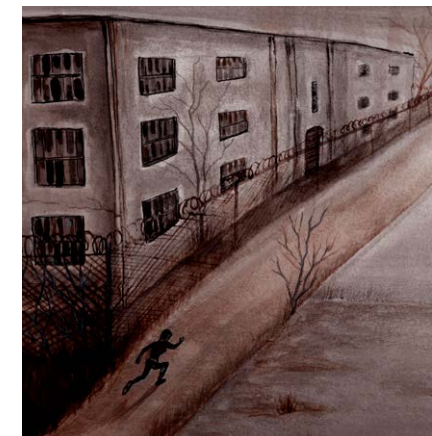
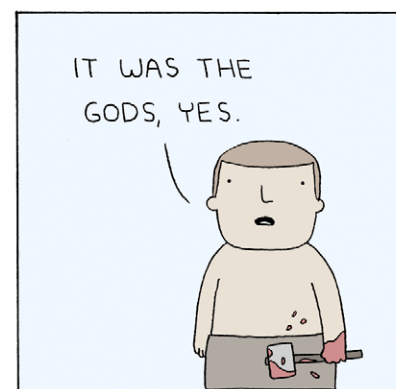
## ATTENTION



## ASSUME



## THE GODS



# Running Through the Dark

Philip Goldberg

The Runner scampered through silent city streets. Despite curfew, which dropped like drapes at sunset, she snuck past spray-painted messages and symbols scrawled on building walls and sealed mailboxes. Her gray eyes fixed on the path ahead. Her brown hair buzzed cut short for better concealment. Her pale skin made dark by smeared charcoal. And she dressed black as night. No name other than the Runner.

No need. With each fleet footstep, her stealth figure found host in the night shadows, unseen by patrolling armed sentries, their chins barely whiskered. Through another ground-level hole in another concertina-wired-topped fence, she crawled, digging her knees into the dirt of what was once a small park.

Within the fenced area, she stood up. Floodlights bathed the street before her, but she knew how to evade them. Counting slowly, she waited until "six" escaped her mouth in a wisp of white breath, and then she streaked up to the four-story tenement's doorway and darted through it. Once inside, she expelled a deep sigh, standing in a dank hallway illuminated by candles. Their flickering light led her eyes to his: two chestnut orbs shimmering in the dancing glow of the flames.

Older than her by many years, Abbad stepped closer. His once rugged complexion appeared scrubbed of its strength, his expression weathered and weak. As leader of the Muslim sector, he met her here once weekly for the latest information from outside the fence. Bemusement traced his lips. After all this time, all their meetings, he marveled at this teenage girl. Runners, he knew, had to be this age to get through fence holes, to be trained by the leaders of the Defiance before the government of the orange-haired one brainwashed them in schools where god and country came before anything else.

Tonight she stood here prepared to dispel the growing

rumors among the different Restricted Sectors, created by the Leader, for the safety of those inside its fences.

"So tell me," Abbad said, "that the Jews are once more wearing yellow stars."

"It's a lie started by the government," she replied in a steady voice.

"But not out of the realm of possibility." He sighed. "That Jews would wear stars. That we would don crescent moons. That Blacks would wear watermelons, and Mexicans would have sombreros stitched to their shirts and coats."

"Rumors," she said. "Nothing more."

"We'll see," he said, always surprised at her maturity, her poise, and her fearlessness. How fast she'd grown up. How little choice she had. How she must miss being a teenager?

"The Leader is wavering on the wall again."

"Who needs a wall when you have barbed-wired fences? Penned in like animals awaiting slaughter. Maybe we'll get lucky. Maybe he'll deport us all. One would think that a better option." He shot a cold look at her. "Do you think they'll greet my people with open arms and ticker-tape parades in our former lands? The result there will be no better than what we face behind these wired walls."

She cast her eyes at the dirt-stained floor, as the hall's stench pressed in on her. This made her feel as off-kilter as she had after the Leader had been elected President. Not knowing what to expect. How to react.

Yet now she knew. When violent protests had begun occurring nationwide, he revealed his hand. Marshal Law mobilized. Democracy dismantled. Elections ended. Public education eradicated. Environment regulations eliminated. The climate collapsed even faster. And anyone different, foreign rounded up and placed in sectors like this one. With it all, the Defiance had been born.

She raised her eyes and faced him.

"I know my history," he said solemnly. "These places



were once called ghettos. A stopping point before...”

In her mind, she finished his sentence.

“And what does the onerous Leader tweet these days?”

“A lot of blaming the movement for lack of food and water due to pollution.”

“Always a scapegoat. Great dictators always have one. Red meat for their masses.”

Her eyes held pain. “I’ve got to move on,” she said hastily. But before she took a step, he asked: “How are the other sectors?”

She weighed her answer and replied: “Hopeful.”

“Hopeful.” He shook his head, chuckling. “Next time, come up with a better answer.

She turned away and slipped back into the night, heading to another sector.

Hours later, she made it home, an apartment of a sympathizer, who lived among the lesser Privileged in an apartment complex. Home was a walk-in closet floor shared with her mother. Bed was a sleeping bag and inflatable pillow. After washing the black dust off her face, she entered the closet. Her head hit the pillow, which hissed some air under the pressing weight. She faced her mother, whose eyes were open, smiling.

Freeing a hand from inside the bag, her mother stroked her cheek, taking in the weariness in her eyes, soaking in the frustration in her expression. “It’s not easy,” she said. “But it’s important.”

“No matter what I say, no matter where I go, everyone’s so hopeless. Addad, Cassandra, Miriam, Manuel...”

Not what a mother expected hearing from a teenager, the woman thought. But this was not an ordinary teen, and these were not ordinary times. “Imagine what they’d be like if no one came.”

Her eyes accepted these words. Her mother was right. She’d always been so. From an early age, she’d taught her right over wrong, intelligence over ignorance, love over hate, and that all people (she’d altered that one word from the Declaration of Independence) were created equal. So her becoming a Runner hadn’t been much of a leap.

“Your days as a Runner are dwindling,” her mother said.

Before she could answer, the nightly siren pierced the silence, awakening the populace. For every night, the orange-haired Leader tweeted, and by recent law all had to read his rants on their phones or computers.

“Fools.” Her mother shook her head and then kissed her daughter on her brow, wrapping an arm over the girl’s bag. Soon her eyes were shut and a gentle snore rumbled through her lips.

Awake, the Runner stared at the closet’s ceiling. Soon she’d be fourteen. The leaders of the Defiance had determined this age the end of one’s ability to run news to the sectors. Adolescence played a prominent part in this decision. Hormones took hold, resulting in highly charged personalities difficult to manage. Better that these adolescents remained close, under the watchful eyes of the information disseminators.

Her next responsibility would be that of a Provider, one who fed important information to the Runners. She’d been training for this new role for a year, and felt herself ready. Even so, insecurity crawled through the fence protecting her confidence. Fear of failure still found hosts in the dark

spaces of her mind. She caught her breath, which always began racing with these troubling thoughts.

She looked at her sleeping mother, thankful for how she’d always treated her as an adult, fostered a love of reading in her at a young age, and instilled an ability to question things. Grateful for how she’d guided her through those first hundred days when everything fell apart. When she was known as Cassidy. When her innocent world turned evil. When she realized her best friend, Rosa, had vanished during the initial round ups. When she witnessed firsthand the separation of girls and boys in school. When education turned on science and befriended religion. When teaching became preaching. When choice was ripped from the bosom of women. When menial jobs evolved into slave labor. When poisons flowed freely into rivers, and toxins tainted the air once more.

Lying there, another familiar feeling overcame her. Sadness at joys she’d experienced before that election: the joy of friends, of playing with them; the joy of learning among her peers; the joy of living in a home and not going underground to evade the authorities who were after her mother and her. Thankfully, there were sympathizers everywhere, many more than those who craved “sameness” in race, religion, education.

Her mother, sleeping so peacefully now (oh, how she wished she could), a former college professor, then known as Julie, a single mother for most of Cassidy’s life, had taken the reins after the last election and discovered the Defiance, teaching her the tenets of the movement. How it stood for every race, religion, gender, sexual preference and freedom. And eventually how it’d lead everyone back to a better world. To do so, they dropped their names. Moved from covert space to covert space in an elaborate and never-ending game of Hide and Seek. Lived off the kindness of strangers. Kept the truth flowing and the fight alive.

When the movement needed Runners, she had been one of the first to step up. Upon meeting her, the leaders of the Defiance leaders had known how important she’d be to the movement.

Her eyes grew heavy. A small smile creased her lips, as she thought of the bleary eyes of those reading the myriad texts from the Leader (he communicated no other way, as newspapers and the rest of the news media had been abolished). Only then she nodded off.

The next night, the Runner made her way through wet streets of a downpour. Carefully avoiding puddles, she stayed in the shadows and headed toward the Hispanic sector. With each cat-like step, she recalled how her mother had taken her out at night and trained her.

She had stood before her on a street where the streetlights had blown out. No effort had been made to replace the bulbs. Not in this section of the city where the necessary searchlights of the sectors were unnecessary. “Let your energy flow from toe to heel,” her mother said in a singsong voice. “Your steps should glide. Silent. Like cats’ paws.”

The Runner tried it. At first, she was awkward. She stumbled frequently. Frustration found a home. She groaned. And then she felt her mother’s hand on hers. Too dark to see the expression in her emerald eyes, she could sense their warmth by the gentle touch. It was her mother’s

way, always had been, and it instilled a sense of confidence in her, a need to improve.

She tried and tried, and despite failure after failure, she finally mastered the movement that would help her pass through the streets unnoticed. Cats’ paws.

Soft step after soft step, she passed by a sentry, who didn’t see or hear her along the rain-splashed streets. Yet with each gliding step, she understood she was lucky, or damn good as her mother had said. Two Runners had disappeared in the past few months. Rumors circulated that the authorities were clamping down. The Leader had tweeted that Runners were “bad people”, instilling rebellion among the “undesirables”. Of course, this was the goal of the Defiance. But it was far from happening. Hope was the goal for now. Hope and defiance were sisters, her mother had taught her.

The chilled air made the rain worse. It made her shudder harder. Made the goose bumps appear faster. Leaning against the damp building wall, ready to push off into her final run to the fence, she sighed deeply as if gaining courage from this breath. In her mind, she knew that counting down the days until she ran no more kept her going as much as the importance of what she’d been doing on these nights for the past few years. But no matter the braveness she projected, she still worried about being caught.

Her black jacket sponged up the wetness on the ground as she crawled through the fence hole. Standing, she eyed the decrepit warehouse walls glistening with rain. Realizing the importance of time, something she’d never noted before becoming a Runner, she headed toward the meeting point where Miguel would be waiting.

“Nice night,” he said, shaking her wet hand, standing on what was once a loading dock.

She nodded, as the chill of wetness rattled her bones. Her teeth clattered.

He removed his coat and draped her shoulders with it.

The warmth of its woolen linen helped absorb her chill.

“Thank you,” she said.

“I don’t want you catching cold on my account.” He smiled.

She tugged the coat tighter around her.

With his eyes, he pointed beyond the fence. “So what do you have for me?”

“All the trouble with China has stalled all domestic plans.”

“He can’t control himself with his tweet rants. Like a petulant child.” His jaw tightened. “A small comfort. Believe me, his followers will get what his followers want.”

“Not if we keep up the Defiance.”

“And where has that gotten us. If we escape, they shoot us down like fleeing dogs. If we stay, we await a fate no better.”

For the first time in some time, she was speechless. No words of comfort. Of hope.

The rain intensified. Their silence lingered in the air like dampness. Shattered by a shot ringing out in the distance. An armed sentry had struck down someone, she knew. A runner? An escapee from a sector? Looking into his dark eyes, she knew he knew too, which prompted her saying: “I believe good always defeats evil. I know if we keep up the flow of information, we’ll be ready to strike and strike hard.

Rumors from Boston and New York City say they’re armed and ready to rise up.”

“Rumors.”

“I believe them. You must, too.”

“You’re out there. We’re cooped in here. Rumors don’t change our situation.”

“But they should give hope.”

He stared at her for what seemed an eternity, but was only a few seconds. A faint smile held his lips before he said in a soft voice, softer than she expected: “You talk like an adult but you’re still a girl, full of wishes, dreams, hopes...”

“How can you say that?” She silenced him. “I risk my life coming here. I spend my days hiding. In a closet, no less. How can you think I still live in that world?” She thrust his coat at him and fled the loading dock, ignoring his voice.

Avoiding puddles, she moved through the somber shadows. Raindrops mixed with tears on her face. She stopped at the edge of an alley, leaned against a wall. His words filled her. She had lied. That world still lived in her. Still occupied her dreams. Fantasies of first kisses, first loves inhabited her private moments. Her tears grew harsher as she recalled the moment she’d discovered Rosa had been taken. How the world had felt as if it’d been spinning the wrong way. How her feet hadn’t moved for minutes. Petrified before the broken-down front door of her friend’s ransacked house.

She turned and pounded the wall before her. Her hands grew raw and red and then bled. Looking at them, she caught her breath. She slowed her tears. She grabbed onto hope, and looked out into the rain teeming down. From across the street, she watched an older armed sentry splashing every puddle he came upon. Like a child, she thought. And when he turned a corner, she finally continued, leaving the train of thoughts she’d endured by the wet wall.

She fell ill the next day. Fever, chills, aches and pains consumed her. Coughs racked her bones. Sleep turned fitful, tossing and turning in her sweat-soaked sleeping bag. Day and night became one harrowing journey, a long tunnel through which she burrowed, where her dreams became nightmares.

In one, she found herself in a darkened city, void of anyone else. Not even a dog or cat. Yet the air buzzed with the tweets of the orange-haired Leader, bouncing off facades, sidewalks and sealed mailboxes. With her heart racing, she began running. But no matter where she strode, he appeared. Larger than life. Angrier than he’d ever been. Pursuing her up and down streets. His orange hair flickered like flames.

Soon it became flames, flicking off her head and streaking to the ground.

In the sleeping bag, this nightmare made her toss and turn violently. Screams spat through her dry, cracked lips.

All the time, her mother stayed by her side, delegating her work with the Defiance to others. She obtained necessary medication through Sympathizers. She spooned soup through her daughter’s resistant lips. Pressed warm washcloths on her forehead, wiped her face of the sickly sweat. Daubed her lips with damp cloth for moisture. And when her daughter began babbling incoherently, she calmed her with a soft, soothing voice.

Days became weeks. Eventually the girl recovered, as



the illness passed like the storm it had seemed. She began standing. At first her body was weak, and her steps were wobbly. Having lost weight, she ate as much as she could. Her strength returned. Her steps grew steady and sure. She did pushups, sit-ups, deep knee bends, running in place.

Finally one morning, she took her mother's hand and said: "I want to run once more." She wanted to see Abbad, Miguel and the rest. Ignite the hope in them. And let Miguel know that she still had the dreams she'd denied in their last meeting. Set the record straight, as her mother would say.

"I don't think it's a good idea," her mother replied. "You're not yet one hundred percent. Plus, your time as a Runner is up. You're a Provider now. Time to move on." Her mother smiled.

Something was off about her smile, she thought. To her, it harbored a different reason from what she'd just said. A truth she was not telling. She pulled her hand away. "You're not telling me something."

Her mother shook her head. "That's what I meant by you're not fully recovered. You're seeing things that aren't there. Thinking things that aren't true."

"But..."

"Trust me."

To the girl, these words sounded more like a command than a suggestion. Something meant to end a conversation, permitting no retort, reply or response.

So that night while her mother attended a special meeting of the local chapter of the Defiance, the Runner defied her and headed out. On the streets, the air felt crisp, the sky appeared clear. Stars winked down at her. The sliver of the moon looked like a lopsided smile.

Despite her illness, despite what her mother believed, she hadn't lost a step. Her instincts remained sharp, guiding her down dark sidewalks, through lightless alleyways, out of sight of the patrolling armed sentries.

Through the fence of the Muslim sector, she slithered. Back on her feet, she ran to the decrepit building. There a silence more eerie than usual greeted her. Abbad was not where he usually stood. Calling out his name was dangerous, so she went looking for him. Squalid room after squalid room were empty. Stopping, freezing, the realization hit her. "He's done it," she uttered, her brow tightening. The orange-haired Leader had lived up to his promise.

Yet she needed knowing how far he'd gone. So she left

what was once the Muslim sector. Beyond hopeless, it was now soulless.

Standing before the warehouses of the Mexican sector, she encountered the same emptiness. Motionless, she realized she'd never tell Miguel the truth of her feelings. The Black, Jewish and Gay sectors would be deserted too. She knew.

Her mother had known. That's why she hadn't wanted her doing this run. She hadn't wanted the hopelessness seeping into her like some toxin. Anger seized her, and then she did what she did best; she started running.

She ran to the fence, crawled through its hole and continued her gliding steps. Her breaths hissed. The lopsided sliver moon smiled down at her. Yet now she felt it was mocking her, all she'd believed, all she'd run for. Seething at it, she ran and ran until she ran out of land, stopping at the river's edge.

Across it, she spied the brightly illuminated buildings of the Privileged-Elite, kept distant and safe from the poisonous people once housed here. The lights taunted her.

So she focused on the bridge spanning the river. Its sentry guard post lit and clearly visible at the center of the overpass. Feeling impotent, not knowing what to do next, she lifted a rock from the shoreline and heaved it at the buildings across the water. The stone landed in the river with a plop, disappearing into the blackened flowing river, far from its intended target.

Hearing the liquid lapping the shore, she wondered if rumors of the coming armed uprisings were just that. Lies to keep those in the Defiance hopeful. Sadness washed over her, producing some hot tears that rolled down her chilled cheek.

But then the twinkling lights across the river, brighter than the stars above, snagged her eyes. Seeing their rich glow, her hurt raged at the Privileged-Elite, at the Leader. From her fury grew determination, strong and steadfast. With determination came resolve. Hope was not dead. Nor was the Defiance. It existed inside her, her mother, and its vast number of members. The New Unsilent Majority, her mother had called them.

She wiped away the tears. She glared at the buildings as if she could demolish them with her eyes. There'd be other ways, she believed. Finally turning away, she set off for home, determined to fight on.

She had learned her mother's lessons well. ↻



# A Dream Once Lost

Jonathan Litten

When I awoke to my gray consciousness, beneath the pallid flicker of the luminaries, I had no sense of departure or arrival, only the faint recollection of an unforeseen journey.

Loud vibrations beckoned me from somewhere below. I followed the rattling sound over to a steel door beneath my feet. It looked like the door to some type of bomb shelter, shaking and vibrating as I felt around for a way to lift it. Once opened, a wave of sound assaulted me. I followed the stairs deep into where the noise consumed me. The sound devoured me—my entire body pulsed as screeching, metallic pounding and thumping cascaded around me. Nothing but sound—yet completely indiscriminate like a terrible siren that hypnotizes with tireless repetition.

Bodies buzzed in spurts and pulses in a wave of human mass. A nude figure passed before me in a swift bronze flash

of breasts and blonde. The lights flashed neon, alternating between a pink and yellow glow, allowing only partial glimpses of the naked, statuesque silhouette. She danced doll-like and swayed past as grating electronica thumped and pounded all around me. I felt dizzy, almost intoxicated by the unfolding scene. Not a warm or welcome intoxication, but the terrifying nausea of sleep deprivation and early mornings. The ceiling spun above my head and the floor shifted beneath my feet. I collapsed to my hands and knees like a seasick child searching for unachievable equilibrium.

I stood up, trying to regain my balance and took a few hesitant steps forward, forcing my way through the sound, through the thick neon light. My head still spinning, my eyes struggled to construct meaning of the images swimming before me. The women all looked the same, devoid of mystique. I reached for the one closest to me, grabbing her shoulder as she passed before me. The feel of her tiny arm



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collapsed beneath the weight of my grasping fingers, and she began to disintegrate before me. Almost instantly, whoever, if anyone, she had been, now lay in front of me in a heaping pile of brown dust.

Before I could fathom what happened, a swarm of others gathered around her. They looked at me with the nervous eyes of battered children, expert in their ability to perceive impending danger and then began using spoons to scoop piles of her brown remains into their mouths. Their silent, devouring spoons darted into the pile as quickly as the woman herself had disintegrated. As I watched, a grimace that started in my face migrated down my shoulders and arms until my entire body shook with disbelief. Luckily, the fiends were too preoccupied with their feeding ritual to notice my revulsion. I feared what they might do if they suspected my condemnation; I tried to restore a look of neutrality. I became, like the pavement stretching around me, stone and gray, unmoving and cold.

After they finished, they returned to their dancing, always keeping careful distance from one another, all of them seemingly insulated in their own world. Though they were in proximity to one another, they remained completely alone, completely self-contained. The men cast their soulless glances upon the silhouettes of the naked women with mechanical longing. The bronze ones reciprocated these hollow stares with their own absent gazes.

Bodies moved and arms flailed wildly, torsos writhed and bent athletically but unknowingly. They moved without feeling. They chased the music in pursuit of what they thought dancing might be, but they were as detached from the music as from one another. Deep industrial boom and bass slipped beneath them and reverberated around the confines of the giant stone room that enclosed them.

The walls were unadorned except for streams of rust stains that dripped like reddish veins protruding from a decaying arm. Gradually, numbness overcame me, but not in a tranquil way—more like the music was consuming my consciousness. I felt ill. I longed for the staircase, but I was disoriented. Trails of neon lingered in front of me and anxious beads of sweat gathered on my face and arms. Through a tangle of neon trails obscuring my eyes and past a sea of swaying brown bodies, I spotted someone who looked like they were ascending from the ground. The staircase itself was indistinguishable, creating the illusion that this person seemed to float upwards.

Patient movement allowed me to regain my balance. Carefully, I walked to the periphery of the most concentrated area of dancing and towards the other end of the building. I watched the stranger’s shuffling feet navigate the cement staircase above me.

“Wait,” I cried.

I bounded two stairs at a time, trying to catch the fleeting figure. Once I reached the top, I forced open the steel door and climbed back onto the street. Above, street lamps lit the moonless back sky. Stillness and artificial light paralyzed the night. The quiet broke only for the occasional rattle of the steel door. To my left a hundred yards, I saw a distant figure, moving towards the unknown, I ran behind him. Finally I caught up to him.

“Hey.”

He spun around, surprised, and distanced himself from

me. Without saying anything, he continued walking. I followed behind him.

“Excuse me?”

“Who are you?” He inquired. “What are you doing here?”

“I... I don’t know. Where is here?”

“No place, really,” He responded almost inaudibly. All the while he walked briskly, keeping his back to me, as I trailed six or seven paces behind him.

“Where are you going? Why are you walking so quickly?”

“Remember the woman who perished before you?”

“Yes.”

“This same fate befalls all who answer to the demands of their sedentary desires. If you stop moving, for any considerable length—no one knows exactly how long—you become dust. As you have seen, touch also has the same... irreversible consequences.”

“What? Why?”

“We don’t engage in the primal behaviors of the sun worshippers.”

“What primal behavior? Touching? What is this place?”

“Because you are new, I have abided your questioning, but there is much that must go unanswered.”

I followed for a while in silence, trying to discern the possible object or destination of his frenzied walk. I persuaded him to share more of the history of my stark new inhabitation. As closely as I can recall this is his tale:

One morning, the sun simply did not rise. The dark gray night elapsed the dawn, with no morning glimmer or first rays of light cascading onto treetops and grasslands. The people were understandably concerned. But just as the final dusk of that last night persisted into unremitting twilight, so the collective acceptance of the sun’s disappearance also came to be. Their acceptance was so complete that people hardly remembered a time before this one.

The people adapted to the darkness and erected giant fluorescent luminaries. They established small communities that extended no farther than the tiny radius of their fluorescent gods. And the luminaries were silent sentinels that demanded obedience without coercion. None dared to venture outside the comfort of their pale flickering. So it has been for some time now. Things quickly became much the way you see them now.

The stranger concluded as a reluctant afterthought that the only vestige of the days of the sun was the old, forgotten oak. He told how first the oak was loved and the people stopped to sit beneath it and study its stillness. But in a quick succession of seasons, the oak grew tired and gray like the sky and concrete. When its last leaves fell and decayed, the stillness went with it. Now, its barren branches reach into the sky like shadow puppets etched in charcoal against a soiled gray canvas.

This, the stranger informed me, was as much as he knew and begged me to forget my questions. I knew from his stare that his request was in my best interest as much as his. Before I could thank him, he disappeared behind a row of decrepit looking buildings. I found myself alone, with my shadows cast around my feet like a spinning sundial.

I followed our path back towards the steel door leading to the underground. I waited above, hoping to meet someone else as they emerged rather than risk another encounter

with the scene below. No one came for what seemed hours although sometimes it seemed like no time had elapsed. Once outside of time and in the midst of eternity, the deep order of things became so misaligned I felt perpetually frantic and trapped in timeless disorder. I rubbed my eyes, and I became aware that I had commenced pacing back and forth as I watched the steel door. Only the constant clanging reminded me that this place harbored some perverted form of life.

As I waited, a type of groggy, malaise rendered me in a sluggish stupor, like that strange sleepiness just after a mid-day nap that meandered too long into night. My loneliness and fear grew as loud and empty as the underground itself. I began to think maybe I ought to return to the stranger.

Then I heard the door burst open and collapse onto the cement as two of the bronze dolls began to climb out with their tufts of wispy white hair followed by blackish eyes and stiff breasts. Their skin, upon closer examination, appeared elastic and rubbery. I stepped back to improve the vantage of my inspection. They looked for a brief second at me and then to each other. I perceived by their expression that my presence made them uneasy. So I spoke quickly.

“Excuse me? It seems I am quite lost and somewhat confused. Where may I find a place to rest and re-establish my bearings?”

The women looked aghast. Apparently, I had again wandered unknowingly into a terrible transgression. Rather than reply, they let out, in unison, a shrill, piercing scream so painful that it caused me to collapse the same way the music did. On the ground, infinite dry heaves started from the top of my stomach and found partial release in the back of my throat. The sickness finally concluded with a trickling gray bile running down the side of my mouth, which left a thin, sour film on the back of my teeth tasting of pennies and cigarette ash. By the time the screaming stopped, the women disappeared. Their footsteps trailed away followed by the echo of malevolent laughter. I struggled to turn from my fetal ball onto my hands and knees.

“You shouldn’t have done that.”

I turned to see the hazy frame of the stranger from before. Only now he towered over me, the oily hue of his immense shadow like quicksand around me. I tried to account for his sudden change in disposition and realized perhaps he had not changed, but that I had. My initial confusion and timid naiveté turned to razors and broken glass, the way years turn resilient smiles and oval eyes into hardened slits. Now my own eyes were narrowed and my mouth stretched tight and stiff, everything once supple, now angles and edges.

His advice felt a little untimely considering I had already endured the wrath of the howling women. I wiped the gray bile from the corners of my mouth as I stood to face him.

“Yah. Thanks.” I replied.

He paced hurriedly forward, glancing over his shoulder to signal me to follow. This began and dictated the nature of our strange acquaintanceship, me following and keeping my head low, him leading from one interminable task to the next. The stranger offered little in the way of explanation, but his cold guidance was my only salvation in the otherwise florescent hell. My understanding was gathered mostly from the observations I made from beneath the horizon of

my downcast eyes, which I cast timidly from one object to the next. We never slept. We never stopped. We just darted from place to place and visited the Neon ritual every night, sometimes for what seemed like nights on end.

The first time I ate the dust, I used my hand and took small pinches from my fingers and dropped them into my mouth. After a while I had my own spoon, which I used the same way I witnessed after the bronze woman perished before me on my first night. The spoon was a gift from the stranger—the only tangible thing that ever passed between us.

Over time I adopted almost all the habits of these metallic people. I grew accustomed to the sounds of Neon, those that were once so disorienting and nauseating. I even began to copy their neon movements. I imitated the erratic jerks and shakes of everyone around me and twirled in my own frantic rhythm. Under the influence of the epileptic pulse and beneath the weight of the lead music, I almost forgot about the sun. The luminaries became my light, the cement my home.

I can hardly fathom now, but I even remember the strange pleasure of the first time I loved at Neon. It was a ritual I had seen performed, at first, with utter disbelief, then numb indifference and eventually, with secret pleasure. One night, amid my dancing, I raised my arm to one of the bronzes. It was a command I had seen demonstrated by the stranger and others. She froze before me and assumed a deer-like paralysis with her head tilted slightly and her body mannequin-still. I did as I had seen many times, using my own hand as I stared at her. After I finished, I rubbed the gray semen into the concrete with the sole of my foot. Then I flicked my hand in a dismissive motion and the bronze jerked away on the synthetic waves of the music. I never saw her eyes. My own eyes felt sunken and heavy as they withdrew into my face, peering out of the corners, stealing only half glimpses of the gray.

Then one day, following the stranger as I always did, carving momentary trails of movement into static black air, I noticed a thought about mad feet scurrying atop asphalt nightmares. It was only a dim awareness, or a whisper of a thought, like accidentally realizing your breath tickling your upper lip. Asphalt nightmares echoing, scurrying, mad feet. Asphalt nightmares. Nightmares. My mind began moving in caffeine circles chasing the frail edges of one torn thought to the next. I gathered pieces of thoughts, pieces of a place with sun spilling over the breezy grass dance, and clouds like crescent waves easing beyond pine tree horizons.

I have no other account for the sudden return of these strange images and thoughts other than that feeling after déjà vu when you think you’ve known all along and you are comforted somehow by the way the memory reminds you. Something vibrant and alive moved into my static consciousness.

“What are you doing?”

I made no reply to the stranger’s initial inquiry, which must have been muted by the sputtering sounds of my imagination.

“*What are you doing?*”

I heard the last part of the repetition, which somehow made the whole of his inquiry intelligible to me. Meanwhile, I had the terrible suspicion of being caught in a daydream.



As I digested the meaning of his question, I noticed my body had the feeling of stepping off a moving sidewalk expecting spontaneous movement only to stiffen and stumble on the ground. I had stopped. The stranger called to me again from ahead. *I don't know* I thought.

"I don't know." I yelled.

"Don't do that. Keep moving."

I began walking again. Tiptoeing across fluorescent tight ropes. Suddenly I felt the weight of my body as my foot landed heel-toe to the cement beneath it. Feet, which had formerly churned unconscious spirals of pavement beneath me, suddenly tingled with life. Fluorescent tightrope time. Tip-toe, tip-toe, heel-toe, heel-toe. And between steps I breathed.

I practiced this walking every day as I followed the stranger, careful not to arouse suspicion, noticing my feet as they touched the ground, feeling the air trickle past my upper lip. Then one day the half awareness of a short in-breath became the total feel of full, slow lungs and warm exhale. My breath awakened, like breathing white streams of clouds into the grey sky that hung in the pitch black beyond the infant glow of the luminary towers. Standing completely still, I tilted my head back with my hands lying gently at my side. I breathed in the gray and florescence and exhaled bits of musical words and phrases.

In deep alternations, the breath went from gray to transparent, then blue and green began like a slow mist expanding into the air, expanding into my lungs. The ground beneath me trembled and laughed, first in tiny ripples and

then a thunderous howl. As the ground collapsed, my feet burrowed beneath the concrete and my trunk stretched and elongated as my hands rose from my sides, becoming looming branches, which spilt and spidered into an intricate web of leaves and smaller branches until they formed a giant canopy of thick green. I stood before the stranger a noble oak. My leaf canopy created a perimeter of shade that blocked the fluorescence. I watched as he stumbled back in disbelief and hurried away in the direction of the underground. I became the stillness.

At first the stranger returned with a group from Neon who buzzed around in the distance, speaking in hushed whispers as they gestured wildly to one another and then at me. Their propulsions and mania seemed even more absurd from the vantage of my fixed and heightened perspective. They left in the same barbarous frenzy in which they had arrived.

Since then, I have seen a few return to steal distanced, skeptical glances. One or two have even have taken bold attempts at momentary stillness. When I see them, I begin prayer-poems about streams and tall grass. Better to know stillness and breath and die an oak than to live as the neons do, feeding on frenzy and ashen remains.

But I can feel the chill of winter hanging in the gray sky and the hum of the Neon light against my branches, which long for the sun. I can feel the first worried chill of fall creeping through my branches with red leaves drying and dangling like unwritten poems, falling one word at a time out of the dying mouths of would-be prophets and mystics.

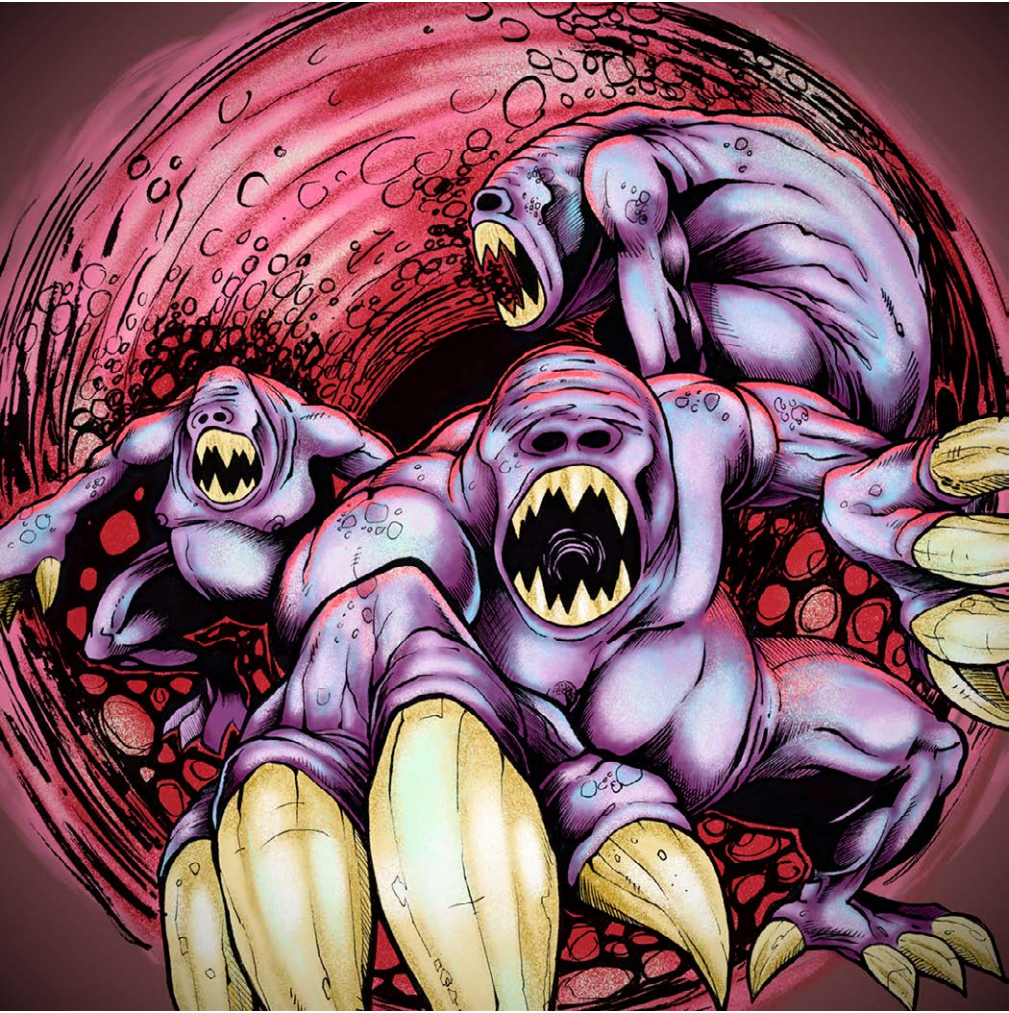
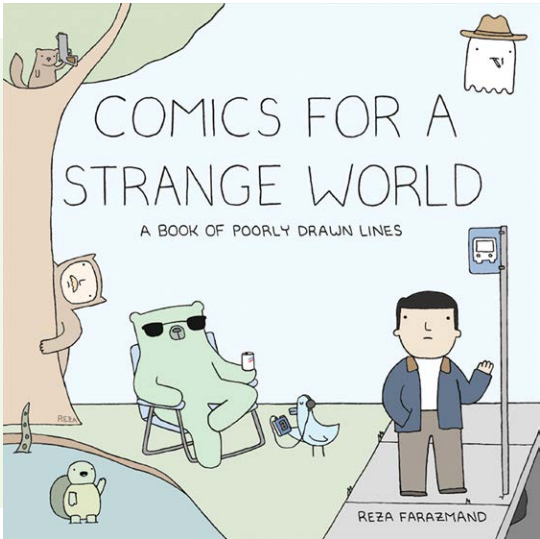
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## ARRIVING OCTOBER 24th

In his follow up to the *New York Times* bestselling book, *Poorly Drawn Lines*, beloved webcomic artist and *Thrice Fiction* contributor Reza Farazmand returns with a new collection of comics that hilariously skewers our modern age. *Comics for a Strange World* takes readers through time, space, and alternate realities, reuniting fans with favorite characters and presenting them with even more bizarre scenarios. Featuring 50% brand new content alongside some of the most popular comics of the past year, *Comics for a Strange World* is the perfect antidote to life's absurdities. For pre-order info, visit [PoorlyDrawnLines.com](http://PoorlyDrawnLines.com)



## Brain Tunnels

Heather Greenfield

I sang in the hollow sockets of my head for the subterranean mole folk who lived there.

There were thousands of miles of tunnels precipitously crisscrossed through and under grey matter, bone, and glands (their civil engineer was a marvel in worlds above and below) that served as a megaphone for my dirge.

I first discovered the people living in my brain and the tubes they built there after one popped out of my ear pit. The mole person was all pearly cyst-head, its parasitic body rooted in a center somewhere below the surface.

"Hey, I just found out we didn't get a permit for this. Sorry, but do you mind..." it asked from a place that wasn't its mouth because, of course, it did not have a mouth.

I didn't ask who or what they were or why they needed my head because the request seemed reasonable. Besides, they were already set up. I didn't want to say no.

"Sure, whatever, no skin off my nose."

Two days later, on a whimsical romp through the wet October streets, I realized I could no longer smell the rotten leaves I was kicking around.

The post-nasal drip came next as excess sweetbread was disposed down my throat as an environmentally friendly way to remove unneeded land.

I didn't mind the tinnitus that followed their Blues, Brews, and BBQ events, or dizzy spells whenever a new transportation tube was built, or the pressure that made my head swell like an egg one day (I don't know how they managed that), but the bee hives they placed behind my eyes were the tipping point.

"Oh God fucking damn it," I said as I plucked out my eyes, collapsing the lids over the socket. "This is just fucking great." My eyelids billowed around against the wings of angry bees and eventually swelled shut like two camel toes



on my face.

The mole people took the hint and moved the hives to my medulla oblongata but I had already purchased my spelunking supplies and started composing my nightmare song. They sent me mountains of paperwork to organize a tax system, a tribute they called it, to properly compensate me for the use of my skull. I ignored it. They sent a mid-level bureaucrat to ask if I had taken a look at the forms, but boy was he surprised when he saw my eyelid cranked open with a tire jack and my hiking gear on. He rolled into himself with a quiver. I opened my mouth beyond the maximum stretch of my jaw. With harsh melodies, I became a conduit for a guttural language I knew but never spoke.

I sang the drum of my heart.  
It prophesied extermination.  
It resounded through the depths of the earth.  
It also contained a subliminal recipe for vegan pulled pork. We must laugh in these trying times.

Almost every day, I would crank open my eye-flaps to sing. (Sometimes I liked to keep the parasites on their toes and find another hole to haunt that day.) They tried harder to push the tax system. When that didn't work, they started bringing me piles of gold and rare mole jewels and spices and silks from their mole worm farms. Then they offered their virgin mole daughters. And then they started sacrificing their mole goats. And then they started sacrificing their virgin mole daughters. Their blood was filled with glitter. It pooled around my feet as I sang louder and they wrapped their heads in foam to stop the vibrations. Tunnels collapsed. The people rioted. My head broke out in hives and eventually the skin fell off but I didn't need skin anymore. The mole people in their frustration began to kill each other for minor offenses and anarchy caused their mole society to collapse and yet they still didn't leave, wouldn't leave. On the 15th day, I used my exploring supplies to take my song to the brain tunnels.

For hours, days, I felt through darkness, encountering ruins, collapsed byways, abandoned mole cars, bones (theirs or mine, who can say), flooded passageways, with only my death wail to keep me company. I wondered where they lived now, where they were hiding. Maybe they were extinct. I imagined the ruins weren't real and no mole people ever existed even though I felt them a million times, a million years.

I thought I had found them. There was a large, rather gelatinous brain mountain I needed to scale. It took a day of avoiding sharp skull fragments and nearly losing my grip several times for me to reach the peak. From the top, I could barely recognize their capital.

The civil engineer carved the blueprints into my

frontal lobe so I could always see the nameless city – the futuristic infrastructure, the dazzling glass buildings, the mitochondria-powered tunnels. It was an impressive cosmopolitan scene I only had to roll my eyes back to see. I ruined this too. The grass burned as bone towers shot jagged from the mind-earth. The tapetum lucidum I grew after living so long in the dark magnified my vision – every tiny window, the barren bloody rooms inside, the shattered transportation tubes. No one lived here anymore. I returned to the catacombs.

I got trapped under rubble with waist-high liquid and cried because I was going to die cold and alone. My legs finally got free after a larger boulder slightly decomposed (a warm moist environment aids in decay). I got trench foot and bat eye and a runny nose. My voice box stopped working. It was quiet and dark and lonely for a long time. I regretted what I had done to the mole people. I regretted being so careless to let them in in the first place.


"I ruined my body." I cried and cried and cried.  
I knew I could never find my way back. The damage was irreparable. The heat. The wet. The ruins. The sweet rotting smell of me. Of them. I could not. Could not.

I collapsed into soft flesh that liquidized beneath my weight and sunk away. I prayed it wouldn't hurt to die. I hoped I would die. I coalesced with my own soupy folds. Dark. Wet.

My legs sprung beneath me into a dry empty space. Something grabbed my ankle and pulled me from the last bit of brain that held any shape. The entirety of my mind immediately liquefied and we fell, screaming. Everything I had been rained around me. Memories, ideas, hopes, thoughts, fears, fears, fears, desire. I do not exist. I was so afraid of falling I didn't realize it. That limitless arm held me tight, dragged me into my heart.

I found them. The mole people sagged and shivered in clusters, spackled with old gore, pawing at their mouths. They gathered around me in the hot red light. "They are going to eat me and I probably deserve it." In the thrumming walls, I caught my reflection in a shiny vein. A wall of skin covered my gaping mouth. Shimmering tissue lined my eye sockets. I looked just like them. "Oh God, oh God, please let me die." I am mutated. A body ruined. The throng put their arms around me, each other. I cried. Over the deafening roar of my own heart, I heard them: "I love you I love you I love you." I screamed, begged for death. I tore at my alien face and they wrestled my hands away, pried my webbed fingers open, and kissed the palms.

Their murmurs, my screams bled into one another until they were some kind of gibberish song, a low hum that rose and fell with the beating of my heart. 🌀



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# Yawnaroo

Judyth Emanuel

Book shop counter level with his chin. Dusty shelved books saw bald patch. There he was little little. We met there. I yawned fleshy. Seen him snub nose nervoused. I said, "What you called." Tiny man squeaked back, "Douglas. You?" "Angela." I leaned over wanted get him. Bench buckled under me lifted him up. Weighed light as stick of chalk. The size of him twig legs ran in mid-air. Got my blood pumping surged it did. Heart thumping. Overcome by avalanche of desire. Licked him from chin to forehead. Wetted him shiny. Yawned again drew ton of air. Cooled the brain blistering hot for its own good. That day in book shop asked Douglas be my own teensy man to treasure pet. Honeymooners ever since. Blend of opposites. Douglas tidy pinkish bloke. Pale clean-shaven skin. Almost

transparent. He adored big women. Nicknamed me, 'attack of fifty-foot woman.' Thought just hilarious. I christened him, 'incredible shrinking man.' And his tender fumbles no match for mischievous woman cried clutching, "Oh wittle little." Squeezed up his small sick. So this. This wonderful life. Except. Douglas chose we live in Emu Plains. Sort of dead-end. Early days let him have his way then just once. Now. There we were. Plain deady in the Plains. Fibro house. Kind of a dump. Aluminium sliding doors. The pokiest kitchen. Star-flecked laminex. Cracked foundations. Sagging roof. Mouldy walls. Bathroom tiles the colour of puke bloody awful. And Douglas not handy. I never complained in the plains said. "It's your choice Douglas." And yawned sounded silky comforting. Everyone yawned. Even animals yawned and no one knew why. Still we



all yawned. If Douglas get yawned in sleep, it frightened him terrible. So did wetting the bed. Once a child bed-wetter. But we never ever talked about that wet.

Dear Douglas. Invented yawning theory of idea told me. Spoke in trusting tone. Excitement revealed.

“Listen Angela. A yawn is invisible essence. I’ve still got mine. I’m not letting it out. I keep it in pre-frontal cortex of my brain. Essence controls all decision-making plus persons personality. It does. Believe me.”

Could not be serious. But was. Made me giggled.

“Oh Douglas darling you funny. I am dying to see your essence. Open your mouth.”

“No.”

Got me frustrated said,

“All you care about is your own silly essence. I get quite lots of inquisitive substances welling up inside me.”

I welled up. Douglas took a step back. I got close nuzzled nose against his tiddly winks ear. Blinked him like small wallaby exposed by bright spotlight shining from roof of hunter’s truck. His round dark eyes. The twitches. Such nerviness. So out of place. Easily spotted hopping across a paddock. How to bag a roo. Poor cotton buckaroo. I imagined a raised rifle. My finger on the hair trigger. Crack shot. Did buckaroo suspect anything? Did sometimes so I suggested.

“We should go for a walk Douglas. Along the bush track near our house.”

I pictured us.

Let’s scrambling through the undergrowth us picking bunches of golden wattle. Tripped discovering banksia flowers springing high in shape of corncobs.

Last time played hide-and-seek under fallen paperbark trees.

Remembered now of course failed to find Douglas. Tucked in crevices. But he found me. I didn’t fit in anywhere. These fun times memories I thought. Dreamy. But Douglas rarely dreamed in sleep. Sometimes disturbed by my strict methods of chastisement. His nightmares. Giant hotdogs spurting oodles of mustard chasing him. Most nights did too. He sat upright in bed and screamed.

Today made effort not to irritate Douglas. But I did. By bigness hovering. By inhabiting much of his space. For monster woman never left house she best. She tried to be. She everything to her lover. She me all donuts, meat pies, fat loaf bread indoor moon mush on inside. I said. “Munch on yummy me.”

Well Douglas did his diddums. He often expected me kiss his fine bony feet. He tapped one side of his nose intelligent knowing way told me this.

“Men crave to be worshipped.”

Yum experimented. Nibbled his tiny toes. Tickled his tiny balls size of Brussel sprouts. Douglas shrieked with delight. But I. Might this believed adoration demeaning a bit. Preferred more control. Tight convinced Douglas to do what I wanted. That occasional physical restraint. Not dog collar tawdry. But pleasant tied to bedpost velvet cord with tassel. And wrestled. Douglas loved to wrestle invigorated muscle tone. My thumb pinned him to the mattress just proud. But woman needed squillion more in a relationship. Liked let me Douglas. Let me must be part of flesh. Oh well. Not yet.

Something to look forward too. But for now. Mid-morning snack time.

Douglas clicked his fingers.

“Angela tea time.”

I bossed Douglas must call me Angel.

And softly softly.

“Or there be consequences.”

Douglas quaked with tremble pleasure.

“What’s for morning tea Angel?”

“Date scones with lashings of butter.”

I made cracked sound of a whip. Fair crack of slapped.

First ham and cheese on white sliced. All crusts cut off. Easy on the teeth. Just the way Douglas fond of it.

“Let me hear it. Three cheers for cheese.”

“Hooray hooray hooray.”

Douglas ate sandwich yawn came. Nostrils flared. He panicked. He gurgled face turned pinker. Than usual. Much pink. I grabbed damp washcloth from the sink. I tackled him from behind. I flattened washcloth firmly over the delicate bridge of his nose.

“Is it the pollen sweetheart? Clogged sinuses? You must yawn to clear. Go on.”

I applied more pressure. His hands fluttered up like a drowning moth.

“I can’t breathe. For God’s sake Angela, get that stinking thing away from me. I slept badly. I’m tired.”

“Oh punkin,” I said.

Went to fling my arms around him. He ducked like someone avoiding missile. Little body collapsed on kitchen chair. His mouth dropped open as if about to swallow a cannon ball. Tears seeped from pink rims around his eyes. Attack-woman I gazed hungrily at beads of sweat on his top lip. The yawn began great ready for it. Opened his mouth wide. Seen bluish veins under his arching tongue. Saliva-soaked membranes pulsed on floor of his mouth not pretty. Ooh I spied cavities.

“Douglas, you forgot to floss.”

I glimpsed saw seen bits of bread stuck between his teeth. Yawn escalated. Became orchestral. Full-blown mighty roar. Large way to innards. Ready willing now I could get myself into him. Take a look around. Worm my way through fragile organs. My massive substances rose up yes enter. I would now. Terrified, Douglas slapped one hand over mouth. Choked back air. Finger prison bars blocked entrance to his oesophagus throbbed. Not willing. Barrier prevented my mystical substances from zooming in and overtaking his body. But one flesh Douglas we must soon. I had leg jiggled with frustration for yawn only lasted six seconds and damn. Too late was. But had patience of maniac stalker. So secretly waited for more yawns. I shook him yawn more another one just one. Go Douglas go on. He cowered.

“Not now Angel. I fancy a turn around the room.”

I settled for slow waltz danced our cares away withered substances. Douglas nimble stood on my dancing shoes. Spun him around the living room Moon River tune.

Douglas sang melodious soft,

“Wider than a mile, I’m crossing you in style. Some day.”

I whispered,

“You old heartbreaker you.”

I threw myself on top of him. Hundred kilos of flesh enveloped shivered ecstasy. Shudder too stuck my tongue

down his throat. This large flaccid size of camel. Douglas gagged thrilled by element of surprise romantic he mumbled hard with tongue big licking,

“I’d be lost without my Angel.”

And I tried best face to appear angelic.

Then nap time now needed his rest. Favourite armchair settled Douglas well it began. He adjusted reclining tension. Struggled this unlocking footrest. His ears angry red to the tips.

“Angela the stupid lever is stuck. Bloody chair.”

Fierce lurch. Seat jolted back pinched thumb.

“Ouch.”

Ever the caring loved one rushed to his side. Douglas shrank sucking finger.

“I’m okay.”

Dozed off. Snored. Contented and whoopee in sleep began another delicious yawn. Brilliant this afternoon snooze. I leaned near his face. Let eyelashes brush his cheekbones. Yawn expanded this splendid symphony. Excitement electric mounted. Tingled sparks under skin. Desperation wanted put my burrow deep innermost him. Yawn the only way. Floorboards creaked splinter rasps. Watched his facial muscles contorted primitive sounds. Weak wallaby so agonized, almost seductive. I waited speck of a sweat exhilarating. Soon. But then. Not a single drop of essence flew out his innards. None. Shock quite surprising. His essence fled already.

I must tell him.

He will freak burst out die. So was this decided how imperative to choose right moment to tell him. Maybe after he went to get the car washed. He enjoyed the carwash. Sudsy foam gave him glorious moods. When he returned, I could mention missing essence made casual so not alarmed.

But a more suitable occasion. I would tell. Said news after he visited the doctor to renew Prozac prescription. On Prozac Douglas developed every side effect. Symptoms such as psychomotor retardation. *I don’t have the energy to do anything Angel.* Inappropriate guilt. *I am flawed Angel.* Fatigue. *I’m really tired Angel.* And great difficulty concentrating. *What did you say? What are you talking about Angel?* But I thanked the lord for mood elevators. To big boost his confidence I one day told him,

“Guess what I read in the medical dictionary? Antidepressants immobilize the diminishment of your brains plasticity by beefing up neuronal activity. Isn’t that lovely? Doesn’t a strong plastic brain sound fabulous?”

Nap over Douglas rubbed eyes whimpering. Not about anything really. Sometimes buckaroo groaned as if body caving in. Douglas struggled to his feet.

“Let me help,” I said lifting him flimsy as a mosquito. I pinched his cheeks to get some colour into them.

Lucky for me, Douglas scuttled out the door. Got appointment for a haircut. Well what perfect opportunity to plan explosive revelation. Began right then practiced how to explain few details of his lost essence. Made list of distractions for easy explanation lessen panic. I planned to.

1. Compose lyrical statements
2. Soothing narrative of irrelevant poetic niceties.
3. Chant hypnotically (this for his entertainment)
4. Expand on the whole tragic story.

That should make his nipples stand up.

Douglas arrived home. Not jolly as expected. Hair gelled hard stiff stuck up like porcupine. Made Douglas sob,

“Fucking hair stylist butchered my hair. I look like a psychopath.”

I smoothed the frightful waves. Cupped his little face in my hands.

“Oh looks naughty boy bubbikins.”

Then felt kittenish. Held his reluctant hand. Led him to the chair. Douglas stiffened. Looked at chair as if never seen chair before.

“Now Angela. I don’t have time for your crazy games.”

Pushed gentle shove. Arranged him in recliner snapped back to a vertical position.

“Relax Douglas. Get comfortable. Be quiet. Keep still. No, I am not mad at you. I just need to tell news not good.”

Douglas squirmed. But I sensed he trusted me. I began to break the facts.

“We begin with poetry. You love poetry. All that you are is a dream within a dream. No? Well even if you are not a dream within a dream. Isn’t that a beautiful thought? I haven’t finished. Stop fidgeting.”

I took deep breath deeper began again.

“Winter is still winter.”

Douglas groaned. But I well continued.

“Yes, it is. Do not disagree with me. I am not starting an argument.”

Added more groaning tried to kick.

“Stop it. Hush.”

Smacked him gentle.

“The earth revolves around the sun. Well because I say so that’s why. And God created man free from blemish. But God failed.”

Some faint disapproving grunts.

“Yes, he did. Be quiet. He did too. Just shut up and listen.

Birds fly swift over land and sea. Yes, they do. Stop shaking your head. Look out the window. What did you see?”

Douglas strained. I allowed him spoken. He replied,

“Magpies flying in the sky.”

“Exactly,” I said.

Paused. Gave few minutes to absorb these ideas. Douglas eyes glazed over. So I repeated everything again everything got much more intensity. Enunciated each syllable. Douglas crimson face started spitting.

“Just tell me the bad news Angela.”

“Wait. You must digest these concepts.”

And I spoke with increased vigour again.

“Yawning very contagious. Don’t frown. Yawning form of emotional transmission. Same as hugging kissing. I know *I know.*”

Douglas hated kissing.

“I am not shouting at you. Kissing sucks essence out. Your mother kissed bit too aggressively. I am not going to kiss you. Not yet. Keep still. No, I don’t think you very fucked up. Well, maybe slight fucked up in head. Blame your mother.”

Douglas started drooling stressed signals. I gripped both his teensy hands.

“*Some* people yawn if tired of someone. For instance. Their life partner. I’m not accusing anybody. Yawns test the state of relationships. Not us, of course. No Douglas, control yourself. Sit back down.”



Paused again waiting for scientific love evidence to take hold of tiny mind

“Precious baby. You lost all essence every drop. No, I am not making fun of you. Something abducted your essence. Left only hollow pretence. Human body containing nothing. Yes, that possible. So. I ask you. I do. Why in name of God protect meaninglessness?”

Douglas suffered minor anxiety attack. Sight of him worried me.

“Sweet pea, I am not screaming at you. I raised my voice for emphasis.”

Necessary to stay strong. Removed the tumbler of scotch from his tight grip pried each finger off.

“Calm down. Keep your toupee on. Accept these facts. Remain positive. Don’t you dare call me a raving lunatic.”

Douglas hurtled from recliner like astronaut ejected from space capsule. Ran and hid. I shouted,

“Come back here. You never listen. How about I explain it in a nutshell?”

Heard seen little squeaks.

“I fancy some nuts,” said my little buckaroo squirrel from his special hiding place.

Disappointment reared.

“We are out of nuts Douglas.”

Then stupendous idea struck me whacked me wow got exhilarated by marvellous solution. Stretched upwards as if towering storm. Only *I* possessed the power to restore essence. My body on fire with essence.

“Douglas Douglas come out from behind the sofa. No, I don’t want to play sardines. You always win. Come here.”

Crooked my finger. Little wagged grabbed him. Tied him to chair. He liked it when I did that. He liked me to be firm. Reached down from my great height. Slipped paper bag over his head pinked zig zag edges. Tore breathing hole in brown paper. Tore little eyeholes.

“Ready Douglas?”

Douglas rustling under brown paper was that anticipation. Rammed my fingers into his mouth wide open with fright. I fondled his luscious gums.

“Don’t be scared. You love this. You really do. Let’s take a look shall we?”

I gripped lower jaw. Forced his mouth open even wider. This inviting entrance. A gateway to his trembling interior. I pushed pretty tongue hard. Its surface of fine wiggly lines ancient markings. I said,

“Douglas you lucky man. You got hieroglyphics etched

onto your tongue.”

My pinkies stroked delicate petal edges of his tongue. Douglas dribbled.

“Don’t be embarrassed Douglas can’t help dribbling.”

My fingertips buried at the back of his throat. Tickled his taste buds. I squeezed his forbidden fruit of bumps and protrusions. His body slackened with pleasure. I pinched dangling pearl sack. (It sputtered like a chainsaw when he snored.) I said,

“Cat got your tongue? This much nicer than kissing.”

Gift-wrapped buckaroo mumbled surrender to warm affections. I untied him. He clung to me. His pathetic arms reached as far as my armpits. His feet hung down to just above my knees. Rush of my essence poured into innermost of his body. His lungs lit up. His intestines sparkled. His heart busted love.

“Oh Douglas. Isn’t this romantic? I love you to the moon and back. The power of essence transforms. People will notice our inner glow.”

Douglas jewel all rosy and prettified. Tried to say something. But I pinched his teeny lips together and said,

“Don’t speak. Oh my cotton buckaroo. We one flesh now. Do you understand? It is *not* uncomfortable. Stop wriggling.”



# Genitalia Philosophica

John Repp

A buzz-cut blonde called Madeleine and I talk Bachelard with a dusting of Wittgenstein. We don’t require coffee or cigarettes, food or wine, table or chairs, preferring to squat flat-footed, haunches swaying a little as we make our points or struggle to recall piquant phrases.

Madeleine wears a motorcycle cap jammed down so hard a roll of flesh gathers over her eyebrows. Her black leather Dr. Denton’s are too small for her, dollops of flesh protruding here and there like burnt dinner rolls. Her slightest movement produces a pungent creaking.

Whenever I glide from the cognitive troposphere to pluck some Bertrand Russell commonplace and toss it her way, I notice with dispassionate keenness how her outfit gaps open at the crotch, her pubic hair shaved but for a bristled fringe ringing the *labia majora*. As she slyly offers a morsel of Whitehead or a few crumbs of Berkeley or Popper and I unwrap another hunk of trusty Hume, I think, “What

geometric genitals,” contemplating the closed-clamshell symmetry of that impeccable pudendum. This puerile fascination, this sexually regressed purity nevertheless registers the respect—nay, the awe with which I regard her.

Tonight, the talk has delved especially deep. Bachelard’s elusive meditations on birdhouses and attics have not yet yielded to our heated inquiry. My irreplaceable interlocutor falls silent a moment, the chuckling hiss of the woodstove cinching the air more tightly around us. Then, rocking back on her heels, her lips parting slightly, Madeleine turns the sort of conceptual corner for which she’s so revered in our circles: “In a journal entry (after all, it *was* 1842), Kierkegaard called circumcision worse than torture because it denies the victim—who lacks perceptual acuity, language, and memory (in short, all but the most rudimentary consciousness)—not only the recollection but the full experience of torment.”

Not for the first time, I realize I’m naked and lack a foreskin. My genitals hang quiet, *sui generis*.





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# Anomic Aphasia

by Thomas Hrycyk

They met at the end of the water on a windy day by accident. The woman could hardly hear through the gusts but didn't roll her head in frustration. Niceties were made before they walked the shore, upstream from the sewer main. The sun-lit flirt who had all day pressed her lips against the sky had now curled back in retreat from the achromatic stasis of the gunmetal cloud cover. They took a seat on the sand and she mentioned the formation of lenticular clouds as silence set out like a tireless traveler between them. He remembered how she had once believed every micromicroinstant branched into countless parallel worlds, each possible combination a microevent that could occur as a result of microlevel uncertainty, going on about it without ever once mentioning Schrodinger's cat. She always thought that meaning was meant to be married to different maps. And she would always say the easiest way to refold a roadmap was differently every time. And he had to agree. Not to please, but to help slow some carnal dégringolade within her.

He noticed her inhaling deep draughts of human proximity like the unintentional perfumes of a passer-by as they spread out in front of some rocks and he flipped a pebble up into his palm. When names detached themselves, their objects, ungraspable like much else, spilled over. She said she had tried to understand the mystery of it by staring into the mirror and repeating her name over and over as if one could walk into language like a familiar house. She felt like she was praying for hinges to make a door. Her platinum hair fell over her checkered chemise as she spoke. "I found a certain strength in sustaining, over a period of time, my attention on a single point." She was tired of all the decoherence, all the things that could easily be swept under.

Was it the jokes you told? He wondered. Or the way bodies fit into one another like links of a chain? He wanted to pull out of her, away from her, as far as it could span, and crouch down somewhere in a patient, pathetic security. Whatever *somewhere* it was must have been occupied. He had attempted to build a wall between them with twenty pounds of definitions. He'd pulled the ledge back on his words, no longer a suffix for her to lean her head on. Subtly scanning over her legs through her nude pantyhose, he noticed her shins were rashed red by chiggers and maybe, he thought, it was some feeling, one of annoyance, she was unable to attach to.

She said lately she's imagined us, everyone, living on an intricately patterned carpet; one we could never be sure extended to infinity in all directions. Some patterns appeared random, others rigidly geometrical.

She paused, losing something somewhere. Her face gave

off her frustration as she rolled her head.

"Describing the whole carpet is difficult because we've protected it, covered it in a thick plastic sheet with a translucence that varies from place to place. We can see through clearly here or there, but other parts are awfully opaque. Also, the plastic sheet varies in hardness. We can scrape it down at certain points to make out better the patterns—sometimes removing the layers radically transforms what we thought we saw." She took a deep breath, pounding her fist against her thigh. "Carpetologists have examined it and have estimated what the unseen parts look like." But she said it has been harder for her. Every day has been harder for her. Most areas have been resisting her efforts: no scraper big or strong enough. Faint lattices with even fainter symmetries seemed irregular, even within a larger context. She stopped, knowing the metaphor had already gone too far. One of the few features he'd always found respectable within her.

He filled the silence, saying, "It's funny how we try to name those unknown parts we can't see and then shush them if they act up."

Her face tightened all over. It was odd, the way she looked. So tight, like his statement had sucked all the life from her. "Look at the gray," she said, detaching the color from the sky as if it were a membrane.

She got up and began walking, somehow cicatrized by words or the roar which lay on the other side of silence—this, he somehow knew. His father used to tell him only late in life does the crustacean discover this molting is what purpose she's allowed and he knew Dad was talking about her.

They stopped outside her old Ford Taurus and she asked, "Is that fuzzy old thing a red hydrant?" She tapped her panty-hosed toes on it gently and confirmed—never once growing tired of life—never rolling her head away. The man walked off through the muffled noise of their goodbyes. There was resentment, a desire to forget.

He knew what was next: she would head back, returning to a silent house with only the sound of her slippers *hishing* along the floor. Sitting in an angle of unaccustomed ease, she would open the cassette player and put in a tape. There will be a crack in the mid-sun of her temper as she is yet again accompanied by silence. She'll push aside her flash cards, sitting up in her tousled bed with the eiderdown humped about her knees. ↻



**THOMAS HRYCYK** is currently a candidate for an MFA at Queens University of Charlotte and has worked for multiple literary journals including *Fifth Wednesday Journal*. His most recent publications include a novella, *L'Amande et La Fleur* (Wapshott Press, 2016), and short stories in *Timber*, *GTK Creative*, and *Boston Literary Magazine*. His work is forthcoming in *Fiction International*.



## ARTISTS & PHOTOGRAPHERS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE

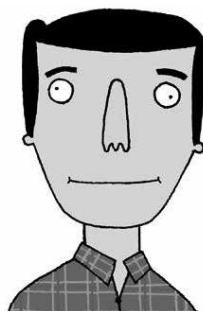
### ALVARO TAPIA HIDALGO Pages: Front & Back Cover, Inside

*Front Cover, 18...* is a graphic designer and illustrator born in Chile. After graduating from Universidad de Valparaiso, he went on to Escuela de Cine de Chile to specialize in Film Studies. Since 2000, Alvaro has worked as Art Director in design projects and as Film Editor and Post-producer in audiovisual projects. Since 2011, he has been working as a full-time illustrator. His illustration work uses a combination of traditional techniques and digital image processing. He has collaborated with print media such as **The New Yorker**, **The Washington Post**, **Wired**, **Rolling Stone**, **New Republic**, **Forbes**, **Harper's Bazaar**, etc. He is currently based in Valparaiso, Chile.



### REZA FARAZMAND Page: 36...

draws comics and writes things. You can find more of his work at Poorly Drawn Lines (**PoorlyDrawnLines.com**), which is updated every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. A collection of his cartoons titled **Poorly Draw Lines: Good Ideas and Amazing Stories** debuted on October 6, 2015. His new book, **Comics for a Strange World** will be released October 24th.



### CHAD ROSEBURG Pages: 7, 9, 41...

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.



### CHAD YENNEY Pages: 20-21, 22, 25, 51...

makes paper collages in Washington state. You can see more of his work at his website at **computarded.com** or send him love letters at **computardedcollage@gmail.com**.



### JENNI BELOTSEKOVSKY Pages: 30-33, 37-40...

is of Russian-Jewish descent currently dwelling in Vermont. She believes art is continuously evolving and feels most comfortable with ink and acrylic by her side and/or in the middle or nowhere. She curates the world's only art kiosk and you can find her art at **facebook.com/JenniBeeArt**



### ROB KIRBYSON Pages: 27, 47-50, 52...

conceives visceral, often surreal ideas and renders them carefully and precisely with acrylic and oil paints, inks and pencils. There are no happy accidents. Inspiration is usually borne existentially from within although Rob also likes to take a personal skewed look at other cultural touchstones. Surfaces used are canvas, canvas board, wooden panel, aluminium sheet and electric toasters. Rob also works in magazine illustration and as a cartoonist. He has worked in independent and newsstand magazines in the USA and UK since the late 90's. Rob works from a camouflaged and secluded studio in Kinross, Scotland. Check out more of Rob's work at **RobKirbyson.com**



### CESAR VALTIERRA Page: 45...

is a graphic artist. To escape the drudgery of life, he draws. He also hangs out with his fiancée Victoria, and their cats, Chubs and Pretty Boy. Check out his work at **CesarValtierra.com** and **OrderFromKhaos.com**, as well as his comic at **TonyBalazo.com**

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## THRICE FICTION MAGAZINE CO-FOUNDERS & STAFF

### RW SPRYSZAK Editor, THRICE Fiction...

has work which appeared in **Slipstream**, **Paper Radio**, **the Lost and Found Times**, **Mallife**, **Version90**, **Sub Rosa**, **Asylum**, and a host of other alternative magazines over the last 30 years. After a drunken hiatus his work has resurfaced in places like **A Minor Magazine** and **Peculiar Mormyrid**. He was editor of the **Fiction Review** from 1989-1991 and co-founded Thrice Publishing in 2011. He compiled and edited **So What If It's True: From the Notebooks of Lorri Jackson** and stares out the window for no reason quite often. He has no degrees, does not apply for awards, and works in a print shop where nobody knows about any of this. You can find his website at **rwspryszak.com**



### DAVID SIMMER II Lead Artist & Art Director, THRICE Fiction...

is a graphic designer and world traveler residing in the Pacific Northwest of these United States. Any artistic talent he may have is undoubtedly due to his father making him draw his own pictures to color rather than buying him coloring books during his formative years. He is co-founder and art director of **Thrice Fiction Magazine** and blogs daily at **Blogography.com**



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