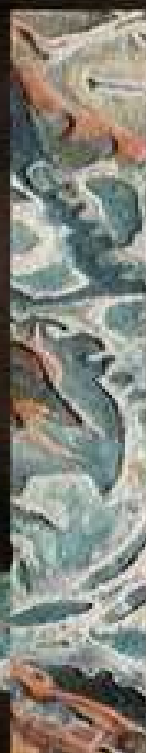
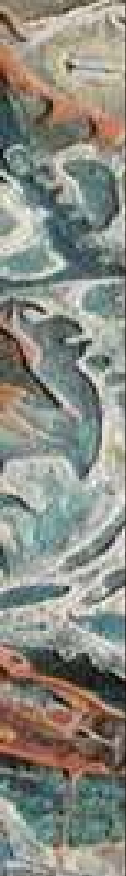
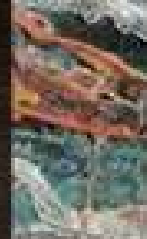
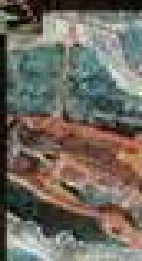


FOR
When
The
Veil
Drops



For When the Veil Drops

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ISBN: 1-4783-8780-7
ISBN-13: 9781478387800
eBook ISBN: 978-1-62345-790-7

For When the Veil Drops

West Pigeon Press

2012

Praise for West Pigeon Press's First Release

You Shall Never Know Security, by J.R. Hamantaschen

The term dark fiction has become a tad diluted by the onslaught of vampire, zombie and pseudo-horror novels that currently dot the literary landscape. However, in J.R. Hamantaschen's You Shall Never Know Security, a collection of 13 short stories, dark fiction is back to what it was meant to be: a bloodcurdling jump into the gloomiest and most sinister corners of the human psyche.

With an elegant and eloquent prose that brings to mind the work of Lovecraft, Hamantaschen repeatedly pulls away the thin cover or normalcy that's usually thrown over our daily lives and unabashedly shows readers what lies beneath. Regret, despair, fear, envy and guilt are all here, and the stories in which they appear are the kind that tend to stick with readers after the reading is over.

—HP Lovecraft eZine

J.R. Hamantaschen's stories tap into the cosmic hopelessness of life. His stories are horrific and terrifying, but really shake one's idea of self and their place in the universe.

—HP Lovecraft Literary Podcast

J.R.'s debut anthology kicks open the doors of the traditional horror fiction genre and takes the reader to a far darker place...Hamantaschen handles some deep topics...[t]his is fiction for readers that like to think, that like to be challenged, that like to squirm.

—The Drabblecast

The language is evocative, almost elegiac...the stories are so varied in type and emphasis that it is difficult to describe them...[b]uried in the razzle-dazzle language are clues to the intended meaning. If horror is your poison of choice, these will definitely fit the bill.

—Innsmouth Free Press

J.R.'s fiction is raw, startling, and dark. The best examples of his work—stories such as “Jordan, When Are You Going to Settle Down, Get Married and Have Us Some Children?” and “Endemic”—make readers squirm with discomfort, wondering how far the boundaries can be pushed before they break. J.R.'s work isn't comfortable fiction, but it's as often as not thought-provoking fiction wrapped around a grimly philosophical edge.

—Dru Pagliassotti, editor of The Harrow Press

A solid collection by a talented author with a strong voice...certainly much more dark than ole Howard [Philip Lovecraft] ever went.

—Toxic Graveyard

And after reading through this masterpiece of unnerving literature, I must also agree that these stories are truly what 21st century dark fiction is all about...[t]his collection of thought-provoking fiction is part of a new turning point in modern fiction...[w]hen I sat down to write this review, I opened the book and looked at the table of contents trying to decide which story was my favorite. To be honest, I can't even properly decide. Each story has a specific feeling that overtakes me as I read them. As a must I would suggest the last three stories of the anthology. These tales are some of the best thought out dark fiction that I have read.

—Unspeakable Gibberer

The book goes into different realms of horror. From grotesque events, to terrifying mysteries, J.R. broke boundaries in the horror realm. I call this a mind fuck book, because most stories leave you paranoid and thinking it could happen to you. This book brings out frightening emotions that can only mean J.R. has sent a message of terror and it must be embraced...I

recommend this book to anyone seeking a good nightmare.

—New York Dark Side Horror Group, Official Book Club Selection

Introduction—On Dark Fiction

So here we go, the second volume in the grand experiment that is West Pigeon Press. So for those of you new to West Pigeon Press (and missed all the superlatives heaped upon *You Shall Never Know Security* on the antecedent page), we here at West Pigeon Press strive to publish dark, resonant fiction. As you'll notice if you choose to make your way through our collection, this phrase—dark, resonant fiction—isn't easy to unpack.

In other words, there is a lot going on here. Our preference gravitates toward the evocative and unsettling. We were going to say 'weird,' but then we thought better of it, because there's nothing too 'weird' about feeling unsettled. In fact, being unsettled is all too familiar a feeling. None of us living may know what death entails, but to be unsettled is to experience its closest corollary, loss. Maybe that frisson is what drives us—and by us I mean *us*, the publishers, and *you*, the reader—to seek out this resonant, dark brand of fiction.

There, again with the term, *resonant*. Because ephemeral frisson...well, that's no frisson at all.

Best,

West Pigeon Press

"Oh, it was a wonderful day all right, one of those days when reality becomes a succession of such bright and sharp images that you are afraid that any moment you will poke a hole in the gorgeous screen and glimpse the illimitable, unknown blackness it films; when everything seems so friendly and right that you tremble lest a sudden searing flash of insight reveal to you the massed horror and hate and brutality and ignorance on which life rests."

Fritz Leiber, "Conjure Wife."

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All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.

—William Shakespeare, “As You Like It.”

Newborn, child, courtier, professional, executive, pensioner, dotard.

Owen Blanchard III had been all seven, and he looked like the end of the last, laying there in bed like a liver-spotted skeleton in his silk, monogrammed pajamas. He didn't, however, have the complete set of accoutrements of most men in his apparent age or condition—missing were the heart monitor, the oxygen mask, a catheter with a cooling bag of bloody urine hooked to the bed. And his was a peculiar bed, too—high-sided with narrow, vertical spindles.

It was vaguely late according to the summer moonlight easing through the window, and a more specific 11:07 on the face of the wind-up brass alarm clock on the nightstand. Blanchard seemed to be reaching for the clock, or maybe it was the bottle of pills marked ‘Triazolam’, or maybe he was pointing at them with his whole arthritic hand, which hung in the air, completely still except for a pronounced tremble, brought on by any one of a number of old age ailments.

“Can I get that for you, Mr. Blanchard?” asked the woman at the door.

“Who are you?” he wheezed, trying to squint past his milky cataracts.

“Linnie,” she answered, running her thumb under the “I HEART NY” bag slung over her slightly slumping, 50-something shoulder. “I’m the

overnight girl. I spoke with your son this afternoon. I hope I didn't surprise you. He said the door would be open and to let myself in."

Blanchard squinted again, but not to see this time. There was reproach in his eyes that Linnie didn't miss. "You are late." He measured the syllables like a metronome, each one as important as the last so the meaning was absolutely clear—don't be late again.

"I'm—I'm really sorry, Mr. Blanchard," stammered Linnie. "The numbers—the street numbers go up and then go down. They don't make sense. Your son gave me directions, but it's dark out now and I couldn't see the silver microphone on the mailbox."

"It's alright," said Blanchard, waving his shriveled claw of a hand. "Just get me the Triazolam. I need a quarter milligram and some water." He collapsed back into bed, breathing heavily. "It's there, on the nightstand."

Linnie picked up the orange bottle and twisted off the child-safety top. "You don't have any kids here, Mr. Blanchard. Do you want me to put the top back on the easy way? Oh, and it says here the dosage is an eighth of a milligram. Where's the pill cutter?"

The folds around Blanchard's eyes sprung open. "No!" he shouted. "Give me the quarter milligram. If I wanted a nurse, I'd have hired one. You just get me my pill and my water, and don't come back in the room unless I hit this nurse call button." He dug his yellow nail into the strange plastic cap over the button, a cap that reminded her of the child-safety lid on the bottle.

Linnie set down her bag and handed him his pill and water. "Yes, Mr. Blanchard."

"You can leave at 6:00 before the morning caretaker gets here. You can sleep or read or watch TV or whatever it is you do, but do not invite anyone else into this house, including paramedics. This is my house and I value my privacy, and I have a do not resuscitate order in place. There is an envelope with your money on the counter in the kitchen by the door. Take it with you when you go, and then be back—on time—tomorrow night."

"Yes, Mr. Blanchard. Anything else?"

"Turn out the lights on your way out."

Linnie picked up her bag of knitting and romance novels, turned around at the door, and looked at Mr. Blanchard. With his hands folded serenely over his hollow chest, he looked ready for the casket—except for those milky blue eyes staring back at her, telling her to turn out the lights and get out herself, which she did. And gladly. The door snicked shut and she crept down the

hallway toward the lake room, careful not to disturb anyone else who might be sleeping. She didn't know how many other people there were in the house, but Blanchard was rumored to have a big family that came and went at all hours. She'd asked around.

Settling into the recliner in the room overlooking the lake, she scooped up the remote and found the 1979 version of *Dracula* starring Frank Langella to watch while she finished the June knitting of another pair of Christmas mittens. She could hear the nurse call button from where she was sitting, but felt confident that he wouldn't be pressing it. Anyone who took a quarter milligram of Triazolam would be sleeping a while. Her mother had taken it for insomnia while cancer ate away at her bowels—well, cancer and radiation treatment. Let's not forget that.

Her mother's illness had set her back some. A lot. And cleaning houses wasn't digging her out of the hole. Treading water was what she had been doing, and then when big medicine got her choking in its armpit, well, the call from Blanchard's son was very welcome news.

"Ms. Shaffer," he asked. "I was given your number by one of my associates. I need a new overnight caretaker to come take care of a quiet octogenarian. You don't need any medical experience and frankly, you'll be able to sleep through your shift. The work is in a home. I just need you there in case of emergency, and above all, I need you to be punctual. Now, as to your rate of pay, given the nature of the work, I hope that a hundred dollars cash would suffice."

She assured him that it would. So what if she wouldn't be sleeping at home—an extra \$700 a week would go a long way toward restoring her finances, especially if the old coot could hold out at home for a while. Besides, she'd heard that Owen Blanchard III was actually in pretty good shape for someone who'd been in the media business since he helped put the DuMont Television Network out of business in the late 1950s. The somewhat reclusive owner of a handful of independent TV stations in the Tri-state area sometimes showed up at cocktail parties looking no older than 70, at least according to the gossip bloggers, but he sure as hell looked older than that tonight. A hard-ridden 90, Linnie's husband might have said to her, had he not run off to Nevada a couple of years ago with that real estate agent with the college degree.

Linnie held the needle-gutted mittens in her lap and her eyes shut all on their own as Frank Langella's tousled locks blew around in the wind. It did

the same outside, nudging a summer storm closer to Moraine Lake while Linnie snored faintly in her PINK sweats.

Thunder crashed like a piece of sheet metal hit with a hammer, and Linnie sat up in recliner, covered in a sheen of night sweat. She looked toward the TV. It was part of the blank darkness staring back at her. Rain danced across the lake room's windows, spattering like the blood of Dracula's victims in the non-light of the cloud strangled sky.

Lightning lit up the room like a flashbulb and then just as quickly, the room settled into darkness again. The power was out. Thunder shook like corrugated metal again. From the sound of it, the storm was right on top of the house.

"I'd better check on Mr. Blanchard," said Linnie to no one in particular. It made her feel a little braver, though, and the light of her cell phone made her feel safer. She didn't know the layout of the room yet, and didn't want to trip over a hassock or magazine holder which would be embarrassing and possibly dangerous if she twisted her ankle and needed help herself. "I'm coming, Mr. Blanchard!" she called. The face of her cell phone said it was just before 2:30.

Her knuckle felt small against the bedroom door, a solid core maple monster, paneled and painted with a heavy varnish. No answer from within.

She knocked again and pressed her ear to the door. She thought she heard something—it could have been words, or it could have just been mumbling—and found that her hand was already squeezing the doorknob. It was warm and sweaty. God, I hate being alone at night! she thought, but she wasn't alone and she knew it.

"Mr. Blanchard?" she called. "I'm coming in."

No answer.

The door opened so easily it surprised her. She wondered why, though. She knew it wasn't locked—she'd closed it herself. But there was something verboten about what she was doing that almost made it seem like the door should be locked.

"Mr. Blanchard?"

She could see his outline in the bed when the lightning flashed through the windows, with thunder ripping the sky apart and the wind bending the trees outside. Blanchard wasn't laid out like a corpse anymore. He was on his stomach with his arms and legs bent into a peaceful swastika, like he had

been humping the mattress. It seemed impossible that he moved himself into that position, and yet there he was.

Linnie approached the bed. “Mr. Blanchard?”

The old man groaned and rolled over onto his shoulders. His silk pajama shirt rode up a little where the bottom button had let go, and Linnie winced when the lightning flickered blue again for a few protracted moments, expecting a curtain of beaded flesh hanging around the snake hole of his navel, clotted with blue lint. Instead, she saw a smooth, somewhat rounder belly—a belly full of life instead of death. No bowel cancer there, she thought. Looks like the stomach of a treadmill executive.

And then she looked at his face.

It was Owen Blanchard, alright, but it looked like God—or Something—had blown life back into him like a balloon. Blanchard’s face was fuller, rounder, and healthier, framed by mostly dark hair that looked an awful lot like a young Frank Langella. Linnie struggled with the urge to check his mouth for fangs. His lips were dark—not the formaldehyde earthworms she’d seen curl over a quarter milligram of Triazolam three hours earlier.

The lights flickered on in the hallway and some piece of electronics whirred faintly to life somewhere nearby. Linnie’s heart raced, and her feet matched it, carrying her out of the room on wings. She wanted the door closed as badly as anything, but she had to force herself to close it slowly so she wouldn’t wake up Blanchard. Unless he was already awake. Or had been. She cupped her palms over both sides of her neck checking for puncture wounds.

Nothing. She was clean.

Linnie picked her knitting back up and slid into the recliner by the light of an infomercial about an amazing new face cream that made you look ten years younger. The before and after pictures looked nothing like Blanchard’s transformation, but by the time the half hour ended, she almost picked up the phone to order—if only to have someone to talk to. With the storm playing mailbox baseball in the distance now, it felt like she was the last human being on Earth—with an inhuman Blanchard gathering strength in the next room.

Finishing her mittens, she started another pair. Sleep seemed a long way off, and she didn’t know how to access anything but broadcast TV channels. The infomercial gave way to a syndicated reality show about people sleeping around on their spouses, which segued into a white-haired southern preacher answering viewer letters about the Bible in front of a blue curtain. Him being

on the screen quoting the Bible made her a little more comfortable, but the potted plant next to him was more interesting.

Linnie's chin sunk to her chest, and she was partly aware of her own snoring for a while before she shot up in the recliner and checked her cell phone. 6:21 a.m. Blanchard told her to be out of here at 6:00 sharp, and she had already fumbled through her first night pretty badly. She stuffed her knitting into her "I HEART NY" bag in a way that was sure to tangle it and dashed off through the kitchen, grabbed the envelope marked "Linnie Shaffer". There was another envelope next to hers with "Marguerite Martinez" written on it, so she paused just long enough to be sure she had the right one—and also to see if the other one looked thicker. It didn't.

The lilac bushes at the edge of Blanchard's horseshoe driveway smelled sweet and wonderful, but the storm had used them and left them. They looked like they had ripped panties around their ankles, and their tiny whitish bugles were scattered all over her car. She fumbled for her keys in her bag and found under her mess of knitting, hit the unlock button on her fob and slipped into the car. She wished again that she had brought a Prius instead of a Mustang, but this time it was because of how quietly a Prius can slip down a driveway and out into a street. She did it as best she could.

The water on the pavement was quickly retreating in the June sunshine. Linnie could see that ahead of her as well as in her rearview mirror, where she could also see a blue minivan pulling into Blanchard's horseshoe driveway. Curiosity crept over her like a cat, and suddenly she had to see if Marguerite Martinez looked normal. Linnie went around the block and idled up the street back toward the old man's lake house. The lilac bushes gave her some cover, but also obscured her view of the middle-age woman climbing out of the minivan with a diaper bag over her shoulder. She looked like she was coming to take care of her grandkids.

"Why a diaper bag?" frowned Linnie out loud. "Hell, it's probably just a convenient bag she uses for knitting or something. Like me." She looked at her "I HEART NY" bag and then in the back seat where she kept some of her cleaning supplies. It was 6:30 now. She had a house to clean in Caldwell starting at 8:00. No time for a shower. Maybe if she could get in good with Blanchard and his son, she could finagle shower privileges out of them. It's not like there would be any hanky panky going on—and then she thought wistfully of the man she saw at 2:30. Cut it out, Linnie. He's old enough to be your father, no matter what you think you saw last night.

Short on sleep, she spent the day going through the motions, cleaning her client's very ordinary suburban bi-level with little more than her usual ammonia-scented disinterest. She had no one to talk to, but didn't think she could muster up any conversation even if she did—her mind was just too foggy and preoccupied from her overnight at Blanchard's. When it was time to drive home, all she could think about was eating, but she needed to shower off the funk and sweat of the last 24 hours or so in the worst way.

The hot steam and water coursed over her head and shoulders, opening up her pores and her clogged mind. Her own body wasn't bad for a woman in her 50s—she had heard her son's friends saying as much when they thought she wasn't listening. Maybe she wasn't quite a MILF or a cougar anymore, but she could still bring it, at least with people her own age. Blanchard, it seemed, could still bring it with a generation younger, because Linnie couldn't stop thinking about him, laying prone in bed at 2:30, a totally different man than the one she left at 11:15. Her shower took a couple minutes longer than usual.

A salad with light dressing and a tall mocha latte later, she found herself flipping channels watching the clock. No Frank Langella tonight, just summer reruns and singing competitions to keep her company until it was time to leave. She tried calling the people on her one-touch list starting with her son, but no one was answering, or they couldn't talk for long. It looked like Blanchard was her only shot at company tonight.

Linnie drove from Caldwell to Moraine Lake in less than the usual hour it took, and pulled into that horseshoe driveway at 10:47. She felt pretty good about that. And she felt good about the second tall mocha latte she drank on the way. She'd be crawling up the walls if she had a third one, but all she had in her bag was a couple of half frozen bottled waters, a stack of dog-eared romance novels, and a crushed pack of stale cigarettes. She had been trying to quit, and the pack alternately reminded her of the fact and teased her with its tobaccoey-goodness.

"Hi there, Mr. Blanchard," she said cheerily, walking through his bedroom door. She supposed she would have been shocked at whatever she saw, but she was disappointed more than anything, because he was that shriveled old man she saw the night before and not the virile businessman at the height of his powers she thought she saw in the middle of the night. Her face sank a little. Maybe too much, because Mr. Blanchard saw it through his cataracts.

“What’s the matter, Ms. Shaffer?”

“Oh, call me Linnie.”

“Then call me Owen. I’m too old to be Mr. Blanchard. Might not live to hear the last syllable, you know.”

She smiled impulsively and patted his leg. “You’ll live forever, I bet.”

“Careful what you wish for,” Owen said. “I think that sometimes that old people get so used to living, they’re afraid to die.”

“That’s a good point.”

“Let me ask you a serious question: Why do teenagers take all those risks when they have so many years to lose, and old people at the end of the game just dig their heels in and fight like wildcats when their doctors tell them they have cancer?”

Linnie considered. He thought he might have something there, but his bigger problem it seemed was loneliness. The only people he had for company were his son, who probably only visited on the weekends, and his caretakers, and she had been in the room a grand total of about 10 minutes since she met him. He looked tired, more, even than he looked when she came through the door. She took a gamble and sat near the foot of his bed where the rail was lowered.

“Maybe because they have the most to give.”

“Bull hockey. Old farts may not be completely useless, but let’s not over-romanticize the point. What time is it over there?”

“Almost eleven.”

“Yeah, how ‘almost’?”

“Let’s see.” She picked up the wind-up alarm clock and stared at its face. “I guess it’s about 10:58.”

“Time for my Triazolam.”

“Sure, Owen,” Linnie started. “But what if I stayed in here and talked with you until you fell asleep? I wouldn’t mind. I’ll probably be up for hours, anyway. I had a couple of coffees before I came over.”

“No, I need my sleep. My schedule is important. Extremely. I can’t stay up late or it’ll affect my health. I’d like it if you’d stay, but only until I fall asleep. Then you need to move into another room. I have a guest room made up across the hall, if you want to sleep there. It’s more comfortable than the easy chair in the lake room.”

“Thanks, Owen,” said Linnie. “I’d like that.” She didn’t specify to which part of the offer she was referring, but she didn’t need to. “Here’s your

Triazolam and water.”

“Thank you, Linnie.” He swallowed the pill and water and then looked at her like the words he wanted were marbles rolling all over the floor. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.” She suddenly thought of those stories about men who paid hookers just to listen to them. She felt like that right now—he was paying her, after all—but it wasn’t as skeezy as she thought it would be. If he asked for sex though, well...that was where she drew the line.

“If you could be any age, any age at all, what would it be?”

“You mean relive part of my life?”

“No, I mean if you could be any age, what would it be? Teenager? Twenties?”

Linnie laughed. “Why do men always think that women want to be so young? Is it because you all want us to be that young? With boobs that defy gravity and all that?”

“Okay, you name the age.”

“I dunno—35 was a good age, I guess, but that’s twenty years ago, give or take, and I’m not getting it back. I was still young enough to be hot, but old enough to know better, if you know what I mean.”

Owen reached for her hand. “And why do women always care about how hot they are? I certainly don’t. Sexy is a state of mind.”

Linnie covered up his hand with hers and smiled. “Mr. Blanchard! Are you allowed to say that word at your age?”

Owen smiled back, his face folding into a thousand tiny creases. “I’m sorry, what would you prefer? Seductive? Libidinous?”

“Sexy. I always preferred a man call me sexy, if you really want to know.”

The old man yawned. “I’m sorry. That’s not a comment on your company. It’s the Triazolam talking now. Remember, you need to leave the room when I fall asleep, but if you want, why don’t you come over tomorrow night for dinner, say, seven o’clock? I’ll have it brought over by Lakeside Bistro—been eating there for years. It’s really good, and I’d love to have some company that I don’t have to sleep through.”

Linnie said she would like that, and then watched him sink into oblivion, barely breathing in his silk pajamas. She squeezed his hand goodnight and then went across the hall to read and maybe knit, but she didn’t think she had a late evening in her after all, and she was right. The next morning, she was

out the door at six sharp, with no sign of the morning caretaker on the quiet streets of Moraine Lake, and despite a vigorous day of cleaning in which he finished not one but two houses, she was back at Blanchard's at seven o'clock wearing jeans and a blouse. She would have worn something even dressier, but didn't want to come off as desperate. It wasn't what she was wearing, though, that was surprising. It was what Owen was wearing.

"Oh my goodness, Owen," gasped Linnie, smiling. "You look terrific! Wonderful! You don't need me here to take care of you." At least in the way that's legal to pay for, but if you ply me with enough wine, you might get it for free.

Owen was wearing khakis and a green polo shirt tucked into his trim waist with a brown leather belt. His chest filled out the shirt like—well, not like a bodybuilder—but maybe a runner who carried weights and lifted some on the side. There was a clear line of definition between his pecs, what Linnie and her girlfriends always called 'man cleavage'. His face was the face she saw during the thunderstorm, full, handsome, wise and kind, but the hair was gray, completely gray, swept back across his head like a person a generation younger would wear it.

"I do need you here, Linnie. I'm not as healthy as I look."

Linnie frowned as if to say, you look fine, but that was exactly his point, so she didn't say anything, instead letting her eyebrows (freshly plucked) melt into an expression that invited further explanation as she followed him to a meticulously-prepared table. It made her feel nice to be appreciated. There were no candles, but the chandelier was dimmed to a nice, medium glow and he was using his good china. They started with a nice chop salad and sure enough, a glass of Riesling for each of them. She wasn't sure how Triazolam went with wine, but she didn't much care at the moment. It seemed to be going just fine with the evening.

"You looked at me incredulously before, when I said I wasn't as healthy as I looked."

"No. Did I?" Linnie didn't know what 'incredulously' meant, but she guessed that it was a look of disbelief, and she supposed it was true.

"Yes, you did. I get weaker the later it gets."

"You mean like Sundowner Syndrome? My dad had that—every afternoon he forgot who he was and started wandering. He got halfway across town once before we found him." Her cheeks flushed, realizing that it probably didn't flatter Owen all that much to be compared to her dead senile

father.

He didn't seem to take offense. He simply dabbed his napkin at the corners of his mouth and answered her. "Not exactly. Are you done with your salad?"

She nodded, her mouth open slightly. Then she felt foolish and snapped it shut, clicking her teeth together. Owen served the chicken and boiled potatoes and poured her another glass of wine. He left his own glass empty.

"My mind is a steel trap," he said, tucking a bite of chicken into his cheek. It wasn't technically the best manners in the book, but he seemed to be in a hurry. "Any time of day or night, unless its right around dawn."

"Why then?"

"Because I start out every day as a baby."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. Physically, I'm an infant. I hit puberty about 8:30, and by then, I am as sound of mind as I am right now, except my hormones sometimes get in the way. That's why I don't make any really big decisions until 11:00 or so. Did you know the human brain doesn't stop developing, physically, until it's about 25 years old or so? That's how old I am at 11:00. I get older all afternoon until I hit retirement, right about 7:00—which is when you came. I guess I'm about 70 years old now, give or take, but a pretty healthy 70, don't you think?"

"Is this a joke?" asked Linnie. "Are you putting me on?"

"No joke, Linnie. I don't have a son. That was me you talked to on the phone. This has been my life now for so many years, I don't even remember."

Linnie thought about her father's Sundowning. He suffered any number of hallucinations and delusions before he died, but he never believed them while he was lucid, and if Linnie knew anything about lucid, Owen was it.

"That's an awful lot to swallow."

"You have to chew it awhile." Owen smiled, a disarming clothing catalog smile, took a sip of water, and walked around the table to Linnie. The low light grooved his face with sweet wisdom to go with his square shoulders and narrow waist. "But I'm running out of time."

Linnie felt his strong hands on her shoulders and thought again about Frank Langella in a Transylvanian cape. Count Dracula was a monster, the undead, and he drank the blood of the living to give himself perpetual youth. His victims usually knew this, and yet he still managed to make them do

whatever he wanted—and so it seemed could Owen Blanchard III, despite the outrageous story he just foisted on her during a wonderful, catered three-course meal.

Drawing her to his lips, they kissed. She hadn't kissed anyone with an open mouth in years, long before her ex-husband gallivanted off to Sin City with that floozy in a blazer. Her ex was about as passionate as spring training baseball, but Owen...Owen was a man! He squeezed her shoulders in his strong hands. If he had let go, she knew she would have fallen to the floor, swooning like a schoolgirl. That kiss felt like every first kiss anyone ever had, and she wanted more, that piece of fantasy he told her be damned.

Owen collected her in his arms, sweeping her off her feet and carrying her into his bedroom. The strange bed with vertical rails had been replaced with a king sized bed with silk sheets and goose down pillows. He laid her across it like a buffet, and once he had her down to her underthings, he began eating all over again. Linnie's eyes rolled back into her head, and she remembered a little something at the dinner table—a little blue something he took with his glass of water. It looked like a Tic-Tac, but brother, that was no Tic-Tac!

"Owen, I—" she began in protest, but couldn't bring herself to make him stop. She knew he would, but she didn't want it to stop. However their relationship began, now they were two people who needed each other, and no one would ever have to know.

Their lovemaking was fierce, and in the end, he outlasted her. One of the last things she remembered before falling into orgasm-drenched sleep was the wind-up alarm clock on the nightstand reading 6:30.

6:30?

The next morning, Linnie had trouble remembering where she was. It wasn't her house, and it wasn't a hotel. Hotels had loud air conditioners under the windows, coffee pots on the dresser, and a channel guide tented on top of the TV. This room had none of these things.

The wind-up alarm clock brought it all back—but where was Owen?

She turned the clock to see the time and it still said 6:30. Underneath was a sheet of paper with handwriting on it made of long, fine strokes—Owen's handwriting, the same as on the envelopes he left for her in the kitchen. It was a note addressed to her:

Linnie,

Thank you for staying with me. I've been alone for so long. This condition of mine forced me to keep to myself most of the time, and I needed someone to share an evening with. You were wonderful—I hope you know that. I'm actually crying right now it was so wonderful!

I know you didn't believe me about my aging. You probably thought I was regurgitating some awful version of Benjamin Button or something, but that reverse aging only happened when I was asleep. Every hour awake was five years forward. Every hour asleep was fifteen years in reverse.

It's the truth. The tired truth—or the truth that I'm tired of, anyway. If I could explain it, I would, but I have no idea why me. I guess I would ask, why not me?

And so it comes to this. I've wound down my alarm clock. Actually I did that before you came over for dinner—I had this planned. I hope you can forgive me! I called Marguerite and told her not to come in today. I hope you slept late. Later than me, anyway.

I don't really know what sleeping in will do to me, but I think it will be the end. You'll have to find that out for yourself when you wake up.

Thank you again for sharing last night with me. It was the most beautiful night of my life and the greatest gift anyone has ever given me.

Yours,

Owen.

Linnie sat back in bed feeling more naked than her nakedness would explain. The late morning sunshine bled through the curtains in the bedroom, but the warmth of last night was suddenly replaced by a creeping coolness. She looked at the empty half of the bed, the side where Owen spent the night. There was a dent in the pillow and the sheets were uneven, but not tossed aside like someone had climbed out of bed to make a pot of coffee, like she found herself wishing hard, especially when she saw the small, still lump about the size of a deflated football underneath the comforter.

Tears tracked down her face. "Why Owen? Why now? Why me?"

Pulling back the covers, she saw a small body covered in blood with a large head and spindly, rubbery, gelatinous limbs drawn up to its chest like it was about to jump into a pool—or out of a uterus—cannonball style.

Owen Blanchard III had aborted himself.

The Chopping Block

by Doug Murano

I remember the chopping block.

Papa raised the hatchet up above his head and over Lucy's neck. I didn't want to watch this part, but Papa said I need to see how it was done. One day, he said, I would have to do this by myself. Papa reminded me that Lucy would only hurt for a moment and that she might run around before she forgot everything bad that's ever happened to her and go to sleep.

"Remember, we have to take a life to give it to ourselves, sweetheart," he said. It's what he always said. "You can't think twice about it."

Lucy lay still between Papa's big hand and the big oak stump. She looked at all the red dents in the wood where the hatchet had made cuts before. Her head was right down by all the little fluffy feathers stuck in the oak, but she didn't wiggle around or try to get away because Papa handled all the chickens right out of the shell. That way, they learned to trust him and they stayed quiet and gentle when we came into the chicken coop and take their eggs in the morning. And they never struggled at the block.

Sometimes, we left the eggs right where they were in the nest and let the hens sit on them so they would hatch to become little chickens that might lay eggs someday. Sometimes, one of the little chickens hatched with too many wings, crooked feet or eyes so big and purple they looked like big blueberries. When that happened, Papa took them away and used an old rusty spade to bury them behind the house. Papa said that's the way things are in the world now. We never, ever ate the sick ones.

Sometimes, we took one of the hens to the chopping block, and then we had chicken for supper. We never took Ricky to the block because he helped the hens get their eggs. Ricky got cranky when we came into the chicken coop and he kicked his heels at Papa's legs. We used to have another rooster Papa named Ricardo but Ricky pecked his eyes out, and it was out to the

block and into the pot with Ricardo, so after that we only ever had one boy at a time.

I liked how the chicken smelled when Papa cooked it over the fire or in an old pot in the old iron stove in the farmhouse, and it tasted like heaven, but I cried every time we visited the block. Papa said it was important to give them names even if we ate them because in this world it's important to learn how to say goodbye to everything we love, like when we said goodbye to Mama when the lights and fires started. I can hear her voice in my head if I close my eyes, telling me to be not to be afraid, but I can't see her face anymore.

Papa asked me if I was ready, and I said I was. He said, "Don't look away now. Don't you close your eyes." He stretched his arm up high, and Lucy closed her eyes but I didn't. I looked right at her and waited for Papa to come down on her with the hatchet.

I remember the day the men came.

Papa and me were getting eggs from the nests in the chicken coop. None of the hens were upset that we were stealing their eggs. They didn't make a sound. Papa was holding Marilyn up so he could reach underneath her; then Papa's shoulders jumped a little like a bee stung him, and he turned his face to the doorway and looked off into the distance behind my shoulder.

"Papa?" I asked.

"Shh!" said Papa, and he handed Marilyn to me. She clucked. "Listen."

I listened, and I could hear the wind shooshing through the tall grass around the farmyard. I turned around to look out the door and I could see forever. Papa said that all that space kept us safe. I heard a *thump-thump-thumpthump* and my eyes followed the sound to a puff of dirt way far away. When I squinted up my eyes, I could see two little dots bouncing around in the dust way across the river. They were the first visitors we'd had since we left the city.

"You get inside," said Papa, and he handed me Marilyn and took the hatchet down off the wall and handed that to me, too. "Get down under the floor like we practiced and don't come back out until you know for sure you're alone or until I come and get you. And if anyone finds you that isn't me, you bury this part right between his eyes."

I ran through the weed patch, past the chicken coop and through the

doorway into the house, holding the hatchet in one hand and Marilyn under my other arm like she was my baby. The wood floor was old and gray and cracked. It was cool on my feet.

I used to fit better because I was smaller before, and the last time I practiced, I had to curl up tight. This time when Marilyn and I got down there, it felt like the cold dirt and the roots would close in on my shoulders and swallow me up whole.

Marilyn tucked her head underneath her wing and went to sleep. She didn't understand anything or maybe she didn't care. I wished I could be like her.

Papa's footsteps thumped across the floorboards inside the house. I heard shuffling and metal sounds as he grabbed his pistol and bullets. Then I heard the *clack-clackity* of his bullets falling and bouncing off the floor.

"Fuck-all!" Papa said.

The *thump-thump-thump* of horse hooves was close now.

"Who's in that house?" said a man from outside.

"Just an old man and his hens," I heard Papa say. "You're welcome to one or two if you'd like."

Then those men just started shooting for no good reason at all.

I remember when we first came to the house.

It felt like we had walked forever, but Papa said we had to get far away from the cities and all the people left there. He said folks weren't like they used to be and probably never would be again.

I saw the farmhouse up on the hilltop before Papa did. "Oh Papa, it's perfect! Is this far enough?"

"I don't know. Wait here," said Papa and he fished his pistol out of the old bag he carried. He opened the gun and eyed down the chamber to make sure it was loaded and started off. "Get down in the grass and I'll come find you again when I've looked around."

I watched him walk across the open field until the dark open doorway swallowed him up. He was gone a long time, and I stayed down just like he told me to. Then I heard the *swish-swish* of Papa walking through the grass. He smiled like I hadn't seen in a long time.

"I have a surprise for you," he said and led me up to the house.

When we got to the house, Papa took me around back and showed me

the chickens pecking around the farmyard.

“They’re beautiful,” I said. “Why did they stay here with nobody to take care of them?”

“I guess they know where home is,” said Papa.

“Is it home? Can we stay here forever?” I asked.

“I don’t know about forever, but I think this might be a good place to be right now. Mama would approve.”

We stayed there and felt happy. The weather got warm and the days got long. Papa gave the chickens names and taught them to me. Lucy. Marilyn. Ethel. Ricky. Papa and I fixed up the house and the chicken coop the best he knew how. The hens made eggs and some of the eggs hatched.

One day, Papa made a secret door by the old stove in the corner of the kitchen and dug a little room out of the dirt below. He said, “You climb down in here if we ever have any visitors.” Papa told me many times that men would do awful things to me if they ever found me. One time I asked him what that meant, and he told me that it didn’t matter and that there were some things little girls shouldn’t know no matter how bad things got in the world.

I remember the darkness and the cold and the smell of dirt around my face.

Down in my secret room, I waited for the men to leave but they didn’t.

I wanted to get up and do something, but I didn’t. I just stayed down there in the dark with Marilyn. She liked it down there. I think it made her feel safe.

“Shhh-shhh-shhhh,” I thought, but I didn’t dare say anything. “We must be brave now.”

I brought Marilyn closer to me and held Papa’s hatchet tight. Neither one of us made a sound. Not when we heard one of the men say, “Woooo-eeee! We got him!” Not when we heard the men clomping around inside the house and going through everything Papa and I owned. Not when they tipped over the old iron stove and I could smell their bodies right over my head. Like onions and dirt. Not when they were dragging my Papa outside into the grass. Not even when we heard them busting around in the chicken coop and the hens clucked and clucked and I know Ricky kicked at their shins but it wasn’t long before they were all quiet again.

After a while, it was getting even darker and colder in my secret room

because night time was coming and the sun was going down. Then I had to pee, and I knew I couldn't go anywhere outside to do it so I held it as long as I could before I just went right there all over myself. Marilyn did too, except hers was an awful sticky-ick that got all over my hands and smelled bad.

I could hear the men outside talking and laughing. It was a bad sound, like cold wet socks. One of them said they should build a fire and then I could hear them peeling wooden pieces off of the house. Through the spaces between the floorboards, I could see glowing and hear the crackling and smell the smoke coming up from the burning wood. And then I could smell the cooking chicken and my stomach woke up. Then I smelled another kind of cooking that was not at all like chicken. And my stomach remembered it was hungry again and started to growl. I hated myself for being so hungry and I hated the men for what they had done and I began to cry. I cried as quiet as I could, for as long as I had to.

I think I slept.

I remember my dream.

I was outside the old farmhouse, because I could see Papa out past the tall weeds by the chicken coop at the chopping block. Except it was different this time because he wasn't holding a chicken down on the oak stump. It was my Mama. I could hear her crying, and her shoulders were bouncing up and down like mine do when I fall down and hurt my knees. Papa was holding the hatchet.

I started to cry, too. When Mama and Papa heard me, they turned their heads toward the sound of my crying and their eyes were swelled up and they looked so sad.

In my dream I could see my Mama's face, and it was just like the last time I saw her and she was so pretty but some of the skin was curled up and burnt like a hot dog on the grill and one of her arms was black and pinched up tight against her side like it would never move again.

I didn't want to see that part, but I saw everything. And the world shook and grew up out of the ground because we were back home in the city, and the big tall buildings burned all around us farther than I could see down every street and I felt the hot on my face and it burned away my tears. I could hear people screaming everywhere and glass breaking. Police sirens and women crying.

“It’s O.K., sweetheart. Don’t be afraid,” said Mama to me, then she looked up at Papa and said, “You have to go, Clint.”

“I know what they’ll do to you when they find you,” said Papa.

“Then don’t let them,” said Mama, and the chopping block started on fire and both Papa and Mama began to burn there together.

“Oh, honey, I can’t, I can’t, I can’t,” said Papa, but I knew he made up his mind already that he was going to listen to Mama because he raised his big hand up high above his head just like he always does right before the hatchet comes down.

“Katie, don’t you watch this. Katie, you look away. Katie, close your eyes, baby, and don’t you dare open them until I say,” said Papa. I closed my eyes, but I knew. Papa said you can’t think twice about it.

I remember his face watching me.

I could see the moonlight shining through the cracks in the floor and shining off the man’s bald head. It was bumpy smooth all over and one of his eyes was gone. When he smiled at me, there were no teeth. I think Marilyn started clucking while I was asleep and the man must have heard the noise and came inside to see.

“What’s this?” the man whispered down through the floor. “A little treat just for me, I think. Don’t you make a sound now or you’ll wake up my friend and we’ll both have a go at you. Then we will eat you up.”

I didn’t make a sound, just like he said, and I watched him drag the knocked-over stove off the floorboards. He had to push three times before he moved it. Then he reached for the handle to the door of the secret room and I held onto Marilyn and Papa’s hatchet and my whole body was shaking I was so afraid. He opened up the door and when it creaked, he stopped and looked over his shoulder and put a finger up to his lips like “shhhhh!” before he turned back to look at me again.

“Two little birds down in the hole?” whispered the man, bending down over the hole where I was and he was close enough for me to smell the dead all over him. “This is a lucky place. Come here, now birdy.” He reached down for us.

Marilyn listened to him and she went up to him. She flapped her wings into my eyes so I had to lean away from her and let her go up to where she wanted to be. My hair blew everywhere when Marilyn flew up into the man’s

face and his hands went up to his good eye and he howled and said all the words Papa told me never ever to say around other people.

I used Papa's hatchet on the man's legs and he screamed some more and fell down. He couldn't see anymore, and when he tried to grab at me, I buried the hatchet right in his shiny bumpy forehead and left it there. I didn't think twice about it.

Then I ran and I didn't know where I would go. I heard the other man say something behind me, but I kept running until I didn't hear him anymore.

Goodbye, house. Goodbye, Marilyn. Goodbye, Papa.

I remember the chopping block.

Papa's big arm came down with the hatchet and it made a *thonk*-sound against the oak and I watched Lucy's head roll off the side. Papa let go of Lucy and stepped back away from the chopping block then and she flapped her wings and kicked her legs around. There was blood, and I cried and hoped it wouldn't take her long to stop.

Papa left the hatchet buried in the oak stump and came over to wrap me up in his arms. "See? Now that's a good girl. Tell me why we give them names, Katie."

"Goodbye, Lucy," I said.

Lucy stopped moving after a while, and forgot everything bad that had ever happened to her. She went to sleep but didn't dream. I hoped she could maybe forget some for me, too, and for Papa and for the whole world, too, because I knew we could never do it for ourselves.

The Persistence of Frondu

by Yarrow Paisley

He asked Elena to the movies, and she said she couldn't tonight, her schedule, and he said *pleasepleaseplease* about twenty times and finally she relented—at first a little piqued but soon laughing and her voice licking his ear through the receiver so that he had a hard-on by the time his dazed consciousness realized that the conversation was now just a continuous trill through pinpoint holes.

Yet when the time came, he found that the Three Words he had intended to utter could not be uttered. Not from lack of resolve but from two zits—one on each cheek of her face, symmetrically placed as if intentionally. He did not object to zits on principle, but the fact that he noticed them just as he was on the brink of uttering the Words deflated his purpose and removed from him the will to utter. Another time, he thought, another time he could utter forth with Words numbering Three, and there would be no impediment then.

The next day at work, he noted that Suzy, the receptionist, featured two zits, one on each cheek of her face, symmetrically placed as if intentionally. He was somewhat nonplussed when, as he weaved among the desks and cubicles of his coworkers, and some turned to say Hi or smile Good Morning, he saw on *their* faces, as well, zits—one on each cheek, symmetrically placed as if intentionally. Strange new fad, he thought. The things people will do for ornamentation. Yet it seemed to him that even the most unfashionable clucks in the office had them—square-jaw, crew-cut men and gray-wool-skirt, hair-bun women alike—and how was it that he had never heard of this fad while everyone else not only had, but had *adopted* it to boot? Fucking Internet. He pretended that nothing was amiss, for fear of looking foolish, but found it nevertheless difficult all day to concentrate on his task deployments. He'd ask Elena, he thought, tonight, for surely he could ask *her* without embarrassment.

This evening, they had agreed after last night's date, they would spend together in her apartment, curled up in front of the TV with a couple movies and some scented candles lit for romance. There would be spaghetti and red wine, and her body would be cradled in his on the couch, she warm and breathing and somewhere within her a heart gently thrumming. It was not merely the lovemaking which would ensue upon full completion of meal and movie that inspired his ardency and his intricate fantasies in lieu of workaday task deployments, but it was more the idea that Elena, with whom he would share those Three Words tonight without a doubt, had something also to share with *him*—knowledge of this strange new fad in which she partook with his coworkers.

And indeed, there were those zits, one on each cheek, that night, symmetrically placed as if intentionally—perhaps even longer than they had been last night—and as his and Elena's intake of spaghetti progressed he worked himself up to ask her about them, knowing that upon receipt of her answer he would utter the Three Words and life would never after be the same. This, the Mother of all Conversations, would begin oh-so-seemingly-unremarkably with an inconspicuous inquiry into the origins of this strange new fad (or was it a "meme"?), which everyone seemed quietly to have adopted without informing *him* (for at the supermarket on the way to Elena's apartment all shoppers he had seen possessed these new dark zits centrally on each cheek, symmetrically placed as if intentionally, on shriveled *anciennes* and forthright middle-aged men and teeny-bopping cashiers as well, on *all* humans in fact, at least those who passed within his angle of view) and perhaps a casual mention that it would be interesting to know generally, or even precisely, where one might find these zits if one—hypothetically—were interested in shopping for them. (*Zits* had not proven an effective *keyword* in *The Google*.)

His question: Elena [caressing cheek with forefinger in vicinity of, but not directly on, right zit], what are these?

Her response: *Frondu*?!

This response was accompanied by her vicious leap from his lap and her flight to the bedroom and her well-slammed door, and he lay still for several minutes with a palpitating heart upon the couch, hardly daring to breathe for fear of violating an undeclared edict.

The next morning, at the office, as he somewhat expected and, yes, dreaded, there was *frondu*. And to encourage his self-conscious discomfort,

frondu was by a small margin longer than it had been yesterday. From each cheek of everybody, symmetrically placed as if intentionally, frondu grew—less than half an inch, but half an inch longer than *his* frondu, for he had none. Although nobody said anything to him directly on the subject, he suspected that there was talk, and his cheeks burned in embarrassment at their own nakedness, which once had been acceptable but no longer seemed so—not, certainly, in the light of frondu.

Elena was busy that night, and he was restless. He turned on the television and saw that the channel six newsanchorman was sporting rather smart frondu, and that so was his co-anchorwoman, who was black, demonstrating that frondu crossed even lines of culture and race. Enraptured, he reclined on his couch, listless in the face of the glow-emanant glass convexity only a few feet away and observed frondu on the visages of every human interviewed, every human in commercials, every human on every channel. It was an inch long, by now, frondu, and he suspected that it was not merely decorative, but that indeed frondu was organic, for it grew. Bland for an hour, he finally erupted seeing Spock stroke his frondu in rueful contemplation of Doctor McCoy's frondu-stiffened plea for gut-trusting humanity in place of logic.

He went for a calming walk, but each frondu-decked face he passed incited fresh pangs. Passing a window, in which was displayed a reproduction of Rodin's Thinker, he noticed that the statue's pose was subtly altered, its hand now at its cheek, the web of thumb and forefinger braced just beneath a marble-white frondu.

He entered a small market and purchased some licorice. He peered into the face of the cashier and examined not only her brown softly rubbery frondu, which curved gently protuberant in a downward trend, but her smooth cheeks besides, and her prognathatory forehead and slightly inward-curling lips positioned apart from each other by half an inch of dark space in which hinted teeth, and especially her eyes, which appeared phantasically opaque, not in terms of color, for that was light green and hazel, but rather in terms of potentiality for seeing through from within, as if some milky curtain had descended just behind the gelatinous convexity of her eyeball, which curtain obscured him from her sight, made him a gauzy apparition in her world, vaguely a shape, humanesque, but perhaps also a bit ill-defined in that respect.

At home, seeking calm, he spent an hour in front of the mirror, peering

at his face, searching for frondu, but not a sign of it did he find. He turned on his television hoping for distraction from frondu, but of course this was a highly misguided action indicative of his increasingly troubled reasoning processes, for there was a *world* of frondu on the television, and no possible escape *there* from frondu, no, but exactly the opposite. The late-night movie was quite a favorite of his called *Casablanca*, but when Bogie and Bergman, staring strabismically aft of each other, mingled foot-long frondu in lieu of lips he jumped from his seat in a frenzy to switch off the machine, with which once he had carried on so beautifully in a symbiotic exchange of entertainment for that flow of electricity which warmed its guts.

At work the next morning, he observed frondu dangling from every cheek, symmetrically placed as if intentionally, frondu not merely dangling but motilely active, curling nimbly serpentine, exhibiting infinite permutations of flexuosity about the face, tracing delicately along invisible paths of intricate tortuousness, then, without seeming preparation, whipping rat's-tail-quick to another point in space there to hang motionless as if seeking something through long-range sensors. The office was silent today, the atmosphere of bustle strangely debusted, the conversations usually overheard annoyingly through thin cubicle dividers nonexistent, laughter normally prancing pan-office in defiance of decorum absent as well, the nature of business suddenly alien to him. He observed surreptitiously his coworkers at their deployments and agonized over attempts to decipher what they could be accomplishing just sitting at their desks staring enigmatically at their own frondu, each eyeball independent and intent on its associated frond, hands motionless and relaxed flat on desktops, frondu wriggling spasmodically at times, slowly sinusoidally gyrating at others, still and curious at others, rhythmically repetitive at others, frondu activity engaging apparently all of their attention.

He left the office early, since he simply could not comprehend his duties any longer—for if they involved frondu, then what could he, frondulless, do? His gait was hurried and awkward on the sidewalks, he weaving among crowds as he passed by these pedestrians who were silent and frondu-staring and seemingly serene and self-contained, perhaps even catatonic, except for snapping graceful knee-length frondu winding and wiggling everywhere about their bodies, their legs resistant to movement and plodding, their arms rigor-mortis stiff holding molded hands next to their square-held hips. He kept his eyes averted and made his way to Elena's apartment, there to await

her return from work, thereupon to fall at her feet in supplication and pleading and begging of answers to his frondu questions.

But when she arrived, his throat was dry and he could say nothing, but stared at her frondu-floating figure unable to meet her strabismic non-gaze which stared back. He sitting, she standing, they existed in silence for that long minute, and window-penetrative pale light decoupled into dust settling slowly through the space between them to the floor, and finally, Elena opened her mouth and broke the silence. She said, Rrrrrrrrrrrrr. The sound of her voice, high-pitched and continuous, struck him from the chair to his knees, and he crawled across the floor to her, touched her knee with his finger, grasped that round knee more firmly in his palm, but she backed disdainfully out from his caress and said, Rrrrrrrrrrrr, the gaze of her eyes sliding athwart him, who was located centrally before her.

He ran into the kitchen and retrieved the scissors from their hook above the counter. Upon his return, Elena's frondu burst into frenetic gyrations, skillfully evading his grasping fingers, but his stomping foot managed to pin one of them to the floor. It took three lurching squeezes to snip the frond, which snapped about on the floor like a water-deprived fish. He watched the death throes with a grim fascination, and when the frond was still, he turned to face Elena—but she was gone.

He plucked the limp frond from the floor and pressed it to his cheek, but it would not stick. He was searching the drawers in the kitchen for glue when he realized there were gesticulating frondu all about him, and EMTs lifted him bodily and strapped him to a gurney. He struggled furiously against the straps, but they were canvas and strong, so he screamed and frothed—but something calming had been injected, and the lethargy it brought was patient, indefatigable, and gradually taking the upper hand. He watched placidly and with some measure of reassurance as two doctors came to stand on either side of his gurney, trilling to each other out of open mouths, across his body their floor-length frondu intertwined and writhing.

Bless You

by C. Bryan Brown

Mark sneezed.

It was a magnificent expulsion of air, microscopic particles, and moisture. The germ-infected blast area was conical in shape, narrow near his gaping mouth, and almost two feet wide at its furthest point, some four feet away. The sudden attack left him no time to cover his mouth. It wasn't accompanied by the usual sound of *achoo*, or the subtle, yet humorous sound of *eef* that's produced when someone attempts to stifle their sneeze by pinching their nose shut, but something closer to the deep, vocal bark of an angry Rottweiler.

He watched little droplets cover the table in front of him. They landed like a summer squall of rain on the wood and the exposed plates that contained his family's dinner of roast beef, mashed potatoes, green beans, and rolls. The reactions were universal from everyone in the room: his wife frowned, made a noise of disgust, and immediately wiped up the spittle. His seven year old son, Jasper, said, "Gross, Dad!"

Even the dog looked up from the floor and snorted.

"What?" Mark said. "The roast is a little dry anyway. It could use some liquid. Think of it as gravy."

"Dig a hole, buddy," his wife said.

Mark smiled over at her. "You know I love your cooking, honey."

She still looked like the twenty-two year old girl he'd married almost fifteen years ago. She'd changed her hair color from brown to blonde (what a night that was, too!) and cut it to her shoulders; her green eyes, like emeralds sparkling in firelight, still charmed him with their vibrancy. The body remained svelte along the legs and arms, tight in the abdomen and rear. She'd gone from Melissa Garrett to Melissa Johns without hesitation and had remained so without complaint and, from what Mark could tell, in all

happiness.

Time hadn't been as kind to him. His once lean frame had softened over the years; muscles hid under a growing layer of flab brought about by too much rich food and not enough exercise. He smiled at his good fortune and went back to his dinner, happily adding another layer to his growing body.

"Isn't anyone going to say bless you?" he asked.

"You didn't even say 'scuse me," Jasper said. "If I did that and didn't say 'scuse me, you'd be mad."

"True," Mark said. "But this is a do-as-I-say relationship, not do-as-I-do. You could say it's a dictatorship."

"And there's certainly a lot of *dick* in it," Melissa said.

Mark merely nodded. "Go ahead, laugh it up."

Later that night, Mark shed his jeans and polo shirt, and looked at himself in the full-length mirror attached to Melissa's closet door. Pale skin sagged, grossly illuminated in the artificial light, and he proceeded to pinch himself on the biceps, love handles, under the chin and even around his wrists. Everything felt normal in a physical sense, but something was out of place; he just couldn't put his finger on it. Ever since dinner, he'd been off, which could have just been the third helping of beef, but he didn't think so. This seemed different, a formless and vague unease, like a case of nerves before attempting karaoke; it's something you know you're capable of doing but have, in the back of your mind, the knowledge that you can screw up and embarrass yourself.

He stepped closer to the glass, opened his mouth wide, stuck out his tongue, and said, "Ahhhhhh." His eyes rotated to the corners of their sockets as he ducked and twisted, tried to get the best view into that dark cave of flesh and enamel. The tongue was still pink, though quite pale and bumpy. He licked the side of his mouth and was happy to know his taste buds hadn't failed. They worked at dinner so there was no reason they shouldn't work now, but he had to make sure.

Melissa walked into the room, fresh from the shower, body wrapped in a robe, a towel trapping her hair. She watched him, grinning, but held her tongue as she sat on their bed. She removed the towel, put her head between her knees so that her hair hung to the floor, and started drying it.

Mark turned to face her. He held his arms out, palms facing her. The line of his belly rested just over the waistband of his boxers. "What's wrong with me?"

Melissa flipped her head and hair back up, looked over at him and smiled. "You look fine to me. Well, a little pudgier around the middle than I remember."

"Funny," he said. "I'm serious. Something's wrong."

"Does anything hurt?"

"No," he said, shaking his head and sighing. He searched for the words to explain how he felt to her. "I just feel odd. Like I have the start of a cold or something."

"Runny nose? Itchy eyes? Fever?" Melissa asked.

Mark started to reply but was interrupted by a furious thunderstorm of sneezing, complete with loud, unrestrained explosions. One. Two. Three. The momentum turned his body around and he sprayed the mirror with saliva before bending over and firing off three more in rapid succession. He sucked in a great lungful of air, felt tingling way up in his sinuses. There was also pain in his throat now, a rawness that wasn't there before.

"Jesus!" Melissa exclaimed. "What was that?"

"Those were sneezes," he muttered, using an arm to wipe the leftover moisture from under his nose and around his mouth.

"Maybe you are getting sick."

"Maybe, you think?" he shot back.

She tossed the towel toward the laundry basket and took off her robe, and stood up, naked. Melissa put her hands on her hips, turned a shoulder. With a wink and a crook of her finger, she said, "Come here, big boy. It could be you just need a little tender loving care."

Mark grinned and started toward the bed, drinking in the sight of the woman he loved. His body reacted to racy thoughts, but underneath, he still felt uneasy. There was something biding its time like a spider, just waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

"Get the light," Melissa said, crawling into the bed.

He turned off the light and was so intent on his wife that he didn't see the pale shadow drift away from the closet.

Mark awoke the next morning and rolled out of bed with a groan. His feet hit the floor with a mild thump and he bent at the waist, put his head between his knees for a few minutes. Weakness pervaded his muscles, his joints were achy, and his tongue was a balloon in his mouth.

The clock next to the bed said it was only a little after seven in the morning, almost a full hour before he usually rose; Melissa was on her side,

snoring. Mark stood and went to the bathroom. He sneezed three times before reaching the door.

He ran the hot tap, held his hand under the steady stream until his skin turned red, then he engaged the stopper and let the sink fill up. When it was full, he turned off the water and put his face in the steam and let the heat fill his nostrils and massage the tense mounds of his temples.

I should take a shower, he thought, and straightened, examined himself in the mirror. He blinked, not sure he was seeing things clearly, and then wiped away a streak of condensation. *Holy shit*, he thought, and whirled around. Standing behind him was a much paler version of himself. Their eyes locked together and Mark screamed. He tried to run but his feet caught together and he plummeted to the tile floor in an unceremonious heap.

This wispy version of himself blinked once at the commotion and continued to stare. Mark realized he could see the shower curtain, the flowers from the wallpaper behind it. He saw the peeling paint on the ceiling through the top of its skull.

I must be dead.

The thought came unbidden into his head and it shocked him. But he couldn't be dead, could he? If so, wouldn't he be the half formed version of himself staring down at the whole, unmoving body? And to that point, his body was moving. As a matter of fact, his ass hurt from where it struck the floor, and dead people couldn't feel pain.

Well, not so far as you know, anyway, he said to himself.

The bathroom door shot open and the edge caught him on the shoulder blade. He cried out again and scrambled forward. The top of his head butted against the leg of his ghostly double. He screamed as a burning jolt shot down the back of his scalp and into his neck. He jerked to his feet and staggered to the toilet, where he sat down. The other Mark had taken refuge on the edge of the tub and was rubbing the spot on his leg where they'd connected.

Then Melissa was there, her arms wrapped around his neck and head, her soft voice whispering something in his ear. He couldn't make out the words, but the tone set him at ease, and he soon wanted to be free of her protective cocoon.

"I'm fine," he said and extricated himself from her grip. "I just slipped." He also wanted to bring her attention to this thing in the bathroom with them.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Melissa asked and sat down on top of the

other him, as if it were made of fog or mist. "You're frowning pretty hard."

"Yeah," he told her and forced a smile, realizing she couldn't see it. "I'm fine. Really. How do I look?"

"Honestly?"

"I don't want you to lie to me," he said.

"You look like hell," she replied. "Pale, a little puffy around the gills, maybe. Almost like a ghost."

Imagine that, he thought. Like a ghost.

Mark left the bathroom to Melissa. It was Saturday and he threw on some old shorts, a ragged shirt, and flip-flops. As he was dabbing some cologne under his chin, the other him walked into the room and sat on the bed. Mark stared hard at it for a long moment, his face set in a hard, scowling posture. The other him smacked his lips.

Mark listened and heard Melissa downstairs in the kitchen, presumably making breakfast. He moved forward to engage it, but stopped, uncertain. Did he really want to know what it was or what it was doing here? The fact that he wasn't dead yet didn't mean Death wasn't lurking right around the corner, just waiting for him to say the right combination of words or wave his hand in some menacing way. Death, he'd heard, didn't discriminate when it came to race, sex, or age. They said He found everyone at some point in their lives, usually the last place they ever visited, regardless of whether they were happy, sad, pissed off or horny. There were no losers in Death's race. And to the best of Mark's knowledge, these were true statements, not to be doubted or trifled with. Speaking to this thing almost seemed absurdly foolish, like using your soul as a muleta in front of Death. He wasn't some new-age suburban matador and his bedroom wasn't a quaint residential arena. Only an idiot would do something like that and Mark Johns didn't consider himself an idiot.

But curiosity drew him forward anyway, despite logic's warning, until he was only a few feet away. This other him still sat on the bed and, as far as Mark could tell, it wasn't looking at anything in particular. Its eyes held the glassy (if transparent) countenance of someone in shock or, if Mark were to be completely honest, someone whose elevator didn't reach the top floor, whose deck didn't have all 52 cards, or in layman's terms, a retard. The look spoke of things such as autism, orated to him about brain damage, broken synapses, and misfiring neurons. *Sorry about your luck, buddy, Mark thought, but you look like you came out of the oven only half-baked;*

therefore, I give you an A for effort but an F for execution. But none of that told him what the hell it was.

He waved a hand in front of it. Its eyes never moved, brow never creased. So far as Mark could tell, it didn't see him at all. As if there wasn't enough wrong with this picture already, now he had to contend with a handicapped ghost. *If* it was a ghost.

Melissa called him down to breakfast and Mark stepped back, unable to really look away from the milky eyes in this other face of his.

"What the hell are you?" he whispered. "And more importantly, how do I get rid of you?"

He worried, too, whether or not he wanted to get rid of it. This thing could be like that rare, mythological *caring* cancer—if you let it alone, it didn't get any worse, but as soon as you started fighting, trying to excise it from your body and life, the doctor gave you six months to live—and so Mark decided not to worry about banishing it. Besides, it hadn't done anything so far other than follow him around, sit, and be handicapped. Spiders were the same: ugly, disgusting, but useful in their own way. He didn't kill them until they crawled on him and invaded his space.

It felt odd staring at himself without a mirror and the realization of why landed on his head like a falling piano. He'd been so focused on the thing itself—and that he could see daylight filtering through it as if it were a cheap lace curtain—the fact it wore jeans, a polo shirt, and slip-on boat shoes had evaded him until now.

"Dad?" Jasper's voice roused him from the semi-catatonic stare he'd fallen into. "You coming down for breakfast? Mom's still calling you."

Mark nodded. "Yeah. I'm coming. You go on ahead."

"Okay."

Jasper retreated from the room but not before Mark caught the worried look on his son's face. *I must have really been spaced out*, Mark thought, and turned to follow his son downstairs where Melissa had put on eggs, toast, coffee. He felt a familiar tickle under the skin at the outskirts of his cheeks and he sniffed, wriggled his nose, tried to push it away. When that didn't work and he felt the sensations coalescing to a sharp point at the top of his nose, he pinched the nostrils closed, shut his mouth and exhaled. The air backed up in his head, corked his ears, and the world fell silent. He released everything before his eardrums popped and the sneeze exploded before he could stop it. It drenched his wrist, which he'd gotten halfway up to his

mouth, and he grimaced in disgust.

Damn summer colds, he thought, wiping his arm on his shirt. He thought he heard movement behind him, the squeak of a mattress spring or the rustle of a blanket, but when he looked, he saw the thing still sitting on the bed, unmoved.

“Mark!” Melissa yelled. He could tell she was standing at the bottom of the stairs, her right foot on the bottom step, left hand on the railing. If he didn’t answer, she’d come up.

“I’m coming,” he called back. And as he turned to go he swore the apparition sitting on the bed looked sharper, more defined.

At the table he found a plate set with his food. There were scrambled eggs, as he figured, and coffee, some crisp bacon, but no toast. Melissa had used English muffins and smothered them in honey. Jasper shoveled forkfuls of egg into his mouth and didn’t look up when Mark sat down.

“You really don’t look good,” his wife said. “Pale.”

“Hopefully it’s just a summer cold,” he said, picking up his fork.

“How’s your back?”

“It’s fine,” Mark said. And it was. He touched the area struck by the door. Mark didn’t feel any pain, not there, or in his throat anymore. But the off feeling from last night persisted, stronger than ever.

He forked eggs into his mouth. His nose picked up the scent of pepper and cheese, then egg, and hunger slid through his belly like worms. He scooped more eggs before chewing the first bite. These eggs joined the others and he began to chew. Teeth mashed the fluff, ground it down, but something wasn’t right. The inside of his mouth swelled and the protein dried out in his mouth, solidified until he felt like he was chewing on day old, used charcoal. Each piece of egg was a feathery dusting of ash on his tongue. He jerked up from the table, gagging, and spit the uneaten egg onto the plate.

“Jesus, Mark!” Melissa called disgustedly after him as he raced to the bathroom.

Mark paid little attention as he pushed up the toilet seat and vomited. There wasn’t much to come up: the remnants of last night’s dinner, which floated in the water like a crew of forlorn sailors who’d jumped overboard. The dry heaving continued for some time after, each one harder and more painful than the last, until he thought his body was going to evict stomach, lungs, heart, followed by esophagus and tongue. Mark was only vaguely aware of Melissa pounding on the door.

When the retching subsided, he unfurled a long strip of toilet paper, wiped his mouth, the toilet seat and floor. He flushed and ran warm water into the sink.

Mark ignored Melissa's knocking as he rinsed out his mouth and splashed water on his face and up into his hair, smoothing it back from his forehead. He examined himself in the mirror, saw knuckle mark shadows under his eyes, and sneezed several more times, coating the glass in slime.

"Mark, dammit, are you okay?" Melissa called through the door. "I'm really starting to get worried!"

He looked up at himself in the mirror again and shrank back, groaning. "I don't think so," he said.

"Open the door!" demanded Melissa. "I want to come in."

He unlocked the door and sat on the toilet. Melissa cried out when she saw him; her sobs destroyed him and he knew it was bad. It was the voice she reserved for notifications of fatal diseases or doomed marriages. Tears sprang unbidden to his face. Melissa stumbled in her haste to get across the bathroom, dropping to her knees in front of him. She took his face in her hands.

"Oh, Mark," she groaned. "What's happening to you?"

He shook his head. "I don't know."

But after that last glance in the mirror, he figured he could rule out the summer cold. *My skin*, he thought. *What the hell happened to my skin?*

"Come on," Melissa said. "Let's go to the emergency room."

Mark groaned, but stood up. "You're driving."

"That's fine," she said and led him forward.

He shuffled after her, willing himself not to look in the mirror. He imagined his neck as a rigid board, stiff and unmovable, unable to rotate to the left or right. He passed the basin and looked anyway. The sight took his breath away. He left the bathroom, wiping away fresh tears.

The veins in his face and neck were completely visible. They pulsed and moved like blue rivers under semi-translucent skin. He saw the same thing on his arms and the exposed parts of his legs.

What the hell have I got? he thought.

"I don't know what you've got," the doctor told them.

Mark looked at the man in the white coat, this Dr. Geoffry Evans, and

frowned. They'd been here for almost ten hours and he'd endured almost that many hours of poking and prodding: blood tests, skin tests, urine and stool samples (the latter obtained in a manner Mark felt should be illegal), scans, and X-rays. He felt qualified to give a guided tour of the hospital and the last thing he wanted to hear was that they didn't know anything.

"We're going to put you in an isolated room for now," Dr. Evans said.

"Isolation? Why?" Melissa asked. She'd been sitting next to the bed, listening while the doctor spoke. Jasper leaned against her leg and side, paying more attention to his video game.

"We don't know if your husband is contagious or not."

"You just said he didn't have anything," Melissa argued. She stuck a finger in the doctor's face. "If he doesn't have anything, send him home."

"No, ma'am, I said I don't know *what* your husband has, which is quite different from saying he has nothing. Look at him. He's got *something*. And the longer he's in this room, the more chance he has to infect everyone, including your son."

"It'll be okay," Mark told her. "Take Jasper and go into the waiting room."

"I will not—" started Melissa.

"Now!" he barked, interrupting her. "Get Jasper out of here. I don't want him seeing me like this anyway, and we both know it might be catching."

"Fine," she said and stood. Jasper turned off the game and took his mother's hand. "Say goodbye to Daddy, Jasper."

"Bye, Danny," Jasper said.

"Danny?" Mark asked, smiling. "Who's Danny?"

"You are, Dad. You look like Danny Phantom!"

Melissa leaned down and kissed Mark on the forehead. "I love you."

"I love you, too. I'll be fine."

Melissa nodded and led Jasper from the room. When they were gone, Mark sat up in the bed and looked at the doctor. The thought of isolation unsettled him. Would they put him in a bubble like that movie with John Travolta? Of course, he was in the bubble for his own protection. But if he were contagious, wouldn't Jasper and Melissa have caught it by now?

"So, Doc, level with me. What's going on?"

"I don't know," Dr. Evans said. "Your skin appears to be fading away, but so is everything else."

Mark nodded. Since arriving at the hospital, his veins had paled, as had

the color in his hair.

“Nothing showed up in any of the tests we ran. You state there’s no pain, just an odd feeling you can’t identify. The only symptom you’ve displayed is a sneeze and, as I’m sure you’re aware, disappearing isn’t a side effect of sneezing; I don’t care how many times you do it.”

Mark nodded. “So that’s it? We’re just going to ship me off to a room?”

“For now, yes,” the doctor said. “I’ll send your nurse in with some antibiotics and to start an IV. Then we’ll move you to the isolation ward and I’ll come visit you again once you’re settled. While that’s happening, I’m going to call some dermatologists and other specialists for consultations.”

“Okay,” Mark replied and laid down on the bed. Dr. Evans left the room and Mark looked at his arm. His eyes followed the network of veins that ran up, over, and around the pinkish muscles, which were now visible as well.

The blood moved at a rapid pace. He’d always assumed his blood flow was more like the Lazy River at the local water park, but it wasn’t true. It came and went from his heart in a big damn hurry to get where it was going and back. He couldn’t see his heart, though, or any of the arteries close to it. The faint outlines of his sternum and ribs, those things closest to the surface of his body, were clear. The scene disgusted him and he lowered the puke-colored hospital gown.

It almost seemed ironic—and cliché, he admitted—that he was healthy as a horse yet in the hospital sick as a dog. After listening to the doctor, Mark was convinced they’d never find anything wrong with him, at least not for his symptoms. They were just too bizarre, too random, and, honestly, too fucked up to be anything but punishment. While he waited for the nurse, he dwelt on “*Why me*” and, to a lesser extent, the origin of whatever...

Mark didn’t know if disease was the right word. Perhaps this was God’s doing, or the universe shelling out natural selection. He didn’t know; he had no idea why he was being disciplined like an unruly child. Maybe it was something altogether different.

He’d never been a believer in ghosts but now, after meeting the other *him*, he thought about revising that opinion. Maybe the thing in his house was an omen of his impending death, sent from the afterworld, or the underworld, or whatever came next. Mark resembled the pale countenance that sat unmoving on his bed. It didn’t have the veins and bones showing as he did, but if it was a ghost, biological functions wouldn’t be present, which accounted for its complete transparency. Everything made sense when you

put it in a supernatural setting.

Whatever it was, he felt nothing in his past warranted this: Mark never cheated on his wife, his taxes; he didn't beat his son, never killed anyone, and he found the thought of raping children repulsive. He gave to charity, stood for the Pledge of Allegiance, and took off his hat for the National Anthem. He was the best man he could be under any given circumstance.

It's not fair, he thought. *I don't deserve this!*

What about O.J. or that bastard Peterson, the one that killed his wife and kid back in 2002? Mark didn't think they were fading away right now, but surely they deserved it more. Mark punched the bed in frustration. The movement sparked a pinch in his chest that traveled up to his sinuses. He sniffed, made squirrel faces with his nose, and sneezed.

There was a knock on his door and the nurse walked in. She wore purple scrubs and a plastic cap over her hair that made her head look like a deformed mushroom. A surgical mask shielded the lower half of her face. She'd pulled latex gloves high on her wrists and tucked her shirtsleeves into them. The gloves were tied off with little latex tourniquets. She was taking no chances on getting infected. She wheeled a small cart carrying a pink container full of needles and other medicinal packages.

"Hello, Mr. Johns," she said. "I'm here to give you your antibiotic. We're also going to start an IV. We don't want you to get dehydrated."

"Shouldn't have any problems finding a vein," he said with a smile and held up an arm. The smile faltered, however, when he saw the disgust in the nurse's eyes. *She'd rather be in front of a hungry grizzly holding a picnic basket,* he thought.

He pictured all the duty nurses, hands on hips and chests puffed out, refusing to come in here; Dr. Evans stood amongst them trying to maintain a professional atmosphere. The bickering was loud, vehement. The doctor's intentions were good, but pointless. There wasn't a name for what he had and no action plan to eradicate it. *It* was an unknown entity and their fear would be too great for any amount of professionalism. Maybe they drew straws to determine who it would be. Or played that old kids' game of rock-paper-scissors. Either way, this girl was unlucky enough to lose.

Mark sneezed. The effect was like a gunshot: the nurse jumped back, let out a horrified squawk, and dropped the needle she'd been prepping.

The sneeze was a heavy mix of mucus and saliva, most of which dripped from where his nose used to be. He cupped his hand to stop the mess from

dripping onto his sheets. He looked at the nurse, rooted to her spot near the door.

“Would you get me a tissue or something?” he asked. “Don’t just stand there like a fucking idiot.”

The harsh language shocked her out of her stupor and she hurried over. She grabbed some tissue from a drawer behind his bed and dropped it on his chest. Mark frowned, wiped his hand, and sneezed twice more. Finished, he held the tissue out for her. He knew she wouldn’t take it but he was already tired of being treated like a leper. *She* wasn’t the one fading away.

The nurse shook her head and brought the garbage can over to his bed. “Just throw it in there, please, sir.”

The disgust in her voice rattled him and, for just a moment, he felt the overwhelming desire to hurl the tissue in her face. He wanted to hear it smack against her cheek. He saw her reeling back and falling over, sputtering, crying, and then fading away just the same as he. The image made him smile with sadistic glee. He looked at her, read her name was Marnie; she wore a wedding ring and a gold chain around her neck. Suspended from the chain was a small heart with two red stones in the middle.

Mark nodded to the necklace. “Mother’s pendant?”

Marnie nodded. “Two daughters.”

Mark gazed into her eyes, and the elation of making her sick blew out of him the way helium leaves a punctured balloon. He threw the tissue in the offered can.

Marnie stuck a needle in his shoulder, explained it was his antibiotic, and inserted the IV in his right arm. Both experiences were quick and painless, for which he was grateful. *A poor bedside manner*, he thought, *but quite competent at her job*. Like most people he knew, once you got through the shit on top, there was usually something worthwhile underneath. But really, who had the time to go digging through refuse piles all day long?

Marnie left and Mark yawned. The hospital room swam like a heat mirage before his eyes and soon dissolved into alternating blocks of light and darkness. Mark thought—not without some amusement—how, when his parts were fading into nothing, could he not see through his eyelids?

Mark’s eyes fluttered open to blindness. It wasn’t the perpetual black he’d read about or that was portrayed in the movies, but an all-encompassing whiteness that burned and shot pain through his head. Hot tears flooded his cheeks and he cried out.

There was a click and his eyesight inched back. Mark blinked away residual tears, looked around, saw a long halogen light hovering above his bed. The bulb inside still glowed with faint electric life and his eyes flashed colored cylinders everywhere he looked.

A single large window was set in one wall and several people with clipboards observed him. They all wore white doctor's coats and he assumed they were the specialists Dr. Evans called in. Across from the observation room, a set of steel doors cut the walls into sections. Mark noted the doors lacked windows and handles. In lieu of a lock, a magnetic plate and keypad provided access. His bed was between these two points of interest, almost in the middle of the room.

The room was square, painted white. The temperature was quite cool. Mark sat up and swung his legs over the side, intending to step down. The sight of his legs made the bile rise; it burned his throat and he stuffed a fist in his mouth to keep it down.

The inner workings of his leg were laid bare and he watched blood in rapid transit. Red and white tinged muscles twitched as they held his toes pointed down. Running through this tangle of muscle, blood, and vein, he saw the dull gleam of bone like the studded framework of a sturdy house.

He held up his right hand and marveled at the same strange intricacy. He smacked one hand with the other, expected intense pain and felt none. Instead, the muscles acted like a trampoline surface that bounced his hand back up and away.

"What's happening to me?" Mark yelled. He stretched his toes out and touched the floor. The blood roared faster, bubbled in its tracks. He wanted to jump up, scream out his indignity, but fear stopped him. He didn't know if these inner workings would support him. Would he tumble to the floor, breaking bone and ripping muscle, his face planted firmly on the tile while any germ present latched onto his most intimate parts?

"Mr. Johns, please try to relax." The voice was calm and it came through a microphone, piped into the room through speakers Mark couldn't see.

"Relax? Look at me!" Mark snorted. He let his anger and fear guide him onto the bottoms of his feet. The floor felt solid and bore weight. His hands on the bed were a steadying force. He looked directly at the window. "Answer my question!"

"We can't answer your question, Mr. Johns," the voice said.

“You mean you don’t know.”

“That’s what I mean, yes.”

“Who the hell are you then?”

“My name is Dr. Randall. I’m with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. We’re here to help Dr. Evans figure out what you have.”

Mark teetered toward the window, still afraid his legs would give out. As he drew closer, he saw his image reflected back at him. Eyelids, nose, and lips were gone, like the rest of his skin. His eyes were still there, floating in the black voids of his sockets. The pupils had disappeared, faded away until all that remained were the whites. His skull gleamed dully, though he thought he saw the grayish ridges of his brain peeking through a few thin spots.

Claude, Mark thought, *you’ve got nothing on me*. He said, “I’m blind yet I can see. I am nothing but everything.”

“Please, Mr. Johns,” Dr. Randall said. “Have a seat on the bed. There are questions we need to ask you.”

Mark smacked the window once with the palm of a hand he couldn’t see and turned away. He sneezed twice on his way to the bed. He heard gasps from the people behind the window and then an echoing pop. They’d turned the microphone off.

He sat facing the window. The veins and muscles in his legs were no longer visible. He opened the hospital gown still draped around his body and looked between his legs. His penis was gone.

Mark Johns wept.

“Don’t cry.”

The voice, right behind his ear, startled him and he leapt from the bed. Turning, he faced the other *him*—the solid, almost perfect him. The hair wasn’t quite as full and the eyes still a bit pale, but otherwise he was the complete package.

“What’s happening to me?” Mark whispered.

“I don’t know,” he replied.

“You’re lying,” Mark shouted and lunged over the bed, grabbing his other self by the shoulders. He hauled this man over the bed, surprised by how light he was, and threw him down on the floor. Mark followed the object of his fury and fell on the body, pummeling with his fists. He screamed, primal and dangerous, instinctively knew it for his own voice.

“Mr. Johns, please calm down. You must stop!”

Mark heard the doctor’s voice but he didn’t really belong to that world

anymore, but an invisible world that may or may not exist anywhere else. He continued to punch at the form huddled on the floor until strong hands dragged him to his feet. He fought, snapping his head back at the ones who grasped him in hopes of ramming them with his head. When that didn't work, he tried to twist around and bite them. His body snapped back and forth, undulated like a rope in a cowboy's hands. They slammed him back onto the bed, held him down with steel hands. He looked up into glass faces perched atop bodies protected by thick white suits.

"No," Mark grunted and kicked a man restraining one of his feet. The man staggered but was back at Mark's ankle in a moment, pressing his body on it. Another suited man reached under the bed and pulled out the straps that would lock him down for good. "Don't you see him? He's killing me! It's me. Don't you get it yet? I'm killing myself!"

"We don't see anything, Mr. Johns," the voice from behind the glass said. "We can't even see most of you. Our people are being as gentle as they can searching for the parts of your body that have already gone. If you don't calm down, we will give you something that will relax you."

Mark arched on the bed, straining his body up almost to the point of breaking his spine. How could they not see the other him lying on the floor? He was solid, touchable. He could speak.

A thought, utterly absurd under the circumstances, entered Mark's mind: *If he was killing himself, would they list his death as accidental or suicidal?*

His eyes sought the apparition and found it standing near the left side of the bed, between Mark and the window. For all the hitting, it showed no signs of abuse, not a single bruise or cut. As far as Mark could tell, it wasn't even breathing hard.

"Why?" he moaned. "What did I do?" He jerked his arms against the restraints, found them tight. The men in the suits, satisfied he couldn't get free, retreated, and left Mark alone with the other him.

"I hate you," Mark groaned to the healthy version of himself. "I fucking hate you."

"I know," he answered. "We always hate what we don't understand. But it will be better this time."

Mark sneezed in response.

"It's almost over now," the new Mark said.

Mark groaned, but nodded. He felt it, too. The end was a tickle in his sinus cavity, or rather, the emptiness that it used to be. He wondered how he

could sneeze without a nose, see without eyes, talk without lips. But he could. At least for now.

“Get bent,” he muttered and understood.

The sneezing started again and Mark knew it wasn’t going to stop. A roaring, like cars speeding on the highway, began in his head. Above this din he heard the doctor imploring him to stop sneezing, that he must stop sneezing. There was little chance of that happening; the old saying, about the soul and the sneeze, maybe it *was* true.

The untainted part of him, the part that was now whole, left the foot of the bed, and headed for the viewing window. Mark watched with invisible eyes as the other him walked through the glass and stone to stand with the doctors. One of them behind the glass sneezed and a pale, indistinct form appeared. The new Mark smiled and gripped it.

Maybe, Mark thought as he struggled to focus, *just maybe, this isn’t just my punishment, but everyone’s*. Or, if they caught on quick enough, maybe it would be their salvation.

The doctor sneezed again.

“Bless you,” Mark whispered as the last of his consciousness faded away.

A Coat That Fell

by Michael Wehunt

Ira stretched his legs out under the covers with soft gasps. His arthritis nibbled at him. The sound of rain numbed the world, washed their hundred acres in a gray blanket. It brought back the womb, something over eighty years gone.

He finished settling in, working out a few last creaks of his bones. Helen lay on her back beside him, staring at the ceiling. A small smile played on her lips.

A moment after he closed his eyes, she spoke. "I was unfaithful to you, Ira." His heart at once picked up bass, a hollow drum in a shrinking cage. He opened his eyes and let a long rain-whispered moment pass before he turned his head to the right. A crow's foot spread from a piercing blue eye toward her still-dark fall of hair, like an etching in marble. Her beauty clung to her at seventy-five. The slight curve of a smile stayed on her mouth.

Dazed, he stared into the corner farthest from the bed. In the deep dimness he saw a lump of shadow nestled there, down by the floor.

"There's something over there by the door." His voice wavered with a rising pang.

"It's just a coat that fell." Still she gazed up at the ceiling. "The first time was in '52."

He sighed. "Before we were even married." His skin tightened at the word *first*. "When was the last?"

"A month ago." Her smile sharpened into a grin. "Age has slowed me down."

He lay there paralyzed, staring into the corner. They hadn't made love in six years; he'd thought they were just at that age. The pride of his life had been this honeyed marriage with this vivid woman, his rock through all their hardships. Shock began to prick his skin like bee stings. His mind opened

into black and he reeled. *His* Helen! “How many?” he whispered. His tongue was thick and parched.

“Oh, I lost count long ago. Many were in groups so I’ve never known.”

“Don’t say these things,” he nearly barked, turning onto his side, away from her. A sour groan welled in his throat.

She carried on in her calm, level voice. “I gave a lot of your money to men who fucked me. Money I said I spent on shopping trips. I cooked you meals and lied about what was in them. You don’t want to know. When you found your bloodhound Winnie run over in the road, it was because I put her body there.”

He turned back to face her, astounded, fighting to keep the panic from his voice. “Helen, you couldn’t have hidden all this from me. You don’t mean it.” He reached out beneath the comforter and picked up her hand. It was very hot.

“In 1985, I think it was, when you, Mueller, George, and those two young things you’d taken on at the firm had the hunting party...Yes, it was ’85, when you shot that beast that’s on the wall in the den. I let all four of them have me that night while you slept. I’ve spent my life pumped full of filth, Ira.”

He let go of her hand. Its warmth unnerved him. “But why?”

Her eyes wandered the ceiling. “Because I’m always hungry. There was a time when I could walk through stores in town and give a blow job in the back room of every last one.”

“Helen, stop it.”

“Patricia didn’t die of crib death, dear.”

His eyes clenched shut and hot tears squeezed through. Dread bloomed in his chest with charring petals.

“Andrew didn’t break his neck falling out of a tree.”

“You killed our children?” The words were blurs; he’d begun to sob, his insides opened up. He thought he saw movement on the floor and gazed blearily at the shape that lay there.

“A man who cries is very unattractive, Ira. But God, every tear you’ve ever shed has nourished me. I did it because they were there. And because taking those you hold dear has always brought me the most joy. Whether it’s blood or jizz.”

“Helen, please.”

“You’re such a kind man. That’s why keeping you around has been

lovely.”

He stared at the soft repose of her face and could say nothing.

“Don’t try to understand. Just go to sleep.”

His chest hitched as he tried to calm down enough to speak. In the corner of the room he saw a column of shadow slide up the wall. It rasped against the paint.

“It’s my time, dear,” Helen said. “You might wish I hadn’t told you these things, but I wanted to taste your misery. I’ve been waiting for this meal.” And she chuckled to herself, deep and in her throat. “Now go to sleep, unless you’d like to watch.”

The shadow swelled in the corner. The covers jerked as Helen rubbed between her legs. Her back arched. Her tongue crept from her mouth and swiped at her lips. Ira shrank in horror as he felt himself aroused. With a keening noise in his mouth, he turned away to face the wall.

The bed creaked and settled as though a weight had crawled onto it. Something writhed at his back. The box springs began to whine in a slow rhythm with a counterpoint of wet smacks. Helen’s moans funneled into grit. Ira buried his head beneath the pillow and shut out the world.

The rain had stopped when he reemerged. The silence was absolute. He lay there on his side and felt the gulf behind him. The black lump was in the corner. It did look very much like a coat. He wanted to lift his arm and twist the lamp on. Instead he reached back and clasped Helen’s stiff cold hand.

The City Underneath

by Robin Wyatt Dunn

Alone, alone in this city. I must get out.

She is smiling wide as she walks by him, her hair ash blonde and her lips blood red and her sighs and movements perfectly timed with the city's.

"I saw him strung up for hours! You should have heard that band, they had over twenty-five screamers all cool and pouring their life out!" she says to her girlfriend.

Kalish smiles like his life depends on it, looking up at the skyscrapers in this strange light.

I tell you, a city that knows your name is not something you can forget. Not some small town or rural zone, but a metropolis, a metropolis where you are *wanted*, a vast urban scape where you are *known* and *loved* and *prized*, if you do the right thing, if you make the right moves. But no one seems to know Kalish.

Men in suits walk fast by him.

"It was ten, over ten in a matter of seconds! I only had to bet a pint!"

"What are you, O negative?"

"That's what I told them!"

Laughter. You know the kind of laughter I'm talking about, where they're grinning at you with those wide eyes, where there is something there you know you're never gonna wanna see, that you're gonna see, that they're gonna make you see.

Kalish smiles as they pass, forcing the muscles on his face to obey him. Kalish, whose name means "most beautiful."

Come on, come on down with me into this too-beautiful city, this city you may have dreamt of on dark nights, half-asleep. That's the only way you can come there, truth be told, half-asleep, in the twilight land of the mind, where you can almost remember that watchword, the watchword that gets

you past that guard with his horrifying eyes...

And there he is!

A tall man, a perfectly tailored suit resting easy on his huge frame, 6 foot 7, at least, impeccably polite, bowing courteously as he steps out of the door frame approaching Kalish, his eyes black and filled with the secret city.

"Sir, are you expected?"

"Oh, yes, yes, of course."

"What's that you're wearing? Next season?"

"My mother made it for me."

"Mothers are welcome here, properly arranged and contracted. Here, let me see your eyes."

Kalish shies away. "I have a medical condition. I may be contagious."

"Here, let me see."

And the tall man leans in close, his conspiratorial smile nothing you ever want to see, it's your death written all over it, written all over his lips and skin.

Kalish hesitates and glances up at the massive man, not wanting this to be his life, unable to escape his mission, his new life in this new city, this city that has become all cities, the center of the nightmare he has been sent to wake up. Should he kill him? Right on the street?

"Oh, you're most welcome here," says the man in the perfectly tailored suit. "Your eyes are shining wide."

"Yes, thank you, I am expected."

"I know you are," says the man, and he grips Kalish's arm firmly and escorts him into the empty marble-inlay lobby, through a fluorescent-lit side passage, and into a small room, a small room, it's always a small room, isn't it, one of those small rooms you're not gonna be able to forget no matter how much you want to...

The man in the well-tailored suit pushes him in and closes the door.

The room is lit with small, carefully placed lamps that cast long shadows. Three huge, elevated leather chairs surround the immediate entry, where Kalish stands. Sitting in each, three feet above Kalish's head, men in white suits sit, smiling and watching Kalish carefully. Behind them, seated behind a long, polished wooden desk where green library lamps glow, another man sits, not elevated like the three men in white, but sitting in a lower chair, leaning back, watching too, dressed in a gray suit.

The man to Kalish's left opens his mouth.

"I like how you're standing there."

The man in front of Kalish opens his mouth.

"I like how you're standing there, too."

The man to Kalish's right: "Look at his eyes!"

And the man behind them, behind the long desk, clears his throat.

"Oh, yes, his eyes!" says the first man in white, his eyes opening wider as he leans forward to stare like a crazy person into Kalish's trembling face.

"He's got eyes, all right!"

Sure he's got eyes. Eyes like you never seen here, baby. Free eyes.

"I like it!" says the second man.

"Take off your jacket, man!" says the third white suit.

And the man behind them makes a *hmm* sound, like he's satisfied with something, happy that Kalish is gonna get the good old-fashioned treatment, the full-on treatment, the stuff you're gonna wanna get, the stuff you ain't never gonna get out of.

And Kalish does as he's told, taking off his dark sport coat and then reaching into his pocket to remove a packet of cigarettes.

"Can I offer you gentlemen cigarettes?" asks Kalish, stopping the tremble in his face with all his will.

"Begin at the beginning," says the first man.

"Begin anywhere you want," says the second man.

"Let's start with a sexual history, just for fun," says the third man.

And then the gray-suited man behind them stands up and makes a gesture and the three men freeze, one with his mouth half-open, and the gray-suited man walks towards Kalish.

"Unnnh ug up ity," says the third man on Kalish's right, drool spilling out of his mouth.

"I know you," says the man in the gray suit.

"I am a visitor here," says Kalish.

"A visitor? What is that?"

"I am not from this city," says Kalish. "I am a visitor."

"Take off your shirt," says the man in the gray suit as he steps between two of the massively elevated chairs and leans towards Kalish, smiling.

"Take it off and let me look at you."

Kalish does as he is told, unbuttoning his white shirt and then removing the undershirt beneath it. His skin is pale.

"I like it," gurgles the first man in white, his voice filled with saliva.

And Kalish wants to scream.

What have you seen, what have you seen, underneath? Did you ever go a night without sleep and walk around a city you knew, and it looks just a little different, people a little stranger, time just slightly off? Did you ever see something you shouldn't have, and try to forget it? Underneath, you see, you can just keep going. You can go as far down as you want, baby, as far down as you're willing to, it just depends how much you can take.

The pores on the gray-suited man seem huge as he leans closer and closer to Kalish, his smile hesitant and eager on his face, his breath warm and hot and fetid.

I can do this, thinks Kalish. And he slams his skull against the head of the man in the gray suit.

"Unggk unggk unggk!" says the first man in white.

"Supah-powah!" says the second.

"I love you," hisses the third, his body frozen.

The gray suited man screams, clutching his head, and runs back to his polished desk and Kalish flies after him, grabbing the man's hair and bashing his head against the desk, again, and again, and again, until everything is covered in red.

Under the day, under your waking life, right at the edge of your vision, there're those words a homeless man shouted at you across the street in gibberish, the woman who looked at you a second too long, there in the café, sure, it's only your imagination, honey. Mind over matter, baby, just chill out, it'll go away, take a deep breath and it'll all be normal. And so it is, and so it is, if that's how you want it. That's the kind of thing you can escape from: just ignore it, honey, it'll go away. Because that's what it is, *attention*.

Attention, to attend. Like you're a lady in waiting, an attendant, kneeling before your liege lord, lending them your spirit, giving them your homilies, rendering them your god.

But sometimes you can't come back, honey, sometimes that rabbit hole gets closed up after you.

Kalish puts on the gray suit of the man whose head he has crushed, and lets in the awareness of the dead man's three white suits. *Where everybody*

knows your name. They've got to be his, now.

"I am Kalish," he says to the three men as they slowly come back to themselves, wiping spittle off their faces.

"Kalllllllsssssssh," slurs one of the men, and Kalish nods and then steps through a side door into another room.

A series of screens dangles from the ceiling and ten brightly-dressed women chat animatedly as the far-see pilot fades out on the screens and gives way to a series of new product options.

"Jack LeRay is just so sexy, omigod, I can't believe he's still single!"

"He's got a girlfriend, or two girlfriends, one of them's Natasha Rangerson!"

The women gossip and select their favorite brands of vegetable, meat, and nutrient-beverages, pressing buttons on their seat arms, watching the images on the huge screens dangling above them.

Kalish watches too, smearing the blood into his suit with his hands. One of the women glances at him and then looks away.

"Jack sticks right in my mind!"

"Right, inside your mind!"

"And he cuts into the gristle like he's on fire!"

"Right into the gristle!" chimes in another woman, as a red-costumed attendant circles through the market research crowd, taking blood samples, pricking each woman's hand with a needled finger and storing the blood data in his smart-hand.

A recap on screen: Jack LeRay, if that's who he is, vomits a huge stream of pus-streaked blood as he hacks into a series of enemies with a glowing claymore. The camera zooms in on Jack's enraged, empty eyes and then fades to a highly polished image of "Strong Green Beans," complete with dancing children. The women in the cushioned seats continue to tap their feedback into their seat arms.

Kalish goes back through the side door.

"Come outside with me," orders Kalish to the three white suits, and they obediently step down from their elevated leather chairs and follow him out onto the city street, where the huge bodyguard in the well-tailored suit bows as they pass.

He walks down the sidewalk, the three smiling white suits in lock step behind him.

What is it, what is it that keeps a city together? A well-chosen settlement site, a wise ruler, a lucky string of growing seasons? Or is it, like in a Jewish shtetl, knowledge, knowledge over and away, mapping your mind out into the weather system, stretching you thin and tight across the muddy street, latching you into your neighbor's mind, and into your other neighbor's mind, and theirs into yours?

And it's so close to you, folks, so close to you, just waiting there, right underneath the city you know.

Rabbit in the hole!

And that same ash blonde turns to look at Kalish as he passes with his strange entourage in tow, her eyes alive with the horrible music of the city that Kalish cannot escape, filled with that dark, lost look that says: *you're ours now*.

Yeah, you're in the big city now, so welcome. And you can try to forget all this as many times as you want to, you know. Just tell yourself: it was that medication I was taking. Just some side effect! One of those effects on the side, right there on the side of you, where you can look again if you want, if you can handle those teeth looking at you. As though, if it's on the side, it doesn't have an effect. Not a real effect. Just an effect you need to forget about.

Don't worry, don't worry, honey, he was a man like the rest of us. It's been a long week, let's go out some place nice tonight for dinner! And just let that doubt slip away, old city-dweller. You've got it under control. Don't worry, we're right here next to you. And we know what's good for you.

Beside Still Waters

by BV Lawson

Rita struggled with the box of banana MoonPies and jar of instant coffee in her arms, as she stared at shelf after shelf of little crayon-colored boxes all looking alike. She reached for one, then pulled her hand back for the tenth time. Travis Ayers from Miss Cay's sixth-grade class skipped by, and he'd barely got two aisles past when he said, "Bet that Rita REE-tard can't read the labels."

Rita bit her lip and frowned at the shelf. All those long words, with their jumbled-up letters. She knew the word "cold," but all the boxes said that, so she finally just grabbed one and a bottle of aspirin. Rita was familiar with aspirin. She often got that for Grammy to cure her Saturday-morning headaches. It was always the same—aspirin, coffee, a water bottle, and...Rita added some pink Pepto to her stack.

She heard more voices, deeper this time, from over near the shaving cream and deodorant. The men were whispering like they were using their church voices, but she could hear snatches of words. "...Found him in the creek face down...head bashed in like corn mash...first Bill Eshom, now Johnny Coggin."

Bill and Johnny, co-captains on the high school football team, along with Peter Ames. No one could remember when there'd been three captains. Bill, Johnny and Peter were the most popular boys in school and all the girls liked them. They had to. Because if they didn't...

"...Gotta be Martin Green." The men's voices were a little closer now. "His daughter Susie and those trumped-up charges he filed two years ago. It's him, all right."

A man not much taller than Rita with a head like a bowling ball, hairless with eyes close together and a small thin mouth, bumped into her and made her drop the aspirin. The man picked up the box and slipped it into her dress

pocket, keeping his hand down there a little longer and giving her leg a squeeze.

“Your grandmother must be having one of her famous headaches again, Rita.” The man moved his stare away from her breasts long enough to exchange a quick glance with the taller man beside him, and finally pulled his hand out of her pocket.

As the two men moved away, the taller man made a drinking motion with his hand and said, “Glug, glug,” and both men laughed.

Rita’s eyes stung with tears and she stumbled to the counter, tripping over a display of utility knives and knocking them to the floor. She ignored a man she didn’t recognize who stopped to help her up, pulling her elbow out of his grasp, away from his touch.

When she finally reached the counter, she thrust some wadded-up bills at the clerk and made sure she got a receipt as Grammy had instructed. The clerks in town knew Rita wasn’t good at numbers.

Rita carried her purchases home and tiptoed inside. She made sure her tears were wiped dry, but she saw it wouldn’t matter. Grammy was still curled up on the couch, and it looked like she hadn’t moved since Rita left.

Knowing there wasn’t anywhere she could go in the four-room house without making noise, Rita decided the best thing was let Grammy sleep it off. She tiptoed back outside.

Then she made a beeline for Devilwood Lane. Those men in the store had said bad things about Mr. Green. HER Mr. Green. She had to see him, to hear him tell her that those men were wrong.

She stopped in front of a mailbox shaped like a sailboat, then went to the front door and knocked. She knew he’d look through the peephole and let her in, like he always did.

Martin Green smiled as she handed him a MoonPie. “Thought you might not be coming today, Miss Rita.” He massaged the edges of the wrapper apart, capturing the crumbs inside, then wolfed the treat down followed by the crumb chaser.

“But I always come on Saturdays.” She was bursting at the seams to ask him about those men, but she waited for him to finish eating.

“Another Saturday, another body found, Miss Rita. Saturdays aren’t so safe anymore.”

Rita nibbled tiny pieces from her own MoonPie breakfast. “I heard some men talking in the drugstore, Mr. Green. I think it was Mr. Bales and Mr.

Dodd.”

“Did you, now? And what did those stupendous pundits of perspicacity have to impart?”

She laughed, knowing he wasn’t making fun of her, that she loved hearing fancy words, even those she didn’t understand. But her laughter faded as she recalled just what the two men had talked about.

“They said you had something to do with Johnny. With him being dead.”

Mr. Green got up to pour them both a glass of his homemade root beer. “Can’t say I’m sorry he’s dead. Can’t say I did it, neither.”

“They said it was on account of Susie.”

He didn’t say anything and she didn’t say anything, although they both turned to look at a framed photograph on the wall. Susie with the blond braids and half-smile, just starting to wear makeup. The only friend Rita could ever remember having. Must have been a stranger who done it, the townsfolk had said. One of them “damn crows” from over in Bingham County.

“I reckon they’ll say it’s me that done Johnny in, all right, Miss Rita. Guess I should call my lawyer, though fat lot of good it did two years ago. My Susie certainly didn’t choke herself to death, now did she? Boys got clean off. The last ones to see her alive.”

Mr. Green’s face was like the sky before a thunderstorm, green and dark and angry. “When the *Hancock Tribune* calls those boys the Triple Threat, they know what they’re talking about. Three Thugs, more like it. But everybody around here acts like those boys have golden halos over their heads.”

Rita had witnessed other girls after dates with Billy, Johnny or Peter. Pancake concealer and long sleeves helped. But in the locker room after gym, the bruises and welts stood out like moldy spots on cheese you’d throw in the garbage. And those girls were the lucky ones.

Mr. Green took sips of root beer in-between sighs. “I don’t know, Miss Rita.”

She smiled at him, encouragingly. She liked it when he called her Miss Rita.

“I just don’t think a lawyer’ll be worth a rat’s ass. Pardon my French.” The corners of his mouth turned up briefly. “You got Bill Eshom’s father who runs Peachtree Bank. And Johnny Coggin’s dad, he’s on the town

council—the same town council the attorney general’s office investigated for voter fraud, I might add.”

The storm clouds on Mr. Green’s face got even darker. “And then there’s Peter Ames. He’s the worst of the lot, but I guess he came by it honest, seeing as how his daddy served a year in prison for killing Peter’s mother in self-defense. Bah! As if a woman the size of Tinkerbell could take down a three-hundred-pound former wrestler.”

“They wouldn’t put you in jail, would they, Mr. Green?” The mere thought of it stabbed at Rita’s insides so hard, she thought she was going to be sick right there on his couch. “Now that Randall’s gone and Susie’s gone, it just me and Grammy. And you.” She felt the tears start up again, and she squeezed her eyes so tight she saw lightning flashes across her lids.

Mr. Green’s voice got softer. “It’s been a year now, hasn’t it, since you got the news about your brother Randall. Sure looked good in that uniform, didn’t, he? Like he was born into it.”

Rita nodded. She kept his picture under her pillow.

“I’ll bet he was a damn fine soldier. And an even better brother.”

“He liked cars. Fishing, too. He showed me how to bait a hook, the best rocks for skipping and lots of things.”

Mr. Green nodded, but he wasn’t looking at Rita anymore and had fixed his gaze over her shoulder to the front window. “Looks like I’m gonna have company, Miss Rita. Why don’t you head out the back. Your Grammy is probably in need of some company, too, I dare say.”

Rita turned to the window and saw a deputy strolling down the front walk. She hesitated for a moment, and Mr. Green prompted, “Run along now. We’ll chat again soon. It’ll be all right.”

Rita sensed Mr. Green was trying to keep her safe and wasn’t sure from what, but she didn’t want to let him down. Following his instructions, she headed out the back door, ducking through the bushes behind his house to take the long way home. After all those weekends she’d spent by herself exploring the town, the woods, the creeks and the ponds, she could have picked dozens of ways to get from Mr. Green’s place to hers.

She started toward the footbridge across the creek, but then remembered—there were probably deputies there, too. Johnny Coggin. Face down in the water. Head bashed in like corn mash.

Besides, it was fixing to rain, although Rita wouldn’t mind. She loved rain and sleet and snow. Randall pointed out they were all just forms of

water, and how water was the most important thing on Earth, with the power to cleanse or to kill.

When she arrived home, Grammy was sitting up, the ice pack perched on her like a blue hat, and she was blowing her nose. Rita made sure to walk softly and not make any loud noises. She started heating the kettle for instant coffee, then handed her grandmother a couple of aspirin and a glass of water.

“What time is it, Rita lovey?” Grammy squinted at the clock. “Ten o’clock? Only five hours of shut-eye.” She slumped back against the cushions. “Lordy, have I got a bad case of the brown bottle flu.”

A knock on the door startled them. They never got visitors. Rita stayed glued to the floor, unsure what to do. Grammy said to her, “You’re sixteen years old, Rita, you’re old enough to open the door, ain’tcha? So open it already.”

The man didn’t bother taking off his brown hat as he pushed past Rita and stood opposite Grammy. “What can I do for you, deputy?” Grammy asked.

The deputy acknowledged Rita’s presence with a nod of his head. “It would be helpful if I could speak with you alone.”

Grammy waved a hand in Rita’s direction. “Why don’t you go clean up your room, lovey. I couldn’t find a nest of snakes hiding in there if I tried.”

Rita always did what Grammy said, though once in her room with the door closed, she made sure she started by tidying up the stack of papers nearest the thin front wall. It wasn’t eavesdropping, exactly.

“I’d like to know where you were last night, Mrs. Wilshire.”

Rita could hear Grammy tapping a tin, probably that tin with Grammy’s favorite Cohiba cigars, and then the snick of Grammy’s lighter. “I was out having a little Friday night fun. With friends.”

“Which place? And which friends?”

“The Black Bass Club mostly. Started out at the Bar-D, but it was dull, so we toted ourselves out of there.”

“The names of the friends, Mrs. Wilshire?”

“Don’t remember all of them. Went to the Bar-D by myself, hooked up with Rhonda Gill for awhile and after that it’s a blur. People came and went. What does it matter anyhow?”

“Last night, Johnny Coggin drowned in a creek near Lair’s Luck Pond after being hit on the head.”

“So? I didn’t know Johnny Coggin. Other than he’s another one of them

full-of-himself jocks.”

In her room, Rita nodded vigorously. Grammy hated jocks in general, never said why. She’d only gone to games when Randall played.

The deputy’s nasal voice reminded Rita of Pastor Ogburn during the sermon last Sunday, pounding his fist on the pulpit as he punctuated every thou-shalt-not. “Well now, Mrs. Wilshire, what about Johnny’s father, Edmund Coggin?”

Rita couldn’t see Grammy, but she could almost see her taking puffs on the cigar and making smoke rings. It was something she did when she was thinking hard, although why she’d be thinking hard now was a mystery to Rita.

“Edmund Coggin? What about him, deputy?”

“We’ve got at least one witness who says they saw you leaving the Black Bass last night with Edmund Coggin. That it wasn’t the first time.”

“Even if your witness ain’t blowing smoke out his ass, deputy, last I heard, there’s no law against leaving a bar with someone.”

“Edmund Coggin is married.”

“So? Adultery ain’t a crime in West Virginia. And even then, I’m not the one committing adultery, am I, me being a widow and all.”

Rita stopped gathering up papers. After a moment of staring blankly at the wall, she realized she’d let all the papers slip to the floor again, making the mess worse than before.

Grammy and Councilman Coggin? Her mouth opened to form the words, Why Grammy, oh why? But nothing came out.

Grammy had a coughing spell, and when she finally cleared it out, said, “Look here, deputy, I’m sorry to hear about Johnny Coggin, but it ain’t got nothing to do with me.”

“What about Vern Eshom? You not-committing-adultery with him, too?”

Grammy hooted. “Look at me, deputy. The bloom is long shriveled off this dry rose. I’m quite tickled you’d think I’m some sort of Jezebel. Truth be told, Edmund Coggin’s the first action I’ve had in a month of Sundays.”

“You getting any action with Martin Green?”

Grammy lowered her voice, and Rita lost the first part of what she said. “...suffered enough. People need to find comfort in their own way, deputy. Let the man be. He wouldn’t hurt a fly, let alone some snooty young prick.”

“I can guarantee we’ll be checking on that. And your alibi, too.”

“Anyways, it’s kind of a stretch to tie an old woman’s love life to a couple of murdered boys, ain’t it?”

“Maybe. Or maybe it’s some kind of sick revenge since Johnny and Bill were football heroes. Near as I recall, your grandson Randall got cut from the team couple years ago. You put up a stink at the time. Said it was a conspiracy because Randall was better than they were.”

Grammy’s voice had the same frost as when she’d told off their neighbor when he called Rita a crack baby. “My grandson goes off to some godforsaken hellhole to get himself blown to bits instead of heading to college on a football scholarship—so I killed those boys out of revenge? Is that what you really think, deputy?”

“I’m saying we’re just looking at all the possibilities.”

“Well, kindly look somewhere else. In fact, you can start by looking over there—you see that door, don’t you? Or are your eyes as useless as your brain?”

“Just keep your nose clean, Mrs. Wilshire. After all, if something happens to you, who’s going to take care of that half-witted granddaughter of yours?”

Rita could hear the deputy head toward the front door, and waited until it closed behind him. Her straightening-up task forgotten, she found herself soon sitting on the chair in front of Grammy, perched on the edge.

Grammy didn’t look at her. “Lordy how I wish your brother Randall were still here. He always knew what to do.”

Rita swallowed the familiar lump in her throat whenever she heard Randall’s name. Randall, who could make fish lures out of a spoon and two split rings. Randall who was two hundred pounds of grizzly bear if someone threatened her or Grammy. Randall who wanted to go to college and become a lawyer so he could “bring some order to this hick town.” To defend the weak, just like it says in the Bible.

Rita didn’t ask about Johnny Coggin’s father, and Grammy looked a little surprised she didn’t. It wasn’t Rita didn’t know about sex. She knew about it, all right. Knew it was what Bill Eshom and Johnny Coggin and Peter Ames were after when they asked a girl out on a date. She knew sex came with bruises and burns and scratches and even broken bones.

She knew of several girls in school who’d gotten pregnant by one of the Triple Threat and “taken care of it.” Others dropped out of school and were later seen around town with a baby in tow. None of them ever said a word

about it. The Triple Threat preyed on the weak, Randall always said.

What she didn't know was why Grammy would want sex with Johnny's father. And maybe Vern Eshom.

Rita couldn't bear to leave a whole week between her next visit with Mr. Green, so she waited until after church the next day and almost ran to his door. But after knocking and waiting, she realized he wasn't there.

An image of the deputy walking up Mr. Green's yard yesterday came to mind. She began to fret. What if they'd put Mr. Green in jail?

A tide of panic surged up inside her, but then she remembered the words Randall had told her before he shipped out with his unit. "People may think you're weak, Rita. But it takes strength to know the world's against you just because you're a little different, and still get out of bed every day in spite of it."

Rita stood there on Mr. Green's front step for some time, doing some hard thinking. Mr. Green needed help. Grammy needed help. She didn't want either of them to go to jail. But what could anyone do?

"Oh Randall, why did you die and leave me?" she cried out to the sullen, low-hanging clouds.

Rita dragged herself to the drugstore and wandered around the aisles hoping she'd hear more gossip about the murders and deputies and Grammy and Mr. Green. But the only people there were folks Rita didn't recognize—a woman looking at oversized panty hose and a man smelling of gasoline and sweat who was buying wine and Skittles.

Somehow, she managed to go back to school the next day and the day after that. No one talked about the deaths of Bill and Johnny, but she was in a classroom with other retards and some of them could barely say their names. For once, she was glad her teacher, Mrs. Black, didn't pay much attention to her.

Rita spent the entire week worrying about Grammy and Mr. Green, even while going through the motions of tracing numbers in a workbook and making crayon drawings based on stories Mrs. Black told. No matter what the story, Rita always made sure to put a little boat in it somewhere. For Randall.

She also went through a stack of Dr. Seuss books. Her favorite was *Oh the Thinks You Can Think*. Mrs. Black thought she was looking at the pictures, but Rita could read the stories, too, thanks to Randall. She didn't let on, afraid they'd put her in a normal classroom. With the Bills and Johnnys

and Peters.

Wednesday morning, Rita saw Grammy writing something on a piece of paper she folded up and put on the table next to her purse. But when Grammy cleared the dishes, the little piece of paper fell to the ground.

Grammy headed to work without rescuing the piece of paper, and Rita's curiosity got the better of her. She picked it up. She could read enough of the words to know what it said. And it gave her an idea.

After school that day, she took a detour and stopped by Mr. Green's house long enough to slip the note into his mailbox. When she'd walked by his house yesterday, she'd been relieved to see he wasn't in jail after all.

Then, she waited. Waited two whole days. Her teacher frowned at her for using mostly black and red crayons, but that was all that was in Rita's head. She'd laughed to herself at the thought—black and red in Rita's head.

Friday after school, Grammy started her usual Friday-night routine of picking out one of her short skirts and putting on her makeup. She'd never said anything about the missing note, but Rita had seen her writing out another one.

Rita had made up her own note using black and red crayons and slipped it through the crack in Peter Ames's locker. She felt like Randall was watching and approving.

She waited some more, until nine thirty Friday night, then took the back way to Mr. Green's house. The house was dark, and she felt a little giddy.

Mr. Green must have found the note—Grammy's note about meeting at the Black Bass Club at ten. He wouldn't know Grammy had intended it for someone else, but it didn't matter, Rita just needed him there. With Grammy. At ten.

She continued her trek through the woods she knew so well, grateful for the clear skies and the full moon. She approached the dock on Lair's Luck Pond where old man Raines kept his little boat tied up. After checking out the boat, she sat with her legs swinging over the water.

She didn't have long to wait. A figure with broad shoulders and strong arms that had thrown many a touchdown appeared out of the shadows. It was Peter Ames.

He stood over her and leered. "So Rita Ree-tard's craving another hot beef injection? I'd never thought it, you were crying so hard last time."

She smiled up at him, batting her eyelashes like she'd seen other girls do. "You didn't tell nobody about tonight, did you, Peter? My Grammy

would punish me if she found out.”

“Nah. If you were Caitlin Quinn, I might have done a little boasting. But you, little Rita Ree-tard, you’re not worth it.”

He started toward her, but she held up her hand. “Grammy told me a story once about two lovers in a boat. She said it sounded romantic. I want to do it in the boat.”

Peter’s smiled dipped slightly. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea. I can’t swim.” He looked around. “And this is near where they found Johnny last week.”

Rita made clucking noises at him. “You chicken? Surely you ain’t more afraid than a girl who’s a retard?”

His chin jutted out as he gritted his teeth. “Just get in, will you? I was up all night cramming for a fuckin’ history test and I’ve had a boner all day.”

Rita wasn’t sure what he meant, but she quickly climbed into the boat, untying the bowline. And waited.

Peter stood there for almost a minute, as if making up his mind, then he got into the boat with her and they rowed out into the deepest part. Rita took off her shoes, which is why she was able to feel with her toes when the first drops of water seeped in.

She didn’t say anything as Peter tore off his shirt and tried to wiggle out of his pants without tipping the boat over. He hadn’t time to start on his socks when he noticed the clothes he’d dropped in the bottom of the boat weren’t so dry anymore.

“Shit!” he jumped up and almost tipped the boat over right there and then. “We’ve sprung a leak.”

“So I see,” Rita said, a quietness descending over her like a freezing rain falling on the skeleton trees on a winter’s night.

“What do we do?” Rita had never seen Peter Ames without a smug look on his face. Had never seen him in a panic, not even with a wall of linebackers heading straight for him. Had never seen him wet his briefs.

The water was above their ankles now, but Rita just sat on her bench, serene.

“You brain-dead little bitch, don’t you know we’re in trouble?”

She shook her head. “No, Peter. We’re not in trouble. ‘Cause I know how to swim.” Randall had made sure of that.

Peter started looking around wildly, “Then get some help. You’re not too stupid to do that, are you?”

Rita slipped out of the boat and started swimming. Now that the boat was out of balance, it tipped over and dumped Peter into the water. Peter clawed at the hull and tried to grab the slippery surface.

Rita reached shore easily and stood on the dock, watching Peter as he thrashed and flailed. She waited for awhile, waited until his head disappeared under the water.

Her mind went back to that night when Peter put the cloth in her mouth and held her body down as Brad and Johnny took turns. And then they'd switched places, and Peter had taken his turn, her crying muffled by the cloth.

When they were finished, they drew words on her body with black and red magic marker, mostly words she couldn't read, and then threw her naked in the ice-cold water, laughing. It had been days before she stopped bleeding and shaking. And weeks before the last traces of magic marker washed away.

Rita's frown at the memory turned into a small smile. This had been a lot easier than climbing up that tree and waiting to drop the rock on Johnny's head. Or slipping Grammy's sleeping pills into Brad's beer, not far from this very spot when he'd gone off to take a pee, and then rolling him into the water as he'd done to her.

This time, Grammy and Mr. Green were someplace where there'd be dozens of witnesses saying they weren't at the pond. An alibi, the Deputy had said.

Randall had taught Rita so many things. That she wasn't helpless. And how to cut a hole in the bottom of a boat you're fixing to scuttle. And what that verse from Joshua in the Bible means, to pursue after your enemies and smite the hindmost of them all, when God delivers them into your hand.

The Condition She's In

by Nick Medina

His puffy eyes seemed to say it all. The dark purple bags hanging beneath them spoke of love, anger, torment, regret and—ultimately—hope. It'd been a long day; a seemingly endless year. But it was all over now. The bad news was that things would never be the same ever again. The good news was that things couldn't get any worse. That, at least, was what he hoped.

Timothy McAuley rubbed his weary eyes and checked himself in the mirror on his way to make the announcement. Gaunt, disheveled and in need of a barber, he was a shadow of the man he once was. Somehow his children still saw their father when they looked at his face.

"Kids," he called from the upstairs hall, "we need to talk."

The soft, slippared and footied footsteps of his two daughters and one son came toward him from their respective rooms. His youngest daughter, Abby—only six years old—dropped her stuffed bear on the floor and threw her arms around his waist.

"I can feel your bones, Daddy," she said, her little hands holding onto his protruding pelvis.

"I know," was all he could say.

"What's up?" Jake, eleven and eldest, asked.

"Downstairs," Timothy sighed.

With Abby still clinging to him like an elastic waistband, Timothy led the way down to the family room where he thought his announcement would be easiest to make. Setting Abby beside him on the sofa, he waited for Jake and Elizabeth, his middle child, to settle before saying anything more.

"I'm very proud of the three of you," he started. "You've been so strong."

"Is this about Mom?" Jake interrupted.

Timothy swallowed hard. "Yes, Jake," he said. "Yes, it is."

“Where is Mommy?” Abby whined.

“When is she coming home?” Elizabeth wondered.

Timothy forced a smile. “Today,” he said. “Your mother’s coming home today.”

“Really?” Abby asked. Her face lit up in a way Timothy hadn’t seen in the longest time. “We’re going to see Mommy!”

Timothy’s lips tightened into a straight line and he dropped a hand on Abby’s shoulder to keep her from getting too excited. “That’s what we need to talk about,” he said.

Timothy was there fourteen months earlier when Madeleine got the news. They both knew it was bad as soon as Doctor Hirshberg walked in with his eyes on everything other than them; he didn’t have to say anything for them to know that they’d have to start making plans for the one thing that no one ever plans for.

“It’s cancer,” Doctor Hirshberg told them when the oppressive silence got to be too much for even him to bear.

Madeleine nodded in response. Her mouth had gone much too dry to say anything. Timothy hugged her, immediately feeling her go limp in his arms. For an instant he thought that she’d fainted.

“The kids,” she eventually gasped, letting him know she was still with him before bursting into tears.

It was one of the worst days of Timothy’s life.

“When will she be here?” Elizabeth asked. She had settled on the floor, and now, as excited as Abby, she scooted close to her father and put her hands upon his knees. “Will it be late? Can we stay up until she gets home?”

Timothy rubbed the back of Elizabeth’s left hand. “You remember the last time you saw your mother,” he said.

Elizabeth made a face born of bad memories. The woman she’d seen in the hospital bed barely resembled her mom. Her mother had been a solid woman with a good lap that she, Abby, and Jake fought to bury themselves in. Her mother’s hands, soft yet firm, always knew the right amount of pressure to put into a backrub or a hug. The woman in the hospital wasn’t comfortable to snuggle with; her hands could barely grasp the get-well cards

placed in front of her. She was thin—thinner than Timothy would become—and pale. Her bony fingers were frail, completely incapable of braiding hair like before. She didn't look like the mother Elizabeth remembered. She didn't smell like her either. The woman in the hospital had a harsh soapy scent, the kind of soap used strictly for sterilization. What made it even more disturbing was that underneath the sterile stench, Madeleine still smelled sick.

And then there were the hospital clothes that tied in the back, the tubes that seemed to snake all over the place—tubes that appeared to do nothing, yet which the children were constantly reminded to be mindful of—the incessantly beeping machines and the needled syringes that looked so big to Elizabeth that she thought they'd tear right through her mother's emaciated arm.

"I don't like that memory," Elizabeth said.

"I don't like it either," Abby chirped. Apparently she'd recalled the same haunting scene as her sister. Maybe her memories were worse. She'd subconsciously wrapped her fingers around the pigtails hanging from either side of her head, perhaps remembering the shiny white scalp—almost unnaturally white—she'd found by accidentally knocking away the bedcap on her mother's head. The discovery of the hairlessness had jarred her. She'd put the cap back in place without speaking about what she saw, as though pretending she hadn't seen the ugly truth would make her mother's lovely locks reappear.

Timothy let out a heavy breath. "Well," he said carefully, almost regretfully, "Mom's not the same."

"She's better," Elizabeth asserted, hopefully.

"No she's not," Jake argued. "He's saying that she's different...that she'll never be the same again. Right, Dad?"

Jake's own memories of that day in the hospital were vastly different from his sisters'. He'd given his mother a kiss on the cheek because he was happy to see her, but after that he hardly looked in her direction. He could barely stomach the thought of her condemnation, and he feared that focusing on the sight of it might make him cry. So, instead, he stared at the muted television knowing that whatever his mother was going through was something from which she would never fully recover.

It took everything in Jake, every ounce of strength, to drown out what was going on around him in that hospital room; he didn't hear his sisters' probing questions, the blipping machines, his father constantly warning the

girls to be careful of the tubes or his mother's painfully thin voice—almost a whisper—fighting to be heard over the combined commotion. He made it so that what he remembered most was the old sitcom rerunning on the television screen.

Timothy felt himself pale in response to his son's assertion. His head felt empty, light, and for a moment he thought that he might have to lie down. It was after the last time the kids visited their mother in the hospital that he and Madeleine decided it best for them not to see any more. From that day forth, the children never stepped foot in the hospital halls. Timothy knew he and Madeleine had made the right decision when Abby, for three consecutive nights following the visit, woke from nightmares. She'd moaned with tears in her eyes, handfuls of sheet balled in her fists, her pajamas damp with sweat that made her shiver. She'd never say what the nightmares were about—she'd only grab onto Timothy and cry into his chest—but she didn't have to tell him what had been haunting her: he knew.

"Right, Dad?" Jake persisted. "Mom won't be like she was before she got sick?"

Timothy gave a slight nod. "Right, Jake," he said. "Your mothers...well, we ought to talk about her condition."

There were many horrid things the children didn't see after Timothy and Madeleine decided that the three weren't to return to the hospital, things that gave Timothy nightmares himself.

He watched his wife wilt only to blossom and then wilt again. Her condition went up and down, hope floating right along with it, over agonizing months that made him think the most revolting things while she put his worries into words.

"What will you do without me?" she asked, her voice as fragile as frost beneath the rising sun.

He kissed her on the temple and gently rubbed her hand, being careful not to upset the IV taped to the thin skin. He could feel the catheter beneath her flesh with each pass of his fingertips.

"Don't say that," he said to reassure her. "You're going to be fine. You've got a lot of living left to do."

"But what if?" she whispered in response.

Those were three of the last words Timothy ever heard her speak.

Madeleine's surgery had been scheduled for the following morning, and they both knew what the outcome of the operation would be before they'd agreed that it had to be done. Doctor Hirshberg had very clearly explained to them that Madeleine would forever be unable to speak, and that she'd never be able to swallow again either. When it was all said and done, an entire portion of Madeleine's lower jaw was removed along with the upper part of her esophagus, leaving her with a gaping hole hidden by her hanging chin.

Timothy cried when he first saw her in the recovery room. Before the nurses wheeled her away to the operating suite none of it seemed possible, but seeing her wrapped with bandages, unable to communicate the way she'd always communicated before, made the nightmare real. He sat there sobbing, his head in his hands, grateful for once that the powerful drugs injected into her kept her from hearing his outburst of agony.

He thought back to when they first met. It was a different time, long before their lives would be stolen in such a merciless way. The theft wasn't fair. He punched the side of his head just thinking about it. Their lives weren't supposed to play out this way. They were supposed to go skiing in the winter, fire up the grill in the summer while hosting friends for drinks on the patio and make love whenever the sparks of passion lit up in their eyes. More than that, they were supposed to watch their children grow. Life was supposed to be as good as they imagined it. But their fantasies slipped away without rhyme or reason—a tragedy they didn't cause, but one which they couldn't avoid.

When the anesthesia wore off, Madeleine was first aware of the overwhelming whiteness around her. The ceiling was white. The walls were white. The light burning overhead was white and bright. Her reaction was to call out, but when she tried her voice wouldn't work, and then she remembered that she'd never be able to call out ever again, let alone whimper from the twinge of pain she felt in her neck: a pain that couldn't compete with the stomach turning sensation she felt upon realizing that what was done was done and that it could never be reversed.

It took a moment for the panic to pass. When it did, she didn't regret making the decision that left her without a voice; she couldn't regret it. The operation was the only chance she had at survival. She only wished that Jake, Elizabeth and Abby could have heard her say their names one last time. She could have made a recording at the very least. But it was too late for that now. Never would they hear her singing in the morning or humming in the

garden. Nor would they hear her call them to the dinner table or warn them about the bed bugs as she tucked them in at night. Worst of all, they'd never hear her say the three words that longed to spill out of her.

Timothy didn't know why he couldn't just come out and say it. He'd kept the secret so long thinking that he was keeping Jake, Elizabeth and Abby from pain, but it was clear to see that they were pained and that they'd continue to be pained whether he told them the truth or not.

"What about her condition?" Elizabeth asked in response to the last words her father had spoken.

Her *condition*. The word reverberated in Timothy's head like an out-of-tune key struck during the solo of a cheerful concerto. He wasn't sure why he'd used the word; it just came out of him in his desperation to make them understand.

"I just want to see Mommy!" Abby, still beaming with the excitement of the terrific news, twittered. She didn't care about her mother's condition. The fact that Madeleine could finally come home after being away for so long was all that mattered to her. She bounced off the sofa and ran out of the family room.

"Abby," Timothy called after her, "where are you going?"

Abby, popping her head back into the family room, nearly laughed as she said, "I'm going to the garden. To get flowers for Mommy!"

"Yeah!" Elizabeth shouted, fully approving of Abby's idea. "We should make welcome home signs too." She leapt from her place at Timothy's knees and ran for her art supplies.

"No. You have to listen," Timothy muttered, but it was too late to stop them. The back door leading out to the yard opened and shut as stomping steps running up the stairs echoed throughout the house.

"Should we make a nice dinner?" Jake wondered. "I can make her favorite pasta."

Timothy shook his head. He almost told Jake the truth, but then Elizabeth came roaring back into the family room with a stack of colorful construction paper and a big box of crayons.

"Why don't you wait for a while?" Timothy said to her.

Elizabeth looked at him like he was crazy. "But she'll be here soon, won't she?" Elizabeth dropped the stack of paper on the floor—it landed with

a whooshing thud—then dropped down next to it, immediately spilling every one of the sixty-four crayons out of the box onto the carpet. Her hands, each squeezing a crayon, instantly went to work making pink polka dots and orange stars along the border of a yellow piece of paper.

“I’m gonna draw some balloons,” she proclaimed. “What do you think Mommy will like better, red ones or blue ones?”

“I don’t -” Timothy started, only to be cut off by Abby racing back into the house.

“I got her favorite!” Abby announced, holding up two handfuls of multicolored tulips, some of them still attached to the bulbs that had kept them grounded.

“Oh, Abby,” Timothy sighed. He crossed the family room to keep her from trailing dirt across the carpet, which was all over her hands and her feet. “Let’s put those in the kitchen.”

He took the flowers from her hands and placed them in the sink.

“Why’s Mommy taking so long?” Abby asked.

“Go get cleaned up,” he said instead of answering her question.

W-E-L-C-O-M-E, Jake was spelling for Elizabeth, who was busy scrawling the word onto her sign, when Timothy reentered the family room.

“Look, Dad,” she said, pointing at her creation, “isn’t it pretty?”

“It’s...lovely,” he said, feeling lightheaded all over again.

“Why’s Mommy taking so long?” Abby repeated as she came bounding back into the family room, water dripping from her fingertips.

“How’s Mommy going to get here?” Elizabeth wondered.

Timothy sighed again. “Grandma and Grandpa are bringing her.”

“We get to see Grammy!” Abby cheered, her day suddenly getting even better.

“Abby, Elizabeth,” Timothy started again. “I need you to listen to me now.” His throat was so dry that it almost hurt to talk. His head whirled. He felt so tired, so utterly depleted inside, that he didn’t think he’d be able to endure the reaction he’d get to what he had to say.

“Your mother’s condition...” There was that word again; it tormented him even more each time it passed his lips. This time it made him want to heave. The bitter taste of acid invaded the back of his throat and tongue. He really thought that he might spew sickness all over the carpet, and yet again he wondered why things had to be the way they were. It had been so long since anything seemed normal. “Your mother isn’t -”

Timothy didn't get to finish his sentence before the sound of a car pulling into the drive cut him off. Triggered by the idling engine, which soon went quiet, Jake, Abby and Elizabeth jumped to their feet like puppets on strings suddenly pulled into position.

"Mommy!" Abby shrieked. She ran to the kitchen for the flowers. Elizabeth hoisted her jolly sign above her head. Together the children ran to the front door, anxious to greet the mother they hadn't seen in so long. Timothy staggered behind them, his stomach churning, his legs threatening to deposit him on the floor.

Jake opened the door and at once they all got a glimpse of Grandma and Grandpa coming up the walk. The couple's grim, old faces turned to startled looks of confusion upon beholding Elizabeth's welcome home banner and Abby's armful of flowers. The reality of the situation took a moment to settle among the children. The object in their grandmother's hands, in conjunction with Timothy's quiet sobs coming from behind them, however, let the truth be known. It was a container that Grandma held, and, suddenly, even little Abby understood the condition her father had been trying to tell them about.

All that remained of their mother was inside the awful little urn.

St. Mollusks

by Paul L. Bates

That the concept of gain without pain is an absurdly childish notion at best, and that the cyclic nature of events—notwithstanding an inevitable alteration of form—are the bedrocks upon which The Foundation has based its research, its discoveries, and its crowning achievement, the legendary facility whose name one might hear whispered only during the direst of times in some exclusive villa or chateau. For the name is spoken only in wavering tones, the speakers choking upon barely containable emotion; broken voices that know not of what they speak—*St. Mollusks*.

Located on a remote and uninviting rock of an island jutting some hundred feet above the equally dark and agitated ocean, it commands a singular view of the hostile sea on all sides, yet has no windows to enjoy this solitude save for the thick skylights that illuminate the upper story and look only upon the heavens. To the casual onlooker, the island appears as if it were a holdover from some other, more intimidating age. It remains nameless and is unlikely to be displayed upon any globe, map, military or merchant marine navigational software.

The building itself resembles nothing more than a huge cubist abstraction of a giant abalone, whose soaring spiral gray walls grope upward and inward like some dormant volcano patiently biding its time to spew a festering pall of contaminated ash across an unsuspecting world. The island upon which this commanding structure clings is black and pocked, like something that might have tumbled blindly for an eon in the icy void before coming to rest in more cordial surroundings during antediluvian times. How the plateau came to be is beyond speculation. Apart from the imposing edifice of St. Mollusks, the only other features the island boasts are the inlet on the north side sheltering the long quay at which the sleek windowless black ship docks occasionally bearing supplies along with those whose fate it

is to come seeking a cure for the incurable, and the cave mouth through which both are ultimately borne.

The exact location of the facility is an impenetrable secret guarded by the captain and crew of that black ship, the initiates of The Foundation, and those long bound in their service who faithfully patrol the seas beneath and around it in submerged armored gunships prepared to obliterate any vessel misfortunate enough to stray into its sovereign waters. So advanced is the technology employed by The Foundation, that St. Mollusks has been rendered invisible to both radar and satellite reconnaissance. During the day a sudden and unnatural fog will obscure the view of any accidental observer lost at sea.

Its patients have three things in common—the hopelessness of their condition, their obscene wealth, and the willingness of their families to believe the personal accounts of the initiates—those few who have survived their ordeals at St. Mollusks and who now fervently devote themselves to its unconventional methods.

A typical patient given over to the facility would be some captain of industry, retired head of state, forgotten idol of the masses, entertainment mogul, or other power broker—physically broken, in the final stages of failing health, sent home to die; someone having already suffered the full range of physical, emotional and spiritual indignities modern medicine offers the believer. Someone who has undergone numerous surgeries in some vain attempt to cut away whatever afflicts them; someone who has endured the horrors of toxic speculative therapies; someone who has come to know intimately endless drugs, each with its own array of side effects demanding others to stem the inevitable consequences of the last; someone who has grasped at well-articulated hope after flimsy hope until they are too weak to grasp at anything else, too erudite to waste what little life remains them on yet another excruciatingly fruitless journey into the dubious, beyond another costly fabrication of phantom hope. And most of all, a typical patient is someone too obstinate to die in spite of everything they have endured—someone for whom death still holds far more terror than all the miseries life has already heaped upon them. In such a person, the possibilities are infinite.

At this juncture, they are already beyond making their own decisions; they are beyond all expectation; beyond anything but the mercy of fate and the judgment of their families. At this desperate moment, someone close to them finally admits in their presence that they have heard a whisper; have

heard an innuendo so vague as to be less than a rumor; have heard from someone they trust, someone outside the family, of another whose condition had been so much worse—someone who was given up for lost; someone so far beyond recall as to warrant euthanasia; someone who against all likelihood, reason and sanity, survived. And not only survived, but recovered.

There follows an emotional chaos within that household, a chaos of blindingly bright optimism mingled with the bleakest leaden despair. Spontaneous swirling exchanges, cries of hoax, accusations of gullibility, demands of proof, livid outbursts of escalating frustrations too long contained, coupled with that soul-scorching self-examination and self-recrimination on behalf of every one of the participants in this inevitable ritual.

It is said that this crucial moment of emotional pandemonium is what summons the initiate; that this seething current of chaotic human sentiment acts like a beacon, draws the nearest initiate to the candidate from wherever he may be much as a fresh cadaver draws flies even when none were present just moments before.

The one who has sparked this poignant deluge of feeling, the one who in truth knows nothing of the Foundation, knows less than nothing—the one who has heard only the name of the facility—or perhaps only a misrepresentation of the name—is banished by the others, forced to beg his source for some sign of credibility.

It is a thing of great cost the other later confides, asking if the family is willing to bear it. Yes, yes, the seeker pleads, at once ashamed for having raised a final hope; desperately in need of anything to restore his own integrity in the condemning eyes of the others; urgently desiring to hasten the process, for the acute growing awareness of time passing has suddenly become a painfully tangible thing for him. Voices are lowered. Histrionics abound. Vows of secrecy are demanded and granted. Arrangements are made. The one who has sparked the bedlam in the sickroom returns to the bedside of the candidate with a singular newfound conviction. Doctors and nurses hovering like anxious vultures are abruptly banished. Night becomes day; day becomes night. Suddenly, without warning, without contact, without invitation, the initiate stands alone upon the threshold of the sick house, the eye of the psychic storm irrevocably drawn to the candidate, awaiting an invitation to enter.

The emotional chaos that has summoned him abruptly vanishes when he

reveals himself. Horribly disfigured, emaciated, with a waxy gray complexion and a spectral demeanor, he stoops before them in his coarse black robes that bear no resemblance to any garment they have ever seen; the rale of his icy breath stilling their unasked questions; the reek of decomposing meat permeating everything, dashing any and all preconceptions.

Their first impulse is to slam the door, to bolt it, to hide; to turn away, to let their loved one die in peace; to take no part in whatever blasphemous undertaking their minds have inadvertently fashioned; to simply put this entire ordeal behind them. But there is something in his doleful eyes—his large unblinking eyes of indefinite color that stare beyond the vacuity of their trembling souls—something that demands an audience; something that draws their complete attention; something that remains staunchly immune to rejection. So hesitatingly they bid him welcome in spite of their mounting monumental misgivings.

Shrugging off the inconsequential questions the bravest of them offers, he demands and is shown the patient. The initiate and the bedridden look upon one another with wide eyes that plumb the unfathomable depths of one another's souls. There is a prolonged moment of recognition between them; a frightful undeniable bonding far stronger than the familial ties that made the moment possible; a instantaneous kinship even the most incredulous of the onlookers is forced to acknowledge. The final kinship of death that unites us all is for the two of them a living thing—an unbreakable attachment has been formed that for the others remains something so appallingly unthinkable that they instinctively avert their eyes, secure their minds against witnessing any more, cleanse their memories of the entire spectacle, offer their souls to anything willing to spare them this fate.

From that moment on the initiate has but to ask and it is his.

He tells them his own remarkable story—or perhaps that of another more closely identifiable to this gathering—tells it as briefly as possible, leaving out all specifics and particulars; anything that might be investigated in detail at some less poignant future, anything that might in any way expose The Foundation to anything save the lasting awe he has inspired. He, of course, omits his own name, which might be familiar to them, even if his face is beyond all recognition. His presentation is callously indifferent, *take it or leave it*.

When his tale is told he states the terms. These are simple and few—

money, so much money as to make this proposed covenant beyond the reach any but the truly elite; secrecy, complete and total, now and forever, save for the moment another suitable candidate presents himself to any of them; no guarantees of success; and acceptance of the fact that should their loved one recover, he will spend the rest of his days as an initiate, spreading the quiet word of The Foundation to those whose means can ensure its perpetuation. The patient is lost to them regardless, but he will have a chance at *life*—something he does not at the moment. The terms must be acceptable to all present—no dissenters. *Is it acceptable to all?* the initiate demands quietly, making ready to leave should it be otherwise as he surveys their anxious eyes, lingering unbearably upon each of them. There is never any dissension.

Miraculously the black ship materializes from the swirling mists in the nearest harbor, docks to take on supplies regardless of the weather. The patient is bundled off on a gurney in the dead of night by two massive orderlies, leaving the family a lasting final impression of their silence, colossal bulk, simian physique and nearly transparent skin. A few quiet tears, a stifled sob, a collective gasp of relief as the door closes behind the initiate, a clear conscience all around and it is over—for the rest of them.

For the candidate, however, it is just beginning.

The black ship cuts through calm or swelling seas like a proud kite riding a zephyr; travels at speeds unthinkable to naval architects; vanishes back into the churning mists from which it so recently emerged; sails far from the nearest sea lanes; returns to the realm of mystique and fable. It makes excellent time, yet the patient experiences only an abiding darkness in his stark and windowless room. He is left with only unending night, total silence, absolute isolation—the perfect setting for fathomless introspection; the ideal environment for the awakening of pure awareness; the precise catalyst required for absolute self-mastery. He is barely cognizant of the ship slowing to enter the small harbor, the weighing of the massive anchor, the roar of the sea dashing itself against the stone, his gurney moving down the seemingly endless quay and even longer tunnel beyond, or the smooth ride in the pristine elevator up through the basalt heart of the island into the coiled interior of St. Mollusks.

Many do not survive the journey.

Even those of the stoutest heart are comatose by now, unaware of the voice of their physician, who has lately joined them speaking dispassionately of the techniques he employs and their humble origins. Nevertheless they

hear those carefully chosen words from afar, like a dream beginning. They hear words which at first make no sense whatsoever, words that offer them neither comfort nor hope. Eventually they hear his voice clearly, hear with every sleeping fiber of their being, hear with their very psyches cringing inwardly even as they struggle to grasp the truth of it.

The healer goes on at some length about how the use of leeches marked the beginnings of modern medicine; of how their application became misunderstood over time, misused, corrupted until it fell out of vogue altogether. His elucidation moves on to the specifics of pain; how its use was once thought to purify the patient of the devils tormenting him; how medicine of that largely misconstrued and vilified era was once the dedicated province of the Holy See which spared nothing to salvage the souls of those believed sorely afflicted. It culminates with a dissertation on the unique character of the giant sea slugs peculiar to the island inlet; the caustic nature of their digestive fluids; the possibilities of transformation they offer—an excruciatingly painful experience that for most will forever remain beyond all human endurance.

It is true that nearly all candidates that have survived their journey die in the slug tanks; that even in their comatose state they writhe in unspeakable agony, sometimes until all that remains is their glistening bones picked clean by the tirelessly methodical sea slugs. But it is in the nature of things that in due course only the fittest survive. Those whose determination and desire to live ultimately surpasses their inability to tolerate pain will, given this unique opportunity, annihilate all barriers to life, raze them irrevocably.

Those few who come to understand what the slugs offer them not only survive, not only endure, not only recover, but through a holy transmogrification so far beyond the pathetic groping and myopic understanding of conventional medicine, philosophy and religion transcend death itself. Those few who emerge from the tanks on their own power are truly the initiates, attuned to the sufferings of all mankind, well beyond the reach of the petty demons who cause that suffering, well beyond the grasp of the greater demons who feed upon it, well beyond the comforting banality that fills the lives and hearts of those they have left behind.

And so The Foundation is maintained generation after generation in perpetuity. The ranks of the initiates continue to swell, albeit almost imperceptibly. St. Mollusks, the Holy Church of Eternal Life Beyond the Certainty of Death coils upon its black plateau, secure in its indisputable truth

that through pain all things are possible.

Thicker Than

by Lydia Peever

She thought she saw Turner again today. He was peering through a fog of condensation on glass, ghost-like. Water droplets beaded down the dingy window that faced the city street. In between the blurry heads of customers in line, she glimpsed his dark hair plastered wet to his forehead. From the bridge of his nose, dark circles under his even darker, staring eyes. Black hoodie. Skinny jeans wrapped around his not-so-skinny waist. His face was calm and pale. His lips were colorless, but that meant little. Turner was usually colorless. He looked cold. A flicker of agitation, his brow may have twitched, and then he was gone.

Of course he was gone. The lump in her throat lasted longer.

Turner was dead.

This sort of thing had been happening a lot. He had been gone for a long time, and she thought she had seen him once or twice after the funeral. Now, over a year later, it was happening every day.

Jostling onto the city bus, there he was, sitting at the back—and then not. Sitting in the corner of the diner where he used to wait for her shift to end, there he was—then there he wasn't. Even if no one was sitting there, she thought she saw him. Walking with headphones screaming in her ears, a glance upward would snag what she thought was him up ahead. It would never be. Turner was dead.

There was no way she could tell her mother, or his mother, what she was seeing. Her aunt had enough grief to deal with. There was no one to talk to.

She had a therapist, but had skipped appointments for months now. Time flies when you are trying to live without...well, without whatever Turner was to her.

Their parents were lame, kids from school were lame. Their jobs, well her job—he never had a job—her job was lame. Perhaps being surrounded by

all these things they did not like made the lines of their relationship so blurry. They only liked one another. Everything else was just white noise.

Living beside each other all their lives, they were barely separated. Even when they were not together, what separated them? A few walls. A swath of grass. Air.

What were they? Cousins. Yeah, legally. By blood they were so much more.

For the first few months after the funeral, she thought about it a lot. With time, she accepted that it really never mattered what they were. They had just been close. That was a fact. She loved him too much maybe. Maybe not enough. It was to the point that she had never had a boyfriend or even entertained the thought of one. She did not want Turner in that way—they were related. There was just no one else. The lines of their partnership were not *that* blurry. No one was like him though. No one was like them. As if they were twins, they rarely spoke when alone. If they did it was ridiculous, over-animated, and what would sound insane to other people.

Turner and Jenny liked to be quiet and they liked to be alone. Turner and Jenny liked to read books sitting back to back, feeling each other breathe. Noticing the subtle dance of bone and muscle under skin as one arm shifted and pages turned. Rocking softly from a hitch of laughter shaken loose by a funny passage. The physical deflation of a breaking heart when a line hit home, or hit hard. Often they would read the same book at the same time. Two copies, his and hers. Never did they ever talk about what they read. They did not need to, sitting like that. Back to back, feeling everything the other felt.

They also liked to take photos of one another.

She had about five thousand photos of him. He had about five thousand photos of her.

Now he was gone and she had them all.

They were in a box. Under her bed. Every single one.

Unlike most people, they printed everything from their digital cameras. They deleted the files. On a good day, they never took more than two or three dozen images, as if what their cameras held were film instead of megapixels. Portraits in the snow. Portraits of new jackets and sweaters. Portraits of new haircuts. Portraits with roadkill. Close-ups. They took photos of the marks that made up their eye color with their temples pressed close so they could compare side by side. Photos of his dimples, photos of her smile.

Turner rarely smiled. Jenny smiled too much really, but it was a fake smile. Stuck on since she was too young to remember when she stuck it on. Her goal was to never have anyone ask what was wrong. People asked Turner what was wrong all the time and she felt a dark cloud of loathing every time someone did. A weak tiny smile usually staved off the question for her. Had she walked around like Turner, she would have never been left alone. If only he had perfected a response or defense mechanism, like her fake smile. He may have not ended up...well, ended up like he did.

She never looked at the photos once they stopped taking them. They had gone in the box, under the bed. The day after his funeral, she slid the box out, added the envelope of photos her aunt had given her, then slid everything back underneath again.

The day they stopped taking photos was when everything really changed. She knew that.

Then five people were dead.

She and Turner would never take photos or sit back to back again.

She brought the camera to the hospital to visit him once, just in case, but one look at him and she knew to put it away. Picking at the singular frayed thread from the cuff of his jeans, he did not look up when she walked in. Dry bare feet, a gray-blue shirt. His lightest of cream skin stood out in the room where everything else was painted white, save his clothing. Like he was the only human thing for miles. She had been told this was the first day he had not been in restraints.

Quietly, she had just wanted to talk. A rarity, so she began, "I know you didn't do it Turner."

"I did do it Jenny," he said without looking up, twisting the fray, "all of it."

All of it.

She had been in that house in the fall. The house had been under construction. It would have been a nice quiet place to relax at night. At least that was the plan when she and Turner first entered the slit cut in stapled plastic, where the door would eventually be.

Instead, they only entered it once.

It was the only time he tried to kiss her.

Seeing his ghost had her thinking of this, too. She was never sure he really tried to kiss her. Was the tension all in her head? Had the stillness and closeness they cultivated begun to claw at the edge of their adulthood? That

must have been all it was. That glance, a sigh. It all meant nothing. Besides, there was no way to ask him now, was there?

Nothing changed between them, but whenever she smelled sawdust or heard a hammer strike and ring off a nail head, she thought of that moment. Dark of an autumn evening. Fresh wood and glue. The silence and coolness of the night in the vacant house. That was the last day they had taken photos and the first night she began to think about what they were.

He became more withdrawn than usual after that night. Winter passed and his silence around others increased. Some noticed, but most did not. No one did anything. She and Turner still spent nearly every waking moment together when they were not separated by her few shifts at the diner or school; or walls, or air. She passed the silence off as growing up.

Then five people were dead. They had lived across the road in the house that was now built and no longer under construction.

She had worked that day and had not seen him in the morning. He had not walked her to work. He had not been there when she was done for the day. She walked straight to his house. His mom said she thought he was with her, then shrugged and closed the door. She stood there for a while until she heard her aunt turn off the television and go to bed.

The next morning they found him. Covered in blood, wearing the same clothes from two days before—the last time she had seen him. He was sitting in the neighbors' living room, fallen dominoes of carnage surrounding him splashed in pools of dark red. It looked like he had been sitting among them when he attacked. Two huge butcher knives were still gripped straight in his hands when they found him. There was no way he could have hidden those knives, large as they were.

The police said the family had been out until after dark that night. He must have been in the living room waiting for them. The wireframe animation of the crime was fascinating. They had him stalking in, badly rendered metal clenched in his fists. Blades out and points down. They had him sit on the couch. A family of stick figures floated in. Every figure paused for a beat. Swing. Stab. Strike. Slash. They had him murder everyone in less than four minutes. They had him sit back on the couch. Then, eventually, the sun had come up.

A week after she visited him, he found a piece of sharp metal on the carelessly bent edge of a window screen. She was told he had pressed his

elbow down until it punctured flesh, then tore himself backward down to his wrist, gutting his arm. Halfway through ruining the other arm, he stopped and sat down on the floor. Two nurses were in the room with him, but since he never said a word, their turned backs gave him ample time to bleed out.

So, a year and one month later, he was dead but she could see him. On the other side of the glass at the bus stop. No, it was a man in a suit. She thought she saw him behind her on her way to work. She thought she saw him walk in front of a car. She thought she saw him with knives but it was a customer with a fork. She thought she saw him in the bathroom, through the steam of stir fry, and on, and on, and on.

He was behind her as she came home, one step behind. As she undressed to bathe she saw him standing in her closet, behind the door. He was haunting her.

At home, she lay in bed, trying to fall asleep and not think. In truth, she went through this every night. Thoughts of that night, in the empty and half-built house. Thoughts of him in the hospital. Seeing him being taken out, handcuffed and bloody, and led into an ambulance. Tugging covers with her, she rolled to one side, and then the other.

Since she started seeing him everywhere, insomnia had taken over. She lay there forever, counting backward from ninety-nine to one. Anything to distract her. He kept surfacing, just like he did every night. She shifted her feet under the blanket, then stopped. Her foot stopped, becoming wedged under something on the foot of her bed. She pressed, and it yielded only a fraction of an inch. She tilted her head up and over, trying to see. There was nothing there. She tested with her foot again, feeling the same resistance and a thread of fear. She was not dreaming. She was wide awake.

She sat up. There, at the end of her bed and along the edge, her duvet was pressed flat. She ran her hand into the depression, following the contour of a human form. Someone was sitting with her.

Pulling her hand back slowly, she knew the impression could not be left over from moments ago. It was not her mother. The spot wasn't warm. With the door open a few inches, she would have heard someone come in—the floor was creaky. She had not been asleep at all. Thinking she could be imagining it, she stared. With a soft scuffling, the imprint shifted as though someone she could not see turned to look at her. Fabric twisted slightly as though pressed under glass she could not see. Holding her breath, she watched. Sitting straight up now, every sense buzzing. She blinked hard,

hoping she was not hallucinating. To the right, her duvet began to deflate in one small point. The movement grew into an inverted pyramid, as if a finger were being pressed into her bed. It was no ghostly finger, but something far worse.

A knife point. Under the tip, she could see the fabric straining. Then another, to the left of where the figment sat watching her. The spots pressed slowly deeper, each coming to a sharp point where the fabric began to fold in angles with the force. Eyes wide and beginning to tear, her mouth worked, but she could not scream. She knew he was there. Her breath caught in her throat. She knew he was with her, but the horrible thought—he'd brought knives. A sudden chill as her blood left her skin, her mind raced along with it, into panic. Finally, she found breath to speak—"Turner!"

Immediately, the hard pressed points lifted, leaving soft divets behind. The imprint of legs and buttock lifted as well. The fabric lost its flat ironed look, but the scoop of where he had sat remained. One, two, three, and her door swung wide open. He was leaving. Just as she inhaled, uncomprehending, her confusion was suddenly punctured. The door slammed shut. So hard, it shook the entire wall.

She told no one, and for two days was afraid to sleep.

Mind racing but trapped in a fog. Her last shift was a nightmare of plates slipping from her fingers, water glasses shattering on the floor, angry customers. And herself; shaking, weak, and unable to eat, she knew she needed to sleep. Her reflection in the mirror was wan, distressed. Saying nothing, her mother searched her eyes with concern. They crossed paths rarely as she left for a night shift just after the diner closed. There was no time to talk.

Hours of tossing and turning in bed followed hours of churning thoughts. Every sound had her bolting upright, waiting, in case it was him returning. Finally, she was too exhausted to react. She lay in bed thinking and waiting. Part of her hoped he would return. Even in death, he had some sort of substance. If he could sit on her bed, could she sit behind him and press her warm back up to his? *Would I feel anything*, she wondered. If there were any way to talk to him would he put the knives down? Turner would never hurt her. She was sure of that. A soft shuffle on the hardwood stopped her mind cold.

Across the room, she heard the whisper of a footfall. Another, and the small slide of fabric along the smooth wooden surface. Closer to her bed, she

could hear what her mind painted as an arm reaching out as if someone lay on the floor beside her. It was under her bed. One edge of her duvet hung low and swayed slightly as he reached under. The box. It shifted sharply, dust on the floor grating as if it were gravel on steel. Clutching into herself, she lay listening, wide-eyed. She heard the sound of the photos being removed. The envelope of his and the pile of hers. Tearing paper, then the sound of the envelope falling to the floor. Thicker paper was shuffled through. Flipped and slapped down into a new pile, one by one. Slowly first, then faster with the determined tempo of someone who knows the images well, searching for one in particular. From one to the other. Next one, next one. Ten thousand times if once, she flinched with each flicking sound. The ghost went through every one. When it suddenly stopped, she knew which photo was on top. His eyes. Her eyes.

Silence overtook the orchestra of whispering motions under her bed. No sounds, save the hush of breeze outside. No suggestion of his having left. Perhaps the ghost faded. Perhaps he was still lying under her bed, mirroring her frozen state on top. She turned over onto her back with no reaction from below. Stretching out her legs below the cover, then her arms above her head on pillows, she waited. She listened. The sun came slowly, yet sleep never did.

The tub was very full. It was daylight now. After eight, nearly nine. Dark circles under her eyes showed more life than her dull gaze into the mirror. Peeling off her shirt, cold air washed around her alien skin though she had no energy to shiver. Exhausted, no food—she had lost a tiny bit of weight. Not enough to register outside of the sick feeling she had when moving her limbs to shake off her shorts. Lethargy wracked the muscles of her arm as she dipped a hand into the water. It was too hot. She ran cold to even out the temperature, and then shut the taps off tight.

Slipping in, she sank below. Her hair rose in lazy waves around her face and in front of her eyes. As the motion in the water slowed, her hair settled back down. She remained under like that. So quiet without the familiar sound of breath. Heartbeat faint and slowing from the exertion of climbing in and sliding down into the warm tub.

A glint, then a shadow, crossed the wall. Hard steel reflected two warbled slashes of electric light through the water. Everything else was a swimming silhouette. Water rippled and she smiled. No desire to breathe wracked her. No impulse from her physical body to rise from the fluid and

gulp air. She lay as her vision swam and faded. She needed no oxygen to make sense of what she was seeing anyhow.

This way, she thought, he will not be able to haunt me anymore.

Darkness washed in the edges of the bathroom ceiling.

And he sat down on the edge of the tub.

His T-shirt was too tight, light gray and too thin. She could see his short hair dripping down the nape of his neck. Spine curved, he rested his arms on his lap. Out of her line of vision, she could not see the knives. Tilting her head, smiling softly, she looked at him. He tipped his head down and peered around his shoulder at her body under the water.

Pressure bore down on her lifeless body. No way to sit up, no way to move, the water clung to her as she became one with it.

Can't haunt me...

Darkness overtook her eyes and her mind. No thought now, and the simple vision of Turner, sitting on the edge of something invisible. Blackness surrounded him, immune to the daylight reflected from his soft white skin.

He turned to face her, ivory knuckles pointed with a strong grip on the handles of his blades. Poised over her waist and chest, he slowly raised both arms.

In this place of shadows and nothing she could hear him speak. As her last thrills of life drowned and dispersed in perfectly clear tap water, he spoke.

"I could not let go, Jenny. Not with you here."

He struck hard, knives slicing deep into her still, dead flesh. Dark blood swam instantly across her ethereal vision. Turner tensed and pulled the blades quick from her body. Metal grated in tandem out of her ribs and lower spine. He held them up and looked, then smiled. Watery blood from her heart and stomach washed down his forearms.

"It was always you, here, haunting me."

The Third List

by Samuel Minier

Billy pushed his way out of the sack the same way he was pushing through the chloroform fog—

—like swimming upstream in syrup, arms in sloppy circles, his fingertips his only sensory organs as they wormed against the burlap in search of the free air somewhere on the other side, stubbornly hiding from him until finally there was a narrowing, both his wrists coming together and then his fingers out and instantly cold, stretching the corded neck of the bag wide enough for him to wiggle forward, head and one shoulder through and then the other shoulder caught on the bag neck, his cheek smacking the freezing floor and slapping him back to reality—

He was in a room approximately the size of his dad's new den. Empty sacks hung on hooks above stacks of boxes lining three walls; the fourth wall forlorn and bare save for a door. Sitting next to the door, arms curled around his legs and pulling them tight to his chest, was a mutilated little boy in a green and gold jester's outfit. He glared at Billy, breathing heavily.

Billy instinctively lowered his own breath and slowed his movements, the way you should if you were walking through the woods and came upon a bear. He was barely conscious of these changes—this immediate calming was familiar, a well-known neighborhood, his default reaction to anything he didn't expect. What he didn't do was cry, scream, scamper back, or give any other reaction typical of a nine-year-old.

The other boy had bright blue eyes—too bright, as if someone had freshly painted them the color of a crystalline sky. His blond hair was silky, tucked behind ears shaped like ragged diamonds, pointed at the tops and bottoms. They'd been cut that way, probably with scissors, their edges flaking from the cartilage. Billy guessed the same instrument was used to slice open the boy's mouth, so that it curled toward his nostrils in a tight,

forever-cute smile.

The door next to the boy swung open and Santa Claus stepped in.

Billy's gym teacher was fat and jolly; this man was big and round but like a boulder, no soft curves. The floor-length red coat draped over his bulk exposed hints of thermal underwear at his neck and ankles. He had on woolly slippers, but Billy knew the boots he usually wore were soft tanned leather. Billy had noticed them when he'd sat upon this man's lap at the mall this afternoon.

"Marcus," the man said. "Could you get me something to drink, please?"

High-pitched gibberish bubbled from the boy's mouth. Billy could now see the scar where his windpipe had been cut.

"Yes, that would be fine," the man said.

Marcus scampered out the door.

"Hello, Billy."

Billy just watched the man, who was standing nine feet away. Billy had always been very good at conceptualizing numbers—he'd jumped two grades ahead based on his math scores alone. So, yes, nine feet. Maybe eight.

"Would you like to know what to call me? Most of them think it's pretty foolish to call me Santa." The man pulled off his red hat and rubbed his fingers against his scalp, through a schlock of hair more gray than white. "I'd have to say I agree."

The man's eyes twinkled behind his tiny spectacles. A trick of the fluorescent lighting, or the icicles hanging from them. Odd that the severe cold didn't bother Billy at all. It felt good, in fact, the pervasive chill against his hot skin.

"Then what should I call you?" Billy asked, in spite of himself.

"Believe it or not, my Christian name is truly Nicolas."

"Nicolas," Billy repeated and then clamped his mouth shut. That narrowing sensation from before now seemed to be pulling him in on himself, making him tight and coiled. It was telling him to be still again. To be careful.

Nicholas watched him in silence. Billy identified the familiar look of friendly study on the man's face—the same kind of look the school counselor had given him after his mom...

"You know what's strange, Billy? You haven't asked me what's happening. Where you're at, what I'm going to do to you. Most people would

ask th—”

“You snuck into my house.” Billy was careful not to rush his words. “You drugged me, probably with chloroform—”

“You know what chloroform is?” Nicholas didn’t rush his words either.

Billy paused. Nicholas waited.

“I read a lot,” Billy said.

“I’m sure you do.” It sounded like a compliment. “Were you scared when I grabbed you?”

“Yes.”

Nicholas looked like somebody had just told him the sky was purple. “Billy, there’s a difference between being startled and being scared. So were you startled, or were you scared?”

No answer.

“Billy, have you *ever* been scared?”

The door squawked open—Marcus, returning with a glass of milk and a tall stool.

“Ah, thank you.” Nicholas took the glass as Marcus sat the stool down. The carved-up little boy managed a leer at Billy before exiting again.

Propping his girth against the stool, Nicholas wedged his fingers into a pocket on the robe. After some tight rummaging, they emerged with a tiny packet. Nicholas ripped it open, swirled it down into the milk, then took a deep drought.

Billy waited until he was swallowing before blurting out, “What did you put in the milk?”

Nicholas patiently finished off the whole glass first. “Magic dust,” he said.

“You mean drugs.”

“Not the way you mean,” Nicholas replied. “Billy, why did you sit on my lap today? You seem a bit old for it. Also you don’t seem the type. To believe, I mean.”

Billy casually took a step back. A solid ten feet away. It was something to do instead of talk, which was good because the man was right—Billy didn’t believe, hadn’t ever. So why had he sat on the man’s lap?

“I don’t know,” Billy said. Why did he just tell him that?

Nicholas nodded in agreement. “Even after all this time, I don’t fully understand how it works either.”

Nicholas stood up, set the glass on the stool. His steps drifted him back

and forth as he talked.

“It used to be much different. Not really like the songs and stories, but...well, enough so you could see where the songs and stories came from. The whole naughty and nice thing for instance—there were never two lists, of course. It was propaganda, just trying to get the children to help out around the house, be nice.”

Nicolas stopped pacing. He was talking past Billy now. “It took some years before I realized what I was seeing. How some children...it wasn’t naughty or nice, good or bad. It was...”

He shook his head, smiled sadly at Billy. “Well, if this was one of the songs, I guess they would have written something about a third list.”

Billy vaguely registered all this, even managed a nod. What was really important was that Nicolas was seven feet to the side of the milk glass. Billy was nine feet from it, but he was probably quicker.

“Billy, remind me: what did you want for Christmas?”

“A puppy.” Billy edged a half-foot closer without the old man noticing.

“Yes. A puppy,” Nicolas said. “What kind of puppy?”

“I don’t know.” Billy hadn’t planned on saying that. He edged another half-foot closer to make up for it. Eight feet from the glass.

“I seem to remember you said, ‘A puppy that can’t get away from me.’ Have you had other puppies?”

“Three.” Billy waited for the old man to look away, but the light was playing with his eyes again.

“They all ran away? Or did something else happen to them?”

“They’re not living with me anymore, okay?” Billy snapped. Blood immediately rushed to his cheeks, combating the arctic crispness of the room.

Nicolas seemed a bit surprised too. “Okay, Billy. Okay. But I would think after three puppies...did you really want something else instead?”

Billy gave it to him because he knew it was what Nicolas wanted. “A baby sister. But I don’t have a sister, because my mom died.”

He took advantage of the old man’s satisfaction to take another step forward. Five and a half feet from the glass.

“I’m sorry to hear that your mother passed away.” But Nicolas didn’t sound sorry; he sounded intrigued. “So the dogs were a substitute for your sister? Had your mom been trying to have another baby when she died?”

“Yes. She said she couldn’t.”

“How did that make you feel?” Nicolas said.

Billy took another step forward, just out of spite. Nicolas could plainly see how close the boy was to the glass. Three feet.

“Why did you want a baby sister? What I mean is, what for? You said you don’t have a sister because your mom died. But is it the other way around, Billy? Did your mom die because she didn’t give you a sister that you could—”

Billy hadn’t intended to act yet—he’d wanted the old man’s back turned—but suddenly the empty glass was in his hand and broken into the shape of a jagged crescent moon, Billy darting with it pointed at the man’s neck, to cut his words off—

Nicolas took a nimble sidestep and blew the magic dust hidden in his hand into Billy’s face.

Crushed peppermint and cinnamon and something else unleashed tingling spasms in his eyes. The glass tumbled out of Billy’s suddenly numb hand, the sound of its explosion leaping up from the ground and danced in pulsating colors. *Visions of sugar plums* thought Billy as the room seemed to invert and he collapsed to the ceiling, even though he knew he was just laying on the frigid cement floor, staring up (or down?) at the old man.

Nicolas dusted the rest of the powder from his palm, regarding Billy with neither surprise nor anger. “Young man,” he said, “I’ve lived a dozen lifetimes. I can cross the globe in a blink. And I can smell what you want to do—and what you have done—from a thousand miles away. The hardest part of all this will be for you to accept that you are not in control.”

Hands seized his ankles—an upside-down Marcus, his raw-cut smile now like the frown on a theatre mask. He dragged Billy through the door, into a passage that seemed simultaneously like an ice corridor and factory hallway.

Billy forced down the bile in his throat as he struggled to discern if he was on the floor or on the ceiling; finally he just shut his eyes against the nausea, but even then red sparks like bouncing birds flitted before the dark of his eyelids, responding to complex rhythms that Billy didn’t realize were actual sounds until another set of doors slammed open and the echo of a thousand tappings created a fireworks display in his brain so frantic Billy had no choice but to open his eyes.

Marcus was hauling Billy upright, resting him against an iron railing that looked out across a cavern too square to be natural but too rough to have been carved by human hands. Below them—yes, below, Billy’s sense of

direction was stabilizing—eighty or so children hunkered over gleaming workbenches. The oldest was around twelve, the youngest maybe six. Billy's vision continued to clear, allowing him to take in the intricate mechanisms they mulled over, the artistic detailing they finessed...

The coal-black eyes with which they did all this.

Every one of the children had dark lumps of rock set where their eyes should have been. They apparently had no trouble seeing, their fingers contorting and spinning metal and paper and fabric into complex, beautiful forms. No light reflected off the rocks, though—their heads looked like flesh-covered skulls.

Nicolas walked up beside Billy. “The irony is, I stole the idea from the elf myth. I never had any workers, never even made any toys. I dispensed only a sense of wonder that was supposed to inspire gift-giving. But after beginning to discover all of you...well, it seemed appropriate to have you try to give something back.”

Marcus tightened his grip on Billy. Billy was more stable, but he knew Marcus could flip him right over the rail and to the cavern floor forty feet below if he wished. Billy risked a look back at Marcus—even this close, the paint that had been applied to his obsidian eyes was quite realistic.

“Marcus did all that to himself,” Nicolas said as Billy gazed at the boy's disfigurements. “He was one of my first, and I was still trying to work out the proper herb mixture. Something about the elf myth lodged in Marcus' brain and then one night he snuck a pair of scissors from the work area...”

Nicolas stopped, appearing genuinely sorry. With a deliberate breath he continued. “Billy, you'll receive a daily regiment of certain herbs and other mixtures. You are required to work, but you will always be treated well. And you will never age. Ever. I can't risk it.”

Marcus edged him tighter against the rail. There was no need to ask what would happen if he ever tried to leave.

Billy looked back to the work floor. All the children had stopped working now and were gazing up at their new compatriot with their dull hard sockets.

“Will my eyes be like theirs?” he asked. Just curious, not scared. He knew part of this acceptance was the dust, but part of it was just him, too.

Nicolas was right—Billy had never been scared. No panicked moments when lost in a department store or fearful dreams of things under his bed. He hadn't even been nervous when the police talked to him about his old house

burning down, his mother still inside...

Nicholas lowered himself to Billy's level. His eyes sparkled again, and his spectacles became tiny mirrors, revealing to Billy two little coal-eyed twins of himself.

"They already are, Billy. They always have been."

Nothing Bad Has Ever Happened Here

by A. A. Garrison

My room is at the end of the hall. No one goes in the room next door. Something bad happened there. My name is Jordan, and I'm eight.

I go down for breakfast but do not eat. "Why's no one go in that room upstairs?" I ask.

Father's paper is big and foldy and talks: "It's empty, Jord. Nothing in there."

"Let's put something in there, then," I say. A room shouldn't be empty, like people shouldn't be alone.

The paper says, "we'll see," but it's really Father, because "we'll see" means no.

"Something bad happened there," I say, just to say it. Some things should just be said.

Mother stops buttering the toast, and the paper falls with a crinkling—like Christmas wrapping. Father looks a way I've not seen him look before. "Nothing bad has ever happened here," he says.

But I remember. I'm a good rememberer. I had a brother, and his name was Daniel, and the room was my big brother, Daniel's, room. I saw him fly and it was bad. I say these things.

Mother leaves the toast altogether, looking at me hard. "Nothing bad has ever happened here," she says. Her words are like wind, kind of.

But I'm a rememberer and I'm remembering Daniel, his big hands and brown hair and so much taller than me. He played basketball and was good, so everyone loved him, and he could fly. I say this too, and Mother and Father look at each other funny, but not the funny that makes you laugh.

Father says, "you're making this up," but doesn't look like when I'm

really making things up.

I say how I was up early that bad day, first, before anyone, and so I went to see Daniel and maybe play some basketball like he did so good, because he'd been so sad and crying and it would maybe cheer him up.

"Stop it, Jordan," Mother says, and she looks like Father, now, too.

And I say how I knocked on Daniel's door and no answer and so I opened the door and it creaked. It was dark but I found the light because I'm tall like that now.

Father says, "obey your mother, Jordan," real unhappy-like, him squeezing the paper all crunched-up.

And I say how I turned on the light and found Daniel, standing straight but his feet not touching the floor, flying, and a rope tight above him and he not answering, then Mother shrieking and crying and bad bad bad—

"*Jordan!*" my parents shout together, Father's face so red, Mother crying just like on the bad day. "*Nothing bad has ever happened here!*"

But I must be wrong, since nothing bad's ever happened here, as Mother and Father seem to agree. I decide they are right, and I'm happy. I don't like thinking about bad things, anyway.

I eat breakfast, then watch TV.

Oh Abel, Oh Absalom

by J.R. Hamantaschen

Vernon Camacho is a thirty-six year old Puerto Rican man who grew up in the Woodside Houses housing project in (no surprise here) Woodside, Queens. Someone who didn't know any better wouldn't think that being a Puerto Rican in Woodside was such a big deal. Shit, walk down Roosevelt Avenue in Woodside and you'll see all types of Latin American establishments, from Colombian to Ecuadorian to Brazilian. Sure, they all mostly love plantains, and if that's really all you know about Latin America, then this may be a distinction without a difference: but those restaurants on Roosevelt Avenue are *South American*, with vastly different attitudes and cultures than Puerto Rico. Most of the South American expats in the neighborhood were the working poor, emphasis on both *working* and *poor*, and mainly just kept to themselves.

But Vernon, being a Puerto Rican, always felt some kinship to that knucklehead culture across the East River, in East Harlem. That's not how he'd phrase it, exactly. That's how his parents had always phrased it. He'd like to disagree, but he really couldn't. He never liked Woodside, and as a kid he'd leave it as often as he could, instead finding comfort in the streets of East Harlem, festooned as they were with the colorful iconography praising a culture he knew nothing about and that meant nothing to him. More than once, he'd mistaken the Puerto Rican flag for an advertisement for Pepsi.

Partly based on his resentment of Woodside, and partly because he just enjoyed being a wise-ass, he used to always insist that, in reality, he didn't live in Woodside. See, Woodside technically began east of 51st street, and his family lived in the western house of the project, on 49th street. So technically, he lived in Astoria. That didn't mean much for his purposes—shit, Astoria, with its Greek eateries, alien Arabs, and burgeoning yuppie population, had far less street credibility than Woodside. But even though his

parents no doubt found his neighborhood hair-splitting obnoxious, they beamed at what it presaged: an attention to detail, a critical mind. A mind, they felt, that could enable young Vernon to accomplish more than they'd ever accomplished.

Plus, Vernon was light-skinned. That Catalanian blood rose up and hid all that dark, like thick cream on a Greek frappe. That was a joke that Vernon's father, Hector, always wanted to tell him—he'd like it, his father thought, because he always tells people he lives in Astoria. But Vernon's father was bad with words—both English and Spanish—so he didn't talk much to Vernon. Still, he always went out of his way to buy his son frappes, lighting up inside thinking about young Vernon, he of fair skin and that stubborn spirit and sharp mind, like the lawyers on television. Young Vernon would accomplish anything, if only he wanted to, if only he set his mind on it.

Vernon Camacho, 36, waited in line with his plastic food plate, just like all the other inmates, to get his mac-and-cheese. Vernon was in prison, with two more months until his release, assuming he was released early for good behavior.

Vernon was serving a three-to-six-year conditional sentence for armed robbery.

Vernon's father had died about four months earlier, from a heart attack. A *massive* heart attack, the doctors had said, as if that made any difference. Vernon's mother, Angelina, was down in Puerto Rico. With her husband dead and her only child in prison, there wasn't much reason for her to stick around in New York, especially not now, not in November, when the dying trees only made the gray skies that much harder to avoid.

As his release date got closer and closer, Vernon thought more and more of El Barrio, that bastard neighborhood of East Harlem. There was a mural on East 117th Street and Third Avenue that had all this Puerto Rican shit: tropical setting, quotes from people he didn't recognize, et cetera. The thing he always liked about that mural was the chicken with the guitar. It looked funny, how dedicated that cartoon chicken was to playing his cartoon guitar, all the serious-looking Puerto Rican scholars and celebrities in the mural completely ignoring the fact that, right next to them, a bright yellow cartoon chicken was shredding on the guitar. As he got older and his parents got more and more worried about him, he'd tell them how he liked seeing that chicken,

and they'd loosen up a bit and think, oh, he's not a gangster, he's not a thug, what kind of thug would find a yellow cartoon chicken endearing?

East Harlem should be in jail, not me, Vernon thought. Yeah, it made no sense. But at his sentencing he wanted to tell the judge the truth: look, I'm here for the wrong reason. I wanted people to like me. I've got psychological problems. I'm depressed. It's East Harlem's fault. Where are they? They. The people of East Harlem. They never visited him: shit, most of them are gone, somehow gentrified-out by the Mexicans, of all people.

He went the whole day without saying a word to anyone.

The friction of his rampaging thoughts was enough to make him tired and burnt-out, even though he did basically nothing all day, except some light reading and surreptitious "lights-out" jerking off. He wanted to get caught and punished for jerking off, so all his righteous indignation could be transferred to the worthy cause of advocating for the human right to self-pleasure. Then people would pay attention to him and congratulate him for his advocacy, tell him they had no idea he was so passionate and articulate. He was like a little wind-up toy, stuck in the corner, looking for a way to turn himself around.

He was bored, and was content with being boring for others. Let them experience a bit of this.

The next day, he spoke to someone, a guard, a correction officer maybe, he couldn't remember, but that person told him he'd been approved for early release. He'd be out in twenty-eight days. Oh, shit. He became instantly nostalgic for all those boring days in jail. There was something cozy about how boring those days had been, something safely soporific, like a dull headache and a warm blanket. He'd never been raped in jail, never really been fucked with, just stayed by himself in his minimum-security prison with his fellow first-timers and minor drug dealers and nobodies.

Who would he live with once he was released? What would he do?

He'd have to call his mother. Fuck.

He looked around his little cell, which he had to himself. There was a toilet in the right corner, a bare bed to his left, a shelf with an alarm clock and some books. He didn't know how big the cell was, the square footage or anything like that. He wasn't good at that shit. Everyone assumed Puerto Ricans knew handy-shit—how to fix cars or build stuff—but he never knew

any of that. If someone told him that method X was the right way to build Y, and method X had been used, Vernon would eyeball it or make a face suggesting he was familiar with the method proposed and found it satisfactory.

A letter, somewhere, written by someone else.

So You Know, World

I watched my fiancé being raped. I saw all of it, every last bit. She was a pretty girl, young, pure. Her whiteness, the opaqueness of her skin, her ethereal quality, made her even more pure. She was a ghost, sent back to earth, too pure for Heaven or Hell, too pure to be anything or anywhere, except with me. Her rapists were drawn to this quality of hers, to ruin something transcendent, just because she was pure and they were not: they were tellurian, she, something else, something transcendent.

There were four of them. They were big and burly. No, two of them were like that, the other two were thin and angular, like weasels. Jittery.

The burly men were the obvious alpha males, held the center of gravity, and the two weasels were always jittery, in constant motion, fluctuating, as if they were anticipating being untethered from their alpha males and blasted out to orbit, alone, vulnerable. Worthless.

What was the worst part of watching them rape my dear fiancé? Seeing those two weasely men inside her. It's one thing to see two lions take down a prized gazelle. Sad, but understandable, almost inevitable. But those two weasels, they would never be able to have her without the assistance of those two juggernauts. The two juggernauts were worthy in their way, by being dominant and strong, by being able to take. But not those weasels. The way those weasels laughed, how excited they were to have any part of themselves in any wet orifice of hers they could locate and widen.

I saw all of it, my eyes cracked windows, unable to adjust, to see anything else.

A hand-written addendum to this letter, in fastidious graphite:

Note to anyone reading the above: if you couldn't tell, that was all fake. None of that happened. I never had a fiancé. I accidentally wrote dear fiancé instead of dear fiancé and considered not even changing it because raping a

deaf fiancé sounded even worse. Eech, what is wrong with me!?

The above is obviously fake, and regrettably stupid. And the whole purity shit, emphasizing WHITENESS: makes me sound racist. Stupid. And tellurian, a poor choice, a pretentious word. Same with ethereal; why does all tragedy have an ethereal, transcendent quality to it? Saw these words on Dictionary.com's Word of The Day. Not a good feeling.

Not what this is about. Regrettable, I hate to think someone finds my records one day and thinks the above is real. If I'm going to partake in mythmaking, must make it better, or abandon the whole enterprise altogether, let the record speak for itself without the pseudo-psychiatry BS.

Vernon resolved to talk to someone today. Not communicate with someone, which he did daily with his wispy head nods, but actually *talk* to someone. He had some acquaintances he could hang out with, all Hispanic, darker-skinned Puerto Ricans and objectively dark-skinned Dominicans.

There—yes, over there—were three of his pals at the table, eating chicken fingers and mac-and-cheese. There was Manny, stout little dark-skinned Manny from Mexico (Mexico, was it?); Hector, a bald, skinny, lighter-skinned Puerto Rican with heavy creases around his mouth, as if he were a three-dimensional model made out of paper; and Frank, a skinny Puerto Rican of no real distinction. Both Hector and Frank looked like those too-skinny hustlers you always find on an uptown 6 train, talking too loudly about pussy or a hustle or 'dis nigga said dat' or something of the sort. Manny looked like the beefy dishwasher you catch out of the corner of your eye at some undistinguished local restaurant, that 5 foot 2 good-natured Mexican guy who points you in the direction of the bathroom who you then instantly forget about. When Vernon was out of jail, he'd never be able to I.D. Manny out of a line-up; the only thing he'd remember about Manny was how he felt bad about not being able to remember anything about Manny.

"Sup Vernon," greeted Hector.

"Not much. Getting out of here soon, if you didn't hear. About a month."

"Word? Good to hear, man. Don't be getting yourself back up in here anytime soon. Rebuild your life out there."

"Yeah," he nodded. Anytime anyone says they are leaving, every other inmate turns into Oprah. Providing well-meaning but clichéd advice is the

only temporary salvation anybody seems to seek in here. It's the easiest box to check-off on the list of good deeds.

"No seriously man, I mean it. Look at me, man, I'm in here for fucking some dumb bullshit, black tar, stupid shit, I never even did it. I was fucking just ferrying it for some nigga' cross-town. Not even fuckin' cross-town nigga, it was fucking, I took a bus from Park Avenue out to Second Avenue, shit fell out of my fucking pocket. Fucking stupid kid shit, man. Point is, I guess, is no matter what, don't do no stupid shit anymore, no matter how little you think it is."

Crackhead Frank nodded solemnly. Manny was inscrutable as always, like a thought never passed through his squat, beefy head.

"Word, I'm gonna be on the up-and-up, for real. I'll see you on the outside." Other inmates loved hearing that: see you on the outside, like they were all going to make it out.

"Knock on wood," Hector added, indeed, knocking on the wood table. That's another thing all these inmates seemed to share, some stupid belief in fate or mysticism or something. That way, they could all believe their incarceration was inevitably leading to some kind of redemption, like this was all some great big plan and not the insignificant bullshit of a bunch of impoverished nobodies. They were ledgers on a crime report, a check-mark on the CO's daily log, a bit of annoying doggerel scrubbed out and forgotten about.

Nothing creates meaning like punishment. No priest or preacher in the world lived the concept of redemption like these sad fucks. All of them. Even the big bad tough guys, the hardcore guys, the guys who pretended not to give a shit. Redemption became more than a narrative with these people, it became something almost physical; you could see it if you looked, the way their heads were always nodding anytime someone spoke the Good Word (or something presented with the gravitas of the Good Word). They would even nod their heads before any of the Good Word was spoken: just participating in a public act associated with redemption and transcendence was enough to set them off, everyone vying to agree and extol the hardest, to be the most sincere, to be the most dedicated. Unnoticed competitions would ensue, where one inmate would demonstrate his sincere desire to change his ways by nodding like a happy parrot and yelling "Amen" whenever the speaker's pitch got dramatic, only to be one-upped by someone who'd complement his "Amen's" with a hand-clap, until a little passive-aggressive war of escalated

woops and jeers and holy ghost conversions took place, two people not just being redeemed, but being the fucking *best* at redemption.

It was stupid, Vernon knew. But still, be polite....

“Word, knock on that wood for me.”

“Will do man, for you, will do,” Hector added, “for you man, for you.”

Vernon mentally rolled his eyes at Hector’s melodrama and walked to the cafeteria door to go back to his cell.

What should he do upon his release? Maybe get a tattoo. But why? Having a tattoo was like adding value that couldn’t be taken away. You could be penniless and on-the-street, a complete piece of shit, but you still have that tattoo. When you were dead, and some stranger looked at your dead carcass—your dead nobody carcass, now even more of a nobody, literally a nobody—well, they will see that tattoo. That’s something added. Value added.

Or maybe a cowboy hat? Anytime Vernon had seen some guy with a cowboy hat, he thought, man, that guy probably isn’t ever bored. A guy with a cowboy hat looks like someone going somewhere. A cowboy hat provides context. Even if you’re bored doing nothing, sitting in a lonesome bar, well, with a cowboy hat, you’re a mysterious drifter, a brooding bad-ass. Well, maybe, but a Puerto Rican with a....

Something wrong sliced into his left ear and cascaded off the left side of his face. His ear burned, inflamed, but it was a cold heat, like the life had been drawn out of it.

He turned around hard on his right, and saw a thin black man he didn’t recognize. Well, he did recognize him, sort of. He recognized this guy as that guy he could never get a bead on. The man was so dark he was like the *Alien* creature, so dark you couldn’t see his eyes, which he kept at half-lid, no visible whites. This man was thin but tough, wiry, average height, maybe 5’7”, 5’8”, close-cropped hair, close-cropped everything. If this guy was out in the streets of East Harlem, he would be the hanger-on outside some head shop or barber shop, chewing gum, eyeing everyone but not really focusing, all tight, all coiled. And now he was uncoiling, holding some kind of something, something hard and seeming metal.

It was a plate tray of some kind; but while all the plate trays Vernon ever saw had been plastic, this one was gleaming and silver.

They squared off at each other, maybe a foot or two away. Vernon hoped mystery-man moved first. Vernon didn’t really know how to throw a punch and knew he could only get away with that in close quarters.

He needn't worry. Abdul—the man's name was Abdul, Vernon suddenly remembered—roared forward, both hands swinging the tray like a pro-wrestler with a fold-out chair. Vernon barreled forward to meet him, shoulders first, jamming Abdul's fingers against the tray and lessening its impact. There was a dramatic toppling sound as the tray fell out of sight, which got everyone's attention. The anarchic sound of the chaos elicited a commensurate roar from the on-looking prisoners.

Vernon found his arm extended—he didn't even realize he threw a punch—and it connected. Technically. It connected in the sense that his arm extended until it ran a dead-stop into something, but there was no force there. No connection there, no depth. His arm and fist were like a middle-school teacher's chalkboard pointer.

Vernon suddenly got very nervous.

Now Vernon had his arms wrapped around Abdul, as if to shake him. Abdul kidney-punched him hard, fast, and repeatedly. Four or five punches landed before Vernon figured out where the pain came from. He thought of birds and the autonomic way their beaks darted into the water.

Vernon bellowed, more out of frustration than anything, and with a quick fit of inspiration leveraged his greater weight to pile-drive Abdul into the nearest table. The mass of watching men moved around them like an amoeba around an acquired pellet.

Vernon had his arms wrapped tight around his skinnier aggressor, his forehead under Abdul's chin, nuzzling hard, jutting hard, hoping to strike Abdul's Adam's apple or jaw. When he could, he'd loosen his grip and hammer blows with his left hand, or throw little ineffectual punches to Abdul's midsection. Mainly, Vernon was just trying to smother him. Fantastically, he pictured there being nothing visible but Abdul's flailing arms tapping him on the back. Like a little boy seeing if his playmate had "enough," Vernon arched his back to get a better look at his opponent. Somewhere, somehow, he planned on raining down a torrent of calculated knee strikes, but that never happened.

His sense of sight must have been elsewhere because Abdul's spindly claw lodged itself somewhere wet, somewhere unwelcome, and Vernon's eye flooded with the sharp sting of blood and sweat. A crushing palm jammed up his jaw and caused his tongue to mesh through his teeth.

And then he was on his back and the prison guards, playing hockey referee, decided this was enough and jerked them away from each other,

hard. They both sprang back like they were on bungee cords.

“You fucking punk bitch!” Vernon yelled, more indignant than angry. Why the fuck did this asshole attack him? Abdul wasn’t responding in any way to being dragged off; he just contorted and sagged wherever he was being dragged. Abdul kept his mouth shut and his demeanor unknowable, face stolid, like nothing had changed, head down, just back to the grind.

“Fucking bitch, fucking scratching little bitch. What fucking faggot scratches a nigga?” If any of his old friends had been around, they would have known Vernon was pissed (and not just by his tone): he rarely said ‘nigga.’

Back in his cell, Vernon nursed his wounds dramatically. Shit stung. Fucking low blow.

The guards had seen from the outset that he’d hadn’t started it. They’d placed him in his cell brusquely and without respect, and gave him some curt order to stay put. That was C.O. speak for *we know you didn’t do anything wrong, but just shut the fuck up, anyway.*

“Camacho, mail. First your own suite, now full-service mail delivery.” That was Tony, the big jovial black prison guard. He always said flip shit like that. It seemed that if a black guy became too fat, they had to become nice. And jovial fat black Tony was nice. The fat creases around his eyes and those weird skin rolls made him look like a dog of some kind, some obese black Shar Pei. When Tony was walking behind you, that shit felt like Indiana Jones running from that boulder.

Tony slid the mail through the bars. It was a typical, plain letter, no return address, addressed to Mr. Vernon Camacho.

“Getting some TLC on your big day. Maybe it’s a fan of your prize fight.”

Vernon eyed the letter and liked thinking about himself as a prize fighter, with a bruised left eye, peering down at a mysterious fan letter, a letter urging him never to give up. Eh, whatever. But he enjoyed neither mysteries nor surprises, and prison wasn’t the place to cultivate an interest in either.

Vernon slid open the letter. Inside was a single page of white, standard computer paper, with four simple, declarative sentences:

You are a rapist. Your son was the product of rape. Your son is dead.

We killed him.

Vernon parsed the phrases in his head, again-and-again, to see if the meaning remained the same. Somehow, the dull headache and stinging eye pain still predominated over these mysterious new feelings. But slowly, his headache went from predictable to erratic and then his insides emitted sparks, a veritable electrical storm in his chest. Again, he read the letter. Then again-and-again.

“Yo, Tony. Tony! Tony! Tone-eeee!”

He lost himself for a moment, somewhere.

“What the fuck is it, man.”

“Who sent this?” Vernon pushed the letter out toward him.

“Shit, how am I supposed to know. You know as much as I do,” Tony responded, dumbstruck. Tony’s brow furrowed and he looked exasperated and somewhat repulsed, as if Vernon had just offered him a blow job. This was an abrupt, unexpected, and unwelcome frivolity, and best dismissed immediately. “What the fuck is this shit, man? A rapist? This shit probably sent to the wrong dude.” Tony’s heart beat faster with thoughts of Vernon bringing a lawsuit for negligent infliction of emotional distress. Tony had to suppress the urge to crumple up the letter and throw it in the trash. But he flipped the envelope and checked again and, indeed, it was addressed to Vernon Camacho.

“Do you even have a son?”

“Yes. Yes.”

“Fuck man, you never mentioned a son....” and then Tony stopped himself, because why should Vernon tell him these things?, and there was an incipient tension in the air, and now it was best to shut up and do something. He gave the letter back to Vernon. “You wait here,” Tony said without thinking, only days later realizing how self-evident that piece of advice was, “I’m going to go, get, talk, to someone.” As Tony hustled out of sight, Vernon sat back down on his bench, staring.

Days later, the following facts were confirmed: Vernon’s five-year old son, Cruz Luong, had been stabbed twice in the back of the head less than a block from P.S. 20, his elementary school, which was located in the neighborhood of Flushing, Queens. The murder had occurred only two days ago. There were no witnesses, no suspects. The only evidence was the two holes in the back of young Cruz Luong’s head: mechanical, emotionless

holes, as if they were created by the human equivalent of a paper hole puncher.

As most of the men in prison generally had not left childhood without some sort of scarring—be it mental or physical—an attack on a child, let alone the murder of a child, was a crime for which there was no pardon. The language of equivocation and the insistence on context that prisoners internalized to make sense of the trajectories of their lives was absent where a child was concerned. Where children were concerned, prisoners were the starkest of Manicheans.

Everyone learned about what happened, and everyone was consoling. The guys who had actively disliked Vernon now gave him sympathetic nods; people he was only casually acquainted with consoled him openly; and his actual friends swore to him a blood oath of fidelity that would rival the *Ensiferum*.

“No one deserves that, man, no one,” everyone said—at this moment, it was Tony saying it—and Vernon just nodded without affectation.

So sympathetic were his fellow inmates that none expressed any jealousy when Vernon’s sentence was expedited and commuted to parole. His son’s death and the decision to release him occurred within two days of each other. No one batted an eye.

Between being present with Vernon when he learned the news, and being keenly aware of Vernon’s impending release date, Tony, whenever he was on mail duty, took it upon himself to rhapsodize at length with Vernon, his captive audience. Mailmen out on the street delay their route for a quickie or other mischief; Tony delayed his to play-act psychiatrist.

“And I ain’t ever even see you cry, man. I have two kids, man, two boys, and I can’t even imagine what you are going through. I feel you man, I feel you. I just want you to know, if you bottling all that shit up, man, it’s ok, it’s ok, you got to let that shit out sometime.”

And Vernon just nodded, without affect. There was no point in talking about it. He felt gray and dull, a rainy immutable sky in human form. No one mentioned the reference to rape in the letter, and that was the only line of questioning, Vernon realized, that would wake him from this stupor. It’d leave him stuttering and dissembling, but he’d be awake, at least.

A couple days before his release, he was given time to take care of some of the prosaic details of his release, i.e. make a few phone calls. Vernon moved with all the vigor of a man whose spine was parallel to the earth.

“Mom?” he asked when he heard the ringing end and the receiver click.

“Vernon.” He heard the edge in her voice already. Well, it wasn’t fair to call it an edge in her voice; it was just her natural timbre. A yappy dog about to go off.

“Mom. It’s me, Vernon.”

“Yes I know Vernon, I jus’ said your name. I have a name too, you know, you don’t nee’ to call me ‘Mom,’ nobody else calls me that.”

No one else called her ‘Mom’ because Vernon was her only child, obviously, but he knew better than to deploy reason.

“Well Mom, I’m out in two days. And I need somewhere to stay—”

“Well you’re not coming down here, you can stay in New York.”

He breathed deeply and closed his eyes. This was the cresting tide of an inevitable headache. It felt appropriate to have his nostrils burning with whatever pungent dust or debris was coming off this worn phone. Piece of shit phone looked like it’d been ransacked off the streets of New York, some Coney Island nostalgia piece.

“Where am I supposed to go, then.”

“I said—dee apartment. Whee still got thee apartment, in Queens.”

“Mom, I told you before. You are going to lose that apartment. It has to be your primary residence. It’s NYCHA rules, they look into that.”

“VER-NON”—the way she said it, you’d think he was a spoiled college boy begging his mommy for a bigger allowance—“don’t talk on the phone about this shit, stoopid. It’s under control. Just shut up, the Machatos next door got the key, go speak to them. It’s good you’re out, you watch the apartment.

“You probably don’t got much time there, so I won’t keep you on the phone no longer. I see you. I’m glad you can stay in the apartment. Call me once you get in and sit-choo-ated.”

What had he expected? That she’d invite him down to Puerto Rico? Maybe. But what would that have done? In some hazy, indistinct rendering of his imagined future, his mother invited him down to Puerto Rico to begin anew, where he never brought up Cruz. And, since she didn’t know anything about Cruz, she never brought Cruz up, either.

And in this reverie he’d continue on with his life, and there was no pain or doubt, and in time the brief tenure of Cruz’s life required concentrated thought to remember, it being so distant and remote, to the point where he’d sometimes doubt whether Cruz ever even existed. For there was an unwritten

rule that the life of a child must be avenged, but he'd like to check the exceptions to that rule. He intuited that enforcement of that societal norm was contingent upon some kind of bond with the child. How many men did he know who didn't give two shits about their child, who ducked child support and were somehow so nonchalant about the whole thing: offering at most presents, never presence. You bring up the ease which with these dudes abandon their kid, and they get mad at you, run through the whole gamut of excuses with you, tales of crazy 'baby mammas' to just boilerplate dismissals, just a 'C'mon son,' as if you just know not to bring the issue up. Yet, if anyone ever hurt their kid, well, "nah nigga, now shit's on, nigga, that's my fam, nigga": all of a sudden these deadbeat dads become fuckin' father of the year, eager Cliff Huxtables.

He was at least being consistent, he figured.

When Vernon was seventeen and believed in something like love, he and this girl promised they'd be faithful to each other. She was going to college upstate at Albany, a good school, and they made all the plans and commitments they should have; bus-this, Amtrak-that, and all was well and good, and then soon enough it was her day to move. He helped her pack up any last things—made sure the blue bulldog he won for her on Coney Island was next to her in the backseat—and they hugged really tight and she made that half-smile scrunchy face that showed off her high-cheek bones. Then she and her family drove off and she was gone, and all those finely-wrought emotions were for nothing. Those promises they made to each other were the product of some liminal haze, and, with her gone, he had unknowingly but decisively entered a new period. A period where she wasn't around and wasn't going to be around, some chapter of his life that ended and was stowed away. That had been that.

That's what he felt when he was out of jail. All he did was walk out—escorted, of course—and, presto, all that prison bullshit was behind him. He was given a card that had a detective's name on it. Then he got in Mr. Machato's black beat-up Civic and off they went, back downstate to Queens. Mr. Machato didn't even say much—you'd think he was just picking Vernon up from a Seven Eleven. Good old saintly Mr. Machato, with his wizened, stoic face, his crusty wife, and their two fully-grown, dependent retarded children, who were rarely ever mentioned.

They rode in stony silence. Mr. Machato didn't ask about prison life because he didn't care. Inmates seemed too wiry and frenetic and rambunctious, plotting, scheming, hustling; quiet Mr. Machato seemed like he was from another planet, like he'd be shocked to learn people like those prisoners even existed.

He barely even talked when they stopped at the roadside diner. Basically, he spoke just enough to tell the waitress his order, to let Vernon know that he thought his father had been a good man and that he'd been sorry to hear of his passing, and to explain how Vernon's mother was able to keep her apartment:

"She sends us the check each month, written out in her name, and we drop it off with the Super. That's it. They don't even know she's not around. Your mom came back to New York to recertify her income for the apartment last month, so she may not be back for a while. I got no idea if your apartment needs repairs, but be careful about that, I guess."

And with that Mr. Machato shrugged. Vernon knew it'd be unbecoming to probe the arrangement set up between Mr. Machato and his mother, but he damn well wanted to make sure that his mother was compensating Mr. Machato for basically allowing her to keep two residences. But Vernon said nothing, just nodded.

The ride from the prison to "home" was another liminal state, a feeling of unreality, that mercilessly ended when Vernon glimpsed the Triborough Bridge. He could have thought about the symbolism—driving through the deprivation endemic to the South Bronx, across a bridge providing two options, west to East Harlem, his old haunt, or east back to Queens—but instead he defenestrated his pretensions, shut his eyes, tucked his neck in disgrace and just wished to be doing something else, anywhere else. He kept his eyes closed until the moment Mr. Machato pushed him gently, apparently figuring he must be asleep. They had arrived and were parked about a block away from the Woodside Houses.

Mr. Machato had a letter in his hand.

"We're home, Vernon. Welcome back." Vernon nodded and they both left the car. Mr. Machato popped the trunk, Vernon got his stuff, and they walked the block in silence.

At the front door, Mr. Machato again reminded Vernon that he'd already given him the keys, and then handed him the letter he'd been carrying. "This was left under my door yesterday, it's addressed to you. A friend, perhaps?"

Even Mr. Machato, unhip as he was, blanched at the naïveté inherent in his question, and took that faux pas as an opportunity to expedite his departure. He forced Vernon to take \$300, wished him well, reminded Vernon to knock if he needed anything to get adjusted, idled himself by checking his mail (it was a Sunday), and disappeared into the complex.

Vernon was tumbling the letter in his hand the whole time he pantomimed the unreality of being back in his childhood home. He imagined what it'd be like if he were being captured on camera for an unsuspecting audience. All they'd see was him, back in this apartment, checking to see if the lights worked, checking the apartment for dust, carrying a letter, carrying out the same list of listless activities as anyone else. They'd have no idea what this letter was capable of, how just looking at it induced some strong psychological reactions, made his stomach bottom-out, made him feel like he was walking on slanted ground through a perpendicular maze of askew, vicious angles.

Yes, here he was, the same two bedroom apartment—the 2 BR, as he knew it from all those income recertification forms—that he'd lived in all his life. And now he went into his bedroom and turned on the light, which flared hot like a supernova for a brief second until it burnt out with an audible pop.

He unfurled the letter, and the strain of the dark made the back of his eyes ache and feel pregnant, as if this letter was actively evil and able to harm him just by being read.

We Will Be Contacting You Soon. We Want To Speak To You. You Want To Speak To Us.

He unpacked and slept without eating, without shaving, without shitting, without doing anything. He felt it immoral to find sleep in circumstances like this, but when he did, he thought of Kim-ly's big full lips, which were most prominent whenever she looked confused. Which was often.

On the subway the next day, he thought of his dead child mainly because thoughts of his dead child weren't coming to him instinctively. That is to say he proactively conjured up images of what his child might have been like because he felt bad that, without his own guilt-stricken prodding, all the little bouncing babies and school-aged children on the train would have passed him by without causing him grief.

He just didn't care, really, and how on Earth could that be true?

He should go to the police, call that number he'd been given. Shouldn't

the police be contacting me? He could show them the letters, maybe get some police protection...but no, he wouldn't do that, he couldn't do that, he had to see this through, perhaps out of the same impulse that introduced ersatz images of a chipper light-skinned half-Vietnamese school-aged boy as the screensaver of his subconscious.

He'd walked through El Barrio for less than thirty minutes until he went home to Queens. While on the 6 train from 59th street to 86th Street, he thought the same jokes he had always thought. At 86th street—please, all white people, please get off the train. Then, at 86th street, a whole lot of professional and posh looking types disembarked. Then, up at 96th street—no, seriously rich white people, get the fuck off this train. As if privy to his imagination, almost everyone in the subway car emptied out at 96th street, leaving just some single mommas with kids in tow and a smattering of the physically or economically disabled.

He got off at East 110th Street, ducked some young dark-skinned kid asking/insisting “Yo, lemme get an extra swipe,” ignored some angry black man giving everyone a mean-mug, and ambled somberly behind the hobbled, elderly Puerto Ricans who traversed these East Harlem subway steps since time immemorial. He walked east on East 110th street toward Third Avenue and, even though there were some atypical condos or bakeries here-and-there, it was just all the same bullshit. He didn't even make it to Third Avenue, as the combination of bummy-looking loiterers outside the public library and the truth-in-advertising banner of the Hellgate Post Office was enough to get him to hightail it back downtown and then across the East River to Queens.

He spoke to no one, got no daps, got no approval, and for the first time in his life he was fine with it. If only it'd always been like that.

“I'm Da-tch.”

Vernon squinted his eyes and creased his forehead. He was back in Woodside and been walking, head down, oblivious, when this stranger brought him back to Earth:

“I said I'm Da-tch, as in, from Holl-and. What do you think of that, Mr. Mexican.”

Vernon's forehead was still terse, eyes of squints, as if in rictus.

“Fuck you say, son? Bitch do I look five-three and brown? Who fuck you be, saying shit like that to people, son. Nigga better get the fuck outta

here before I beat your ass, son.”

“Mijn hemel, there you go. Ghetto talk. That Ghee-toh talk goes straight to your head, ja?”

Vernon kept squinting at this man. Vernon didn’t know shit about this guy or what he was talking about, but that lederhosen accent nullified any fear he’d otherwise be feeling. The man was six three, muscular, bald and dome-headed, broad-shouldered in brown pleats and a tight brown T-shirt that looked basic but which Vernon knew was of some material or of some brand that made it expensive and chic. Vernon wasn’t used to being intimidated by white people—by this he didn’t just mean of European descent, like he was—but *white people*, you know, that ineffable middle-class whiteness that bleached out the aggression and volatility of generations past. This man was imposing, no doubt, but he was composed, too, and Vernon couldn’t picture him lashing out unexpectedly, as if this man was contained behind some invisible frame.

“Nigga you fucking retarded, get the fuck outta here. You know where you are, nigga, you right by the projects.” Vernon pointed one under-handed finger in the direction of the western house of the Woodside projects, only a block away. “Stupid fuck.”

“I know whe-ere I am. And I’m not a nigga or a nigg-er. I’m white, obvious. Like you, you are white, too, ja?”

“And joo know I know where I am, don’t joo, Vernon.” He had no accent when he said Vernon, and that was unsettling.

“I’m here to give you a message. I don’t know why you’ve been selected, so to speak, but you have be-en. We know you won’t do anee-thing stupid. This just involves you, your child, and us. No reason to bring other people in it. If you do, we will kill them. Everyone, anyone.

“We are going to meet you tomorrow, southeast corner...are you listening?...we are going to meet joo, tomorrow, noon, southeast corner of 63rd Drive and Queens Boulevard, in Rego Park. M or R train, you know where, ja?”

“No police, no friends, no any of that. We know you won’t, we know you. We are not dumb, obviously, and, while it not as obvious, you are not dumb, either. If you want justice, you can get it. Tomorrow, ja?”

Now the man strolled forward, and Vernon could see how muscular this man was; he half expected the man to show off the ripples of muscles in his abs, proud of them like a family seal.

“But first, of my own interest, I must ask: Is it true? Are you a rapist? I mean, I know it is true, it must be. But I just want to make sh-ore, to hear it from joo.”

It never felt like rape. Whether some asshole could look at it after the fact and tell him technically this or technically that happened, and the occurrence or non-occurrence of this or that made something technically rape...that was beside the point. It didn't feel like rape.

She had said “no,” that was true. They had been alone in her apartment for the first time, unpacking her groceries, and he cupped the back of her neck with his hands and kissed her. She said nothing because his face smothered hers. When his face was off hers but still close by, she looked askance and, if his hands hadn't been clamped around neck, she would have been shaking her head.

He'd pressed forward. He thought cupping her neck was romantic and dramatic, and when that wasn't enough to woo her, he decided he'd take her on the kitchen table. That display of bombast would be enough to impress her. Then she whispered “no” when his weight was down on her, and “please, Vernon, please, no,” in her stereotypical sexy-fuck-me Vietnamese accent.

She hadn't struggled, or maybe she had, but not struggled by pushing him off her, but maybe by holding onto his shoulders and restraining him. No, not restraining him, more like enervating him, so he took her weakly, like the way she was weak, saying ‘no,’ and ‘please.’ Even her resistance was submissive, and when he entered her, there'd been a look of consternation on her face that didn't parse with the pleasant image of her humble face with those big fat beautiful dick-sucking lips. She always looked so inscrutable and confused, as if she didn't know that being a pretty Asian woman with big lips gave her exploitable advantages.

But that inscrutability was broken through and she was in pain. But she took his thrusts—held him to lessen their impact, but she took them—while he whispered in her ear, “please, please, I need this,” and she whispered back “please,” too, and there words had different origins but that was lost somewhere and the words came out the same. But he wasn't dumb and he knew they meant different things except he was inside her and that's what mattered, and he pictured her pussy was warm and all-encompassing like those big lips, and only he was smart enough to somehow know that and take

the initiative.

The Dutchman's nose hair looked like crushed ant legs, Vernon thought, inexplicably, as the man darted forward and socked him hard in the jaw. The force of that punch knocked Vernon out of himself; he was on another plane of existence, a whirling top. He'd never been hit that hard, and he could never hit someone that hard, and all his tough-guy bravado bullshit spun right out of him. Still dazed, a solid punch to his gut brought him back down, down, down to earth, and this wasn't just a fight, it was something horrendous, it was getting hit by a car or struck by a terrible explosive or something. This, too, was unreality.

Vernon pulled his head up, gasping, and looked into that dense, implacable face, painted onto that round dome-skull. Strong, imposing men had bare heads, Vernon knew. He wanted to genuflect before that bare head, beg it not to hurt him anymore. Then, as if sensing that Vernon was prostrating before it, that bare head lunged forward and smashed into Vernon's nose, which was once something of structure but now emptied out like a stomped-upon balloon.

Through some miracle, Vernon landed flat on his back.

"Don't joo pass out, now. Queens Boulevard and 63rd Drive, tomorrow, noon. Be there, you piece of shit. You stupid ghee-toh piece of stoopid raping shit. Be there.

"We won't kill joo or hurt joo, I promise. We won't. Don't show up, and we will, we'll kill you and everyone joo know."

Vernon's breathing was wet and congested and the back of his throat tasted salty and metallic. He didn't know how long he was out, but when he got to his feet, there were young boys on bikes staring at him from across the street, and a Middle Eastern bodega owner straining on his tip-toes to see what was going on, as if Vernon was on a ledge or something. Vernon got up, half-dazed, and spit up. He heard an excited, almost-goading "oh shit" from somewhere behind him, and heard someone say "son got bodied for some Pop Tarts" and then someone else say "nigga those ain't Pop Tarts, they Hot Pockets" and he heard laughing, but he didn't care and lurched forward until he was back in his dim apartment.

He pulled out pepperoni Hot Pockets from the freezer and threw them in the microwave. He ate them and felt somehow unworthy of them. He left the

cheese-caked encasement on the round table and made his way to the bathroom, where he recognized himself as something swollen and puffy but still himself. He may have brushed his teeth or dotted his face with water, but soon enough he was out of his clothes and collapsed on bed.

Vernon had befriended Kim-ly, so to speak, because she was pretty and there was something voluptuous about her. It was obvious she was pretty, but he couldn't put his finger on what it was that attracted him so strongly to her. What first attracted him were those lips. Her lips looked like a duck bill when closed, they were so big and rich, and her eyes were almond-shaped and her skin was pretty and clean and glowing. He wouldn't and couldn't describe it in these terms, but all her features spoke of a virile fecundity that made him turn his head and hunger, like imbibing the wafting scent of freshly-baking bread.

And, to think, all this fruitfulness came from this clueless Asian woman tending to fruit in some shitty little corner stand a block-or-so from his project.

When he first spoke to her, he situated himself and spoke as if it didn't matter how she responded: either way, he seemed to be suggesting, he was going to be a part of her life. He stood there, broad-shouldered, cocky, accentuating his New Yawk toughness, really emphasizing the heavy d in 'water,' and—this was so corny even he felt it was too much—ended their conversation by buying a single peach and biting into it luxuriantly like it was pure ambrosia.

He'd see her all the time—she always seemed to be working—and he'd help her out sometimes, bringing groceries back to her apartment, which was a two bedroom apartment shared by four women. She'd nod and be effusively thankful, not saying or revealing much, just listening and saying she'd been in New York for three months and still wanted to visit the Statute of Liberty, and he'd sometimes laugh and she'd smile unknowingly, as if they were having a real conversation contingent upon what each person was saying to the other. All he knew was her name, that she was from Vietnam, that she had a husband-or-someone back home, and that she was probably here illegally, as anytime he recommended she go here-or-there to collect a benefit or get an I.D. she just coyly shook her head.

Once, he thought his lust for her had turned into love. Loving her would

make no sense, since they had nothing in common other than that which everyone has in common, but love was supposed to be crazy, right? He'd noticed that the white T-shirt he was wearing was stained across the stomach with congealed strawberry jam, and he thought it looked like blood, and imagined, what if I were dying? This opened him up emotionally, and he looked up at her and she smiled unknowingly and she seemed to fill up that open space.

He came inside her and yelled his release loudly, to show his appreciation and make her feel better. She said nothing, just pivoted off the table and pulled her panties back on up under her skirt. Vernon was all smiles and endorphins, and kept looking at her like a solicitous dog, waiting for her to break out in smiles, as if his enthusiasm was contagious. She never did, and then Vernon's enthusiasm curdled briefly into self-pity until it sparked into resentment, and he said "ok then, whud-ever," and left, wishing he had some friends on hand to tell about the hot Vietnamese girl he finally bagged.

And after that one time, he didn't hang out around that fruit stand much anymore, except maybe he'd peek in here-and-there. Over a long course of time, he'd noticed a trend: she was rarely there. He thought maybe she'd moved back to Vietnam or some shit, until one time the little Asian proprietor spotted him and, in that annoying Asian way, pointed a squat finger at him and said, "You! You there! You, get out! You not allowed here." Vernon made an arrogant, obnoxious face of dismissal, a loud "pshh," like he was just too hood for this fruit stand. His stance and patois got more ghetto, he said something like "fine, faggot, I don't need your fag shit," and practically crip-walked out of there. He heard someone behind the counter mock-tauntingly, "ooh shit, there goes father of the year, scumbag," and Vernon's stomach lurched up, but he maintained his cavalier composure until he was back on the street.

Then a couple days after that incident, he stalked the fruit stand again and, running into a Mexican employee, played the concerned citizen and asked about Kim-ly. The Mexican man nodded knowingly and pantomimed a swollen belly, and Vernon said "pregnant?" and the Mexican smiled and nodded mischievously.

And the months passed and he continued working his intermittent construction jobs, all-the-while pretending to be getting away with something even though he knew she probably wasn't looking for him and that she knew where he was if she wanted to find him, anyway. This fantasy of escape

continued for a long time until, like a little boy tired of waiting to be found in hide-and-seek, he outed himself. He went to the fruit stand and asked another Mexican if she still worked there—it could have been the same Mexican who first told him she was pregnant, for all he knew—and the Mexican just said, casually, “tomorrow,” like it was nothing at all. And he was there tomorrow, and so was she, next to a young tanned baby, being oooh and ahhed over by an avuncular Asian man.

Vernon woke up sometime around 10 a.m. He took a shit, showered, and made a quick breakfast of buttered toast and did some other things. There was a weird interlude where he went about his day as if things were normal. He checked himself in the mirror and yeah, the area under his nose had a big rouge smudge like he cut himself shaving, but in a really, really bad way. And he peeked at the clock on the microwave and rushed out the door like he was still on one of those construction jobs, and his body implored “late!” and for a moment he forgot what he was running late for.

Then he was getting off the R train at 63rd Drive-Rego Park, wondering if this was the last time he’d pass through a turnstile.

Even though he made sure to get off on the southeast corner of the intersection—where he was pretty sure he was supposed to meet the Dutch guy—he spun around wildly once he got to the surface, afraid he’d somehow missed them. The last few days moved too rapidly for him to interrogate his thought process, but he either took the Dutch man at his word, or felt obliged to endure whatever punishment awaited him.

Even before he made out any faces, he knew: this was the group he was looking for. There were five men, all fairly tall, hovering around six foot, all in fairly good shape. Varying hues of dark-skinned white, from olive to something approaching burnt sienna. He felt a tap on his shoulder that screamed “walk with us, buddy,” and he kept apace with the pack like a wayward fish rejoining its shoal.

“Glad you made it, Mr. Camacho.” He didn’t need to turn around to know that was the Dutchman. Odd, though, that he sounded genuine.

The pack of six walked half a block down 63rd Drive before Vernon had any idea who was the leader. But all the group’s focus on one man—all the soft touches on the man’s wrist, someone pointing out a traffic signal to him, all the little nods appetent for praise—tipped Vernon off that the oldest

gentleman, the one in the hat with the 360-degree brim, was the leader. Vernon's hunch was confirmed when they arrived at their destination, a small outdoor cafe with a stubby, rectangular wood table made up for six. The hatted man sat on the west side of the table, his back to the street. The others, the functionaries—a group that included the Dutchman—sat two or three along the northern and southern sides of the table, respectively. Vernon, the guest of honor, was granted the glory of sitting on the eastern side, his back to the restaurant. There were no other guests; in fact, there weren't any other tables set up outside.

"It's a nice day for this, at least," said the hatted man. He was in his late thirties or early forties, fit, maybe even dashing, if dressed the right way. Vernon half-expected to see the functionaries staring at him expectantly when he failed to immediately respond to the hatted-man's comment. He braced himself for one of the more goonish functionaries to slap him hard on the back and bark "say something!," or maybe even something as dunderheaded as "when the boss speaks, you answer!" But the goons at the table looked like normal guys, for the most part, and instead of cradling their guns in anticipation, they looked kind of bored and maybe even annoyed. The hatted-man, Vernon surmised, would never say "annoyed"; he'd say "peeved" or some fancy shit like that.

"So, I'll make this brief, Mr. Camacho. Let me just state from the outset that, as you can imagine, we don't do this, ever. By that," he chuckled a bit, "I mean we don't, ahh, usually talk, informally, with the type of people, like you, who we deal with."

"And what, exactly, type of people is you talking about?" Vernon spat out the question in his usual default hood insouciance, as if that flying Dutchman hadn't beaten the moxie out of him less than 24 hours ago.

The Dutchman leaned in, smirk folded and hidden behind his arm.

"Well, rapists, Vernon. You know that by now. You aren't stupid, despite your...unfortunate diction.

"There are degrees of rape, of course. The violent street rapist is, of course, the worst. The date rapist: still terrible, but not as terrible. We don't say 'better.' Still awful, just not as awful.

"Our question is zero-sum. Rapist, or not a rapist. You are a rapist, although your crime was not as awful as most we've dealt with. In fact, your crime, I can say with only slight hesitation, is the least awful rape we've dealt with. Which is one of the reasons I've decided to talk with you."

Vernon nodded, his taut mouth and stone-cold glare serving as stated objections to this characterization.

“Don’t, Vernon, don’t,” he breathed heavily, “don’t, look, we know you’re a rapist. We know it, you know it, look,” and on the hard ‘k’ on ‘look,’ Vernon caught a hint of the fast-talking New York shyster he was talking to. “Look, I already said your crime was the least awful crime we’ve dealt with.”

“I didn’t commit any crime like that. I wasn’t in jail for rape.”

The hatted-man gave him a hard stare. “Don’t get smart with me. You know what I meant.”

As if to shut Vernon up, the hatted-man continued. “You had sex with her once, didn’t you. Ever think about that? You had sex with her once, and you conceived. Never struck you as odd?

“Did you know that sexual intercourse from rape is almost three times more likely to result in conception than voluntary sexual cohabitation?” Breaking out statistics, the quickening pace of his speech, the use of that curiously prim term ‘sexual cohabitation’: Vernon felt that this was the beginning of a speech that’d been rehearsed before.

“Some ignorant people think rape is about ‘power.’ That’s a fashionable idea. Popular on college campuses. Complete nonsense. That’s like saying bank robberies are undertaken because it’s an opportunity to use guns. No, bank robbery is obviously about getting otherwise unobtainable money. Likewise, rape is a way to spread the seed. Either ‘trading up’—getting a woman of greater genetic worth, also known as getting a girl ‘out of your league,’ or, in more desperate cases, allowing a man otherwise shut out from the evolutionary sweepstakes to put in a bid.” The hatted-man smiled. One of the minions at the table swayed and nodded his head nonchalantly, as if keeping rhythm with a familiar song.

“Let me ask you a question, Vernon. When you went off to jail...you went off to jail for armed robbery, correct? During the time you found yourself in such desperate straits that you needed to commit armed robbery...you know what I bet you did all day? I bet you jerked off a whole bunch. I bet you jerked off a whole bunch after you got that first letter we sent you, too.

“How do I know that? Because you were nervous and desperate. And desperate men are horny men. Did you know that a man is more likely to cheat on his wife after he loses his job? Makes no sense, right?

“Wrong! Because a desperate man is a man who recognizes his sinking social status. His subconscious is telling his body: it’s do-or-die time. The seed needs to be spread before all hope is lost. That’s why spousal rape, as it is now called, occurs so frequently after the man gets laid off from work.

“You think you’re in control, Vernon. You’re not, not at all. Think about it! Think about it! What are the odds that you got Kim-ly pregnant on the first and only time you had sex with her? Did your body know you were raping her?”

Their server brought them all coffee and water right when the hatted-man said “did your body know you were raping her.” The server continued serving, nonplussed.

“Thank you, Jackson. And you...you, Vernon. You are interesting to me, I’ll grant you that.

“You haven’t even asked me anything regarding your son. Your son, remember? Your son, the son we killed, Vernon. Remember that?”

He said these final words in the same timbre as his earlier exegesis on the roots of rape.

Vernon leaned in and rubbed his hands together. “About that.” What could he say? In reality, he was relieved. He’d never even met his own son. People he knew—people he grew up with—ignored their kids and no one says shit about it. They didn’t give the issue a moment’s thought. He had.

He’d been tormented by those feelings of inadequacy, of shame, of not even having a family history of abandonment to pin the blame on. He’d had dreams of meeting his son in his pre-teens and finding him to be some skinny pussy-boy Asian faggot, getting knocked around the schoolyard and taunted for having a tiny little yellow pimple-for-a-dick. He’d had other dreams, alternative scenarios of shame: meeting his son when his son was older and in school for medicine or something, his son talking modestly about math or science or something, real casually, like it was nothing, leaving Vernon wishing he could explain that he too was smart, in his way, but his stuttering, simple language betraying any of his claims to profundity.

“About that, son,” Vernon started, cringing in hot embarrassment, “you really think nothing going to happen to you?”

“No, I don’t care about that. I wanted you to ask why we did it.”

“Listen, you faggot.”

“Please Vernon, don’t act like that. We thought you were different.” Vernon sensed someone shaking his head.

"I don't understand your thinking, Vernon. Are you trying to threaten us? We outnumber you. We're armed, you're not. We obviously know where you live, we knew how to get to you in prison. We could have killed you there, if we wanted to.

"Please don't disappoint me, Vernon. I wanted you to ask why we did it. Savior, fill in for Vernon. Ask me why we did this."

The other men around the table laughed while Vernon continued rubbing his palms, like a tough guy about to get his hands dirty.

"Which one of us is Savior?"

"I don't know, I just said it because our guest here is boring me. Someone, say something."

"Why'd you do it, you bastard!" one of his minions play-acted.

"How could you, you monster!" another chimed in.

"Because," and now the top-hatted man betrayed his zealotry with a smile, "because, we had to. If we'd let him live, we'd be allowing rape to win, right? How is it that scum like you somehow instinctively learned to target the religious, the believers in shame, those who won't abort? Most pregnancies from rape end in abortion, certainly, but somehow, instinctively, you guys are getting better and better at making sure your seed lives on.

"Well, not anymore."

"You murderer!" another yelled in mock-horror.

"Yes, yes, it was terrible, as murder is. And yes, we are very sorry for that, although, of course, if you hadn't committed a terrible act, then we'd never need to commit our terrible act.

"I won't tell you which one of us did it. It really doesn't matter. You are not the first, and you not the last, so what of it? Your son's survival was, *prime facie*, a tacit acceptance of the very premise for which we stand against: the proliferation and success of the act of rape. In other words, ceding to the moral demand to let your son live would be acquiescing to, on a biological level, the most ruthless and insidious crime. Ruthless, for obvious reasons, yet insidious, because by its very terms it takes moral hostage over the wicked fruit of its labor. The goal of rape is to spread the seed, and allowing the seed to flourish—for whatever supposed moral reason—surrenders to rape its only sought-after goal. Although, I should add, we are experimenting with just neutering the rapist's progeny," he said, with an implied nod-and-wink.

A couple moments of silence, and then the Dutchman piped up. "Wow.

This guy is a rock, isn't he?"

"Yes, Jesus, even I am getting worried here. Vernon, don't you have anything to say? There are biological reasons why you would be so, shall we say, disinterested in your rape-product, but this...don't you believe deeply in 'respect,'"—and here the hatted-man employed exaggerated hand gestures to puff himself up when he said 'respect'—"or such similar ghetto bullshit. Aren't you going to say something?"

Vernon nodded solemnly, but that was fake too, like his hand cleansing ritual. "I heard what you had to say, I heard it. I may not be smart as you," he said aggressively, "but I heard what you had to say. You best believe, I'll be checking in with you, for sure. You won't be getting away with this."

"Oh okay, there we go. The threats. That's better." He pointed to the Dutchman, who leaned over and flicked a thin, rectangular card. "Here, that's his contact information. Go say hello if you have any other questions."

The business card read *Jorge Victorio*, and there was a Queens address. Probably around Corona or East Elmhurst.

"So your name is Jorge? You don't look like a Jorge?"

The Dutchman shrugged.

"I don't get this," Vernon continued, rotating the card between his fingers, "what makes you think I won't just go to the police with this. I know the detective on the case. You don't think the police want to catch a child killer?"

"Feel free to. See what happens," the hatted-man said, matter-of-factly.

"What's your name, son."

"I won't tell you my name, daughter. Or I can tell you one of my many names, if you like. I'm not your son, by the way," and here the hatted-man again betrayed his exuberance with a smile, tipping Vernon off to the many easy jokes at his disposal, "and it's too late for this now. You had your chance to ask questions. You blew it. We'll be in touch."

And with that the hatted-man got up, and his four companions got up, too. Vernon hadn't touched his coffee. "C'mon, you too," one of them said to him. Two of them were too close for comfort, and the one on his left tapped Vernon's elbow, as if to say, "rise!" Vernon got up warily.

The guy who touched him on the elbow pulled a gleaming silver pistol halfway out of his coat. "Ok. So you walk that way," the man pointed back to Queens Boulevard, "and you go home. I'm going to walk you back, okay. You get on the subway, and you go home."

He stuck Vernon with the gun in the solar plexus. Vernon walked forward, the man two solid steps behind him. Vernon didn't look back, and none of the men at the table said anything to mark his departure: like his experience with prison, all that had just transpired was just some discrete chunk of time that now felt like nothing at all, an unreality, cordoned off and compartmentalized into nothingness.

"What's your name, man," Vernon asked, still looking forward.

"Can't hear you. Not interested, either." Vernon didn't know what he was doing or what he was planning. He could see the foot traffic approaching on Queens Boulevard, and thought of spy movies, scenes of throwing somebody in his captor's way and running off. Then he'd look back and see his captor yell "fuck!" and his captor would try to maneuver through the crowd and get a clear shot, but he couldn't because there were too many people, and again his captor would yell "Fuck!" and...scene...fade to black.

But Vernon did nothing of the sort and just walked back to Queens Boulevard, his captor at his back.

"You expect me to believe you guys really gave me a real address?"

"Yes. Why wouldn't we? We already did what we did. I don't get you. Not that it matters, but we thought you'd be a little more...informative, in your way. I mean, it was disappointing how...he loves a good debate on ethics. We all do. I think he thought you were something you weren't. Maybe, someone more...engaged. Your situation was...unique, to say the least. Not like anything we've seen, tell you the truth. Don't you give a shit about this?"

Before Vernon could turn around fully, the man interrupted and made some gesture toward the subway. "No, don't, whatever. I don't really care. I get to wear the hat next time." Vernon detected a smile on the man's face, sensed it somehow, and instead of running or turning or overpowering him or doing something, he went down into the subway, through the turnstile, and got on the R train to head back to Woodside.

Before he knew it he was back in his home. Well, not his home, but his mother's apartment. Where he used to call home. Back to Hot Pockets and dingy light and hot air redolent of musk, mold and age. It had all been a dream, in a sense, just a nightmare. He'd plunged unexpectedly into this netherworld, populated by bizarre characters of inexplicable beliefs and moralities.

What was this? What was he to do? Was this is it? His son dead; the

mother of his child, left to grieve alone in silence. Even that expression, mother of his child, was cumbersome. A wife was something, but the awkward phrase ‘mother of my child’ was klutzy, as if having to use that title was part of the punishment for having a bastard.

Did he truly not care? Look what apathy had gotten him. Here he was, so safe in his not caring. Like he didn’t care if Kim-ly didn’t love him and never loved him and never even understood him. So he didn’t care that he lived in his mother’s project house, or that he hadn’t had a real job for god-knows-how-long.

The first and only time he’d ever mugged someone he’d been arrested, for god sakes, and that too was probably because he was too lazy to care.

Not lazy, but fatigued somehow. He always felt like he could collapse upon himself. Too lazy to live. When the cops busted him—minutes after he’d committed the robbery—he didn’t really protest or run or anything. They just swooped in and got him, got stupid, lazy Vernon, the water-cooler joke who mugged two white kids right across the street from a fucking police car.

He had nothing of worth in him, fine, but his son didn’t deserve that. Even if his son was going to be too weak, or too smart, or not like him, or something else...even if he was a listless piece of shit who snickered at all the dunderheaded tough guy bullshit but wanted them to accept him so badly. He couldn’t escape anymore from the need to care.

Emboldened, enjoying a rush he’d never felt before—his heart was actually racing; the last time his heart had raced was last night, when he’d exerted himself by expelling a loud fart—he made his way to his bedroom and looked under his mattress. It couldn’t still be here, nah...he felt around for his gun, a little .22 he’d stashed here about six years ago. He’d never actually used it before, and he never ran any drugs or anything illegal out of this apartment, so he’d never worried about getting busted...but somehow it was gone. What the fuck? His mother knew about the gun, but would she really be proactive enough to get rid of it? Didn’t seem like her.

He had a spark of inspiration and bounded over to Mr. Machato’s apartment.

“Hey Mr. Machato,” he said excitedly, as Mr. Machato slowly opened the door. Vernon could see Mrs. Machato, decrepit and crusty but all smiles, sitting on the couch. She was ensconced with linens and doilies, just as he always remembered.

“Hello...Vernon,” she said very slowly, lifting an ancient arm, not really to wave but to do her version of waving, which consisted of showing Vernon her palm.

“Hello, Missus Machato. Nice to see you again.”

“Nice to see you too, Vernon,” she said, and brought her attention back to the television.

Mr. Machato looked at him expectantly.

“Sorry to bother you. Before my mother left for Puerto Rico, did she give you anything? Like, any valuables, or a box, or anything like that?”

Mr. Machato froze for a moment, like he was processing something that did not compute. Then he nodded gravely, put up one finger, and ambled out of view. Several minutes later, he returned with a small cardboard box.

“Great. And, thanks for everything. And thank you too, Missus Machato.”

At hearing herself referenced, Mrs. Machato turned again and did her signature gesture. “No...problem, Vernon. We love...you. Say hello...to your mother, for us.” And with that, her hand went back to where it was.

He explored the box. He frowned in confusion when he saw the top layer consisted of innocuous T-shirts...until he felt the hard steel underneath them. Goddamn Mom, you selfish piece of shit. There was a whole mess of shit in this box, but here was his .22. He checked the clip and, holy shit, it was still loaded, just like it was all those years ago. Only mom would repay the Machatos’ kindness by gifting them an illegal, loaded .22 for storage.

He could feel the steel jutting like a foreign protuberance inside his puffy jacket. He raced down to the elevator and tapped his foot the whole time, as if Kim-ly was going to be outside waiting for his embrace.

It was a clear day, early afternoon around 3 p.m. He didn’t have a phone so he couldn’t be sure of the time, which brought his mood down. Nowadays, if you didn’t have a smart phone, you were poor. What’d it make you if you didn’t have any phone at all?

He had no way to predict what exactly to expect, but for some reason he

thought it best to assume this place kept regular business hours.

Was it his imagination, or was there a guy following him? His project house wasn't too far from the organized center of bustle and frustration that was Northern Boulevard, and as a result the neighborhood had a longstanding lack of street traffic. So this guy stuck out. Not for any real reason. Just odd to see a white guy in his mid-thirties with black glasses and a beret listening to an I-Pod by a wrought-iron fence. Nothing wrong with that, exactly.

He had an idea where to get off. While he waited for his train, he kept an eye to see if anyone—any beret wearers, perhaps—were down there waiting, too. He didn't see any.

Why he chose to spend his misspent youth—and misspent adulthood—in East Harlem rather than Corona was never clear to him. Maybe it was the cultural cache. Everyone knew East Harlem was rough. The corner of East 125th and Lexington was like the Apocalypse: lines of bums depositing their pilfered recyclables; every disabled old-timer in the neighborhood sitting on an upturned garbage can or leaning on a cane; out-of-it toothless women in wheel chairs waving little Puerto Rican flags; angry young black and brown men plotting and scheming and hustling, voicing their plans without shame or fear of repercussion. Corona may have its rough parts, but after disembarking the 7 train and walking north on 111st Street toward Northern Boulevard, he didn't see much of anything, except some old-timers and maybe some young families heading to Flushing Corona Park to take their pictures by the Unisphere.

And when he made it to Northern Boulevard and saw that, yes, it was still Northern Boulevard all the way out here—with its car franchises and blaring traffic—he had to fight the urge to turn around, as if this was some bullshit errand at a crowded Toys 'R Us.

He walked up the 112 block of Northern Boulevard, doing his best to guesstimate the right address. He tried his luck at the only lot that wasn't a car park or car dealership.

It was a squat industrial unit—a factory, maybe, although he was conditioned to believe there were no factories in the boroughs anymore. All that shit had been torn down and turned into condos. Shit, he hadn't met anyone who worked at a factory, maybe not in his whole life.

There was a man standing outside wearing a tight black shirt and jeans.

He was white, about 6 foot, good shape. The fact that he was a white guy doing security out in Corona gave Vernon pause. The brief reverie, of forgone factories and old timers and tourists and the hood politics of Corona and East Harlem...the jarring presence of that white guy....

“Hey,” Vernon shouted, no longer thinking. His brain was no longer acting in sequence, his lungs and heart on overdrive, marinating in adrenaline.

“Yes sir, how can I help you?” the man asked, flatly.

“What kind of building is this?”

“It’s a factory, sir.”

“Yeah, a factory? What kind of factory?”

“Do you have business here, sir?”

“Yeah, man. I’m an interested customer. I heard about this place and I’m interested.”

“Yeah? You need 1,000 aluminum cans? Do you normally solicit from businesses you don’t know about?”

Vernon had no idea why he felt that this man should be more deferential.

“I’m here to see this man.” Vernon presented him with the card.

The man took the card, and maybe the man’s face hardened. If it did, it was by a matter of degree unknown to the human eye, but detectable by some other, unknown sense.

“Yeah, and what do you want to see this man for?”

“That’s my business. Is he here? I want to see him.”

“Yeah? That so. You know man, you’re pretty lucky, if ‘lucky’ is the right word.”

“Yeah? Now what makes me so lucky?”

“Well, you were given this card, for one thing. And you’re here, that’s another. You don’t seem too bright though, if you don’t mind my saying. I’m surprised it’s gone this long with you, really. Really, I am.”

“Is that....” Vernon didn’t know where this stand-off was going, and he didn’t realize that it had ended. A heavy force collided with the left side of his head, hard. He toppled over to his right.

From his new vantage point—the concrete—Vernon saw a different man regain his composure. A murmur of pleasantries between the two men. Vernon didn’t see the interloper, but in his mind’s eye he assumed it was the man with the beret. It had to be.

"I can't believe this asshole," said a familiar, heavily accented voice.

"I wonder what would have happened had this guy been smarter. So much for field work." Vernon couldn't pin that voice.

There were four fingers, vice-like, around the upper row of his top teeth. A strong thumb was rooted on the bridge of his nose. He was being dragged like a heavy piece of luggage with defective wheels.

He was being dragged by his mouth.

"What the fuck did you expect, 'Son,' as you like to say? You were going to just come in and take revenge like a fucking action hero? You don't even know what you're doing."

"Chooses to be a hero after his son is already dead. Maybe you should have been a hero when your son was alive."

"Not even a hero, just not a piece-of-shit rapist. Acts like he's a fucking hero now, right? Like he's the good guy."

"He's just misunderstood, right. That's all."

"Quick, where's Oprah?"

"Won't someone find Oprah!"

Vernon clamped his mouth shut. He felt angular knuckles and a satisfying, off-kilter crunch.

"Well, figured that would happen sooner or later," and with that comment came a great fist that pummeled Vernon's head into the hard, dirty ground.

"We took a chance on this asshole. What a waste of fucking time."

"If you'd been around, you probably would have forced her to get an abortion, right? And now you're all indignant about this. Like you ever gave a shit, right?"

"Let's have the rapist lecture us."

"That's an ad hominem attack, by the way."

"Yeah, I know. Shut up, this isn't class. This is extraneous speech."

"Not like he was much of a foil, anyway. Did he even say anything of substance at our meeting?"

All the voices were the same, except now and again he made out the distinctive lower pitch and harsh consonants of the Dutchman.

Someone stomped hard on his forehead, and again on his nose. When he turned over another foot cracked him in the stomach with the angle and force of a swung croquet mallet.

"You probably thought she was unaffected, emotionally, I mean, right?"

You didn't think anything of it, right? I mean, it's not like you beat her, right?

"Did you know rape victim suffer more emotional stress if there *isn't* violence attached to their rape? Did you know that, Mr. Nice Guy? Mr. Hero?

"You knew she was married, right? You know that married women suffer far more psychological harm than single women, right? Not like you fucking care, right?"

"Well," another voice interjected. "That's true, but here, her husband was in Vietnam, right? What you said is statistically true, and borne out by the fact that a victim who exhibits physical evidence that sex was forced would have less difficulty convincing her partner that she was actually raped. This, in turn, makes it easier for her partner to accept her story and stay with her.

"But here, she didn't have that problem, because her husband was in Vietnam. Or did he visit regularly? Damn, we should have reached out to her instead of this stupid fuck."

"Hey, would you guys stop? It's not like he's going to debate you. Anyway, that's not the point, you know that. No one disputes that this rape was anything other than immoral. Gradations, yes, but it was not like he was arguing that he didn't do anything wrong. Further, if he were violent, as you well know, we never would have been allowed to talk to him about this, do field work like we did. And, anyway, the focus was on how he fits into the evolutionary mold—"

"Yes, I know, but this experiment was over. Bringing him in was a waste of time. Don't get me wrong, I was looking forward to interviewing some of them. I wanted it to work more than anyone. But I don't care about the soundness or persuasiveness of what I'm saying. It's like, the game is over, and this is now a pick-up game. No rules."

Vernon was now on his stomach, still gasping. Two feet, from two different men, pushed down on his chest.

"Well, Vernon. You tried, didn't you? You tried to avenge your son, who you didn't give a shit about, and the mother of your son, who you didn't give a shit about. Or maybe this was just a pride thing, and you get no credit at all. You didn't establish, or even attempt to establish, your son's moral claim to be born, or Kim-ly's moral duty to bear the child of her rapist, or what difference there is between aborting a viable fetus versus painlessly and swiftly executing a young child who missed out on a life it could not yet

conceptualize.

“Anyone home there? This too much for you? Bueller, Bueller?”

All he wanted was for them stop talking. He was limp and felt limp in every way possible.

A knot of fingers tugged his head back. Vernon thought of how a gun sounds—boom! Black screen. Credits roll, movie over. Turn off the T.V.

Now he wanted the “boom!,” one big boom, screen to go black, maybe two booms, for the wise-asses in the theater who liked to play at being a gangster and tell their friends that you should always double-tap it. Boom! Boom! Then he’d be back at home, somehow, ready for another phase of his life, a new beginning following another ending. He’d gotten a girl pregnant. Then he avoided her and waited around to see if she gave birth. He went to jail. He was in jail. He left jail. Then this, this new thing, this weird experience. Well, he reacted in a way he felt he should. Let him be over with this, somehow, so he could wash his hands of this and move on to the next phase. Call his mother in Puerto Rico or something, go back to Mr. Machato and pay him back his money.

A wicked, searching knife pierced his throat. He screamed a scream that began shrill and ended in a messy gurgle, a clogged drain. No, was all he thought. No, not this. This isn’t right.

“Hey Vernon, good news. You also had a daughter. Bad news: we killed her too.”

“Shut up, now’s not the time for jokey bullshit. Man is concentrating over there.”

“Fine.”

No. The world was an explosion of red hues, everything was a red hue, dripping exuberant yet dull brick-red paint, digits flailing, an irritating itch where the hair on the back of his head met the back of his neck, crack! and spray! like opening a cheap can of beer, like nothing at all, to be useless and ordinary like a cheap can of beer, red, heat, hot, red, a higher vantage point somehow, could see above all their heads, drenched, heavy drainage, emptying out, hot, heat, red, alarm bells ringing....

Misery Don't Wait on Me

by Joshua Clark Orkin

*for Sophie,
for myself.*

“Oh reverend please, can I chew your ear,
I’ve become what I fear most—
and I know there’s no such thing as ghosts,
but I have seen the demon host.”

—Timber Timbre

Prologue

matter is only transferred, never destroyed

i’ve been seeking you over stars
over moons over skies over oceans
over ages aimless never knowing
what was wrong forever missing
something important i’d forgotten
how to see and when i saw
you i knew you from forever.

be very still, i am no builder

i am no builder yet somehow
here we stand together
touching heads atop this tower
looking down on desolation

where i stumbled without ears
for songs that went beyond
myself but here and now inside
this tower that we've built
i know i must contain the notes
which carelessly aligned
could strike upon a resonance
to set the walls to shaking
and send me back to earth.

as i go to pieces

more and more i have begun
to understand as i get on
that memories are simple things
and wear apart in time for you
are stark and clear for me but i
seem to be eroding as i watch
the fraying creeping upwards
towards my face i sit and raise
a crumbling hand and crack a grin
at all my luck for there you are
before me looking stark and clear
and calling out my name.

hello little corpse

something is broken in me
something i didn't know
was still hiding there
under long bitter leaves
peeking out at the world
but you found it and now
it's cracked and gasping
something is broken in me
and i can't remember
what it was.

away, away, away

a screaming bloody thing
lies trapped under burning
wreckage and i keep reaching in
fool hands to pull it out but you
called to snakes and each time
they bite i pull back try to stagger
away let it scream and burn down
then i hear like some whisper
a voice on the breeze
from its mouth saying sorry or
i miss you and i'm back reaching in
with fool hands and each time
there are snakes more vicious i can't
take it i'm swollen and listing
severely as it screams with a voice
which was ours but it seems
it's all mine yours a dream
gone now from its mouth so i'll
keep walking this time as the flames
lick up and that poor bloody thing
once so beautiful now
screams finally out as the skies
open up and the rains
wash it all
away.

Misery, Don't Wait on Me

1. Electrelane—Come Back
2. Howlround—What Should I Have Been Told
3. Menomena—Queen Black Acid
4. The Morning Benders—Stitches
5. Yo La Tengo—Damage
6. Typhoon—Modern Prometheus
7. Girls—Ghost Mouth
8. Miles Benjamin Anthony Robinson—The 100th of March
9. Howlround—Solitary Refinement
10. Brian Eno—Some Of Them Are Old
11. Girls—Lauren Marie
12. Howlround—Goodbye Saint Marie
13. Woods—Born To Lose
14. Suckers—A Mind I knew
15. Electrelane—I Keep Losing Heart
16. Woods—Rain On
17. Brian Eno—The Big Ship
18. Girls—Hellhole Ratrace
19. Electrelane—Suitcase

Let It Wash Over You

“I don’t deserve this,” I said to the phone. There was a long silence, but I could hear her breathing. I let the silence linger, relished the awful feeling.

“No, Jonathan, you don’t. What do you want me to say.” I could hear the sounds of laughter, the clink of drinks being poured in the background. The scene was as clear in my mind as if I were viewing it myself. I could picture her, beautiful and vulnerable and being stared at. Someone would take her home tonight.

“Samantha...” Everything was ruined. I let the silence linger, relished the awful feeling.

“Look, Jonathan, I’m sorry. But this is life.” I heard someone call her name in the background, imagined her holding up a finger, telling them to wait. “Jonathan, I have to go. Take care of yourself. Give it time, you’ll be okay.” There was pity in her voice.

“Yeah,” I said. “Right.” I hung up and just stood there, awash in it, letting it run over me. I felt very acutely alive. Then I went into the bathroom, opened the medicine cabinet and ate everything.

I awoke in silence with a ringing in my ears and the sensation that something had just exploded. I checked myself, my bed, my room, and found everything in order. I got up and threw on sweatpants and a t-shirt. It was the silence, I decided. No traffic, no fighting neighbors, no barking dogs, just my heartbeat and the ringing. I went to the front door and paused. Then I threw it wide. I think that was the moment my heart stopped.

Gone the city, the people, the cars. Gone the sky and the earth. I couldn't describe what was left because there are no words for nothing beyond nothing. It was as if the world had been sucked in on itself and imploded, leaving me in its recess. With a sudden tug I was sucked out into the nothing and swept away. But it was a gentle sort of sweeping, like drifting, and with nothing before me, I turned back to watch my little home recede into the distance. When it was gone I was alone.

In the intervening hours, days, years, seconds I don't know what I did. I suppose I did nothing. My panic slowed and after a time my thoughts of life became more and more distant, eventually leaking away in a swirl like water down a drain. I was left with nothing, looking down at myself, my sweatpants and t-shirt. They were my last link to what I had known, my only companions from that place.

Who can say how long this went on. At some point I remember stripping my clothes and letting them drift away, watching them recede to tiny dots. At some point my flesh began to dissolve, to crumble away. At first I clutched at it, tried vainly to hold it to me, but soon gave this up. I lay back like I was drifting in a warm pool and felt my body disappear beneath me. I looked up and took it all in, everything and nothing. I felt nothing, nothing washed over me. Then I closed my eyes and it was just the same.

Nightmare

Hamilton stood before the mirror, dressing himself. He leaned in and inspected his face, pulled at the soft flesh beneath his eyes, scrunched up his forehead and felt the wrinkles. Lifting his floppy hair he looked suspiciously at his hairline. He pulled out his phone and looked at the last message he had sent, hours ago: *I need to see you. I love you. Meet me at Mcawber's.* The

wall clock ticked in silence.

On the empty street he walked with his eyes on the pavement, watching his shoes. Lost in thought, it gave him a start to find someone in his way. He stopped and his gaze traveled upwards. Black stiletto heels, slim, black-stockinged legs, the hem of a tiny black skirt. He jumped to the face and was not disappointed. She licked her lips. "Hey lover," she said.

Hamilton shuffled his feet. "Hello," he said. He glanced around and realized they were by the park. She followed his gaze.

"Come on, little man," she said, "follow me." With that she walked off into the darkness of the park. Hamilton stood on the sidewalk, gazing after her. She didn't look back. He pulled out his phone and read the message again. Still nothing. He looked up at the moon, full and white in the sky, then back down at his phone, then at the woman receding into the darkness. He caught her quickly.

"What are you?" He said.

She turned and embraced him, slipping a hand down the front of his pants. He closed his eyes and her mouth came upwards and found his. They kissed, her tongue slipping into his mouth. "I'm a nightmare," she whispered. Then she bit through his lip.

He didn't know what was happening. He couldn't understand what was happening. He knew it was bad and it was wrong and it hurt. Something important was being pulled up out of him and he felt himself going weak. She stared at him with eyes gone milky white and glowing. No. He decided. No.

Like flexing a muscle he had never used, he pulled back. Hesitantly at first, then harder. The flow slowed, then reversed direction. He felt his strength returning as the face of the woman went from lust to confusion. Then fear. He pulled until he felt he had regained himself, but he didn't stop. He pulled until he felt something new. An inky blackness poured out of the woman and into him. He ate it up hungrily, feeling himself swell and expand. With a gasp she pried her face off of his and stumbled backwards, falling to the grass.

He advanced on her slowly, flush with power, the front of his pants tented. She looked up at him and moaned. Overhead a black cloud passed over the moon.

Inside the bar it was bright and loud. She sat at a table full of drinks,

sometimes putting her arm around the boy next to her. As they talked and laughed she played idly with his hair, ran her hand up and down the back of his neck. He looked at her and smiled. She leaned in and gave him a kiss. The lights flickered.

Heads perked up and conversation hushed. The lights flickered again. Then all the bulbs burst at once. The bar went black and voices began to rise in confusion. One by one they fell silent, as all eyes turned to the large front window. Beyond the glass, in absolute darkness, glowed two milky white orbs.

O O

Rocks

I awoke on my back, completely naked. I sat up and saw I was in a field of smooth rocks of every shape and size. I tried to talk but knew no words. It was a nice day so I stood up and walked around a bit. As far as I could tell this was all there was. I wondered vaguely who I was and how I got here.

Some sort of heavy sensation stirred in my chest but it had no name, so I ignored it, took a deep breath, looked dumbly at the blue sky. Between the rocks there was grass and the grass was soft. A few times I lay down and felt its warmth on my bare skin.

I don't know how long this went on, but it felt like a long time. I wandered around, touching the rocks, letting my hand slide along their varied surfaces. Everything was a geometric shape with no name. The blades of grass, the fluffy clouds, the rocks, my hands, my fingers. Sometimes that feeling niggled at me, squirmed in my chest, but it had no name and I had no voice. We were strangers.

After wandering and touching and lying down and getting up for a while, I came to a rock that was different from the rest. There was something carved on it. I sat there for a long time, feeling the carvings, wondering at their meaning.

A word drifted through my brain, settled behind my tongue, then flitted away when I reached for it. This happened a number of times, but I was not disturbed. I had lots of time and I used it. I was patient. When the word came back, I let it sit, get nice and comfortable. Then I snuck up and cradled it, gently, gently, until I held it cupped in my hand:

Home?

My eyes widened, something whirled in my brain, but nothing clicked. It was a question. I looked around me. Was this Home? I stood up and walked around, felt the grass, touched some more rocks. The sky was blue and a warm breeze blew across my bare skin. The heavy sensation stirred inside me. I took a nap on the grass.

When I awoke the question was on my lips. I walked around aimlessly, touching rocks. The feeling stirred in my chest. It was beginning to make me uneasy and I no longer felt the placid calm of this place. This was not Home. But what to do about it? The feeling niggled, and I kept touching rocks.

Then I found another. I repeated the procedure from last time, rubbing the carvings, waiting patiently for the word to get comfortable. When I had it in my grasp I took my time, let it fall asleep. Its breathing slow and even, I carefully peeked at it:

Go!

My breath caught. A hot new sensation stirred beside the old one. This one made my heart beat. Hard. I looked down at my legs and rose. I began to walk quickly in one fixed direction, my heart pounding in my chest. Nothing in the scenery seemed to change, so I began to run. I ran as hard as I could. Nothing changed, just rocks and grass and sky. Eventually I was spent and sat down. Here I found another rock. This one came to me quickly. The words were getting careless:

Love!

The old sensation in my chest swelled as my heart continued to beat. Was this Love? Was I carrying Love? This was not Home. No, this feeling was not Love. Something was very wrong.

A shadow came across the sun. The clouds were thickening and the sky began to darken. It grew colder. Goosebumps formed on my skin. The sky was now completely dark and a chilling rain started to fall. The wind swirled and gusted, blowing the blades of grass back and forth. In the distance a tornado touched down.

I panicked and ran. I ran as far and as fast as I could, my heart pounding, the old feeling dragging at me, my three words on a cycle in my brain:

HomeGoLoveHomeGoLoveHomeGo—

I slipped on the wet grass and crashed face-first into a rock. Blood dripped down my face as the roar of the tornado grew behind me. I scrabbled at the face of the rock, but there was no carving. Spinning around I searched

the other rocks but saw nothing, blank faces. I closed my eyes as the tornado bore down on me. Reaching inside I gripped the heavy feeling, grabbed it, shook it. Held it squirming and thrashing in my hands. It slowed. It spoke. Everything clicked at once.

I knew its name and how I'd come. I knew this place and myself. I looked sadly at my Sorrow. Then the tornado lifted me off my feet. It wasn't gentle, but it carried me into the sky. I disappeared among the roiling thunderheads. I went Home.

Some Shining Life

"That's what I thought." He had his foot on my chest and I could feel blood dribble from my nose. "You have anything else to say?" I really didn't.

"Eat shit," I managed. He kicked me in the ribs. I turned on my side and curled in a ball. That seemed to be enough and he took her arm. The crowd turned with them and began to walk away. Someone spit on me. This was not how I'd pictured it.

I lay there for a while as the sound of laughter moved off down the street. Then I pushed myself up. The moon was out as were the stars. Standing there I had to admit it was a nice night. So I went back inside.

Sitting at the bar, a twist of napkin in my nostril, I sipped at my beer. I could feel my heart beat in my chest, the gush of blood in my veins. I felt strangely powerful. There was a couple sitting next to me. "What happened?" The guy asked.

I was silent for a minute. "How well do you know that girl?"

He looked at his girl, then back at me, "She's my girlfriend. I love her."

"Yeah," I said, "that's what happened."

When he went to the bathroom I scooted down and took his stool. She stared at her drink, but I could tell she wanted to look at my black eye. I felt my nose swelling. "What are you waiting for?" I asked her.

"I'm waiting for my boyfriend to come back."

"Why don't we get out of here?"

She rolled her eyes, disgusted. "I'm not going anywhere with you. You're a mess. And an asshole."

"I can't argue with that," I said, "I'm a poet. Did you know that?"

"No, I didn't know that."

"I can offer you a strange, shining life. I've got heart and brains and

passion. I can make you truly happy. Much happier than that guy in the bathroom.”

“You really need to stop,” she said.

“Don’t I know it,” I said.

When her boyfriend came back he sat in my vacated seat. If he didn’t like the new seating arrangement, he didn’t say anything. I bought a round of shots. We had a cheers, but as they drank, I just watched them. When they were done I raised mine and threw it back. I knew where this was going and a little evil smile tugged at my split lip. This time I would deserve it.

nothing is fucked, nothing is broken

the sky is still vast and the sun
is still bright and warm
on my face and there is still
beauty in this world in
equal part to the pain
and suffering and when
i wake from this dream
of life i will smile and sigh
for though we learn so much
we never learn anything at all.

for you, with the changing of leaves

i was fine before you
i wasn’t but didn’t know
i wasn’t, you know? i knew
life was a winter then you
dropped a spring in my lap
and like that it just melted
away laid bare all the hidden
love to a love and green grass
grew here and a tree, a tree!
yes, i was fine before you

i wasn't but didn't know
i wasn't my winter was free
of the dream of your spring
and a tree of my own.

On the Surface of the Sun

It was morning and I sat on a bench at the train station reading a book. Across from me sat a little girl with her mother. Her hair was red and she wore a green dress. I finished my book, set it down, and looked at her. She was looking back at me, studying me. Her eyes were open wide. Her mother glanced down and seemed to notice her. "Hey," she said, "don't stare. It's not okay to stare." She looked up at me. "Sorry, she can't help herself."

"No problem," I said, "I understand."

"She's just curious is all."

"I know." We sat there in silence, trying not to look at each other. Then the train arrived.

The mother stood and took the little girl's hand. As they walked away the child looked back at me with those wide eyes. Then they were gone and I was left to scan the crowd of passengers getting off the train. I saw her almost immediately, she was impossible to miss. She had on black sunglasses and an attendant held her by the arm. As they approached I thanked the man and took over, guiding her outside.

"You shouldn't have come," she said, as I helped her into the car.

"Yeah, I know."

"Where are we going?"

I didn't say anything, just started the car and turned out of the parking lot. We drove in silence for a while. Then I pulled off the road and stopped the car. I led her by the arm up a grassy hill and stopped beneath the outstretched branches of an old tree. I helped her sit, then sat down beside her. We were quiet, everything was quiet.

"Why did you do it?" I finally asked.

"Because I'm a terrible person," she said.

"No," I said, "that's not it."

The sun was full in the sky and she turned to stare directly at it. I closed my eyes and did the same. She reached over and took my hand. It was a strange sort of bright darkness.

A Kind of Bravery

Gran stood over the stove, tending to a boiling pot. She was a stout old woman, wearing a cooking apron and a warm, wrinkled face. The kitchen was quiet and the steam from the broth drifted up and around her like mist. She was singing under her breath as she stirred, “Que sera, sera...” The door to the living room swung open and a boy walked in.

“Hey Gran, where’s PopPop?”

Gran gestured towards the basement. “He’s down there messing around, tell him dinner’s almost ready.”

“Sure.” The boy walked down the flight of wooden stairs to the unfinished basement. At the bottom step he stopped and stood quietly.

PopPop sat at a little desk with his eyes closed. The boy gazed in silence at his long white beard and mess of white hair. The old man’s face was pretty well obscured by all the hair and the boy came closer, peering at it, wondering if the old man was sleeping. He leaned in and squinted.

The eyes snapped open, fixed on the boy. The boy froze, unconsciously holding his breath. They were a shocking color, blue as blue sky amidst the clouds of white. They flashed, then sparkled, then eased. The boy took a breath. “Gran says dinner’s almost ready.”

“Excellent, boy, excellent. Where’s your brother?”

The boy frowned. “He’s in his room, told me to fuck off.”

“Did he now? What’s eating him?”

“He won’t say, but I heard Amy slept with someone. Now she wants him back.”

The old man stretched his bony arms and yawned. “You know how many girls I’ve had, boy?” The boy shifted his weight from foot to foot before answering.

“I don’t know.”

“Guess.”

“A hundred?”

PopPop stroked his beard. “That’s a pretty good guess. What do you think about that?”

“I think Gran must not like it.”

“Well, that’s the thing. Sit boy, let me tell you a story.” He slid an empty milk crate across the floor with his foot. The boy sat and clasped his hands in his lap. He liked stories.

“A long time ago there lived a soldier. He was skilled with a sword, but he was more than that; he was an educated man, a philosopher and a poet. After the fighting was over he would wander off somewhere to sit by himself and compose verses.”

“What are verses?”

“Poems, boy, poems. Don’t they teach you anything? Anyway, one day he stood at attention on the front line of a grand army. Their banners flew crisp in the wind and the war drums beat a steady cadence at their backs.

“What’s—”

“Rhythm, child, it means rhythm. So their general went riding down the line on a big horse, and as he rode past their voices rose as one and they beat upon their shields. Across the field there stood another massive army, clothed in black and monstrous to behold. The horns sounded and these brave men flooded onwards towards their destiny.”

Here the old man paused and opened a drawer in the desk. He pulled out a little whiskey bottle and took a nip. Then he wiped his mouth, winked at the boy, and continued.

“But our soldier turned and fled. He ran away. The next day the remnants of the army returned to camp and he was in his tent, writing a poem.”

“Why did he run away? Didn’t you say he was a good fighter? Wasn’t he brave?”

“Of course. That’s what the poem was about.”

“Wasn’t he embarrassed?”

“No, he wasn’t embarrassed.”

The boy sat thoughtfully. “Well, that doesn’t sound too brave to me.”

“No, it wouldn’t. But your brother won’t listen to my stories.” He took another nip off the whiskey bottle, screwed on the cap and put it back in the drawer. “Now get on upstairs, I think I hear Gran calling.” The boy stood and began to walk away. “Oh, and one more thing.” The child paused. “Be nice to your brother. He’s going to need it.”

“Okay PopPop.” He scurried up the stairs and was gone. The old man pulled out the whiskey and drank off the end of the bottle. He ran a hand through his white hair and down his white beard. Then he just sat there. He sat there until Gran came to get him.

be kind and i will tell you

be kind and i will tell you
of the breaking place
where strong legs buckle
and stitches start to burst

touch my face and i will tell you
of the breaking place
where you clutch your boulder
with shaking hands and kick
to keep from drowning

kiss my cheek and i will tell you
of the breaking place
where the whole weight
of the world is not enough
where the world itself
looks down and away
take me home
and i will show you
we do it to ourselves.

Epilogue

Give Me Everything

I was tired of everything and I think she was too. We were sitting on a park bench drinking sometime in the late afternoon. My old nemesis the sun was still too bright but fading. She handed me the little pint bottle and I finished it.

“It’s too bad you’re such a selfish bastard,” she said as she leaned back. Her heart wasn’t in it though. I looked down at the empty bottle then back at her and shrugged.

“Sorry, I wasn’t thinking. You’re very beautiful, you know that?” Her head was back against the bench and her eyes were closed. She barely moved. Just slow breaths.

“Shut up with that.” I left her there and went to the shop. When I got back she was asleep on the grass. I lay down next to her, opened the bottle and lit a cigarette. One arm behind my head, feet crossed on the grass, I

listened to her breathing. The sun was setting and the sky was changing colors. Not too bad, I thought. Not too bad at all.

Still Life

[by Michael Trudeau](#)

The feeling began while he gathered his belongings and headed home, on a summer afternoon no different than most. He had to run to catch the train. He hopped on as the doors closed, his heart beating quickly but not yet heavily. Due to the exertion he did not notice the feeling until he'd been seated for several minutes. It was a tension first rising in his stomach and then soon diffusing to his chest, his limbs, to the very nerves beneath his fingernails. To him the vague sensation indicated he'd overlooked something, or forgotten something. Perhaps in his cubicle. He checked the pockets of his windbreaker, and then his pants. His keys and wallet were there. Bending over he checked the zipper on his bag. It was closed securely, and he assured himself that nothing could've fallen out. After a moment he discreetly checked the zipper on his pants. Up. Trying to calm his nerves, he rested his head against the train window and closed his eyes. But he could not help wondering about the racing in his veins—which simply made the racing worse—and how in the last few hours he had not taken caffeine, chocolate, nicotine, nothing that could've caused it.

The train made two stops, and with closed eyes he visualized the familiar scenes of these stops—the colors and positions of pillars and signs. A thigh brushed his as a passenger settled beside him. Moments later, eyes still closed, he became inexplicably afraid that he wore no pants. This he believed, he understood, despite minutes earlier having plunged his hands into their pockets in search of keys and a wallet. To have thought that he wore no pants worried him more than the possibility that he actually wore no pants. Nonetheless, after some deliberation he did something a bit frightening—he opened his eyes to make sure.

Alone in the kitchen, now, in jeans, t-shirt, and white socks, he stood at the stovetop preparing an Italian meal. He moved to the bowl that held garlic, pearl onions, shallots, and retrieved three garlic cloves. He moved to the bamboo cutting board and pressed a garlic clove with the flat of a paring knife, removing its flaked skin, and proceeded to shear translucent slices from the clove.

Usually he enjoyed cooking alone, he thought. He did not like to think himself paranoid, and yet, that he understood paranoia to be a ridiculous phenomenon did not save him from being subject to it. The feeling of trembling was rare for him but not unheard of. The trivial things an hour earlier (the keys, the zippers, the wallet) were now just that—trivial—along with the feeling earlier of having overlooked or forgotten something. The feeling had swelled into the trembling.

And now, at the cutting board, he tried to suppress the sensation that he had overlooked not something trivial like keys but something of a grander magnitude. The paring knife, which was slicing a garlic clove, looked...unfamiliar. The words *paring* and *knife* did not apply. Whatever it was that he held in his hand could be dangerous. He might slip and cut off the tip of his finger, or worse, watch perplexedly as his hand, stretching out—*now outstretched*—turned the tool toward his body, and plunged it into his orbit.

To keep these things from happening he applied more pressure to the smooth plastic handle of the tool, the knife, we can say, an action which kept its blade firm against the bamboo board after each slice from the clove. To keep these things from happening he then emptied a can of stewed tomatoes into a pot. Then the olive oil (golden in a clear bottle) was selected by his fingers, gingerly, from its place on the counter—

The feeling that he had overlooked something of a grand magnitude devolved into a feeling that he had overlooked something of the very grandest magnitude.

—and then the balsamic vinegar (rosewood and syrupy)—

It only troubled him more that he had no particular reason to feel this way about his life.

—and then the pulverized sea salt (pinched from a mortar and sprinkled)

—

And why would there be, he had asked himself before and repeated this supposition now, a prescribed account of his existence, he the central subject

of it, subject to its parameters?

—and then the parmigiano (grated)—

And why, if there were such an account, why must it be allegorical, and why must it come to an unhappy ending?

—and set the burner to low for the sauce to simmer—

A story that ends with his unhappiness?

But that is what he thought, nevertheless.

He was irritated for having thoughts like these and believed them irrational. Or if he must have them, he was irritated for not dismissing the thoughts instantly. But since he could not dismiss them instantly, he'd have to dismiss them as soon as possible. And so that night his careful dismantling of the (illogical, he thought) thought process, plus his reaffirmed conclusion, plus the steady preparation of the rest of dinner, all this began to soothe him.

Soon he sat down, alone, at a table in the middle of the apartment, to a piping-hot Italian meal. His cat walked into the room and around his legs to say hi. He stood from the table and retrieved a decanter of red wine and then found a juiceglass from a cupboard and filled it halfway with wine. He sat down again before the meal.

He tried to smile at the plate of food—its preparation so simple and flavor much more authentic than anything he'd been served in his youth—but to smile was difficult in this instance: He knew he was fooling himself, just a bit, by smiling. He still shook slightly from before, though the shaking now was not exactly physical, or if it was, it was internal, atomized throughout his bloodstream.

He picked up a fork.

The last time he felt a similar feeling occurred several weeks before, when he'd looked after a young boy, his twelve-month-old nephew, while the boy's mothers went out for the evening. He held the toddler in one arm and together, from behind a screen door, they waved goodbye to the boy's parents, the little boy happy to be waving with his uncle. The small show of enthusiasm was enough to please the uncle.

The boy, who was usually beautiful and energetic, and whose happiness was one of the uncle's few comforts, had begun sobbing not long after as his parents left, perhaps after the boy had realized they wouldn't be returning right away. The uncle tried to console the boy: the boy's parents would return

soon, he whispered.

He tried to console the boy by rolling a dump truck across the carpet, and by talking to a stuffed puppy. The uncle could also make the puppy fly by its ears, but the boy wasn't interested.

"Gray," the boy said. He stood on tiptoes in tiny sneakers on the sofa to look out the window. The boy turned his head and the uncle saw that tears streamed down his flushed cheeks. The boy did not whine but pleaded in a low, steady tone.

The boy would not come to the carpet to play or be to consoled; he stood on the sofa, holding tightly to its back cushion, pressed his tummy against the cushion, and looked out the window. The boy would then look back to his uncle, and would look back and forth between the window and the uncle several times, repeating, as far as the uncle could discern, the word *gray*.

Taking a seat on the sofa, the uncle patted the boy's little back, hesitated, and then looked out the window. The uncle searched the fading evening, for what? For signs of gray. Through the window the sky showed several deep shades of blue, and, at the horizon, purplish pink. The few cars parked on the street varied in color, but none could be considered gray. He ran a hand over the boy's back, smoothing his flannel shirt, and then the back of the boy's head, smoothing his wispy blond hair. Then with a thumb he wiped away the boy's tears.

The uncle, who had no children of his own, asked, "Are you saying *gray*?"

The boy repeated the word, opened his mouth as if to cry, but only tears rolled down his cheeks.

"What's gray?" the uncle asked.

The boy drawled, repeating the complaint.

"Sweetie, what is it?" the uncle asked. He asked the boy to please not be sad. Then the uncle offered, "Your mommies will be back soon," but to no effect.

The boy's little fists opened and closed desperately, grasping first the sofa cushion and then the uncle's large hand. And in this way the twelve-month-old continued to sob and repeat the word, a word that had already begun to spread panic through the uncle's chest. The uncle could not help but see something portentous in it. The fact that he did not believe in portents did not matter.

Before the mothers had left for the evening, one of them, his sister, had

notified the uncle that the toddler's molars were coming in. Only after the boy had jammed a knuckle in his own mouth did the uncle remember what his sister had said. To dull the pains of teething, his sister had mentioned on her way out the door, they had from time to time been applying a gel to the boy's gums. The uncle could find the gel in the medicine cabinet, in a plastic tube. He went to the cabinet and found it easily. He hurried back to the sofa and the boy, squeezed some gel onto his index finger and, hesitating, worried that this act would make no difference. He asked the boy to open up. He ran a fingertip over the boy's lower gum, pressing gently a sharp point. The uncle smiled upon feeling the new, surprisingly sharp tooth.

Soon the boy's sobbing slowed, then stopped, and he reached out for the plastic tube. The gel could not have worked so quickly: It was the feel of the tube in the boy's hand, the uncle thought, and not the gel itself. Then he asked the boy for a hug, and the boy gave him one, his tiny hand gripping tightly around the tube.

With the same hand the boy would clutch the tube of gel for the rest of the evening: as they played trucks, had a snack, read three books, even as his uncle laid him in the crib for the night. The uncle would watch a movie in the next room with the lights off thinking little about the movie and mostly about what the boy had said. The boy's parents would return late, and the three adults would tiptoe to the bedroom door and admire the boy in the crib.

In the mothers' bright kitchen over glasses of wine the uncle would tell them, a bit uneasily, about *gray*, though he would hide his apprehension. The parents would nod and smile and say that for some unknown reason the child's word, whatever it was, just meant the teething gel in the tube, nothing more—*that's babies for you*. The uncle would feel foolish and for the rest of their chat sit there dangling his wine glass in front of his face, feigning nonchalance, to conceal himself behind the red wine, as if his insecurity about the word were a visible flaw.

When he returned to his apartment that night, alone, and as he prepared for bed, he would remember looking in on the boy with the parents from the darkened doorway, how the boy slept peacefully on his back, even in sleep his fingers wrapped around the plastic tube.



At the table in the center of the room, in his apartment, in front of an Italian meal, he raised a fork to his mouth and took a bite of food. The food

was warm, and it was flavorless. He did not realize it was flavorless because he chewed absently, glancing around the apartment at an orange armchair, the surface of a gold-speckled Formica table, and the bare, pockmarked walls, in an effort to occupy his mind, his eyes then becoming fixed on the richness of red wine in a juice glass. He took another bite and then another, and on this bite his chewing slowed, and then stopped altogether. It was flavorless. Despite the garlic, black pepper, oregano, cheese, and the other ingredients. He could not understand. And so, an internal shaking, which had been waiting as if on a threshold, quickened, grew inside, and his fingers began to tremble. He placed the fork on the plate. He could not help himself—he wondered what the flavorlessness could mean. A sign, a warning, a judgment. It was all too clear: Life without flavor.

His spine wavered and he slid out of the chair and onto the floor. The fork was catapulted by an elbow into a nearby vase. He crawled, his knees and palms pressing hard on the hardwood floor. His goal was to reach a corner, any corner, and with some effort he reached the corner by the front windows. He wedged himself between an end table and a floor lamp.

Were he to look out the open window he would see an evening sun, a red midsummer sun, just now moving behind the downtown buildings. Were his thoughts and senses present in that world he would have felt a warm breeze through the window, a breeze which lifted a curtain that in turn settled onto his shoulder, and he would've heard the familiar sounds of traffic on the street three floors below. The measured application of brakes, the acceleration of tires on dry pavement.

He stayed in the corner for some time, who knows how long. He was able to emerge only after the cat—who had become curious at the huddled character in the corner, or perhaps worried for it, or perhaps interested in the gentle movement of the curtain in the breeze—came visiting, licking the hair on his forearm. He saw in this simple creature evidence that life could not be an allegory, that he himself was no character consigned to some ending, and he gained a bit of courage. He emerged from the corner steadily, glad for maybe the first time that he lived alone in the apartment, and sat again at the table. His tailbone hurt from having sunk onto the floor. He searched for the fork, couldn't find it, fetched a new one, and returned to the dinner, now cold.

"I like that you're here," he said to the cat, who had jumped onto the table. This is what he said, but what he meant was more along the lines of, *If I am, then I'm glad that you are, too*. He stroked its white, outstretched chest.

Playing, the cat flopped onto its side, rolled on its back, and gnawed into the fleshy part of his hand. Then it grasped his arm with its paws, its claws slightly flexed, scratching his skin playfully but too hard.

He scolded the cat and shooed it off the table. Then, in an effort to rationalize what had just transpired—sliding to the floor, the corner—he said to himself that the meal better not be flavorless, and he began to take slow bites. On the third bite it occurred to him—come on, dumbfuck, there is flavor here. He rolled his tongue in his mouth. Though cold, the Italian dish was tangy, the sauce garlicky and peppery. Not bad. Relief broke through his bloodstream, flooding out the trembling. He ate the rest of his meal heartily and, it might even be said, enjoyed it.

At the sink he rinsed the juicerglass, fork, and plate. He placed these to dry on the dish rack, then set the pot to soak. He was even whistling a little bit. One-by-one he put the parmigiano, the mortar with sea salt, the balsamic, and the olive oil in their proper places on the counter. He wiped down the countertop with a wet rag, rinsed it, then hung it to dry. The white stovetop showed spots of tomato sauce, which he would leave for now.

That evening he would go to bed early. His apartment was empty but as night came and—as he moved to the refrigerator, to the sofa to nuzzle the cat, to the desk to check his email, to a chair to read—his thoughts about the feeling and, more distressing, the incident of the corner, were too much company. He wanted stillness.

He would go to bed early.

He brushed his teeth, washed his face. As he peeled off his contact lenses his fingers began to tremble. He felt an urge to hurry: If he were motionless in bed perhaps he couldn't be affected.

Walking briskly down the hall to the bedroom he was passed by the cat, who was also eager for sleep, and who darted in front of him and leapt onto the bed. Getting into bed he snuggled in, almost burrowing his face into a pillow—the softer of the two pillows. Despite the summer weather he added another blanket to the layers, and on second thought decided to wear to bed a sweatshirt and sweatpants and his warmest socks. He needed the warmth of immobility and wanted the warmth nearly uncomfortable.

Despite all this, and beneath the covers, a shiver took control of his body. First his calves were affected, then his thighs and genitals, his abdomen, all the way up to his temples. The cat stepped around his covered legs, kneaded near his feet, and then settled on top of them softly. Through

chattering teeth he said some loving words to the cat, and the shivering passed out of him. He held the edges of two blankets and a sheet beside his cheek, all three bunched into a knot, which was becoming damp from his palms. Attempting a smile now, he was trying to absorb this moment of coziness, worrying and knowing that it would fade.

It faded. His doubts soon edged it out. He tossed in bed, his chest becoming tight, and tighter. He tossed and tossed until the night was no longer early. The cat, who knows how many hours prior, annoyed at his tossing, had moved from the bed to the other room. In those numberless hours he lay awake a tragedy had been threatening to take over his mind, had finally done so, and now revolved there. It was the one about a character doomed to unhappiness: the gist of all parables. In the story the character did not make the right choices, and would never—would never accept this or that into his heart. Faith? Love? It was unclear. In what, of what? Also unclear. But presented with an opportunity or opportunities to make the correct choice, the character instead acted with the determination of a man committed to making the same mistakes again and again.

And speaking of, if the character were to make the right choice now, this instant, his world, a dark cocoon, and by that we simply mean the bed sheets and sweatsuit, would disintegrate. Correct? His unhappiness yielding to what?

He saw this choice as parable, a legend, the thing of lore to be inscribed to a tome—a choice considered and its consequence, the start of a new creation or the repetition of all things. *Between what and what?* he pleaded.

And so, obdurate, maybe prideful, certainly cowardly, the character would never. In bed he turned, the blanket rubbing against his ear, the fabric deafeningly close.

Post-Scripts and Author Bios

Paul L. Bates lives in New England. He is happily retired from a career in construction management, swims distance, caters to a pair of rescued cats and writes dark fiction. His publication credits include the first two novels of an end-of-days post apocalyptic trilogy, Imprint and Dreamer, as well as over fifty shorter works appearing in periodicals and anthologies including Arcane, Pulp! (winter/spring 2012), Darker than Noir, Jack-O-Spec, In the Garden of the Crow, ParABnormal Digest, Surprise: an Erotic Fiction Anthology from Racy Pages, New Writings in the Fantastic, Sporty-Spec, Desolate Places, Ruins Extraterrestrial, Withersin Magazine, City Slab, and Zahir. He strongly favors printed work over electronic, but nevertheless maintains a blog at Red Room, filled with insightful book and film reviews, floggings and crowings about recent publications, and the occasional pithy observation: <http://redroom.com/member/paul-bates/blog>

Inspired, perhaps, by the wasting death of my wife, Nancy, at age 53 from cancer and the attending medical freak show which accompanied it, “St. Mollusks” may well be the purging of the pent-up frustration and rage the entire two and a half year experience engendered. Whatever it is, I literally wrote half of “St. Mollusks” in a dream, awoke to transcribe and complete the first draft in the wee hours of the morning, making every effort to remain faithful to both the tone and the logic of the dream version. As a “story,” it is definitely a departure from the norm, as there is neither protagonist (unless an institution can be a protagonist), nor plot (unless a series of hypothetical situations and random histories may be considered a plot). Nevertheless it remains a coherent whole, celebrating the inevitable triumph of medical “science” in the (thankfully) unlikely event it should ever come to pass.

C. Bryan Brown writes to avoid going to jail and to provide himself with stable mental health after being hit with a dirty plunger at the age of seventeen. The plan succeeded beyond his wildest dreams; he's married, has two wonderful, intelligent (and sarcastic) sons, holds a steady job, and is in debt up to his ears. Yes, he's happy to be living the American dream and you can view more of his work at www.cbryanbrown.com.

As a semi-reformed child and current parent, I've learned one of the most effective teaching tools is fear.

My grandparents and parents said when someone sneezed a part of their soul left their body. Blessing them, even in the most superficial manner, brought the soul back and subsequently saved lives. I was six years old (give or take) so this supposed loss of my soul was momentous, horrifying even. Therefore, it made sense to bless everyone who sneezed and accept those blessings in return. It was the polite thing to do; it was the *right* thing to do, because we're all people and everyone deserves a minimum amount of courtesy. To this day, if a stranger sneezes in my presence, they get blessed.

Enter my short story writing process: inciting incident, anger/contemplation/sadness/WTF moment, and then zero draft the story. "Bless You" wasn't any different and while I don't remember the specific incident anymore, sneezing wasn't involved; I was looking to make a point concerning the lack of courtesy we show each other in a subtle, disturbing way and, at the same time, explore one of the urban legends local to where I grew up. The story remains a favorite for those reasons and I hope readers agree.

Robin Wyatt Dunn lives in Los Angeles, California. Underneath every city is a world of secrets that you can stumble blind into. This city just has a little more than most.

A.A. Garrison is a twenty-eight year old man living in the mountains of North Carolina. His short fiction has appeared in various magazines, anthologies, and web journals, from Something Wicked to Kaleidotrope to the Psuedopod horror podcast. His first novel, "The End of Jack Cruz," is to be released soon by Montag Press.

J.R. Hamantaschen is a part-time writer from Queens, New York. His dark fiction collection, "You Shall Never Know Security," was released

August 2011 by West Pigeon Press. He has no bones for self-promotion, but if you throw “You Shall Never Know Security” into Google (or visit West Pigeon’s website, which you should be familiar with if you are reading this post-script), you can read the editorial and customer reviews, and decide for yourself if you want to take a gander at some more of his work. As always, he can be emailed at jrtaschen@gmail.com and, if you live in New York and are not an asshole, he invites you to grab some coffee with him.

As to “Oh Abel, Oh Absalom,” I’ll just take the Dennis Etchison approach and avoid commenting. It works better that way.

Christian A. Larsen writes short science-fiction, horror, and dark fantasy stories published by critically-acclaimed magazines and presses. His work has been anthologized in What Fears Become (“Bast”), Sparks: Exciting New Fantasy from Today’s Brightest Stars (“What the Moon Saw”), and A Feast of Frights (“Clawed Sod”), among others. Mr. Larsen received his bachelor of science in broadcast journalism from the University of Illinois and studied secondary English education at National-Louis University. Follow him on Twitter [@exlibrislarsen](https://twitter.com/exlibrislarsen) or visit exlibrislarsen.com.

I wrote “724” in the summer of 2011, right after I had resigned from my job and committed myself to the financially tumultuous condition of writing full-time. My five-year-old and I were splitting a peanut butter and Nutella sandwich one afternoon, and he asked me if he would always be a little boy. I told him no, that he would be a grown-up someday, and he asked me if he would then always be a grown-up. I told him the truth we all are made to live with, that aging only goes in one direction—but what if it didn’t? What if we could age in reverse, not like Benjamin Button with a finite live-and-death cycle, but pretty much at will, back and forth? Would that be better? Owen Blanchard III didn’t seem to think so, and even as I grow older, neither do I. The story pretty much came to me fully formed there at the kitchen table, or at least the idea did—so in way, “724” owes its existence to my son, Heath. Thank you, buddy.

BV Lawson is a former singer and radio announcer who enjoys flying around in little Cessna planes with her husband whenever time permits. She’s currently a freelancer who writes on a wide variety of subjects for various newspapers and national magazines. Her stories, poems and articles have appeared in dozens of national publications and several anthologies to critical

acclaim, including the 2012 Derringer Short Story Award. She operates the blog “In Reference to Murder,” and her web site is bvlawson.com.

Growing up in a small town, I observed first-hand just how provincial and insular they can be. You don’t need newspapers to know everyone else’s business. And more often than not, in a small town, being “different” makes you a pariah, and being an athlete makes you a prince, which was partly the genesis for this story. But it’s not the whole story. When the half-witted Rita is victimized by some of those princes, the question becomes: does anyone really know the true cost of evil? Or to take it a step further, is the loss of innocence a cause or effect of darkness in the human soul?

Samuel Minier has published sixty stories and poems in venues such as Chizine.com and [Read by Dawn](#) Vols I—III, as well as [Chicken Soup for the Dog Lover’s Soul](#) (seriously). He currently has two screenplays in development with a production company. See www.samuelminier.com for more of Sam’s writing.

This story arose out of a topical writing competition: a week before Christmas, the topic assigned ended up being “Evil Children.” Between the season and the assignment, the general idea came together pretty quickly. Marcus was inspired by an old Christmas ornament of my mom’s; that same ornament also played a role in one of the first nightmares I ever remember having. After thirty-something years, I guess it’s about time for that creepy little bastard to start making an impression on others as well.

Nick Medina is an author from Chicago, Illinois. He has been published in print, online and audio formats by magazines, journals and anthologies in the United States and the United Kingdom. To contact Nick or to read more of his work, visit <https://sites.google.com/site/nickjmedina/>.

The initial motivation for *The Condition She’s In* came from my desire to toy with the ambiguous nature of the word “condition.” Basically, I was going for a surprise ending and little more. When I settled on the story of Timothy McAuley and his three children, however, I discovered that the real horror was in the split-second rendering of utter and optimistic happiness to crushing sadness. The theft of that happiness is what haunts me most; much more than the unfortunate truth of the situation itself

Doug Murano lives somewhere in the wide-open spaces of the Great

Plains. Since 2008, his stories have appeared in a variety of periodicals and anthologies, including Necrotic Tissue (Stygian Publications), Fifty-Two Stitches Vols. 1 & 2 (Strange Publications) and BULL: Fiction for Thinking Men. In addition, he has served in an editorial capacity with several small presses, including Stygian Publications and Belfire Press. Keep up with his latest news and musings at <http://muranofiction.blogspot.com>.

“The Chopping Block” began as an image from a recurring dream I’d been having of a headless chicken flopping through its final moments. After a week of nightly visits to the chopping block, I decided to attempt an exorcism through storytelling. I’m reluctant to pin this story down too much, but I think it has something to say about our reasons for and reactions to committing acts of violence—on both personal and grand scales. Beyond that, I leave it open for your interpretation. Thanks for reading.

Josh Orkin: When I was 22 I graduated from the University of Michigan, swallowed my fear and moved to Taiwan. There I taught English, studied Chinese, traveled southeast Asia and began writing in earnest. At 24 I fell in love. For the first time, well and truly. A year later she moved to Vietnam and in faith and ignorance we began a long distance relationship. It fell apart, and in turn so did I. Well and truly. I stopped going to work and drank myself into a hole. I booked a flight home and spent a despondent month on my parent’s couch. Then I went back.

Needing closure I flew to meet her on neutral ground in the Philippines. There we fucked, she cried, we fought, we fucked and in the end we got back together. Then I went back to Taiwan, she went back to Vietnam and once more it went to shit. I crawled back into my place of darkness and wallowed there, reckless, becoming someone I didn’t recognize. Writing was my only signpost, the only thing that made sense.

This is the product of that time, each piece conceived and executed in isolation, born of need and catharsis. Arranged in chronological order, it tells a story of failing light, a re-union and an ending. Without it I don’t know what I would have done. It helped me somehow stumble through that midnight and I am proud of it. If nothing else, it is real and it is honest. I present it here, with trembling hands, to you.

Yarrow Paisley contains multitudes. Which is to say, “Pen Names.” Released, variously, on both screen and paper. For more weirdness *a la*

Frondu, check out Shelley Altamont. For blockbuster genre fiction, Zinna Kingsley. For medievalist nonsense, Sholder Greye. If you want plain vanilla “Yarrow Paisley,” his work appears in various publications such as the one in your hands, all meticulously cataloged at yarrowpaisley.com.

Frondu is the appendage you have always felt wiggling in your blind spot. Mirrors don’t reflect it because mirrors lie. Others don’t acknowledge it because people lie. If I’m the first to reveal the truth to you, well, what can I say, I’m a truth teller: I use words, and words don’t lie. Don’t worry, someday your frondu will grow long enough for you to see. Until then, keep lovin’, keep truckin’, and keep your pants on.

Lydia Peever is a journalist and horror author living in Ottawa. With articles in some newspapers and a few magazines, she is currently working on the sequel to her violent vampire novel, Nightface.

With too many hobbies and diverse interests, you may find her researching genealogy in a dusty library, profiling artists for ottawahorror.com, or taking photos at a punk show. By day, she haunts trendy cafés, tends poison flowerbeds, and photographs roadkill.

All my fixations on knives, mental breaks, introverts and suicide culminated as I was falling asleep one night. It began as a story of someone I used to know but veered off on a terribly dark tangent. So far, I have been jarred awake by the sensation that someone is sitting on the foot of my bed three times.

Michael Trudeau is an editor and writer from Saint Paul, Minnesota. His writing has appeared in The Smart Set and North-wind Magazine. He can be reached at michael@belleetoilestudios.com.

Horror is the everyday.

Michael Wehunt spends his time in Atlanta, Georgia, wondering if that’s really him in the mirror. There is always a piano playing in his head. If you’re interested in more of its melodies transcribed into gloomy words, please visit www.michaelwehunt.com.

This story came from an age-old fear: Do we ever really know anyone? Even those closest to us? We are social creatures, particularly when coupling, and we hold our companions close. But that nibbling fear can persist, no matter how many years of secret-swapping and bed-sharing. Do we ever

really know anyone? An old man lying next to his wife of fifty-plus years...from this image, "A Coat That Fell" sought a darkly extreme answer to that question.