

# Inwood Indiana

Breaking Curfew

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**INDIANA**



# Breaking Curfew

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## **Temptations are Limited**

My wife has been playing that song over and over again today. I forgot the name since I numbed it out of my mind, but I know the rhythm by heart. I suppose I can't help but understand her, though, since we've just recently lost another child. Ten years I've been with this woman and not once have I held a child in my arms and smiled down upon it. At first I thought it was just me, but now I'm starting to believe maybe it's her as well.

"Three loses..." I mumble to myself as I sit in my living room, listening to that song my wife plays in our bedroom. "Three loses in ten years..." I close my eyes. "Three..."

Three strikes and you're out, a voice then says in my mind. I know this voice—it's mine.

"Shut up," I tell it.

How cruel. It laughs at me. Say...why not just find someone else to bear your child?

I open my eyes. "Are you serious?" I growl. "I love my wife!" Mm-hm? The voice is testing me. Just ask your wife for permission, then, if you love her so.

I close my eyes again, waiting until the song ends for the umpteenth time, and say, "Fine..."

That night my wife and I sit at the dinner table, barely touching our food. Although this is melancholic, this is the only other time besides sleeping I can enjoy since my wife turns off that annoying song.

Ask her...! the voice in my head growls, pressuring our earlier dispute.

I sigh. "Sweetheart?" I ask my wife, forcing a smile to show. "Yes, dear?" my wife asks back, still looking down at her barely-touched plate. It makes me frown. Her voice is so dulled-out that it's barely hard to hear her. She sounds as if she were thirty years beyond what she was now.

"I was...thinking..." I gulp.

Just say it! the voice hisses, making my head feel as if it were being filled with acid.

"About the..."

"You know," my wife interrupts, still staring at her food, "I

was thinking about the solution to our problem.”

My heart stings. “Oh?”

She looks up at me. Her eyes have lost their shine from over the years; her skin turned pale like a corpse’s; and her hair unkempt. “You should find someone else to bear your child.” I blink blankly, then smile and clap my hands. “That’s exactly what I was going to ask you, sweetie!” I get, walk over to her, then grab her hands and kneel before her. “Oh, honey...You won’t regret this. Once the child is born, we can take custody of it and...”

My wife lets me go and gets up. “What I meant was...she bares your child, not ours.” She then takes off her wedding ring and puts it on the table. She solemnly walks to her room. When she plays the song again, I stand up and smile gloomily.

“What a soothing song...”

Derek Smith



## **Red Box Phone**

I sit by the phone  
With the lights off.  
It's red like the idea of a fire hydrant  
And smooth, the paint unpeeling.  
I wait.  
For it to ring, you know.

A precise jangling sound that makes me jump  
And fumble in the grey darkness  
Trying to answer before it goes to the machine.

It looks like a phone that could end the world.

Ashley Dean

## **Jimmy and Katie, 1998**

Still we tried to look away from the moment when the bird hit the ground, but it was impossible not to stare. It thudded on the dirt road. There was no sound. We just imagined the thump. It did not twitch. It had the kind of sickness that made it die while still on the air. Only a husk now. Dried and bitter. Once there was warmth inside it, and we wished we could breathe it back. It raised some dust; bristling, the dust cloud obscured what we thought was its pain. Perhaps, it was better that way. We buried it on the vacant lot near Mr. Dramb's farm. The clumps of earth we had overturned with our bare hands.

Kristine Muslim

## **The Magnolia**

Moonlight flower, ivory white skin of the South,  
Sugarcane rivers and wrap around porches, cotton  
Curtains blowing slowly in the breeze  
Rocking chairs and iced tea, or spring  
Water thick on the tongue, petals  
When they fall, once upon a time  
Civil War red as seeds in a cone.  
Old Scooter the house cat and Spook,  
Puppy in the backyard.  
At the Big House, aunts and uncles adrift  
In the halls,  
Horses, goats, and Moo in the pasture.  
Still Gertrude and roosters in the coop.  
Dan's store on the corner, closed. West  
Spring's is the home of my brother-in-law's.  
Squirrel guns and shotguns in wood and rides in  
A Model T, sassafras , and endless memories.  
Churches and parades and Fourth of July  
Schoolhouse and Boy Scouts and softball field.

Danny Barbare

## Night of the Living Dead

Remember when you read me ghost stories and it was dinnertime but I had no intention to eat? When I was saving myself for the mounds of Kit-Kat bars and candy apples and popcorn balls and Reeses and I had no idea what "calorie counting" was? It was my fourth year in a row being a witch but this year was different because I wasn't going green. I was done hiding behind globs of emerald makeup. Oxford shoes and spider web tights and a bell sleeved black sheet-like dress. My eyelashes were thick black creepy crawly bug legs and my midnight lips looked even better once the lipstick got on my teeth.

You dressed as a Dead Sea captain like always. I guess the Angersola's don't like change. Your face paint was a masterpiece with your black eyes and stitched up lips and ghastly bruises all over your cheekbones. Your jet-black hair was wild and your old naval jacket covered in fake crimson blood. You were unrecognizable.

This year Halloween was going to be different. No more trick or treating on Pleasant Street where people left baskets of fun sized M&Ms outside their front doors to be emptied before we even set out by middle school kids who didn't wear costumes. I was finally old enough to go downtown with you. I had a minor panic attack when I realized my Sky Dancers bike didn't go with my ensemble but we were already running late. Witches are never late.

I raced you down Liberty Street past all of the monstrous colonials with the fake cobwebs covering the doors and candles in the windows. Twilight was looming over Chester and the tinted cream crescent moon was coming out of hiding. The skeleton trees were fading to black. My bike pummeled through the orange and brown leaves but you were faster. The air smelled of smoke and pine needles and Hershey bars.

We didn't pass one car during the ten-minute journey so I spent most of it riding the yellow line. I was walking now and you wheeled both of our bikes along either side of you. We passed Trooper Brown and he nodded hello as we passed the barricades into the chaos that stood before us. No cars would be entering downtown Chester tonight.

The sea of kings and pirates and Elvis' and devils filling the twisted two-lane road made me grip your hand as you parked our bikes next to Simon's Marketplace near about ten others. I could see high flames over the stonewall up ahead. Drumbeats rumbled behind my ribcage and rattled in the back of my throat. I couldn't tell what was louder, my beating heart or the beating drums.

Everyone around us was unfamiliar to me at this mysterious masquerade. Noticing my evident shock you bent down next to my ear and explained that, "Halloween's not only about ghouls and candy corn, it's about being someone different."

I understood why you wanted to hide. Why you coveted the cover of darkness and the costumes and the ambiguity. Everybody in Chester had his or her own stagnant reputation. Nothing got past anybody. This was the one night when the only thing anyone would be judging was the amount of effort put into your attire.

I always knew you loathed everybody knowing everybody else's business. Like when we found out people were praying for you at church because of the ambulance outside of our house and the hospital stay and the antidepressants and the iv drips and your car sitting in our driveway for weeks unused. People looked at us differently at the grocery store. Moms went out of their way to say hello to me at school and I had to go talk to somebody during recess that probed me with questions. But at the bonfire, you were no longer my father, you were the Dead Sea captain and none of that happened to you.

The Dead Sea Captain didn't have to take Escitalopram because he lost his job. He was a sailor with his own three masted zombie ship. Out in the ocean he was freed of the confinements of land, the suffocating pressure of society. The Dead Sea Captain would have never thought to take too many pills. Maybe that's because he was already dead.

The street was lined with dozens of orange jack o lanterns of varying sizes. They lit a scorching path straight to the bonfire. I proudly explained to you that every single student at Chester Elementary had carved one and I searched high and low for mine. The lopsided cat face with the sunken triangle nose and half opened eyes finally stared back at us. I told you it was Dutchess, our cat, and you replied with a chuckle and an "obviously, it looks just like her."

I couldn't let go of your hand as we approached the inferno without the risk of losing you. Orange and red embers danced to the drums high above our heads. Somebody on stilts dressed as a giraffe waved at me from the sky above. I tried to figure out who it was but it was useless. Everywhere people were shouting out "hi's" and "hullo's" over the drumbeats to one another and I tried to tell if anybody really knew who anybody else was with of all of the glitter and makeup and wigs. I guess everyone had something to hide. We got apple cider out of an enormous metal bathtub and you stepped on my feet a few times. You could tell it was too much for me so we went back to the safety of the Dutchess pumpkin.

My friends were standing near their respective jack o lanterns dressed as Princess Barbies and ballerinas. My Morticia like gown made me the sore thumb but I wouldn't be caught dead in those tight pink unitards anyway. I grabbed my pillowcase and went door to door at each and every art gallery and boutique and restaurant with them in toe.

I received French hard candies from Du Village and homemade fudge from Simon's. The Norwegian artists gave out oddly shaped chocolates and almost every restaurant abided by the two-handful-rule. When my pillowcase was sufficiently stuffed to the brim I found you at the Pattaconk Tavern with the other dads.

You were standing there, covered in fake blood, black curls going mad, with your dead eyes and ghoulish face drinking from the mug you kept at the bar. I knew it was yours by the faded Red Sox stickers that sat over the Pattaconk logo. So at ease conversing with the other costumed patrons, you had taught me to love the mystique and mystery of Halloween and tonight I learned why. At that moment I wanted to tell you that if you wanted, you could be the Dead Sea captain everyday. At that moment I hoped you would dress as him forever.

Christine Angersola

## Pastoral

On the morning of the Saturday Vera and Rich would die, they sit at the kitchen table together going through the newspaper as always. Vera lays her section of the paper down, drags a white coffee cup toward the edge of the kitchen table and picks it up. She stands and pours the cup in the sink. She's in a blue bathrobe and blue slippers. Rich is in his underwear at the table reading his section. They just finished talking about the story on the front page of an old man whose wife perished in a house fire. Rich suggested the old man set the fire for the insurance money; otherwise, he would have gone in and got her out. Vera pointed to the reports that the fire was very intense and the old man fought fiercely with firefighters as they dragged him from his living room. Rich and Vera are at an impasse over this.

They live out a gravel road. If you come from town, you pass big farms and thick woods before you get there. If you keep going out the road, you pass more farms and woods and come to an intersection with a single-lane county road that eventually meets up with a two-lane state road. If you take the state road east, you can be in Kentucky in five minutes. Once you get there, you won't find a serious town for twenty miles. The sheriff's department has jurisdiction out around Rich and Vera's. Headquarters is on the other side of the county. It'd take a deputy a half hour to get to their house.



They bought the property a year ago. They had lived in an apartment in town until the bosses at the steel mill promoted Rich to a section manager and Vera got on as an accountant in the mill offices. The mill is pretty much all there is for work here unless you're in a family that has a funeral home, or if you can tend bar or farm. The mill pays well, but it's been downsizing because of foreign competition. The mill used to employ thousands of people. Now there's about three hundred on the payroll.

Their house sits back from the road at the end of a short dirt driveway lined with pines. The house is an old farmhouse. The Bertram's lived here when they had their farm. A few years ago, old man Bertram died from complications due to shingles and his wife moved to Phoenix to live with their daughter. The family had sold off most of the farm's three hundred acres by the time Rich got wind of the liquidation.

One person already bid on the house and the remaining two acres that came with it. However, the family took Rich's bid because it was ten thousand more. Once Rich got the promotion and pay raise, he spent money. He bragged to everyone at work about his outbidding. He bragged about his new television, the stereo, the new truck and tractor. After six years of marriage, he declared he finally bought Vera a diamond engagement ring. "She's been wearing a mood

ring,” he told the guys in his section. A couple of weeks ago he announced he was having a tin roof installed on the house and barn this summer. Some of the men he used to work alongside are now his subordinates and don’t like hearing these things. Most of them have been at the mill longer than him. They talk angrily about him in the lunchroom.

Vera’s twenty-nine, a year older than Rich. She’s pretty and has nice long brown hair. Since she handles payroll, she deals with workers coming in for their checks. The men flirt with her. Some are old enough to be her grandfather. A lot of the men call her “Love,” a nickname that grew out of “L.V.,” which were initials for “Little Vera,” the first nickname. She tells Rich about this and says it bothers her the way the men act. But she flirts back sometimes. There was a rumor going around that Vera and a worker named Burt had sex in his car in the parking lot during lunch. Rich found out about it because someone taped a note to the front of his locker. Rich didn’t know of a Burt at the mill. When he confronted Vera about it at home, she told him the rumor wasn’t true. “Workplace politics,” she told him. “It’s a lie.”

~O~

Rich walks out to the porch in his underwear. He just took a drug test at work and passed and the next one isn't scheduled until next month, so he carries a joint. He looks out over his big front yard. It's a sunny, warm morning; forecasted to be in the upper-eighties by noon. He plans to get the tractor out of the barn and mow today. The grass is high. It'll be the first time this season he mows. Last season he cut with a push mower. Took him a full day to do the job.

Wind works up from the valleys on either side of the house and makes it difficult for him to light the joint. He cups his hands over the joint and hunches with his back turned for the lighter to work. He gets it going and turns back to the road and smokes. The sun is just over the green hills across the road. The gray posts of the barbwire fence that keep in Henderson's cattle look black with the light behind. Their house sits on a crest. The road slopes down both ways and fades into the shadows of the forested valleys.

A small blue pickup comes up the road from the direction of the county road. The pickup travels slow as it passes the house, almost comes to a stop. Rich holds the joint down behind his back and waves. He can't see the driver clearly, but it's obviously a man in a ball cap. He sees the bill of the cap turn in his direction, then back to the road. The pickup is rusted around the wheel wells. It keeps crawling by and then

picks up speed as it heads down the road toward town. Rich takes a hit off the joint and scratches his stomach. Some of Henderson's brown cows stand behind the fence and watch him.

When the joint is half smoked, Rich butts it out on the banister and tosses it on a low table between two rocking chairs. He opens the screen door and goes inside. Vera is in the shower. He dresses in shorts and a t-shirt in the bedroom. He grabs a pair of socks out of the drawer. In the kitchen, he pulls on his socks and work boots. Then he heads back out the front screen door, grabs the joint, and lighter off the table and heads around the side of the house to the barn. He's got a new tractor in there. He forgot the key to the padlock on the front door of the barn, so he goes back in through the back door for the key, which is in the kitchen.

"Rich!" Vera calls from the bathroom.

"What?"

"Get my lawn chair out of the basement and set it up in the front yard. I'm going to lay out and read."

"I'm going to mow."

"I'll move when you get that far."

Rich heads down to the basement and brings up a lawn chair. He begins to go out the front door with it, then remembers what he came in the house for and goes back in the kitchen for the key and puts it in his pocket. Outside, he opens up the lawn chair in the front where there is the most sun. In the barn, he lights the joint again and holds it between his lips. He takes the big red gas can and fills up the tractor. He squints against the smoke rolling into his eyes. He screws the cap back on the tractor and puts the gas can away. He finishes the joint and pinches off the cherry with his fingers. Then he puts it in his pocket with the padlock key. The back of the house and barn are still in shadow. The area is cooler than the front yard. Rich climbs on the tractor and starts it up.

Henderson's cows watch him make his first pass next to the road. He rides back and forth across the yard. The red metal of the tractor's hood gleams. He wears earphones and listens to loud music. Now and again, he raises his face to the sun. Things are good for him. By the time he gets to where he set the lawn chair, Vera has not made it outside yet. He stops the tractor and leaves it running. He moves the lawn chair out in a part of the yard toward the road where he already cut. Then he continues mowing next to the porch, and then around the sides of the house. He travels in circuits that run the length

of the house—toward the barn—toward the road. Vera waves to him from the porch on one of his circuits toward the road. She wears a blue bikini and is barefooted. He waves back and turns toward the barn.

Vera walks through the yard to the lawn chair. She carries a book of stories by an Argentine writer and a can of beer. She wears black sunglasses and has her hair pulled back in a ponytail. Her skin is slick with suntan oil. The sun is higher now and the air is getting hot and windy. She adjusts the chair, then reclines and opens the book.

Rich, on a circuit toward the road, idles the tractor and looks at his wife. Her skin is shiny and smooth. She looks over at him and smiles and takes drink of the beer and then goes back to the book. The music blasts in his ears over the tractor's engine. He is looking at his wife when the pickup comes up the hill from the direction of town, faster this time. When the pickup pulls into the driveway, dust blows out behind it in a cloud and swirls up around when the pickup comes to a sudden stop. Rich turns off the tractor and pulls the earphones down around his neck. He can still hear the music. Vera closes her book and marks it with her finger. She shades her eyes and looks at the pickup.

A man opens the door of the pickup and steps out. His face is in the shadow of the red ball cap's bill. He wears blue jeans and a flannel shirt. Cowboy boots. The man waves to Rich and hollers, "Ho!" For a moment, the man flicks his face into sunlight and flashes Rich a toothy grin. Rich doesn't recognize him. The man walks around the front of the pickup. There are at least thirty yards between Rich and the man. Rich waves back and climbs off the tractor. The man opens the passenger side door and leans in on the bench seat. When he stands back in the sunlight, he first directs the hunting rifle at Vera.

Justin D. Anderson

## Exactly How You Wanted It

In the cotton field, with a hoe in your hand, the hours sometimes tick off like seconds. You walk up a row, maybe a quarter-mile toward another cotton field or a soybean field, off too far to make out which it is, but you know it's cotton because you've already walked this same row a thousand times and if not this one, another just a couple of steps to the left. You come back toward your tan truck after you've got to the break in the field, a dirt path separating the two cotton fields; and by the time you make it back to that tan truck, it's lunch time or quitting time.

Other times, the seconds drag into days and the days into months. The field does not end, or rather, there is no end to the number of fields that need chopped. You raise your hoe to the sky—the sun would glint and shine in your eyes if the damn thing wasn't so rusted—and you drop the hoe to the earth, a resonating thud of steel and root colliding. But the root only gives way to a thicker one you hadn't seen just yet. You strike down upon the earth again. You walk up and down, raising your hoe and dropping the wrath of God down upon those demon roots, and you finish the entire field. It's still a quarter til noon and there's another field to get in after lunch.

Lunch is a bologna sandwich and a beer you stole out of the refrigerator. Your momma doesn't even know it's been taken yet because she won't wake up for another couple of hours still. But when she does wake up, she'll be madder than hell that her beer is gone, not because you took it and drank it though, but because you took it and she couldn't drink it.



Lunch lasts just long enough for you to unwrap your sandwich and down the beer. Then it's time to move the truck to the field down by the Marshall's place—out on Highway 61—or to the one down by Byrd's Corner off of Salcedo; when you get there, you're not sure which you hope it will be: an afternoon that flies past with one walk up and down a row or one that hangs on the end of your hoe like so many roots slashed and stuck over the last couple of years.

Some days you see people while you're out in the field, off in the distance somewhere, another worker or two loading irrigation pipes into a trailer to take to another field, or maybe you see a hitchhiker walking the highway trying to get taken down the road a ways, to New Madrid maybe, or even further if the driver's going down to Arkansas or Mississippi. Other days, most days, you're on your own in the field, no one around for miles. On those days, when the breeze is blowing just enough to bend the leaves of the cotton plants, you can lose yourself in the quiet noises of the field. You walk by dozens of weeds, a whole field of weeds without seeing a single one. You stay through dusk to go back and finish the work that should have been done hours before, but you were so caught up in the rhythm of the wind and the slight give of the dirt underneath your boots that you hadn't swung your hoe for hours. When you finish walking the last row for the second time that day, it's time to go home, and now you know which you had wished for at lunch. You hoped the day would go on for an eternity so you'd never have to go home to that trailer with your momma. If you were lucky she wouldn't have a new man at the house, someone she picked up to buy her booze and meth or any other drug they could get their hands on, someone who picked her up because she is as easy as losing a whole afternoon caught in the slow sounds of the earth.

But the days always end and run into that trailer sitting off the side of HH just outside of Sikeston, Missouri. No matter how many times you get beat on by a fist you don't even recognize, or how many times your momma is so fucked up she can't pay back those men for her drugs and they beat her and beat you and ransack the trailer and rob you out of a week's pay, there's always another field to be in as the sun's rising. One day, after being up all night just making sure your momma doesn't die on the floor of the bathroom—which isn't even big enough for her to die in—you're out in the field as the sun's rising, your jeans soaked up to the knees from a few drops of dew from a few thousand cotton plants. You hear the man's voice, so far off in the distance that the words are a jumble in the cool windless morning. You have just struck through a root the size of your forearm when you hear it. Every hair on your body stands up and listens. You look for the headlights of a pick-up truck coming down the dirt road, the boss or maybe one of his men coming to tell you that this or that field is off limits today because they're getting crop dusted or some other thing. But there is no truck, no headlights, no nothing except for the dirt and the rows of cotton. The sun's rays just barely make it over the tops of the trees in the distance. You hear it again, but it doesn't sound like someone yelling too far off to make out what it is they're saying. It's more like someone whispering soft enough, just soft enough so that you can't hear, like it's done on purpose. Goose bumps, not from the soaking wet pants, come up all over your legs and arms and a funny feeling settles into the base of your head. You pause and adjust the bill of your baseball cap. You make the decision, voice or no voice, there's still a day's work to be done. The sky stops as you walk up and down, slamming the ground with your tool, your weapon; it freezes, remaining too dark for twenty, thirty, forty-five minutes too long. But how can you say for certain in a place where time starts and stops as it pleases?

You come to the end of a row, on the side furthest from your pick-up truck, where you heard the voice before, and there's a figure about a mile away, walking toward you on that dirt road that borders the field. It isn't the boss because he would have just pulled up in that big F-350 of his. You stand there watching as the dark mass in the distance turns into the form of a man wearing a wide-brimmed hat and before you can blink more than twice, the man is only a few hundred feet in the distance. If you had turned away for just a second even, you would have said the man got there that quickly by getting into a full sprint; but you hadn't taken your eyes off the stranger, and he hadn't broken from his short, smooth gate.

When the man comes close enough to talk you up on the weather or high school football like those men down at Jay's would have done had you left and gone for breakfast when you first saw him, the man doesn't even move his lips to say hello. His long black coat blows in the wind that kicks up just as he passes by and it mesmerizes you like the dirt under your feet. You can't take your eyes off of it. That's when you hear the whisper again and this time you can make it out.

"What do you want?"

Four words hadn't hit you so hard since Momma said, "Your daddy is dead." That was six years ago now and the man's words pluck the same chord as your momma's had then. You notice the goose bumps are gone but that a cold chill has replaced them all over your body. You look from the spot where your tan truck's parked, just visible over the tops of the cotton, to where the man should be walking still and there is no one, no trace that a man has passed by at all. You step from the field into the dirt road and there isn't a single footprint in the dry, almost sand-like dirt.

You walk back into the field, the sun much higher in the sky than it had been just moments ago and you wonder how long you were standing there. You work through lunch trying to catch up on the work and you raise and lower your hoe a thousand times and when you come out of the last row, you walk over to your oversized, but perfectly sized, red water jug and pour the last of its contents, which isn't much, over the top of your head. The luke-warm water washes streaks through your dirt-stained face and arms. It feels nice, like you have finally woken up after the day's labor. You take your hoe and flip it into the back of that pick-up truck, the one that used to be your daddy's and which you're still paying on today. You get inside and are thankful that the A.C. still works as you crank it to full blast. You fold your arms on the steering wheel and rest your head for a moment.

There's another truck at the trailer when you get home. Calling it home drives you crazy and more than a few times you have tried to drop the word from your vocabulary all together, but it holds on in your head like a concussion; and like a concussion, it makes you physically ill. You sit there and stare out at the truck, through the dirty windshield, and try to figure out where you've seen it before. It's nice, too nice to be sitting outside of this trailer, off this county road, outside of this town. Every accent is chrome coated and shined as though it has been meticulously cleaned after being parked. Hell, the truck should have lost its sparkle just coming down the dirt road from HH to the trailer.

You stay in the beat-up old pick-up that used to be your daddy's and stare at that beautiful vehicle for a full hour, not because of how much you'd like to own such a truck, or because you'd rather not see what's going on inside that trailer, but because you can't shake the feeling of having seen it before and that scares you.

Usually, the men that stop in with your momma are vagrants and dope heads, men who just happen to have something your momma wants, and when they've gotten what they will out of her, they leave and you never have to see them again. But a man that drives a truck like this, a truck that you can almost put your finger on where you've seen it before, a man like that might be a man who you could run into from time to time in an area like southeast Missouri where people from other small towns know each other. You'd have to look him dead in the eye when you did have dealings with that man and stand there, knowing what he had done to your momma.

Finally you get out of that little tan truck and throw a tarp over your hoes and grab the water cooler. You walk toward the door but when you're ready to pull the handle you hear laughter from just on the other side of the quarter-inch thick metal. The woman, who must be your momma, but she hasn't laughed like that in the last six years, continues to giggle as you stand there. But she doesn't sound drunk or high and this makes it all the more odd. You step lightly back down the two plastic stairs and head around the back of the trailer. In the dark, you remove the checkered wood piece that hides the wheels and reach under an old car hood that's been sitting under the trailer since before you were born and grab the half-full pint of Tennessee whiskey you knew would be sitting there. You're momma doesn't have money but there's liquor hidden anywhere and everywhere and probably buried too. You sit down on that red water cooler and take burning sip after burning sip until it doesn't quite burn anymore. When it stops burning, you get nice and comfortable there on the ground next to the trailer and take drink after drink until that bottle's gone and it doesn't seem so bad sleeping out in the dirt behind a trailer.

When your eyes open, they're met with a burning not unlike the one your throat met with upon taking those first drinks of that whiskey the night before. But you force them open, fight against their fluttering.

The noon day's sun would be beautiful if your head wasn't beating and punishing you for the drink you consumed without thought for how you'd feel today. The clear blue sky, only broken by puffs of soft white clouds here and there, makes you think of the day you and your momma laid your daddy in the ground. It's the middle of August just as it had been six years ago. You didn't have a suit to your name and after the funeral expenses, there was hardly going to be enough money to pay the bills much less to go out and buy you one. But your momma told you to get in your daddy's truck and she'd drive you to Penny's and see if you all couldn't find you something that she could afford. You and Momma got in his truck and it still smelled like cigarettes and dirt, the smell that no matter if he showered or not, still lingered on him. It's the same smell that on certain days when you and the other workers have been out in the field all day and you come to meet up before going home, that same smell that stops you dead in your tracks when those workers get too close to you and you can smell your daddy standing right there beside you.

You get up and shake the dirt from your hair and watch it fall from your clothes as you straighten them and pull at them so that the buttons of your shirt and the zipper of your jeans are back in the front where they ought to be. The thoughts and pictures from the night before remain just out of grasp as you walk around to the front of the trailer until you see that big, oversized Chevy still shining against the dirt and gravel drive that it's sitting on. They come rushing back through your alcohol stained mind and you're faced with the same choice you had the night before, except this time there's really no choice at all. You can't go back behind the trailer and soak it all away again because there ain't no whiskey left and eventually, one way or another, you're going to have to go in there and face them, go inside the trailer and face him that is.

You step up those plastic stairs again, feeling your weight shift the plastic underneath you to the right with your first step and then back to the left with your second. You put your hand on the knob, hoping that when you turn it you won't find your momma with a needle sticking out of her arm, passed out on the floor and this new man waiting to go upside your head just for the recreation of it. But when you do open the door, you can already tell a difference. The place is spotless, no cigarette or alcohol containers on the card table, no condom wrappers on the floor.

"Hey honey," your Momma calls to you as you walk in the door. "Where have you been all night?"

"Umm...I was—"

"It's alright sweetie. I wasn't too worried about you, only Bill wants to meet you is all."

Your momma hasn't asked you where you've been for a couple of years now and you know that something's wrong. You can hear the shower down the only hall in the trailer.

"Come on Momma. Let's go before he gets outta there," and you tug at her shirt like a little kid but she just stares at you like you've lost your mind.

"I ain't going nowhere honey. What has got into you?"

"Have you been doing drugs?"

"No, I haven't been doing no damn drugs—"

"What did that man do to you? Did he hurt—"

"That man has a name honey and no he didn't hurt me. In fact, we had a right pleasant time last night."

You can feel the vomit rising in your throat as the words come out of her mouth and it must show on your face too.

“What kind of woman do you think I am honey? We just—“

“What kind of a woman? What kind of woman do I think you are?” You feel the blood rising to your face and the tears come to your eyes before you can even notice. “I think you’re the same woman that’s been too damn drunk or high or both for the last six years to even ask me how my day went or...or where I’ve been if I don’t come home.”

Your momma sits back a second and looks back at you through teary eyes of her own. “I guess I deserve that. I deserve just about any ole thing you can throw my way and you know what? You’re right. You are right.”

You feel the hurt in her voice and it slices you, cuts you through to the marrow of your bones. “Look momma, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean those things but—“

“Well you shouldn’t be sorry honey. You’re right. I been so screwed up for the last few years I didn’t know what was real and what was them drugs talking to me. I know I’ve done some bad things, some down-right-stupid things, and some flat out wrong ones, but last night I went to the store to get me a couple of 40 oz. beers and there’s Bill, like he been waiting on me to show up. Knows me inside and out like he’s lived here with us over all this time.”

You feel that anger rush back up. Bill knows your momma? Bill knows what’s been going on since your daddy died? “Who in the hell is Bill and how do you know he don’t want nothing from you like them other men did?” You scream.

Right there behind you, you never even heard the shower shut off, there’s Bill standing there buttoning up the buttons on his shirt.



“Well son, I think I can answer them questions you got.”

Before you can turn around though, something about the voice causes you to stop, and then you smell it, him. Over the top of the shampoo and after shave, there it is just like you had smelled so many times in that trailer, cigarettes and dirt.

“Have you been saved, son?”

“Wha...What?”

“I said, ‘Have you been saved?’”

You look at your momma and she’s smiling like an idiot and you realize that you have no help there. “Saved? You want to know if I’ve been saved?”

“Well...yeah,” he says and smiles just like your momma.

“You come into my home,” and you almost grimace at calling it home but go on, “You come in my home and do God knows what to my momma—“

“You watch yourself son. That’s your momma you’re talking about.”

“—and you want to know if I’ve been saved?”

He stares at you. You turn back to your momma and she’s staring too and you just want to run out the door, or have her answer for you, or for someone to tell you what in the hell is going on but no one’s talking and both your momma and Bill are looking at you and waiting on you, expecting you to say something, anything.

“Hell, fuck, shit no I haven’t been saved and what the fuck is it to you anyway whether or not I’ve been saved? You some kind of goddamned preacher or something?”

You brace yourself as the corners of his mouth turn up, not sure if you're waiting on a hand across the face or a pat on the back as he stands there grinning at you, and you might as well be ready for it this time

"No sir. I'm no preacher and I ain't a reverend, or a priest, or minister neither for that matter. You see son—"

"Don't call me son, Bill."

"Alright. Alright. I get it. I don't mean no disrespect by it C.Q."

You freeze and straighten up at the name. Your daddy called you C.Q and not a single person has called you that since the minister at the funeral asked you if you'd like to say a few words at the service. Your momma calls you Charles and the boss and the other workers always call you Chuck or Chucky. Your eyes well back up at hearing C.Q. and you say, "Chuck" almost under your breath and you're surprised when he hears you.

"Alright Chuck. Good. I like that. You see Chuck, there's people all over this earth that need a change and plenty of them people are right here in this wonderful country we got us here. Only, they don't realize they need a change. Day after day, they pick up a bottle or a needle and they try and push whatever happened to them somewhere deep down, sometimes so deep that they think it's gone, but you know what Chuck?"

He looks at you like it's a real question and he expects an answer. But instead of answering, you sit down at the cheap, folding card table that's been your kitchen table since some time right after your daddy died and your momma was so high on PCP or crack or who knows that she tore into your all's table with a butcher's knife until there wasn't nothing left of it but splinters when you got home from school.

Every time you sit down at the built in bench-seat and look at that card table, you can't help but seeing Momma's eyes when you walked in that day. They were so big you thought they might pop and for a full year after that day, you dreamed about those eyes. You sit there and look up at Bill and try to answer with something that might make you sound smart but you aren't and you know it and now Bill knows it; all you can think to say is, "What?"

"It ain't Chuck. It ain't gone by a long shot." He stares you dead in the eyes and you wonder about his angle, wonder where he came from, think about that accent that isn't quite southeast Missouri but it ain't quite the South either. As you keep staring into them brown eyes of his, the ones with the slight ring of yellow right around the blacks of the eye, you forget those worries and finally, you break from his gaze and look at your momma. She looks better than she has since your daddy died. For the first time since you walked in you notice that she's got her hair done up and there's some color in her cheeks that's replaced that ghostly white they've been for the last several years. You smile at her and she smiles back, a real smile, nothing forced about it, and she looks happy, really and truly happy. Bill sits down next to you, between you and your momma and pats you on the shoulder with his right hand. He turns to face you, putting his back to your momma and stares you right in the eyes again and just barely audible, asks, "What do you want?"

The question cuts right through you as it echoes around in your head. You walk up and down the rows of that field out by Bird's Corner; the morning dew's long gone and the warm breeze sits at odds with that cold feeling you've got all the way up and down your arms and legs.

Bill's been living with you all, your momma and you, for almost two weeks now. He's been taking Momma to the movies up there in Cape, crawfish boils down at Danny's Place in town, and talking about how you two would do some hunting when deer season came around, offering to take you fishing on the weekend. You smile as he says these things; you smile because your momma smiles and because she's cleaner than you've seen her in six years. You smile because it suits your face or at least that's what Momma used to tell you when you were little and what she took to saying again anytime you'd come home and she was so far gone she could barely open her eyes much less make them focus on you. You smile because you are scared not to. Something about that truck of his still bothers you. That ring of yellow in his eyes, where it had brought a peaceful feeling on you the first time you stared into them, now leaves you looking away any time he tries to look at you. Your momma not using drugs makes you happier than anything and that's the one bright spot in all of this that makes all the worrying and fear worth it. You still can't quite put your finger on what it is that you're scared of but there's something and you consider it as you get to the end of the last row of the last field for the year.

Just a few weeks ago it seemed like the rows would never stop coming but now the weeds are gone from all the cotton and soybean fields and other than some random work here and there on one of the different farms, there won't be much work or money for that matter for the next several months. Bill said he'd take care of you all, help out with bills and things until your momma gets back on her feet and is ready to go back to work, but you don't really want to rely on Bill for anything at all. Plus, for the last few years, you've gone into town and got seasonal work at Aldi's or Wal-Mart or both and those incomes have been enough to get through the winter.

As you finish the thought, you throw the hoe in the bed of the truck and rest your back against the warm metal, smelling the land, mostly the dirt stuck to your face, pushed deep into the fabric of your shirt and blue-jeans. You hear the sound of a truck coming down the dirt road and a second later see the dust its wheels are kicking up. You wipe your face and watch it turn from a Hotwheel to a real truck as it gets closer to you. You know the vehicle from its mismatched parts before you notice the man behind the wheel. He comes to a stop and rolls down the window on the gunmetal and rust colored door.

“Chucky,” he hollers over at you through his false teeth.

“Yeah? What you need Rick?”

“Chucky...He’s...Well, he’s dead.”

“Your daddy is dead,” The trip to Penny’s, the minister’s sermon at the funeral, all of these flash through your mind in a single second and you ask, not certain that you want the answer, “Who’s dead, Rick?”

“The boss. Me and John were out in one of the fields off Highway 61 and he was pointing out where we needed to put in the last of the irrigation pipe and all of a sudden he drops down to one knee and asks for some water. I runs down to the truck, bout 50 yards off, and when I get back to him, he’s laid out on the ground, grabbing at his chest.”

“Wait, John’s dead?”

“That’s what I’m telling you Chucky. I got him up in the truck and drove him over the hospital as quick as I could but it didn’t matter none; he was DOA.”

“Does his family know?”

“Well, I called Johnny, his older boy, right after I got to the hospital but his wife, Maggie, left him a couple of months back and Johnny didn’t even know where she was staying these days.”

“Is there anything I can do?” you ask, knowing there ain’t.

“Johnny got up the hospital and his chest is all puffed out like he owns the goddamn place and he tells me he’ll be taking over harvesting. Says we should all take a week off and meet back up on Thursday. I told him if he wanted everything done right and like John would do it, we ought to be back in the field tomorrow, but he won’t listen none. Says take the week off and walks off.”

“Too much work to take a week off, at least for you all that is. My job’s done for the summer,” you say, grateful not to have to be a part of this.

“I tried to tell him that, but like I says, damn kid wouldn’t hear none of it.”

There’s a pause and before he says anything, you know the conversation is over.

“Anyway, I better take off. I’m trying to catch as many folks as I can before they go home, you know?”

“Yeah, I’ll see you Rick.”

He rolls up the window and drives past you to get to a place big enough to turn around and comes back past you again, kicking up a cloud of dirt all around you.

Three days later, on Saturday, there's a knock at the door to the trailer. You're back in your room and Bill hollers for you. Your momma's off at the beauty salon and getting groceries and doing a couple more errands she said she needed to do, all with Bill's money, and you come out of your room and there's a man standing there by the door. His big belly's only held in by a couple of stressed buttons and he's got that pair of seven hundred dollar boots you'd seen up at Francine's Western Store a few weeks back. He takes off his hat and holds it out in front of him.

"You Charles Quinn Rodgers?" He strokes a meaty paw through his receding white hair.

"Yes sir." You look at Bill who's sitting on the built in seat behind the card table and he looks like he's trying to hold back from laughing.

"The Charles Quinn Rodgers that worked for John Montgomery Waters before he passed?"

"Yessir. I mean, if his middle name was Montgomery."

"Well son, I don't really know how to tell you this or if it'll even stand up in court or what have you, but I was Mr. Waters' attorney, and well, he came in a few weeks before he died and...Well, he signed every bit of his farm land over to a Mr. Charles Quinn Rodgers."

You sit down next to Bill, not caring if he makes you nervous or not; you need to sit down. You stare at the man, not knowing what to say, running through thoughts, not knowing what to think. You drop your head down onto your knees and block out the light with your arms and you cry, deeper and harder than you have in six years. Bill puts his arm around you and holds you to him and no one says a word for a few minutes, or twenty seconds, or an hour and a half.

“Is there a number we can reach you at Mister?” Bill asks.

“James Arnold,” the lawyer says as he reaches in his coat pocket and fishes out a card. He hands it to Bill. “It’s there on the card with my number and the address of the office. Just bring your boy down in the next day or two. There’s quite a bit of paperwork to be taken care of.”

“Will do. Thank you, James.”

Bill removes his arm from around your shoulders and you look up to see him shaking Mr. Arnold’s hand and escorting him outside. You wipe your eyes on your shirt and get up just as Bill comes back inside.

“Can you believe that?” Bill asks smiling from ear to ear. You don’t say anything back and Bill walks to the refrigerator and gets a beer, which doesn’t seem at all odd to you until much later when you realize there hasn’t been a drop of alcohol in the house since he moved in.

“Come on outside with me Chuck. I think you could use a little fresh air.”

You walk outside with him, not because he asked you to, but because you really do need some air. When you get out there, Bill turns around and faces you, holding out a set of keys. He looks at you and then the truck.

“It’s yours Chuck. A big time farmer like yourself should have a big time farmer truck. Don’t you think?”

You stare at the truck, knowing that you’re going to throw up. He hands the keys to you and you try not to take them, but he grabs your hand and presses the keys into your palm. Right then, you bend over and throw up all over the only patch of real grass in the whole yard.



You wipe the tears from your eyes and the vomit from your mouth and Bill walks over and puts his arm around you again. He's smiling when he says, "What's wrong Chucky? Everything's exactly how you always wanted it."

Shane Stricker

## Committed

The knife was so sharp its edge fitted snugly between the looped ridges of Greg's fingerprints, just a slight touch was all it took to break through the skin. The cut was not deep enough to draw blood though; a tiny crescent of white ectodermic tissue rose above the rest like a wave on the wash. Clenching his fist, he pressed down with the blade onto the taut flesh of his arm. It felt as if he was cutting through the rind of a soft brie cheese. Slowly, blood oozed to the surface, carnelian drizzles trickled leisurely over his wiry arm hair. During these moments, his body seemed like nothing but a haggis, covered with a fine layer of intestines that once ruptured allowed his insides to escape.

He passed the knife to Debbie and kissed her. With some trepidation she copied him, rigid steel and pliable skin met and she adopted a chopping technique she had learnt while watching chefs prepare food on day time television. Starting from the tip of the slightly curved edge of the blade, she rolled it over her defenseless limb as if she was slicing a crisp cucumber.

"Too deep, too deep," Greg said, snatching the knife from her. Debbie stared down in horror at the welt she'd created. While dainty, red rivulets of blood decorated Greg's forearm, hers was smeared with ugly, misshapen blobs. "Wha.. wha.. what should I do?" Debbie stuttered, tensing up so tightly that her mouth momentarily stopped secreting saliva.

Greg froze, becoming fixated by the sight of her absconding body fluid, but then he suddenly recovered, stood up and pulled her out of his bedroom towards the bathroom. She placed her arm under the faucet of the tap and started to cry. The clear water stung as it touched her sinews, nerves and cells.

It mixed with her still flowing blood to form a pink waterfall that revolved like a satellite image of a spinning cyclone as it tumbled into the plughole. The maize colored hypodermic level of her skin had been exposed, the place where her fat had once hidden.

They both worked in the same call centre, plugged via their headphones into a telephone like two hospital patients connected to an intravenous drip. Throughout the day, they gave the same replies and advice to a line of customers whose voices arrived into their ears after a short warning buzz. Sometimes, Debbie was jolted awake at night when this sound reappeared in her dreams. Separately, they attended a work social event that was organized during Christmas. After drinking copious amounts of half-price happy hour cocktails Greg showed her the rows of scars on his arm, "It's just something to do," he explained with a casual shrug.

That evening, she had questioned him about his self harming. The way he described it was so nonchalant and casual as if it was the same as someone biting their nails. So she decided to give it a go. He said it would make her glands produce endorphins and she would experience a natural high. Instead, she was weeping uncontrollably, "I want to go to the hospital," she said in a hushed, broken voice.

Greg shook his head quickly, "It's really not a good idea." "What do you mean?"

"The nurse will probably guess that you cut yourself," he said; his voice trembling a little.

She was confused and replied, "So?"

"They could commit you," he explained as he ran one anxious palm over his shaved scalp.

She was shocked by his words, by the suggestion that someone might consider her insane. A few years ago, a friend of hers was committed but her behavior had been bizarre. Jane had been rushed to a psychiatric hospital after climbing up a crane so she could hitch a lift with a spaceship.

For months before, she had trained for her new life by bouncing on a small trampoline, believing that when she was suspended in the air she was experiencing weightlessness. Debbie was surprised when she heard the news. People had talked about the odd exercise regime she was following but nobody had assumed that she was mad.

At first, Jane was distraught to find herself in a hospital instead of on another planet and blamed the foreman who had rung the police for ruining her life. Jane wondered if this was actually the place where the spaceship was landing and whether the series of events that had resulted in her forced admittance was all part of the plan. However, when she was forbidden from exercising, she decided that she must be at the wrong location, the exercise regime was a very important element of the whole process and only her enemies would try and make her stop.

The messages she'd received from the people wearing denim shirts had been obvious and incontestable until the doctor informed her that the code she was using to decipher their words was a referential delusion. 'Excuse me' did not actually mean 'x marks the spot', so the crane she had been passing at the time was not a pick up point.

"But the man who said that was wearing a denim shirt," she explained. It had all added up, including as well the shopkeeper who informed her that the space ship would arrive in five months when she handed Jane five coins and said,

"Here's your change." There were even hints in the articles she'd read on the internet and once a lark had sung to her that they were looking forward to her arrival.

"The bird was not singing to you, that was an auditory hallucination," the doctor replied.

Sometimes, she was certain that he was wrong and that instead she had attained a higher level of consciousness and was able to sense things that other people couldn't.

Not everything could be explained by science she thought to herself, the big bang theory was just a theory and it could never be absolutely proven. Her denial that she was sick, the psychiatrist informed her, was also a symptom of her illness.

His medical jargon blurred into a meandering babble at times and she stopped listening and remembered how free and content she'd felt when she climbed up the crane's ladder. It had been a hot day and by the time she reached the top she was sweating heavily, the view had been wonderful, she could see the undulating, sage hills that surrounded the town in the distance and a seagull flew by, glancing at her as it passed as if to encourage her on her way.

"You've never met any of the people who helped me, so how can you be so sure it was my imagination?" she said resentfully.

"No one helped you." The doctor said impatiently.

She told the doctor about her many enemies,

"They shouted insults at me." she answered.

"Did you meet them?" he asked, suddenly leaning forward in his chair and smiling as if she had said something important.

"No, they were far away, that's why the people wearing the denim shirts were helping me escape." She stared at him; he said nothing for a long time while he wrote in a notebook. Later, she thought about what she had said and his silence.

She remembered that a woman had insulted her again the day before, she recognized the voice but this was not really possible because she was living somewhere else now. It was then that she began to wonder whether this voice was real. Something in her head seemed to relax as if a muscle in her brain had been pumping iron repeatedly and was now exhausted. She did not hear the woman's shrill, hostile voice again.

Debbie slowly took her arm away from the tap and grasped a few sheets of toilet tissue in order to catch the nasal mucous meandering down the shallow of her philtrum.

"I'll say it was an accident." she said.

“That might work.” Greg paused, “My tattooist Sid cut himself too deeply once with a razor and said someone tried to mug him.”

“I could say that.” she said hopefully between sobs.

He paused and considered this for a moment,

“Maybe, you don’t have any other scars.” Greg peeled off his white T shirt and used it to carefully wipe the water from her arm. He then wrapped it around her cut; he pressed downwards and she winced with pain,

“Sorry,” he said anxiously and he reduced the pressure, “this will help the bleeding.”

The material soaked up the blood like litmus paper, the color dissipating from crimson to salmon.

Glancing at Greg’s watch, Debbie realized that she had been bleeding for nearly ten minutes.

“What happened to the tattooist?” she asked, sniffing.

“He was committed,” he replied, carefully avoiding her eyes, “and given electrotherapy.”

“For just cutting himself?” she queried with disbelief.

“Yep,” his voice grew hoarse, “they gave him tiny shocks until he answered the doctor’s questions correctly.” Her fear was escalating and she pictured herself lying on a stone slab, bound with leather straps, convulsing wildly, as watts of voltage were pumped through her body. Sid’s ECT sessions had actually been far less dramatic. The anesthesia administered before by the nurse relaxed him completely and his muscles had only twitched slightly.

At the hospital after they had seen his scars, they bundled him into an ambulance and drove him to the psychiatric unit. After a few sessions with a psychiatrist, they diagnosed him with severe depression. This was despite the fact that in the real world he had a steady job and was rarely sick. He was thin anyway but the shock of having his life stolen destroyed his appetite. When his girlfriend left him, he lost about twenty eight pounds in weight.

Nobody had called Sid crazy then; they were just sympathetic and tried to revitalize him by arranging evenings of drinking in bars populated by plenty of friendly, single women. The nurses were concerned though, worried by the untouched meals and his reticence.

When he sat on the bed before his first ECT session, tears welled up in his eyes, for some reason he thought about his ex and remembered when they had lain in bed together, she with her arms around him complaining about his long hair tickling her face. Afterwards, it felt like his brain had been rearranged and the reason why he couldn't eat moved to another place as if a picture in his head had been divided into squares and scrambled. Even though the first had removed his inability to eat, he had to be administered six more electro therapy sessions. His anger grew at being treated like some kind of psychopath, forced to have ECT in a place that seemed like nothing but a prison for people who were not normal enough. He was told that his hostility was caused by his depression and that he had turned this anger on himself when he repeatedly cut himself. He decided they were all idiots and ignored the doctors as much as he could. His contempt earned him a year on the psychiatric ward.

Debbie moved Greg's hand and slowly unwrapped the T-shirt hoping that the cut had stopped bleeding. She wanted to leave and never come back; she couldn't remember ever having such a terrible time. Breathing with some difficulty, Debbie removed the last layer and stared at her arm nervously,

"Its stopped," she exclaimed.

"Yes, the blood is starting to clot," and he clapped his hands and smiled, put his arm around her shoulders and kissed her on the lips; she giggled.

"I have some plasters and antiseptic lotion in the bedroom," he said tenderly, rubbing her cheek.

"Ok," she replied, sighing with relief.

As they walked down the hallway towards his bedroom she put her arms around his bare torso. Several tattoos on his chest moved when his muscles tensed and she rested her head on the razor sharp talons of a scarlet dragon; his body covered with pitted scales. The piercing yellow eyes of the monster looked down at her and for a second she thought that she saw them blink.

Elle Pryor



## **Park Birds**

Mom is sixty, from nowhere, Ohio.  
When I asked her where she lived, she showed me:  
On a flat block in a flat bungalow.  
Knowing that, I asked how I came to be.  
Our pathetic car, in Cincinnati,  
Passed the red house of her college boyfriend.  
He was a football player, who screamed Ho Chi!  
Minh, (crucified him) then, like a bird, unleashed the end.  
He came back crazy and fucked her. Wonder!  
His legs and arms could be replaced with mine,  
But God, he couldn't touch anyone.  
In Cincinnati, at a stop sign,  
We saw him kicking on his back  
In a park full of giants and skyscrapers.

Patrick Sugrue

## **Mr. Misanthrope**

Has a different mask to put  
on his wife, some days the pig—  
the rubbery tail entwined in his fingers  
and some days the cow—  
her horns prick, then gouge his shoulder

Children when they come live  
in Halloween costumes bought  
cheap, in bulk, from Goodwill  
Mother teaches them to scratch  
in the litter box so Daddy will let  
them outside

Family wrap themselves in furs  
hung by hooks in the doorway  
allow him to ignore the sentient  
eyes that peer from hoods of hair  
the hands that long to touch him  
back with the madness of love  
which sees only what it chooses.

Helen R. Peterson

## Bar Hop

1.

Leake clung tight to the armrest, back arched, muscles tight. He'd forgotten to slam the steel door shut, and so found death a sharp drop away. Hot brains on cold pavement. The door wobbled in his hands.

When Old Gray scrubbed against the curb and onto the sidewalk, Numa yanked left, hit the other curb, yanked right.

Leake, he panted

“momma. momma. momma. momma.”

till she hissed

“What boy?”

and slapped the brake down causing the Lemans to lurch to a stop. Leake's muscles deflated like a loosened bowel.

“What?”

“Momma, we gon' die!”

Numa slid her eyes along the windshield and out her window. She squinted at the side mirror then pushed her face back into the windshield again.

“Leake, where are we?”

“I don' know!”

Gas fumes burped as they sat idling in the night. Her toes searched for the pedal, slide-tapping side to side, front and back. It took 15 seconds to find their mark, but when they did her piggies pressed down flat. Old Gray popped out into

purple twilight. Leake knotted his arms to the door.

They passed lightless windows and empty spaces, streets lacking in men or women, girls or boys. Leake didn't know if he wanted to see a police car or not. There were no police cars.

Numa stopped for a red light. Leake opened the door and tried to pull it shut, but his arms were jello. He couldn't tell if it was opened or closed. The light turned green.

"Leake, can you drive?"

He farted and laughed at the same time, but then eyed his momma. Her lower lip hung down below her bottom teeth. Leake could see past her tongue, into her gullet. Her eyelids pinched together; wrinkled slices, charred cheese. The light turned red.

"Leake, I wan' you drive us home."

"Momma, I can't drive!"

"Sure. You can. I give you the keys."

"But I don' got a license!"

They sat in fog and exhaust, blue and gray in the bruised night. Their bodies vibrated, the engine thumped. The light turned green.

"Drive us home."

"Momma!"

"leake"

"I don' got no license momma! I'm ten! Ten years old!"

She turned her head; stared past his ear. Another minute

barreled away.

“You not gon’ drive?”

“No!”

“Allright then. got damn it.”

Iron talons slapped down as momma twisted the Lemans hard right. Leake howled

“Momma! Momma! Momma!”

his arms a fleshy rope between door and death. Numa burnt doughnuts until the light raged, green, yellow, red. The signal painted an arrow in her mind:

Forward!

She gripped the wheel tight, shooting them both into the big empty. Whiskey and nicotine clogged out screaming tires, screeching boy.

2.

It started out like all the rest, Nate and Numa deep in a face scratcher. Numa woke Leake in the middle of it, squawking “Leake! Leake! Help me Leake!”

so that Leake, who normally slept like the buried, snapped up and out of bed, running full bore on bare feet for momma. He found the yellow-brown circle pressed into the trailer’s back wall: Numa pushed back in the couch, head and hair inside Nate’s one squeezed paw, his other paw thumping sideways against her pink-scorched cheek bone.

Leake dove in, his scrawnish frame gluing onto Nate’s back

and neck and head. It was more surprise than Leake that made Nate fall between couch and coffee table. He took the metal ashtray and plastic cup, squeaking Leake and cigar butts down onto the carpet. His arms spread like a cindered eagle as he hollered

“You noodley bastard!”

slapping at Leake over his shoulder. Leake slapped back, hitting arm and boob and gut. Then Teagie was in it. Leake’s step-brother and Nate’s boy. He went at Leake for slapping his daddy. He went at Nate for slapping Leake. Numa crouched over and above them on the couch. The hardened gambler eyeballing roosters in a smoking pit.

“Get him Leake! Get that dough lipped cocksucker!”

And just as quick, Teagie was out of it. He ran for the green phone, hiccupping

“I gon’ call the law! I gon’ call the law!”

which stopped Nate and Numa both. They yelled

“Teagie/son, No! Put that got damn phone down!”

He threw the phone against the kitchen wall, running and snotting back to his bed. Numa hopped off the couch, grabbing her purse and cigarettes. She grabbed Leake’s arm too, glaring into Nate’s wild man eyes as she spit words in Leake’s face.

“Come on son, we are goin’ out.”

3.

Numa sat on one red stool. Her boy Leake sat on the other, spinning. When the bartender asked

“What can I get you?”

Numa squeezed her nails into Leake’s shoulder. The whirling stopped.

“Jack and Coca Cola.”

To Leake this was nothing new since she’d been drinking those all his life. But then the bartender asked

“What’ll it be for you young man?”

and before Leake could whisper chocolate milk or Dr.

Pepper, Numa pinched him again, answering

“He’ll take a Shirley Temple.”

“Well I’ll have to see some I.D. then, little man.”

They snickered as Leake’s ears and face waxed a purple rose.

“I’m pretty sure he left it at the house.”

“Aw, I guess he looks old enough.”

When the bartender turned to mix the drinks, Leake whispered

“Momma, I can’t drink alcohol.”

Numa’s eyes circled the room.

“Don’t pee yourself Leake, it’s just a soda drink.”

She patted his head, smiling as any body else’s momma would for anybody else’s boy. The bartender brought Leake’s drink, then plopped a cherry on top. It was cut through with a blue plastic sword. Leake sucked the drink down and asked

his momma for another. She obliged, ordering a second Jack and Coke along with.

The more Numa drank, the more she tossed peek-a-boos out at the men wrapped round the bar. They'd been ogling her since she'd first walked in, dragging her wide-eyed boy behind. She lifted her purse, dug around; slapped quarters on the counter.

"Leake, why don't you go play a video game?"

4.

"So your momma, she married?"

He was a pale man with an orange beard, and really good at Donkey Kong. Leake stared up with raccoon eyes into the screen, his face reflecting the pale blues, reds and greens. He'd run out of quarters two hours gone.

"Yessir."

Beard jerked his head left at the bar. Leake turned to look and saw Numa sliding one finger along the rim of her glass. Her other hand rubbed circles on a stranger's arm. She was laughing, but not in her real way. She didn't snort at the end. Only Nate ever made her snort.

A rolling barrel of beer crushed the skull of a blue-mustachioed plumber in red overalls. An evil monkey danced. Beard reached in his pocket and pulled out a quarter. He placed it in the crown on Leake's head.

"Your turn kid."



5.

Leake wouldn't wake up, so Numa dipped her cuticles in the dregs of Jack and Coke #13, splashing his face. Leake yelped, not knowing the when, the where or the why. She belted out, "Wake up sunny shine!"

and sneezed out a molasses giggle.

Leake's eyes fuzzed over the bar, then tweaked clear on the vibrating teeth of a smiling man in a yellow tie.

"Well hello there cowboy."

He was holding out his hand. Leake shook it, but instantly hated the hand. Hated the teeth and hated the man.

"Your mommy tells me you like video games."

"yessir"

"How'd you like to come over to my place and play Atari?"

Leake thought of perverts in station wagons with candy bars and lollipops; of ice-cream trucks where you had to step inside for your free Nutty Buddy. He stared at perfect white incisors. Mr. Smiles.

"Your mommy will be there too. We're gon' have a talk."

Leake stood up, found his mother's wrist.

"Oh Leake, it aint like it's a school night."

Leake thought

"But it is too."

without saying it out loud, knowing the words would sink and die in her muddy titters.

"You like Asteroids, cowboy?"

6.

She leaned into the windshield, trying to follow Mr. Smiles' dancing lights. Red, blue, green. Booze-sweat dribbled light z-lines through her Mascara. A broke-back cigarette wobbled on her lips. The Jack Daniels had made her cross-eyed, so the Lemans swayed wide right and wide left. Leake knew Mr. Smiles wanted that talk with his momma real bad. He was driving slow, so very slow, allowing her to keep up.

"I don't want to play video games momma. I'm sleepy."

"You can take a nap then. Jesus."

She snapped the wheel to avoid hitting a parked Sunbird.

"Does Nate know we seein' your friend?"

She slapped her foot on the brake. They were in the middle of the road, well past midnight.

"Listen to me smart ass."

Numa pinched the bent cigarette between two pointing fingers. Its hot tip matched the carmine flash of her eyes. Mr. Smiles honked his horn once, blinked his lights twice. Numa leaned back into the windshield.

"oh."

Her foot jerked side to side, up and back, then found the gas, pushing them further into evening's gaping maw.

7.

Big toothy had his fists squish't in his sides, elbers out. Paul Bunyan, subtract the beard. We both lean't in the windshield, oogin' a stranger in a yellor tie. With tusks.

I turn't to my momma.

"I wan' go home."

Her eyes bounced circles round my head, but finally they did land on my face. Her mouth hung open. Breath to kill poo flies. I don't know she was in her right mind or not.

"Come on boy."

Momma jellied out the Lemon so I got out too. I ran over to hold her steady, but she slap't me off, pushin' the jingle jiggles and the wet wiggles back down into her pinkie toes.

Mr. Smiles step't in. I was blinded by teeth.

His arms and hands spread wide, and he moved in close. I seen the *Dionaea muscipula* once, in one of Nate's National Geographics. Before Smiles could pull her in, momma lean't her neck way back. I seen Dracula once too, 2:30 in the morning – Nate 'n Numa past out on the couch; wrap't up in they love burrito.

Momma got an eyeful of Mr. Smiles' banana tie. The charcoal in her eyes flick't and I felt just the littlest bit a momma heat, so I yell't out

"Momma!"

and the embers caught. I felt the burn. She was with me again. Her palm pop't up to Smiles' face -- fang level.

Momma whispered

"no."

Mr Smiles, his canines twitched.

"What?"

“Leake. Get your ass in the car.”

“Oh come on now baby.”

“It’s pas’ his bedtime.”

He tried squeezin’ her again, but her lids and lips drew tight cracks in her face. I knew it was all right now, I’d seen that before. I got in the car. Smiles’ arms flap’t down.

Momma eased back into the silver Lemon and slam’t the door. But he haint give up yet. He leant in the window, Momma glarin’ up as Smiles glar’t down.

“You shouldn’t be on the roads baby.”

“You didn’t mind me drivin’ here did you?”

”You can sleep it off.”

“My son, he don’t need”

Her words dript off and away. For a moment I thought she was gone again, that Mr. Smiles had won. He and momma would have their talk after all.

“I’ve got blankets and a couch. He can play video games.”

“Video games?”

She look’t over in my general direction. For the first time that night Momma snorted. I guess Nate won’t the only one after all.

“Video games.”

And my Momma flash’t her own beautiful brights back at Mr. Smiles.

“Nighty night Pac Man.”

8.

Leake didn't know how they found home and bed, but they did. The next morning his momma fought running eggs and calcined toast; a dry white hangover and gummied lips. She only said 4 words before Leake was off for the bus; a bleary, bearish sort of day.

"Don't tell Nate."

"I won't."

She pinched his arm.

"Promise."

"I promise. Ow."

And Leake kept his promise. Through the week anyway.

9.

That next Saturday Nate and Numa got into it early. As was his wont when daylight still simmered and he'd had enough, Nate went for a trailer park stroll. He grabbed his pink fedora with the plum band and the silver feather. He lit a cigar. The boys didn't want to be around Numa in her current high temperature, so they went with Nate.

As they walked along, Leake thought Nate seemed lower than usual. Blue, like the hell-catting had wore him down. His mustache kind of drooped. Leake knew just the something to cheer him up.

"She loves you Nate."

"Not today she don't"

“No, I mean it. She came home to you.”

Nate stopped, sliding his hands into the frayed pockets of his bib overalls.

“What?”

“Promise not to tell?”

“Tell what?”

“Promise.”

“Alright. I promise. What is it Leake?”

And so Leake flicked Numa’s secret up into open air. They stood in the middle of the gravel road, a half-mile out. Nate sucked on his cigar, blowing tight cloud puffs, and Leake told all. At last he reached the story’s moral:

“She didn’t stay. He wanted her to so they could talk, but she didn’t want to talk to him, she wanted to take me home. She came home too. Because you’re the only one she talks with Nate.”

Nate let the cigar nub drop straight out of his mouth. He twisted it down into asphalt and grit with the heel of a camel-hide boot.

“Well come on then.”

“Sir?”

“We’re goin’ back home.”

“But you promised!”

When they got back to the trailer, Leake pressed Nate’s hand with his own.

“Don’t tell Nate! Please! She’ll whoop me! You know she

will!”

“She won’t lay a finger on you Leake. But you boys better stay out here for a minute. Me and Numa goin’ talk.”

Nate lit another cigar. Leake croaked out

“She did it cause she loves you!”

understanding no more now what he’d done than when he’d started the barrel rolling to begin with. Leake and Teagie stood side to side, watching Nate walk in. They listened.

It started out all Numa -- holler and cuss. She thought they were just picking up where the earlier round had left off. But when she finally wound down to catch her breath, Nate had his say. He didn’t raise his voice. The boys couldn’t hear what he told her, but that didn’t matter, since they already knew. There was an arid pause, then the thick snap of hand on face.

Leake jumped forward, out of instinct and habit. Teagie held him back. Numa wasn’t hollering now. But her voice being pitched to a higher key, they caught it all.

“Nate it aint true. Nate, he was just mixed up. I shouldn’t had him out that late. Nate.”

If she had hollered it, Nate might have believed her. But it wasn’t till the screen door slammed in her face that she recovered her true voice.

“NATE!”

He shuffled over to the boys.

“Come on Teagie, we goin’ out.”

Leake ran after Nate, tugging at his sleeve.

“What about me?”

Nate paused, squeezing his teeth around the fresh burning cigar.

“Your momma needs you more than me son.”

He eyed the trailer, then turned back to Leake, still tugging.

“Besides, Leake, my boy won’t tell on me.”

10.

As Nate rode Old Gray into a hemorrhaging dusk, the trailer window snapped up.

“Nate! He’s a lyin’ little tattle-tale bastard! Nate!”

But Nate was gone. The eyeliner streaked her face, black tributes now lacking in river. Her gold bleached hair splayed against the darkness of the trailer’s pulsing guts. The mother saw her Leake standing in the dust. She said

“Thank you boy. You stupid son of a bitch.”

as calm as if she’d just ordered her next Jack and Coke.

Numa snapped the window shut.

Leake didn’t know what to do. Well, he wanted to play Atari.

Or at least watch the Saturday night TV movie. But Numa was inside. Throwing furniture, slandering walls, expectorating hell’s grim fire. Leake wasn’t old enough to drive but he had two feet.



*As old monkey sun burnt out a day's end,  
Li'l boy blue skipped o'er an ashen bend.  
Along rolled the ale can, twisted, in the wind.  
Blue hopped up, plopped flat, skipped again.*

Chancho Cox

## Christmastime

Never been much for Christmas. Even as a kid. Never worked out. If I was set on a blue dump truck I got a red one. Gave me a mind that nobody was listening. I just stopped expecting.

Haven't been in a church for years and years since Ma finally passed. Don't begrudge them that goes. Some enjoy Pot Likker Soup, some don't. I prefer to do my praying in private.

Nobody but myself here now so there's no shopping as such to be done. The money's one thing but the crowds are the worst. Too many people. Not just Christmas but in general. Too many people.

Sis is out West with her two kids. I send them each five dollars. Ten if I have it. Can't do much with five dollars. New set of crayons maybe. They always color up a Thank You card. Just toss it in the trash. What am I supposed to do? Put it on the goddamn fridge?

Looks and feels like we're in for some snow, heading up street to Fran's. Christmas Day Fran helps old Mooney to open up and lets him tend bar over at her tavern. Old Mooney ain't right. He probably don't even know it's Christmastime. But he can serve up a brewski just fine if you let him know where it's at in the cooler. And we all help him out making change and what not.

Used to when he was a kid go up and down the street making engine noises. Never harmed nobody. Lived with his Ma, then when she passed, his maiden Aunt. Now he has a colored woman in looks after him.

Lawyer pays her from money his Ma left. Pearlstein I believe his name is. Lives over near the college. Jewish I believe. Colored woman spends Christmas with her own. Fran has Mooney tending bar on account of that way there's somebody to keep an eye on him. Pays him a couple of bucks makes him feel like a somebody. Gives the rest of us somewhere to go something to do when everything's closed down. She takes in some extra cash. Works out for everybody.

Mostly it's folks like myself who don't have nobody or else folks that just don't make a fuss over Christmas. Front door stays locked and the sign stays off on account of the barrooms are supposed to shut down Holidays. Sheriff Polk don't give a damn as long as the sign in the window ain't on and the front door's locked. Probably be in later himself after awhile.

Eddie Williams let's me in. He does stone work for over at the cemetery. Stutters when he talks and don't talk much. No family. Funny thing is after he's had a few in him you don't

hardly notice his stutter.

Mailman John follows me in grabs a stool, motions Mooney over and orders a Seven and Seven. Mooney looks over to Big Dave, sitting on his bent stool at the far end of the bar, for the okay. Big Dave's not a drinker. Says he just comes for the company. Looking at him I can't figure how a person could find the time to eat so much to get so big like he is.

Mooney knows he ain't supposed to be serving anything but beer on account of Fran not having the license for liquor only sometimes he can go ahead and serve from the bottle of Seagram's behind the bar so long as it's just regulars in the place. Of course Mooney can't keep in his head which is regulars and which not.

So Big Dave tells him it's okay and Mooney reaches down the shelf under the bar for the jug and a shot glass and pours without spilling any this time. He grabs a can of Seven-Up from the cooler and sets it on the bar with some ice in a Coke glass so Mailman John can mix in the shot with the soda.

"Two dollars!" Mooney says, only he don't have no idea how much two dollars is. Mailman John counts the two bills out for him, one, two and Mooney drops them in the register.

Mailman John ain't delivered mail for years. From what they say he lives off a pretty good-sized pension. Got married out of school. The story goes his wife left him for a younger man, a college student, then come back, then left again, this time

with Stone Henley one of Sheriff Polk's deputies. No kids. Anyhow she's dead now going on two years. Some kind of cancer.

Mailman John gets a little troublesome sometimes after he's had a few and Fran's had to take away his barroom privileges. That's how she calls it, "barroom privileges." Means he can't come in for a spell, usually a week but then she let's up and he's back the next day promising to behave. It's getting on noon and little by little the place starts to fill. Still no snow. Radio claims it's going to be one hell of a blizzard, ten, twelve inches.

Fran put up Christmas lights but nobody's turned them on. She has one of them fake silver trees over by the juke box. At the bar there's Weasel Hendrix and his wife Margaret come up from the Eat and Drink and Clyde Wilcox from over in Jaspur. Clyde's skinny as a string bean. He gets the door for Thorn Baxter who it appears is already two sheets, let's out with Merry fucking Christmas and yells to Big Dave to set up the bar. Setting the bar up is too much for Old Mooney, take him forever to figure what's what. So Big Dave gets off his bent stool and breathing heavy moving all that weight he goes round the bar to help Mooney out.

Mailman John points to Margaret says to Thorn watch his mouth there's a lady present! Great big guys Thorn and Mailman John.

Margaret looks up from her Duquesne and tells Thorn merry fucking Christmas your own self you crazy sonofabitch! At least a half dozen Duquense empties on the bar. She's as tanked as he is.

Used to be Margaret was a pretty gal. Well, attractive maybe, not pretty, attractive. Had a shine to her. A sparkle you might say. Weasel always said she put him in mind of Ann Margaret the movie actress. Not too far from the truth. Hadn't seen her for a time then a couple weeks back I'm in the Eat and Drink for some smokes, a Snickers bar and a sixer and behind the counter looks like some old woman with booze breath in a stained housedress. Not hardly Ann Margaret.

Weasel doesn't look so hot himself nowadays. But he never did take after no movie star.

Little Bobby Day shows up and Mailman John lifts him up to a stool and sets him up to a PBR and a shot. Mooney looks to Big Dave again for the okay. Then Mooney can't find the other shot glass so Big Dave has to get his large carcass up again and help him out.

Bobby Day don't take to being called midget. Says little person is the proper name. I don't know. I could see dwarf maybe, but little person is something you might call a young kid.

He pulls on his beard for a bit then downs the shot and takes a chug of the beer. Peculiar sort. Even for a midget. Quiet.

Where the drink gets Mailman John all wound up and loud it goes just the other way with Bobby Day. More he drinks the less he's got to say. Not like he has a whole lot to say to start with. Don't care for us calling him midget though. Says we need to call him a little person.

Only sounds is the stools squeaking and the noises of bottles and glasses coming down on the bar and folks drinking.

Clyde asks Weasel for a match for his Camel. Big Dave tells Mooney get him another Coke.

Mailman John says to nobody in particular it's going to snow I can feel it in my bones. You know how you get that feeling sometimes? That's exactly what it feels like...

Nobody says nothing.

Mailman John goes on, saying the college kids are at it again causing a ruckus. Every goddamn Saturday night it's the same thing! Over at the bridge by College Avenue, boozing it up and smoking their dope and carrying on like nobody's business. And you can smell that dope all the way up Hyde Street, six seven blocks away. If he weren't so goddamn lazy that good for nothing sonofabitch Polk would put them all away...

When nobody speaks Mailman John slams his bottle down hard and says dammit! Can't none of you sonsabitches be sociable?

He stumbles over to plug in the juke box and damn near  
knocks over the tree, drops a quarter in and presses some  
tunes.

*“...I’ve been cheated*

*Been mistreated*

*When will I be loved...*

The snow’s coming down like all get out and a couple is  
banging on the door to be let in. Strangers. Probably with the  
college. An older fellow with a beard and a gal who looks to  
be in a family way only it’s hard to tell for absolute sure on  
account of the way she’s all bundled up.

*...Let’s pretend that we’re together, all alone...*

Clyde slides off his stool and yells through the door “Closed!  
Private party!” Then over Jim Reeves on the box I hear  
Margaret scream “Go way! No room at the inn!” But the  
couple they don’t budge. The old fellow’s trying to say  
something but Clyde cracking the door cuts him off says,  
”Sorry folks. Private party. This establishment’s not open to  
the general public...” As he’s closing the door the old guy is  
still saying something but between the music and the wind  
outside I can’t make out what it is.

*...on tap in the can or in the bottle*

*Oh bartender bring it to me...*

Counting the empties Old Mooney don’t have the sense to  
clear off the bar by now I’m working on number five and I’m  
feeling no pain. I’m thinking I’ll wait and see if the snow



lessens up before I head home.

*...There's no place to go and hide myself*

*The only sanctuary I see...*

I see Polk on a stool next to Margaret and don't even recall when it was he came. She's whispering in his ear and he's doing his damndest to look not bothered about it. Meanwhile Weasel looks to be concentrating really hard on that shot of Seagram's in the Coke glass in front of him. Fran ain't got but two shot glasses.

*...blue ain't the word for the way that I feel,*

*There's a storm brewin' in this heart of mine...*

Margaret has her arm around old Polk, reaches up and rubs the bald spot on the back of his head. She's sloshed. Polk takes a big swig of his Old German, another swig to polish it, then reaches back takes Margaret's hand in his and puts her hand on the bar covering it with his own.

"I got to go now Margaret. Weasel, I suspect it's time for Margaret to go home as well. Looks like she might could use a good lie down."

Weasel downs his shot and goes back to staring into his Coke glass.

"Aw Gerald, don't tell me you're leaving already," Margaret says, "Gerald honey you don't want to be going out in that mess, you'll catch your death..." Sloshed.

Polk turns and wishes everybody Merry Christmas, then unlocks the door and already just two feet away you can't

make him out on account of how it's snowing so.

I'm thinking just one more and then I myself ought to be getting as well.

I look over to where Clyde was at and see he must of left else he's in the head. Mailman John is over to the juke box again, helping George Jones out at the top of his lungs on "Tonight the Bottle Let me Down."

Margaret's out cold, head on the bar, breathing deep from her mouth. Big Dave puts another shot in the Coke glass on the bar in front of Weasel, next to a can of PBR.

Bobby Day jumps down from his stool and leaves, mumbling Merry fucking Christmas but I don't think anybody hears aside from myself on account of the racket from Mailman John who has now grabbed Clyde coming out the can and is trying to get him to sing with him and George Jones without much success, Clyde trying to get out from under.

Thorn Baxter growls at Mailman John to let Clyde be.

Mailman John drags poor skinny Clyde over to where Thorn is at leans in close as he can to Thorn's face and says "Who it is you're telling to do exactly what?"

Thorn tells him, "You just ain't only an ugly bastard you smell like a skunk."

Mailman John still hugging Clyde says, "Get your fat ass off that stool an let's see just who it is is the skunk!"

The song is over and the barroom is quiet except for Old Mooney making his worried noises on account of it scares

him when voices is raised like that.

Thorn Baxter slides off his stool holding his bottle of Bud, takes a long swig and sets it down on the bar.

Then Big Dave yells, “Hey! It’s goddamn Christmas for Christ’s sake! Either take it outside or give it up!”

Thorn looks over at Big Dave, then long and hard at Mailman John. He finally buttons his coat and gathering up his change from the bar he points at the door says to Mailman John “You got any more to say I’ll wait for you.”

He makes it to the door working hard on putting one foot in front of the other without falling over.

Mailman John lets go of Clyde and says, “Good rubbish to bad rubbish riddance...”

Eddie Williams shifts his place over to where Margaret is at, reaches over to bum a Lucky Strike from Weasel and tells Mooney to fetch him another Rolling Rock. Can’t hardly notice the stutter now that he’s had a few.

Mailman John is over at the box, can’t decide on a tune, and finally presses some buttons.

*I saw mommy kissing Santa Claus...*

Slams his fist down on the box.

“Dammit that ain’t what I played! I played Conway Twitty!”

Bends down to unplug Brenda Lee and hits the floor with a thump out cold.

I hear a snow plow come up over the hill. They’re pretty good about plowing on account of all the snow we get and trucks

has got to be able to make it up and down 40 which becomes Main and then 40 again.

Weasel gives Margaret a shake to wake her, buttons her coat and all but carries her out the door. Clyde polishes his shot of Seagram's, takes a long hit off his beer and follows, mumbling a Merry Christmas on his way out.

It's getting dark and time for me to head back too, past time.

I tell Mooney bring me one last PBR.

Eddie Williams comes over and bums a Winston, tears off the filter and lights the cig then takes the stool next to me where Clyde was at. Just him, Big Dave and me now, and Mailman John laid out on the floor by the juke box and Old Mooney, pacing behind the bar still making his noises still scared from the ruckus with Mailman John and Thorn.

Big Dave says "Last call."

Eddie swallows one last Rolling Rock in two long gulps and mumbles M-merry Christmas as he leaves.

Big Dave gets on the phone and calls Fran tells her he's closing up and he'll bring her over the key on his way home. Then he goes over to give Mailman John a kick in the side to wake him. "Closing time," he says, "Come on John. Time to go home." John sits up opens and closes his eyes a few times groans and finally stands up.

"Need one more," he says, "For the road."

Big Dave takes a deep breath then pours Mailman John a shot and puts a cold PBR on the bar next to it.

I look at the front window and watch the snow for a bit. The way I figure it it don't matter one way or the other whether I have one more or not so I do.

Arthur Levine

## **Collapsed Barn**

This plywood in its dotage has fallen  
in on itself and only the varicose  
veins of the nails run along  
the epidermis of rotting boards.  
Swallows not smart enough to read  
their eviction notices, still try  
to claim their squatter's rights  
in what's left of the eaves  
while out back, frogs try  
to clear their throats amid  
a skelagtal moon that barely  
sheds enough light on the nightly  
parade of field mice searching  
for a newer, more long-term lease.

Richard Luftig

## Four O’Clocks

She started them from seed,  
ordered from catalogues that choke  
off a mailbox in December  
while trying to delude you  
about the inevitability of spring.

Now, these sweet-scented ones  
that she considers as dear  
as her own grown children,  
grow round-faced and full  
in the summer Iowa sun.

They manage to sprout  
unannounced across  
the garden and take up  
residence in furrows of  
the field far from the tyranny

of trees. Later in the day,  
perhaps around four,  
she will walk down  
to the mailbox  
at the bottom of the drive,

her cane clicking  
against recalcitrant stones.  
She’ll check for letters  
that never seem to arrive,  
look in on the progress

of marigolds in a milk can,  
their necks straining to see  
the sky, and worry about  
when winter will catch them  
all leaning the wrong way.

Richard Luftig



## **Closing Night**

Very few farmers  
mourn this last act  
of winter. They look  
ahead to a new play  
still in rehearsal that  
they hope will have  
a long summer run.  
But for now, prima donna  
winds steal the show,  
forcing everything else  
offstage. The wheat planted  
last fall and still  
reduced to being spectators,  
wait with stage fright  
and muffled heartbeats  
for their chance  
to show off their lines,  
steal the show as if on cue.

Richard Luftig

## **Snapshot from Lake Wawasee**

I leave the water behind  
unable to bear it any longer  
and advance towards the camera  
which is my life, hands sunk deep in  
pockets like fish avoiding the predatory  
nature of nature. Here, where the obligatory  
wind plays magic havoc with my madcap hair,  
I begin to stare at the ground in front of me, out  
of frame, as if there were answers somewhere just  
beyond reach, but the lens doesn't allow a large  
enough panorama. I am limited to what is caught  
for a moment in its brilliant net, dazzled by the light  
and the background blue, by the trees arched toward  
this solemn figure I cannot comment on nor claim,  
an accident like birth or death, or any other  
sacred thing that shapes and surrounds,  
that creates pictures I can neither  
walk away from, nor out of.

Brion Berkshire

## Second Cousins

The door slammed them outside in the damp gusts. "It's spitting," she said, hugging her cardigan close. She wished it were newer, one of those ones with furry cuffs. Maybe he wouldn't notice her clothes were crap.

"Can never breathe in there," he said. He zipped up his leather jacket and walked as close to the edge of the little porch as he could without leaving the protection of the wedged roof jutting overhead. The light over the doorway was a dim flicker, the sensor responding to the shadows of late afternoon.

The parking lot ignored them, the pick-ups and family cars silent, and the corn fields beyond an ill-humoured grey. They could hear voices and music muffled through the door, bursts of laughter. Someone started testing the mic.

"I hate these things," she said. "Don't know why I came."

"Because you're morbidly obsessed," he answered. "Like the rest of us."

She looked at him in silence. Bastard. It was true.

"More like I don't have a choice."

He shook a pack of smokes out of his pocket, slid a lighter out from the pack and stuck a cigarette between his lips. She saw a couple flashes from the plastic cylinder as it failed to produce a flame.

"Shit," he muttered, shaking it a few times and trying again. Nothing. He coiled his arm back and pitched it as far as he could. Somewhere out in the colourless lot they heard it hit something that wasn't asphalt.

"That could've been my dad's car!" her voice caught between laughter and accusation.

He stood unmoving for a minute, staring out at the grey. Then, cocking his head to one side, "You have a light, don't you." Didn't even turn all the way around, just aimed the words over his shoulder down the wheelchair ramp.

She wanted something to show off and be happy about. Especially today. It was torture in there, pretending to congratulate those guys.

The flickering bulb glimmered scar shadows onto his cheeks

from when they'd all had chicken pox in grade five. Chad had called him Craterface in there just now. He'd laughed off the old epithet, but she knew it had hurt. Especially in front of Lucy. She didn't mind the scars, herself. They'd long ago become a part of him.

There was a whole box of matches in her pocket, along with a bunch of other stuff—keys, wallet, lip gloss. She didn't have a decent purse, so she needed pockets. Hence the crappy sweater stretched long and bulging at her thighs. She wasn't going to give him a light, though. Not yet anyways.

Her hand reached in and held the box loosely, thumb rubbing the rough striking surface. Her mother had made her light every one of those stupid candles in there. There must have been dozens. She'd still been at it when Lucy arrived, all pink-cheeked and feigning surprise. "Oh my gawd," she'd squealed. "Oh my gawd, I love you guys!" Tears and hugs all around. Bitch.

He still wasn't looking at her.

"You shouldn't be smoking," she said.

He laughed bitterly. "You should try it. Might help." He horked and spit, the glob almost clearing the cement stairs, landing on the very edge of the bottom step, thick and white. "No thanks, I don't need cancer."

He laughed turned around, looking over her head at the flickering lightbulb.

"Shitty light. Lunch time, it turns on full. Soon as it gets dark, it starts going out." He moved the cigarette to the other side of his mouth and turned back to the parking lot. "You're going to get cancer no matter what you do," he said out to the emptiness. "And smoking is good for the nerves."

"You're feeling nervous, are you?" she asked. "Chad got you wound up?"

"Chad," he snorted.

"I don't know," she went on. "He's obviously keeping Lucy happy. What do you think, they gonna get married? May be secretly engaged already."

"Would you give me a light already."

She pulled her sleeves down over her hands and flexed her knees to warm up her legs. Walking out to the edge of the

porch next to him, she enjoyed a little thrill of proximity. She looked up at him but his eyes didn't leave the distance. There was no colour in the sky out there, just a fading away of cloud cover.

The big box of matches came out. Slowly, as if she were just passing the time. She slid open the cardboard drawer and removed a match, shut the drawer again carefully and struck the match in slow motion up the side. It spit and spat the whole way along and sparked in her fingers another half second before bursting into flame. She held the match up at eye level, watching it burn, a yellow and orange that failed to brighten the day. "This whole big deal the family's making just because they're home for the holiday. Like it takes a hero to go to university instead of get a job. Who gives a shit?"

"Don't look at me, I'm here for the food."

"Like hell, you got to come, just like me."

"That's right. Morbid obsession. Can't keep away from the beautiful people."

Just before the flame reached her fingers, she flicked it over the side of the steps. The orange streak careened through the air and sizzled out when it hit the wet ground. She pulled out another match.

"You going to give me a light?"

She saw a drop from the edge of the roof land right on the cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. She could just barely see the spot absorbed by the paper, a circle growing until it wrapped around the tube.

He still wasn't looking at her. Bastard. It killed her that he was still so crazy about Lucy. Even now that she'd moved away and started dating Chad, he couldn't tear his eyes off her. And Lucy knew it, you could tell by the way she stood so close to him, teased him with smiles, touched him when she didn't need to. Trying to turn him on. She wished she had Lucy's self-confidence. She wished she had anything of Lucy's.

Well, she had once. Chad. She sniffed. Biggest mistake ever. Ever. Didn't matter, though, it wasn't as if she'd really liked him. Shit. One weekend in the city and the whole world had to find out about it. She glanced over at her cousin again –

second cousin. He had found out, she knew that. She wondered if it made a difference. Maybe it increased her chances.

"It's not so bad for you," she offered. "You're doing well for yourself. Good job, you could go places with it."

"Yeah, like the fuck out of here." His laugh sounded like a dog barking. "Gimme a light – I'm freezing my butt off."

"You shouldn't smoke," she repeated meaninglessly. She lit the second match and watched it burn. "Chad doesn't."

Chuckling it still burning after the first.

"Chad doesn't smoke anywheres you're going see him. He doesn't do anything he doesn't want the family to know about where he's liable to get caught. Unlike you." His eyes darted over to her for the briefest moment before returning to the far side of the parking lot. "But he does have his vices," laughing again, quieter, shaking his head. "You gotta feel sorry for Lucy."

It was her turn to laugh. "You're kidding, right? Lucy?"

Struck two matches together this time, making a bigger light.

"The whole hockey team. You knew that, right? The whole frigging team. Except you. And here you are, still wanting your piece."

He stood as cold as the damp air hanging around them, his eyes not moving from their distant focus. "That was only a rumour."

"Rumours gotta start with something."

"That one started with you."

She stopped, unsure whether this was true. She'd certainly done her part spreading it. Just like Lucy'd been spreading it. She smiled at her private joke, throwing out the burning matches to be swallowed up like the others.

"See? I knew it. You did start it."

"You wish." She struck another match.

"Look, give me the matches."

"No." She saw him reach for the box and stuck it back in her pocket. She wished he would tussle her for them. She'd like to tussle with him. They used to when they were kids.

"I didn't come out here to be social."

It stung and she concentrated on not showing it. "Feel free to

go back in." Throwing out the match.  
A big cheer went up inside.  
"Yay," he muttered. "Yippee. We're all so proud."  
She sighed. "Anyways, they're cousins. They shouldn't be together."  
"Second cousins. And don't be such a hypocrite."  
"What do you mean?"  
"Just shut up, okay. It's not going to happen." He looked at her at last, a sideways glance cutting deep.  
"What?"  
"You're not my type. I would've had you by now if you were. Like the rest of this town. So drop it and give me a frigging light or I'll go in and get one from somebody who isn't such a pain in the butt."  
She whipped the matches out and threw them at him as hard as she could. They hit him full in the face and tumbled down the stairs. She hauled open the door, warm air and light spilling out onto the steps along with the music and voices, suddenly louder. "I wouldn't be caught dead with a goddamn small-town construction donkey like you, Craterface." And she slammed her way back in.

Heidi Petersen

## Interrogate My Heart Instead

*To my mom.  
To each and every  
person who fought for  
freedom.*

## Interrogate My Heart Instead

He has forgotten that he used to exist and that he used to love him. He doesn't even think about him while taking a shower. They have told him that if he stabs people in the chest or hits them in the streets of his own hometown, he would make God happy.

He has forgotten that he once wanted to become a lawyer so that he could fight for the right to marry him. He has forgotten that blonde guys used to turn him on and he was the only brunette he ever wanted to be with. He was an exception but now he's just like anyone who's been captured because of protesting for "Human Value".

He's looking for something that he'd never find: "The Meaning of His Life". He can't recall his past. He can't even recall yesterday's interrogations, innocent faces, shattered minds of young boys and girls in the room. What has he done! How many boys and girls he must have had screwed, physically and mentally.

She's strong, beautiful even with the blindfold on, held together and ready. He doesn't like the last part, READY. Readiness makes it hard to get over a genius mind. She won't suffer, she won't scream, she wouldn't beg. He doesn't like it. He has seen hundreds of young girls in the torture room. They all expect to be saved; saved by a call, a miracle, saved by God. But this one, this girl, she's ready for everything to happen. The blindfold has made her even scarier.

Her indifferent smile, her crossed hands that have hugged her breasts intimidates him. He wears his invisible mask and walks towards her. She won't get out of here. That smile shouldn't be seen outside these walls.



He wakes up from a dreamless sleep. It is weekend but he has bones to crush, smiles to make disappear, and lives to get. It's a new day, it's a new dawn and he's goanna be a step closer to heaven and God.

He has forgotten that he couldn't even think about fucking girls. He could like them, hate them, love them but he couldn't fall in love with any. He couldn't even manage to TRY to sleep with any. Ali was his first and he was meant to be the last one. But now his job wouldn't be done if raping wasn't included in the daily torture routine. God wouldn't accept his prayers if he didn't punish the protesters. Freedom isn't something they are allowed to have. He has forgotten what Freedom meant to him. He can't remember his night stands at Ali's, tears of happiness and then their devastating future image.

He has tamed her, she's writing a long fake confession. He wouldn't remember this tomorrow, so what? God is watching. Heaven is waiting.

Ali is in the other room; they call it "The Second Unit" of the city's prison. They say if you get in there, there would be no way back. You'll be gone forever. And that's exactly where he is right now: Nowhere.

He walks in. Ali's tied to the chair. The room is watching, God is watching. Freedom? He's goanna give it to him right away: "You've got two options; die here or go live on television and take back your words." Ali can't tell if he is serious or it is all a big fucking joke. He smiles, just a faint smile and his spinal cord twitches. It takes a couple of seconds to realize the pain. The pain of forbidden love used to be more than this. The memory of the past draws a smile on his face. And it's then that the second one falls on his fingers. He faints.

Darius or better say Ahmed, his new religious name, keeps showing up every seven hours and each time he asks the same questions: Why do you work for western countries? Why do you lead the protests each Tuesday? What do you have on your Facebook page? It is like he can't remember the

last time he has been in this room. Ali can't believe the man who was literally torturing him used to be his best friend and his then boyfriend. He has been brain washed. Ali feels helpless; he has to save him himself. So he asks for a pen and paper; he writes anything they want to hear. Confessions that are never true but they are the way out. He crushes his ego, cries of picturing himself as someone he never was. He gets released right away. He flies to the US as soon as he gets himself together. He is free but his heart is still full of questions and murdered smiles.

*Dear Darius,*

*It's been three months and eleven days that I have not gotten to see you. In the cell, I would wake up every day with bleeding fingers in my pockets, cold and bruised body but a heart full of love and helplessness. I would wish to hear your steps walking in every -I don't know how many- hours and hear you talking to me like you had never known me. It was so sexy. A tough game. The adrenalin rushing through my body, getting deep down to my core would save me. Now here in Boston I don't want to get out of this warm bed knowing I wouldn't hear your voice again. My body alarms every seven hours and makes me lay still and stare at the pillow that used to be yours. I smile at it and wait but there's no hitting after each smile. There's no slapping, no breaking body parts, there's no pain.*

*I have saved all our photos together in Dena's laptop. I drink my espresso and review each story behind every picture. The last picture of the album is the one I took when you were walking out of the door heading to join the army. I was proud of you, I can memorialize that strong feeling: "My boyfriend was going to save lives" But did you ever save any?*

Elaheh Steink

## Other Shrink-Wrapped Leftovers

The day that marked Joseph Shaw's one year anniversary of quitting his gambling addiction, his wife left him. Joseph wasn't surprised. He knew he was the type of guy these things happened to. It didn't matter that he now worked full-time as a postal carrier, or that he had quit eating refined sugars, or that he successfully completed two sleep studies to try to remedy his snoring problem. It didn't work, but still...he tried. He even changed his facial hair, going from a full beard to a mustache. He finally had health insurance. He remembered to change oil in both cars. He recycled and was aware of when he, at times of laziness, decided not to. He mailed bills. One year clean of addiction, and here he stood in his kitchen holding the green post-it note that was stuck to the refrigerator.

Joseph, We both KNOW it's over.

Bye.

He read it over and over again. Did she mean that they both knew it was over the same way people knew that it was "a good way to go?" He had often found this expression to be completely ridiculous. People said it with such surety as though they had heard full reports of drowning being far superior to a plane crash, or a heart attack beating out cancer, or being shot as opposed to being hanged. One was a good way to go, and the other, well...was simply unfortunate. Was this the same thing? Did they both know with that same blind surety? And, did this outweigh the equally unknown, perhaps simply unfortunate, alternatives?

He had shrugged then. He often communicated in silence. This was nothing new. And yet, in a way, it was. There was something different about this silence. It was thick, awkward, and wrong.

He then did what he always did in a crisis—he removed the tea kettle from the stove and started boiling hot water and removed the jar of peanut butter from the pantry. Even though it was eighty-six degrees outside, he needed hot chocolate and peanut butter. He ate it in spoonfuls. It was one of the few vices he still clung to. It had driven his wife

crazy. She often commented about the “sound” that he made while licking the spoon of peanut butter. He tapped the spoon over and over against the side of the mug. He left powdered hot chocolate all over the counter and it would attract ants that they never seemed to be able to get rid of entirely. She was always cleaning up after him. He was aware of this even from the beginning. Yet, he never did try to change it. It was comforting and expected.

Joseph opened the window even though the air conditioner was on, and he listened then. He heard the quiet wind brushing against the tree in the front yard, the only witness to his wife’s departure. He wondered what it sounded like. Did she cry? Did she laugh? Was there any expression at all? Did she pause before leaving—looking back on a life that she had built with a man she had often said “embarrassed” her? He had been married for twenty-three years. Joseph considered this to be a great accomplishment. They made it through the seven-year itch. They made it through two miscarriages, being laid off, the death of parents, the birth of their only daughter, home improvement projects gone awry, unemployment, kidney infections, debt, parent-teacher conferences, addiction.

They made it past ten. They celebrated and toasted glasses of the cheapest champagne ever purchased. They were smug about it, gossiping about family members who would never be as fortunate. They held hands, kissed, and were almost in complete synchronicity with each other. They were One, having moved past being the One and becoming One. Right? Wasn’t that how it was? Joseph had trouble remembering.

It was during the seventeenth year that his wife started talking about feelings—anger, resentment, suffocation, loneliness, frustration. At first, these all had to do with the betting. He got lucky once in his twenties on a spring break trip to Vegas and spent years looking for it again, long after luck had expired. That’s the thing with luck—it shines more than it lasts. Every New Year’s, he made the same resolution. His wife had nodded every year, getting him numbers of local support groups, telling him about friend’s friend’s of friends’ cousins’ uncle’s co-workers who had success with

building a small support group and replacing the addiction with smoking or exercising or porn or cooking. “Whatever works,” his wife had said. “Just find something.”

He had promised. Again and again and again. He would do fine for a few days and then be back online playing poker or going to the local bar, betting on a dart match, or stopping at the raceway rather than going to work. His wife knew about this even though he tried to hide it. She found the bank statements and saw his notes when he had been considering filing for bankruptcy. She saw the statements on the credit card when he had stayed in a hotel room and had slept in sheets stiff as paper, alone, and had even accused him of not even having the balls to cheat on her. He couldn’t screw up right.

And then one day, he kept that promise—one whole year. And she wasn’t even around to see it. Figured.

He poured water into the cracked mug his daughter made in pottery class her first year in middle school, dyed his two favorite colors—orange and blue, even though they clearly were not meant to be together on the same mug—and he wondered if that promise could have saved anything other than his own self-respect. It really was a selfish promise, in many ways, now that he thought about it. He laughed out loud. Clearly, even then he cared more about himself.

He wondered what she took with her. The house still had her smell, her fingerprints surely...if he ever needed to check for them, and yet, it seemed completely empty of her. The kitchen was fully stocked. There wasn’t even a granola bar missing from the jar. The milk seemed to be at the same level it was at when he left it that morning before work. The dishes were all there, even the wedding china, boxed in the pantry. He walked into the living room, heard the crack of the floorboards that he had promised for years to fix. The couch was there and the three chairs and the coffee table and end tables. The television with the remote seemed untouched. The wall hangings were there—various cheap prints of famous nature paintings. The photos of his daughter hung crookedly. The bathroom was intact. She hadn’t even taken her toothbrush. Her brush and comb were still in the drawer,

filled with strands of blonde hair that he imagined of doing some type of voodoo with, just in case. Her expensive shampoo bottles were still in the shower. The bedroom was the same—the bed made not-quite- right, his watch on the bureau. Her wedding ring sat next to his watch. He almost had missed it, but the light caught the glint of diamond. He moved to touch it, and then recoiled. He felt ridiculous, but he thought it could be cursed.

He checked the closet. He had never put the door back on the frame after he had once accidentally locked it. Her clothes hung neatly, while his seemed to have been hurled at the hangers. The shirts were crooked, buttoned in the wrong holes, and the ties thrown over the railing. They were never the neatest of people, though they did care to keep things clean. They tended to build a life of efficiency. His wife would typically make two meals a week and they would live off the leftovers that were carefully shrink-wrapped. She would do laundry once a month, and ironing maybe once a year. She had told him she grew tired of straightening after him. “You don’t put anything back,” she had pointed out to him. Once something was removed from its place, he never could quite figure out how to make it fit back in. Even as he stared at his clothes, messily hung from plastic hangers, he knew that he was always making a mess of his wife’s once perfectly crafted, organized life.

Joseph then wondered if she took the suitcases or the car. When he went to the garage, he was struck by her car’s appearance, and when he checked the storage room, there were the suitcases. Nothing was missing. She had left a twenty-three year life with someone and found no need to take any of the objects that were filled with memories, objects given to commemorate something special, objects that were like rings on a tree—markings of where they had been and where they would go.

Nothing was missing. Nothing was necessary for her new life, wherever that was taking place. The space was filled with the amount of belongings she had left behind—the genuine leather wallet bought in Milan that he gave her for her thirty-fifth birthday, the emerald earrings his mother left her

before she died, photographs of a daughter they created together, recipes collected at showers, towels bought on sale, letters he wrote her when he was young and more romantic. It was all there and accounted for, simple remnants of a woman who lived with him once, a woman who had taught him everything.

He stared at the post-it note, smelled the ink before he folded it carefully and placed it in his wallet. Even her note seemed weighed by the amount of things she did not want.

Erin called when she needed money and food. Even though Joseph knew her invitation of going out to dinner was usually a ploy to get more money out of him, because she was his daughter, he ignored the ploy. He was excited to go out anyway. Erin was studying art at Seattle Pacific University and she always needed money for supplies. Joseph still maintained that it was her art supplies and not his gambling addiction that had forced them to file bankruptcy three years ago. Every time he asked how school was or when she thought she would be getting done, she shrugged. "It's art, Dad. You can't rush things." He had the sinking feeling that she was going to be in school forever and that he would always be working to help her afford a canvas, tubes of oil paint, a special kind of brush made of horse hair that cost over three hundred dollars because it needed to have a wooden handle.

"I know this new Indian restaurant," Erin said when she got into the car. "You might like it...could be interesting."

Joseph laughed a little. Despite his acid-reflux, he never had quit eating spicy food. He meant to follow the strict regimen that the doctor had laid out for him. He always meant to, really. But, somehow he never could force himself to follow the directions.

"Anyway," Erin continued, "you need to celebrate your new freedom."

"Oh," Joseph said, unsure of how to respond. "So, you know your Mom left?"

"Please. Anyone could see that coming ten miles away. This is the best thing that's ever happened to you guys. Now you

can both be happy.”

“We were pretty happy before—”

“You need to take First Avenue, not Fifth. Here, change lanes,” Erin motioned wildly with her hands. She possessed the characteristics of an only child. He supposed he had himself to blame for this. He had overindulged her.

“And no. You weren’t pretty happy before. Please. At least say it like it is,” Erin said.

Joseph shrugged. He didn’t know how to respond. His daughter had this annoying stoicism that he found hard to handle at times. He knew this had something to do with school and the friends she had made there. He had met her friends, Connor and Helen, when she first moved. They were quiet and reserved, but full of attitude. Maybe Erin had picked this up from them. He never knew why this surprised him. Both he and his wife were not the most expressive of people. They were typically passive—people who were acted on rather than people who acted. He saw life as a game of cards, and rather than counting them and knowing when to jump in, he waited to be invited.

“Well. I hope she’s happy. I mean, wherever she is—”

“She didn’t want to tell you. She doesn’t want to be contacted.”

“But, you heard from her?” Joseph felt relieved. At least she planned on staying in Erin’s life.

“Yeah. She called to say she needed some time to figure things out. She called to say not to call for a few days...well...until she calls me again. You know how she is...she has to have space to manage her psychotic tendencies. Remember that time that she didn’t get out of bed for five days? She still says she was never depressed. Whatever. There are pharmaceuticals for these types of issues. Dad—it’s right here! Ugh! You missed the turn. I think we can park in the back—change lanes.”

Joseph waited, watching the blue sedan in front of him. The sky was overcast and it looked like it was about to rain. He turned left by the side of a building with a bright orange door. He wondered what would happen if he kept driving. He wondered if Erin would tell him where his wife was.



Inside, the restaurant looked like a typical American knockoff of India. There were gold statues everywhere and wall hangings that depicted seductive looking women with six arms and large eyes. There were small statues of elephants. The lighting was dim. In Seattle, everything reflected Seattle. It didn't matter what sort of ethnicity was being honored. There was some sort of malfunction in the translation of culture. There was a doormat with an American flag, a cook with a Mariner's hat rather than a turban, and the smell of grey goose that Joseph found typical of the city. There was a wait of about forty-five minutes, Erin rolled her eyes and stood by the wall.

"We could go someplace else..." Joseph had suggested.

"We'll run into this problem no matter where we go."

They had been waiting for about twenty minutes in complete silence when a woman called Erin's name. She looked familiar, but Joseph couldn't quite place her. She looked to be about the same age as Erin. But, Joseph never counted on looks to tell him an age. He was usually off by ten or fifteen years with anyone under thirty.

"Dad...you remember Connor?"

Joseph nodded. Connor had long red hair which looked even more vibrant against the black dress that she wore. She was tall, almost an inch taller than him, which he guessed would put her at 5'9. She had long legs and pale skin and had incredible posture. She seemed poised for a photograph.

Joseph had met her a few times...but he had never really interacted with her. His wife always relayed the information about Erin and her friends. That was part of her job.

"We met a long time ago," Connor said. "I came over for dinner about three years ago...was that about right, Erin? I can't keep the past seven years of my life straight. School does that to you. I'm on this sort of perpetual Bachelor's degree program. Every year I get a little farther away from getting my degree, sad to say."

"You must be on the same plan Erin's on then," Joseph laughed. "Are you an artist as well?"

"Dancer...so...kind of. I work for a company outside of school...so that kind of slows things down. I started out in

the visual arts, though. Erin's amazing. You must be really proud."

Joseph smiled. He hadn't seen any of Erin's art since she left the sixth grade. She was fanatically secretive and only shared her work with her mother, who she often said "understood it more." Joseph didn't have the patience for art. He wasn't a museum person. He had walked through the Louvre in twenty minutes on a family vacation. His wife had spent hours with Erin reading every placard and walking around each piece. He had spent hours waiting outside, throwing pieces of a dried-out bagel to the pigeons in the plaza, and laughing about how he was an entire ocean away from his home doing the same thing that he would have been doing there.

"Are you here alone?" Erin asked Connor.

"Yeah. You know how set-ups are. Half the time they say they will meet you, and then they usually take one look and bail. I love this restaurant, though. So, I'll eat no matter what."

"You should join us...I mean...we wouldn't mind...right? Dad?"

"Uh...yeah, of course not. We would be happy to have you."

"No...I don't want to intrude. I know that it is a big deal to go out to dinner with your father. Trust me. If mine ever came down here to visit, I wouldn't want to share him with anyone."

"Don't be ridiculous—we don't care. Seriously. It will make dinner more interesting," Erin said, winking at Connor. Connor ran her fingers through her hair, shifted her weight, and shrugged. Joseph noticed the three gold loops in her left ear, the small star tattoo on her wrist. He wondered if her skin smelled as good as it looked. Joseph noticed the curve of her shoulders beneath the fabric of her dress. He thought of his wife then, how she slept half curled on her side. He remembered how he ran his hand along the dry curve of her skin before she would brush his hand away and tell him about her headache or her busy day in the morning. He never knew how to tell her touch could be simply touch.

Connor had a history of bad relationships, which she relayed

to both Erin and Joseph. She blamed this on dancing, rather than on her father. She had a series of one-dinner dates. Men become obsessed with her even though they have never been out on an official date. She laughed in between sips of white wine and asked Joseph for his opinion. Joseph shrugged. "I am the last one you should ask about relationships. I have trouble relating to coworkers, let alone, a...well...it's different when you get older."

"Oh—come on!" Connor laughed. "You must know something that could be useful later on. Don't you have any words of wisdom?"

"I can tell you about postage...uh...that's about it."

Connor and Erin laughed and laughed. Joseph noticed the small fillings in the back of Connor's mouth. He watched the curve of her finger around her wine glass and noticed how her skin matched the soap that he had picked up in a bed and breakfast on a college trip in Madrid. He mailed it to his wife, who he was then dating, and wrote the words most feared by men: I love you, I love you.

"Oh...it's okay, Joseph. This is sort of your initiation to dinner with us. We'll have to do it again and again. Months from now—I'll probably be asking the same questions. What can I say? Men have preconceived notions about dancers. They think we are all...I don't know...loose or pliable. It's crazy."

Erin agreed with her and told her about how it was the same with artists. "Those are the craziest of all," she said.

"Especially the abstract painters. Usually the men get high and try to paint what they see...which is a horrible idea in the first place. Art is never about what you see, but rather about what you don't or what you could see if you looked at life a certain way. Whatever it is, the men come with baggage.

After Mark...well...I took a vow never to date another artist." Joseph remembered hearing about Mark. He was addicted to coke and finally, after months of covering an over drafted checking account, Erin had to break it off. Joseph was silent through most of dinner, watching the interaction of his daughter with someone else. He played the role of the third wheel well. She would go to her mother rather than to him

for advice on pretty much anything. Joseph wouldn't know what to tell her about dating or sex or men. He relied on his wife to give her sound advice and to keep her out of trouble. He didn't know how to handle being asked questions about the future. He still felt confused about his own parent's deaths. He would get home from work late, having stopped by a bar on the way, and would pull a tray of carefully shrink-wrapped leftovers from the refrigerator. He reheated the casserole, enchiladas, stew, or whatever his wife had made earlier that week, and listened as his daughter opened up to her mother in a way she never had or would with him.

"This must be boring for you," Connor said suddenly. "I mean...I am sure you aren't like the rest of your species, right? You've stayed happily married and you have a pretty excellent daughter. You must be proud."

Erin choked on her water.

"Yeah...I am," Joseph heard himself say. "But...uh...I'm not married anymore. Well, technically I still am...I guess you could say...but...uh...I don't know..." He spooned more of the chicken marsala onto his plate, mixed his rice into the sauce. He didn't know how to answer these questions. In many ways, there wasn't an answer.

"Oh...I am so sorry! That was completely thoughtless of me...I mean...I just assumed—"

"It's fine, Connor. You didn't know. Actually, it's a really good thing," Erin said. "They were married a long time...you know...but now they are...uh...going in different directions...right, Dad?"

"Um...yeah, you could say that." Joseph smiled. The silence was awkward and he watched the dim light dance on the side of Connor's champagne glass. He was struck in that moment by his daughter's assertion that there were different directions that one went when a marriage ended. It was like giving driving directions at a gas station. He doubted there was any change one took. He felt, with a deep surety, that he would continue in the direction that he was already going.

After dinner, Connor wanted to hit a bar. "The night is young," she told Joseph, "and you need to celebrate. Seriously. This is like a sort of...well...baptism by alcohol. You know...a symbol of the new life you are starting up." She laughed and put her arm loosely around his shoulders, directing him towards the sidewalk. At first, he pulled away a little. He was old enough to be her father. He knew this. Yet, really, it was the shock of having a woman willingly touch him after so many years. He felt the light frame of her arm, smelled the light floral scent of her perfume.

Joseph felt young and free. They walked into a bar at the corner before the entrance to campus. He had been to this bar before with Erin. She said the artists usually went here. The music wasn't as loud as in the other bars, and occasionally, they would allow students to set up performance art productions. "The usual crowd is probably there," Erin told him on the way. "I might have to talk to Samantha, you know...that girl I told you I can't stand. I mean, she hasn't been in the program that long, and yet, she talks to me like she knows everything."

"Maybe Drew's there," Connor said with a smile.

Once inside the bar, Connor drew a cigarette from her purse and lit it with a match, and walked back outside. Joseph hadn't seen anyone light a cigarette that way in years. He watched her features, which seemed harsher in the dim light, and thought of his wife, who had quit smoking when she found out she was pregnant. Even though she had later miscarried, she had successfully stayed away from smoking. "You have to give up those tendencies...you know...the psychotic ones. Kids need stable parents. They do," she had told him once. He remembered lying in the bed next to her and feeling as though she was a stranger. Her smell changed. She chewed gum and drank peppermint tea. She fidgeted with her coin purse when she got a craving. She lost weight, grew her hair out, started working and told him about each step she made while he spent the days going deeper and deeper in debt, gambling the property his mother left him, his daughter's trust fund, his savings. He didn't resent his wife for his addiction and he didn't resent her for

successfully overcoming her own. But it was always the conversations they had at night, in bed, that reminded him how disappointing he really was to her that he resented. She used that term often—psychotic tendencies—to remind him of what he could never live without.

Joseph drank dark beer in the corner of the bar and watched his daughter flirt with a man that looked like Kal Penn. Even though Joseph had a hard time picturing them together, he had to admit that Erin looked happy.

“That’s Drew,” Connor said when she sat across from him. She poured a glass of beer from the pitcher and wrinkled her forehead when she took a sip.

“Kinda strong...”

“So...Drew...she...uh...”

“Yeah. Likes him. Drew’s a good guy. He’s into photography, though. I don’t think he’s as much of an artist as he thinks he is. He probably will end up doing photojournalism or something. Who knows. But, he’s good. You would like him.” Joseph laughed. Connor seemed to assume that she knew his tastes. He hadn’t ever liked anyone that his daughter dated. His wife had always blamed Erin’s bad taste in men on him. Connor sat in silence, fingering the glass of beer, staring at the table.

“Are you glad?” She asked him suddenly.

“What do you mean?”

“Glad—glad that it’s over. Your marriage. I mean...I know it’s none of my business...but...are you?”

“I don’t really know what I feel...I mean...I came home and she was gone...and...well...she had been wanting to leave for years. And really, she needs to be someplace she can be happy...and...and...” Joseph trailed off when he felt Connor’s soft skin press against his hand. She pulled his hand to hers and stroked his palm. He pulled away and took another sip of beer.

“I...uh...everything’s fine,” he told her.

“It sounds like it is.” They waited in silence until Connor pulled him closer to her. She pushed the table back, looked behind her to see if Erin was out of the way, and then carefully straddled Joseph’s lap. He felt the outline of her

body through her dress. He felt the corners of her ribs, her wrist, her neck. She pressed into him, kissed his neck, ran her fingers through his messy, un-cut hair. She moved her lips closer to his, as he was waiting to meet her, to guide her and show her where to go and what to do. She moved closer and closer, and Joseph sat there and waited.

"I'm...uh...I haven't done anything like this...I mean...I'm old enough to be your father—"

"But you're not," she replied as she stroked his neck, stared into his eyes. He sat there, looking at the deep brown of Connor's eyes, noticing the small spread of freckles across her nose. He wondered what his daughter would say if she saw him there with this young, lithe dancer, sitting over him. He wondered what his wife would think as he did everything to push himself away from that sharp curve of Connor's ribs. "Look...I won't make you do anything. I just thought...well...I just had a thought." Connor laughed nervously. "I mean, you are alone now, right?" He looked at her, felt the heat of her body, breathed in the smell of spring amidst the smoky air. She was drunk. Perhaps she had always been drunk. He thought of the sharp square of green paper in his wallet. His hands ran down her back as he felt her frame and tried to decide. He felt her skin inside her dress, moved his hands between the fabric. He checked the room. People laughed under smoke-filled haze. No one could see. There were no witnesses around, only the strong beat of his heart and the things he didn't know if he could want—other psychotic tendencies from his wife's disappearance, other shrink-wrapped leftovers from last night's love. He felt the beat of his heart, the pumping blood swishing in his head, and listened, his hand trying to untangle strands of Connor's hair, the panic of his daughter being around the corner. He listened to the hum of noise in the bar and felt Connor's hands as he touched the side of her face and saw the shimmer of luck.

Kate Kimball

## Fingerlings

I didn't hate Uncle Buddy. He wasn't better or worse than the rest of my daddy's family. I don't know if Uncle Buddy was kin or not, but it didn't matter. I don't know how old he was, younger than my daddy and not as young as Mama. Anybody you called Aunt or Uncle First Name was to be trusted more than those you called Mr. or Mrs. Somebody. Mama was allowed to name us girls and she called us after her favorite flowers. Lilac. Lily. Rose. And poor little Sweet Pea. None of my brothers were called by their real first names. Ever. My brothers were: Junior, Bucket-head, and Picker.

As I was saying, Uncle Buddy was okay for the most part and it seems part of an uncle's job to tease his nieces. Anyway, the index finger of his right hand was snapped or cut off right above the first knuckle. Every holiday dinner, whether the first knuckle is the one closest to the palm of the hand or to the end of the finger was subject for debate. Whichever, it freaked me out. He'd sneak up behind me and wiggle that stub on my neck, or under my arm, on my ribs and anyplace that was ticklish. He'd hold me down and stubble me until I cried. Daddy said Uncle Buddy was just teasing me, and if I didn't stop acting the fool he'd stick me in the root cellar with the fingerlings.

The only thing as repulsive as Uncle Buddy's finger were those potatoes. My brothers and sisters liked to play with them, draw faces on them and make whole families. All fingerling crops produce some odd shaped potatoes that look mostly like knobby fingers with eyes. On Uncle Buddy's farm, weird shaped tubers were more the norm than the exception. My brothers weren't unaware of my morbid disgust of Uncle Buddy's stub or the fingerlings. They'd chase me, corner me, poke and rub those spuds on me. They stuck the biggest ones in their underwear and had 'who's got the biggest slong' contests.

What happened to Uncle Buddy's finger was a parable, like stories in the Bible, everybody knows they're only part true, but you pretend to believe because they're life lessons. So,



the story went that when Uncle Buddy was a little boy, he was showing off holding his firecrackers longer than the other kids. One blew his finger off and it never grew back right.

The year I turned eleven, I gave it weight for consideration and came up with a plan I figured might just put an end to his giggling me with that nasty finger. My brothers never bothered to chase after a firecracker that failed to explode. I started collecting the ones that didn't go off and saving the ones with the longest wicks.

Girls grow up fast around here. My mama married Daddy two weeks shy of her fifteenth birthday. I borrowed mama's lipstick to blush up my cheeks and lips, took the toilet paper rollers out of my hair and brushed it until it was shiny and floated around my face, put on a tight pair of last summers shorts and a tank top.

Uncle Buddy parked his new El Camino in the far corner of our yard. I waltzed toward him looking as happy as I knew how, turning side to side, hands behind my back.

"Hey, Uncle Buddy."

He licked his lips, I could see drops of saliva in his mustache and knew he wanted to slobber mouth kiss me. Lots of relatives think they can plant one right on your mouth up 'til the day after your wedding'. It might have been what Mama called my over-reactive imagination but it seemed to me his hands and fingers were twitching in anticipation of 'the tickle'. Not today. Not ever again if I could help it.

"Goodness, Sugar. You done grewed a foot since last time I was here. Your daddy better start watching after you, the boys be coming round here like bees around a hive."

I giggled and took a step toward him. "Close your eyes and put your hands out, Uncle Buddy. I got something for you."

Buddy chuckled, closed his eyes and put his hands out palms up. I dropped the lit firecrackers stuck in gobs of Crisco on his palms. "Guess what?"

Then I ran like hell.

I ran until I got a stitch in my side, slowed it down, jogged until I saw the trees of Granite Falls Forest ahead. I could

rest there while I figured out what to do next. Why didn't I think about 'next' before this?

I heard Daddy's old Studebaker truck behind me, the distinctive thump-ka-thump of a rear tire, and slowed to an easy trot.

"Hey, Daddy. Hey Uncle Buddy." The truck idled along beside me coughing billows of greasy smoke. I smiled and gave a little wave. "I needed a walk."

"Yup." Daddy said. "Well, get in now." He pulled the truck to the side of the road in front of me, got out and spit on the ground.

He grabbed my upper arm and pushed me up onto the seat between him and Uncle Buddy. I guess the firecrackers burned Buddy good. Men don't cry out where we live and fat tears were squeezing out the corners of his eyes. His hands were wrapped in lard and gauze.

"I was just teasing, Uncle Buddy. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Girls got no right to tease a grown man, Lilac," Daddy said. Daddy turned onto a dirt road and we drove a mile or so and stopped at what might have once been a milking barn. He pulled me out of the truck and into the building. Couple of three leg stools, tack hanging outside the stalls, a few bales of straw. Dust motes rode the sunlight pouring down through the loft gate.

"Take off your drawers, Girl."

"I'm too big to spank, Pa. I already got the curse."

"We'll see. Take off them drawers and bend on over that bale."

He spanked me with the palm of his hand and I pretended it hurt something awful, though it didn't really hurt at all. He stopped and said, "Too bad about them bandages, Buddy. I'd let you give her a couple-a licks."

Daddy ran his hand softly over my bum cheeks, squeezing them like peaches; gave a couple of slap-slaps – snap on the right – snap on the left – loud as a rifle crack. "I used to wonder why God made girl-children, they mostly useless," he said. "Don't know what get into Lilac, she usually a good un. Get your clothes on, Missy. This be the last time you get off easy. Don't you forget it."

Uncle Buddy got a goofy looking smile on his face and started turning his hat round and round in his hands. "Do I call you Mr. Gunderson now or do I still just say Gus? I'd like to start calling on Lilac, Sir."

"Her ma might take some convincing, son. She pretty hard-over on the girls not stepping out 'til they pass thirteen."

"Maybe you mention I be willing to give you the conveyance on that bull I bought up Kansas City last year."

Daddy spit on the ground and looked off in the direction the sun would soon set, just to let Buddy know the offer wasn't sweet enough.

"An, I let your missus pick one of my prime milk cows for herself. If that be all right with you." Buddy slid his arm around me and poked me in the ribs with his stub.

Marie Shield

## Guardian Angel

Oslo, Norway, Tuesday February 6th, 2035

The blazing fires of war and its opaque clouds of smoke mixed themselves with the snow of winter. A tempest was raging, blowing its small white dust in all directions as if to erase the horrible scenes that had just taken place. It was a reality that could not easily be forgotten by Erik however, as the boy marched through the layers of fragile ice, covering his eyes from the wind's anger.

"Mother... Father...", muttered the boy, recalling how his parents died to cover his escape from the invading French army.

In the space of a few hours, Erik Isaksen had become an orphan, a fate shared by many other children, all victims of this cruel war. He yearned for his parents' warmth, the icy cold of winter piercing through his long white coat, his warm mitts and beret, and his thick footwear.

Norway had become a prime target for the Coalition in their campaign against Queen Iseult Windsor because of its geographical position. The successful invasion of Norway would leave the United Kingdom vulnerable to a pincer attack from France and Germany to the south, and from mixed Coalition forces stationed at Norway to the north. Belgium and the Netherlands had already fallen a few months ago. The Coalition's military campaign would be a quick and swift one, leaving Queen Iseult no choice but to abdicate the throne and respond favorably to the Coalition's demands.

Looking around, Erik still could not believe the confusion that was taking place. French and Norwegian soldiers running around, gunshots being fired, houses being turned into rubble by tanks and other heavy machinery, all was happening so fast. As he crossed a small bridge, a tank came out of a narrow pathway to face Erik. Perhaps the boy had been mistaken for an enemy soldier, or perhaps it was indiscriminate slaughter; in any case, a shot had been fired, triggering a chain reaction.

The young man's vision was blinded as he anticipated the projectile to consume his life. In a matter of seconds, the necklace that hung around his neck shone brilliantly, its light piercing even through the boy's winter attire. The last thing Erik recalled seeing before slumbering into unconsciousness was a beautiful young woman clad in silver armor, her long silver hair blown back by the wind, standing resolutely in front of him as if to shield him from harm.

~O~

A slender young woman of incredible beauty was standing in the middle of a field of grass and roses, her long golden hair slightly tossed aside by a weak current of wind. With one hand, she was holding her other arm behind her back, biting her lips in deep reflexion.

"You gaze at these flowers as if they could ever equal your divine beauty", boomed a masculine voice behind her. The woman turned around to look at her interlocutor, recognizing the one person in this world that truly understood her, but soon after her eyes wandered away from him, to the ground.

"My mind is consumed by no such trivial thoughts", the woman said before kneeling to pick one rose. She felt the man's shadow cover her graceful body completely as he approached her. She stood up, glanced at her life companion, then looked again at the flower she held between both hands.

"This world is filled with wonders", she stated with her light, crystalline voice. "I want to protect it, I want it to last forever..."

As she handled the flower, blood started dripping down her fingers; a thorn had penetrated her soft skin.

"But it is also filled with pain, it's not right!", she went on with a broken voice, closing her eyes to push back tears of anguish. Unable to contain them any further, she let these tears flow and opened her eyes to look at her lover, seeking his comfort. "What will become of this world?"

The young man stepped forward and slowly put a necklace around the young woman's tender neck, then lifted her hair and pushed it back, away from the jewel. The woman's golden hair returned to its original position like the smooth current of a river.

"Keep this necklace as a reminder that I will always be here to protect you", the man told his beloved before surrounding her bare body with his strong arms. "I promise you this, Eve: you will know no pain as long as our love endures."

After a moment, Eve returned her lover's embrace, closed her eyes and dried her tears on the man's bare shoulders. She then looked up to the sunset with eyes still full of doubt.

~O~

As Erik slowly opened his eyes, the blackness gave way to a blurry vision of his surroundings. He was lying on his back, atop a pile of rocks and mud.

"Ow... My head...", he muttered to himself, sitting up straight and caressing his forehead with his right hand. "And that dream... What was it about?"

He glanced around and noticed no snow nearby. Looking up, he understood why: he was under the bridge he tried to cross earlier. In the distance he saw nothing but ice and snow carried by violent gusts of wind. It was cold, but the boy was covered with a blanket, and a small campfire was burning in front of him. Beyond the campfire he noticed the same silver-haired woman he saw before fainting, kneeling with her hands on her knees, a benevolent smile complementing her exquisite facial traits. She was not clad in armor this time, but in fashionable clothing, mainly a white vest with black lines around the borders, black pants and white gloves. "You're finally awake, master", she said with relief, her smile still shining brightly while looking at him affectionately.

"Who... are you?", he asked, bewildered by everything that was happening.

"My name is Tara, your humble servant. I am what you would call an Organic being", she said with a mature voice.

"You summoned me using the Protection Organic that hung around your neck, and I answered your call".

"An Organic?!", Erik exclaimed, looking at Tara with disgust and anger. Soon thereafter, his expression changed to one of profound sadness. "This is the reason why they are fighting this war! The reason why my parents... My parents..." His voice broke with emotion. He closed his eyes as he felt tears moistening his pupils. "Why did they have to start this war...?", he asked with a meek voice.

"My only purpose is to protect you. As such, I do not know about or care for these mundane matters", she stated, looking very serious. "However, if I may offer a bit of insight, every Organic Being, while endowed with a fair amount of magical energy, also possesses the ability to briefly tap into an infinite amount of power to perform its duty. We call this ability a Mugen".

"Mu... Gen?", the young man repeated, trying to take in all this new information.

"Correct", Tara continued. "If Organics were the cause of a war as you say, master, it must be because the ones who instigated this war are afraid of our Mugen".

Tara rose to her feet and looked at the horizon, trying to discern buildings and other objects from the chunks of ice and snow.

"My Mugen is nothing to be concerned about", she said after pausing for a bit, "but you have to consider that there are a wide variety of Organics out there. Take the Destruction Organic, for example... Its Mugen could cause irreparable damage to this planet".

"I see...", Erik said while rising to his feet and walking towards Tara. A few seconds later, he came out from under the bridge and looked around. He saw smoke and the wreckage of vehicles all around; there no longer was any military activity in the area. Tara walked up to the young man.

"Did... you do this?", Erik asked his feminine protector.

"Yes", she answered casually, with no hint of emotion. "In order to ensure your safety, I secured the perimeter".

"There you are!", an authoritative female voice yelled behind them, her French accent readily apparent.

Erik and Tara turned around and saw a young redhead clad in a beige trenchcoat, looking at them resolutely as a predator would gaze at its prey. The stranger expressed her politeness by bowing to her two interlocutors.

"I finally found the only surviving individuals in this area. It seems our reports were correct", the red-haired woman said.

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Geneviève Renard..." The young woman stared at the boy and woman in front of her and displayed a self-confident smile, savoring the moment before continuing, "an Organic Slayer".

"Organic Slayer?", Tara asked with a tone of deep surprise; she wasn't really expecting an answer from a person who had just declared herself to be a potential enemy, however.

"What do you mean, your reports were correct?", Erik asked the red-haired stranger. "What's going on?"

"Are you deaf? Or simply stupid...", Geneviève went on with her usual arrogant demeanor. "Very well, I suppose I shall oblige you and explain to you the current situation." She fiddled with a lock of her red hair in a gesture of conceit.

"Although I don't suppose it will do you any good, since you will most probably die here by my hand in a few minutes".

Tara's facial expression became very solemn, reflecting the gravity of the situation. She jumped in front of her young master and spread her arms out as to signify that she would be protecting him at all costs.

"I won't allow it!", Tara yelled at the stranger. In response, the French officer grabbed a gun from inside her trenchcoat, which she then pointed at the silver-haired maiden.

"As you may or may not know, she is a magical being known as an Organic Being, and she was summoned by you, little boy", Geneviève started to explain. "I don't know who precisely she is or what triggered the summon, but we Organic Slayers are trained to sense magical energy, and she exudes quite an enormous amount of it. Her appearance cannot possibly go unnoticed".



Tara grit her teeth, bracing herself for when the French woman would take action against her master.

"Right after her appearance, this entire area was leveled with what we can term reality distortion magic, and all soldiers, whether French or Norwegian, simply disappeared, leaving only unmanned vehicles and heavy machinery behind", Geneviève continued to explain with haughtiness permeating her every words.

"Any and all source of danger was simply teleported out of the area, do you understand?", The French officer said while pointing her gun at the empty battlefield. "The intent of the intervention and the type of magical energy emanating from this girl means she must be the Organic Being associated with the Protection Organic."

"You do like to prattle on for someone who was disinclined to speak", Tara noticed, still on her guard.

"Well I do find it very boring to kill a person who has no clue as to what is going on around him!", the red-haired woman said with a certain hauteur, elevating her voice in anger at being interrupted. "We Organic Slayers came into existence after seeing what these creatures were capable of!", she continued, emphasizing the word 'creature'. "A little girl in Belgium destroyed an entire Coalition battalion all to herself using an Organic!"

"She must have used her Mugen", Erik said, finally breaking out of his silence.

"That's correct, and now you know why this war can't possibly continue with these things running around", Geneviève concluded. "The Organic Slayers were created to find and destroy Organic Beings or Organic holders".

"I do hate to kill children, but you are an Organic holder, and consequently your life must be terminated!" Geneviève yelled with resolve and authority, finally pointing her gun at the young boy and shooting a bullet towards his right side.

"I said I won't allow it!", Tara exclaimed, distressed at the boldness of the attacker.

The goddess concentrated a vast amount of magical energy in her right fist and deflected the bullet towards the ground

with the back of her hand; the projectile simply penetrated a layer of ice once it reached its final destination. Not long after, Tara felt some pain on the surface of the hand she used for the deflection. She looked at the source of her pain and saw a small and peculiar green dust cloud surrounding her white glove.

"What's this?", Tara asked herself before snapping out of her moment of inattention.

It was too late however; Geneviève had already jumped to the ground to get a better angle of her real target and shot Erik to his left side. The young boy was too scared to say anything and just grit his teeth, his eyes widened with terror, awaiting the bullet to claim his life. However, it was not his chest that the projectile pierced through, but Tara's. She had rushed to his left side and shielded him with her body. The French officer, lying on the ground and supporting her upper body with one hand, appeared a little surprised.

"You really know no fear...", Geneviève noted with a hint of awe in her voice before regaining her scornful composure.

"Surely you realized, these are not normal bullets!"

Tara was kneeling in front of Erik, a hand on her wound. It was not blood that transpired from her body but raw magical energy.

"Tara!", Erik yelled in earnest concern before kneeling and looking at the chest wound. Tara stared at the red-haired officer, who had swiftly leapt to her feet.

"Tell me, human, what do you seek by destroying either me or my master?", Tara asked Geneviève. "Can you not see? I am not Kali, goddess of destruction, and I mean no one any harm".

"We are unsure of your abilities or real intentions", Geneviève responded casually. "We will not take any chances".

Tara rose to her feet. Erik looked at his savior, worried that her wound might cause her to falter. Suddenly, the air around the area did not seem to follow its regular patterns. Gusts of wind converged towards Tara's chest, forearms and legs, as if responding to the vast amount of magical power

being gathered by the goddess from her surroundings. Geneviève became very wary of Tara's transformation. A silver armor appeared and covered the Organic Being's entire body. Her pupils dilated and became expressionless. She started to float above the ground, her hair meekly carried to the side by the surrounding wind current. "Very well human, do your worst", Tara said with a very low and mature tone of voice, displaying no hint of emotion. Geneviève could not conceal her anger after being challenged in that manner. She fired a gunshot towards Tara, but the bullet simply disappeared when it came a few inches from the target. To the French woman's bitter surprise, the bullet reappeared right in front of Geneviève and did not lose its velocity as it pierced her chest. She groaned in pain and let go of her weapon as she crashed against the floor. "Consider yourself lucky I did not see fit to kill you, human", Tara told her victim mockingly as the red-haired woman landed flat on her back. The magical being then looked at Erik. "My master, let us leave this place in haste before more of her kind appear". "Understood", Erik said before vanishing in thin air with his guardian angel as Tara used a teleportation spell. Geneviève simply lied on her back, looking at the sky and at the falling snow. The white dust gently covered her body and the blood dripping out of her wound. "I did not think...", she managed to mutter to herself after a minute of silence, still looking at the white sky. A concerned masculine voice could be heard coming out of the small bluetooth device on her left ear. "Geneviève, is everything well? Did you find them?", asked the male voice in French to Geneviève. "I... did...", she responded through the device with a broken voice, the pain from her encounter still very fresh. "But I... failed..." She turned her face to the side, breathless.

"You engaged them without me, didn't you?", the mysterious man asked, a little exasperated with her self-confidence.  
"Geneviève!", he exclaimed, trying to get an answer from her, since she wasn't responding.  
"Tristan...", she finally said before slumbering into unconsciousness.

Gary Germeil

## Vinnie and Bill

Vinnie and Bill had walked for miles without exchanging a word. It was a hot day. They were both sweating and breathing heavily. They liked to hike into the hills just outside of town on Sunday mornings, thinking of it as a form of mountain climbing, though they seldom had to exert themselves to get to the top. The reward was a panoramic view of the town and countryside, miles and miles of fields and orchards laid out in neat squares and rectangles and the deep woods of their childhood and the hazy blur of the river running out to the horizon. Entering the woods they took the path that led down to the creek where they had gone swimming as boys. Vinnie had brought Nellie there once and had lain with her on the mossy bank and now Bill was marrying her. They passed the big clearing where they'd played baseball at berry-picking time. It must have been a pasture once where farmers grazed their cattle. Vinnie lagged a step or two behind. He had fashioned himself a walking stick from a dead branch and imagined swinging it at Bill's head.

Bill turned around and said, "You wanna go back?"

"Let's go for a swim first," Vinnie said.

The path was strewn with pine needles. It was cooler in the woods. There was a point at which you could cross the creek on slippery rocks, so that they could leave their clothes on the other side and then come up to the highway when they finished swimming and get onto the tractor path that would take them home. Vinnie had always felt a little thrill when they made the last turn and scrambled down the steep, rocky incline and saw the clear water running its leisurely course though not without debris and the occasional water moccasin transporting itself downstream. Through the trees he saw the cloudless sky and the hot sun blazing through the branches as though it had burned the leaves away.

They stood at the edge of the water and watched it for a while. Then they took off their shoes and socks and rolled up their pants and crossed the creek a little farther down. Bill jumped in first, shouting "Yee-haw!" with great exuberance.

Vinnie sat down on the bank and let his feet trail in the water. Then he eased himself in and swam across and back again while Bill treaded water and occasionally disappeared beneath the surface. "That was good," Bill said when he came out. Vinnie lay on his back drying off. They were alone. Vinnie sucked on a blade of grass and folded his hands behind his head. Bill scaled some rocks across the water. "You gotta get a suit for the wedding," he said. "I'll come as I am," Vinnie said. "You can't do that." "Why not?" "It isn't proper." Vinnie laughed and said, "Well, fuck me." Bill didn't argue. Usually he deferred to Vinnie, who was older. He just said, "Come on," in a whiney kind of way. Vinnie felt something turning in his stomach, a sourness and sinking feeling, then heat rising in his head, and had to breathe deliberately to calm himself. They dressed in silence. Vinnie lit a cigarette, sitting in the shade. The resentment was growing in him now. Bill started scaling rocks again. "What you throwing those rocks for?" Vinnie said. "Just fooling around," Bill said. "Well, quit that. I can't hear myself think." "What you thinking about?" "Whatever I want to think about." Vinnie threw his cigarette into the water and stood up. "You ready to go?" Bill said. "Not just yet." Bill threw a few more rocks into the water and then gave it up. He was restless and impatient to leave. Vinnie liked making him wait. "Where you going on your honeymoon?" he said. "We haven't decided." "Niagara Falls?" "Maybe." "That's stupid. Everyone goes there. You ought to go to New York and see some shows." "I'll ask Nellie."

"Does she always tell you what to do?"

"Not always."

"A man's got to tell a woman what to do. You have to put them in their place."

"That isn't the way it is."

"You telling me I don't know how it is?"

"I didn't say that."

"You're lucky you didn't." Vinnie didn't know himself if he was being serious or just teasing Bill as he did when he was in a certain mood. For a moment he felt affection for him, but it vanished when he thought of Nell and the heat came into his face again and he breathed a little harder and wanted to kill him. The impulse rose and fell in him. He was like a caged animal being goaded with a stick. Now it pushed at him, now it blinded him.

They walked up to the highway and crossed over to the tractor path, which ran through a field of corn. Bill stopped to urinate. Vinnie looked around. They were deep in the field and couldn't even see the road. Vinnie picked up a rock and came up behind him. He didn't hesitate. There was nothing to think about. It was like falling through a chute or being carried down a river. He brought down the rock with all his strength. Bill didn't make a sound when he fell. Vinnie hit him again and again. There was a little puddle of blood forming now under his head. His eyes were open but Vinnie knew he was dead.

He stared at the body for a while. Then he dragged it between the rows of corn and concealed it as best he could. He felt calmer now.

When he got to the house their father said, "Where's your brother?"

"How should I know?" Vinnie said.

"Didn't you go walking?"

"No," Vinnie said.

"Then where can he be?"

"That aint no concern of mine."

"Have you been fighting?" the father said.

Vinnie didn't answer him. He turned away and looked out toward the hills and fields. It wouldn't be long before they

found him and then they'd know and the shame of it would outlive him, but he didn't care. He felt as if a great weight had been lifted from his chest.

Fred Skolnik



## Untouched

Three miles out of the little town, the road dwindled to a dust track and followed the line of an irrigation ditch between endless dusty acres. Greg Duvalier drove in the single seat of his dune buggy past a broken sluice gate and a tumbledown shack whose open roof allowed dappled light to fall on jumbles of crates and piles of sacking inside. At one point a piece of farm machinery blocked the path completely, and Greg had to back the buggy up to make a detour across the meagre ditch and out through untidy bales of alfalfa.

The purple haze on the field and the crunch of the buggy's tires on the hard earth only added to the sense of dereliction and loneliness. It reminded him of the day, four summers back, he'd buried Mary Rose and the twins. Dune Fever, the doctors called it. Either it killed you or left you untouched.

When he reached the Peyton homestead a gust of wind blew desert grit into his face. He pulled the peak of his cap down and glowered off into the wasteland. Shallow, ochre dunes blended with the dust-filled sky. He winced and turned back towards the farmhouse, glad that he didn't have to live out here on the edge of nothingness.

The house was timber-built with four symmetrical front windows beneath a rusty roof. As a centrepiece, it boasted a dilapidated wooden porch, bearing a tired chair and an iron swing seat. A low table stood between the seats, on it a pile of books and an empty jug beside a three-quarters empty tumbler. Its residual burgundy-red liquid made the only break in the monochrome scene.

Greg stopped the motor and climbed off the buggy. He was drying his palms on the seat of his jeans when a woman appeared on the porch.

She shielded her eyes against the beat of the sun. "Lewis?" she said in a thin voice that seemed much older than the woman herself.

Compared with Mary Rose, she was slender, almost brittle. She held her arms folded across the midriff like strips of twine binding kindling. Yet her hair was golden brown, and her breasts stood pert against the blue and white gingham of her dress.

“I’m not Lewis. I’m Greg Duvalier, ma’am. I was sent out to look at your irrigation system?”

She bent to pick up the jug and glass, then straightened and smiled at him with her head tilted to one side before disappearing wordlessly back into the house. The door remained open. Greg followed.

His eyes adjusted to the gloom of a large room with sparse furnishings. The woman had already passed through a door at the rear. Sounds came of water running. He caught sight of her blue and white dress swaying as she swished the jug and glass under a tap.

He looked away, disconcerted by the woman’s rhythmic motion. He found himself thinking four years was such a long time – an eternity.

He shook his head, refusing to feed his desire. Instead he focused on the stone hearth, and after that on the narrow stairway that led up one side of the room. Somewhere upstairs a floorboard creaked.

“Mrs. Peyton?” he said. “I couldn’t help noticing on the way over, most of your fields are bone dry. You need me to look into your water supply, right away?”

She entered the room with two full highball glasses of red-colored liquid. She handed him one. The glass was cool. When he looked into her eyes she was studying his face. She showed no sign of answering his question.

“The thing is, I’m certain the main inlet ditch by the road is faulty. You’re not extracting all the water you have a right to. On top of which you’re losing most of the rest at that broken sluice back there.”

She took a sip of her drink, eyes hovering over the rim.

He continued. “Maybe you’d rather I spoke about it to Mr. Peyton?”

Her face flew upward. “Him? He’s no longer concerned by irrigation ditches.”

Another creak came from above, accompanied by a frail voice calling, “Eileen? Come up here will you? I need you to...”

Coughing drowned the sentence.

“Would you like me to come over another time, Mrs. Peyton?” said Greg. “If it’s inconvenient.”

She crossed her arms beneath her breasts. The mounds were smaller than Mary Rose’s had been, but tighter too, her shoulders sparser, eyes greyer, hair lighter. He forced himself to look out of the window at the rolling desert dunes.

“Oh, ignore him upstairs,” she said. “And drink up your pomegranate juice. It will refresh you. Come on, let’s sit outside in the breeze.”

They went out to the shade of the porch. Mrs. Peyton sat on the swing seat and waved him into the chair on the opposite side of the small table.

“I really need to get out into the fields to check where the irrigation fault is, Mrs. Peyton. Have you got any crops other than that cattle feed you’re growing along by the track?”

The coughing from upstairs was still audible even outside.

“Well, the watermelons failed,” she said. “Stupid place to try to grow them. He wouldn’t listen. Apart from that I keep a few low-growing pomegranates out the back. Water them myself using a can and a trough.”

A louder cough made Greg shudder.

“Shouldn’t we check on your husband? What’s he suffering from? Maybe a doctor could help?”

She shook her head. “No, no doctors. It’s Dune Fever. Nothing to be done. I know it. He knows it.” She paused, staring out over the desert dunes. “You want a refill?”

The red liquid had tasted pleasant and it was cooling as she’d said. He was about to accept when a crash came from inside the house – a dead weight falling.

“My Lord,” she said and rushed indoors.

Greg stood and followed her blue and white hips up the stairs. They found the man lying face down on the floor of the landing. He wore pyjama bottoms but was naked from the waist up. The skin of his back was covered in a pebbledash of angry-looking swellings.

Mrs. Peyton stood beside him wailing. Greg knelt and checked his neck for a pulse.

“He’s gone, I’m afraid, Mrs. Peyton,” he said, looking up at the slim woman silhouetted in the light from a high landing window.

She began swaying, standing at the head of the stairs. Greg lunged and grabbed her waist just as she was about to topple over. She hung limp in his grasp.

She weighed less even than he'd expected as he whisked her up and took her into a bedroom.

The room was dimly lit, tattered pale green curtains drawn over the window. He laid the woman softly on the double bed that dominated the room. As he stood over her a shaft of light shone on her cheek and neck. He noticed a couple of gritty swellings there. Heat rash or the first signs of the Fever? Impossible to tell.

He was about to leave her and ride the buggy back to town when she stirred.

She opened her eyes and then her mouth. It seemed an effort to speak. She cleared her throat. "Lewis, honey?"

"No, I'm Greg Duvalier, ma'am," he said.

She ignored his correction. "Listen Lew, could you fetch me some pills from the box in the jacket hanging behind the door. I swear they help a little against the Fever."

"You're sick too?"

"Maybe. Or maybe it's just the shock. Fetch the pills."

He crossed to the door and searched the jacket. It was a man's jacket, doubtless Mr. Peyton's. Hunting for a pill bottle, the first thing he found was a piece of card. He pulled it out to find it was a driving licence. In the gloom he made out the photo of the dead man who lay on the landing. Beside his picture was the name: Moses Albert Laboite. Greg rechecked the photo. No denying it was a snap of the dead man. And he wasn't any Lewis Peyton, that was for sure.

"Honey, don't bother with those pills now," said Mrs. Peyton.

He returned the licence to the jacket pocket, and swung around to face the bed. Mrs. Peyton was sitting up.

“Are you sure, ma’am?”

“I was just shocked and fell faint.”

He wondered if he ought to sit on the chair beside the bed till she was fully recovered, but decided to remain standing by the door.

“I’m really quite fine now,” she said. “I’ll be back on my feet in a moment.”

Greg glanced out of the room at the pyjama-clad legs of the dead man, Moses Albert Laboite. “Mrs. Peyton, you’ll need to call a doctor.”

She tried to stand but sat back again. “No, I’m fine. Really.”

“I meant for your – husband.” He couldn’t avoid the pause. “You need a certificate. A confirmed cause of death.”

“Cause of death?” She laughed. “Are you serious? I can’t afford to pay out to be told what I already know. Dune Fever killed him. You yourself must have seen victims before.”

Pebbledash rash. Weakness. Coughing. Breathlessness. Final collapse. He nodded. “My family.”

She cocked her head to one side. “But not you?”

“I was untouched.”

“Me too,” she said. “So far.”

“Okay, so no doctor, then,” he said. “But what do you suggest? We can’t leave him lying on the landing in this heat.”

“We’ll move him, Lew. I’ll show you where.”

He touched the woman's shoulder. "I told you, Mrs. Peyton, I'm not your husband, Lewis. My name is Greg Duvalier."

Her eyes cleared for a moment, but then clouded with tears. She fell into his arms sobbing. He allowed himself to stroke her hair and mumble her name – Eileen – a couple of times. The word felt strange on his lips after all those times whispering "Mary Rose" with his face nuzzling darker brown hair.

After a while Mrs. Peyton pulled away. "Do you think we can manage to get the body into your dune buggy?"

"Yes."

"Will there be room for us to ride in it too?"

"It'll be a squeeze."

"Come on. We don't need to go far."

She stood and brushed passed him, the breeze she generated accentuating her frailness. On the landing, she stepped over the corpse and passed downstairs. Greg lugged the dead man over his shoulder and made his way awkwardly down the narrow stairway. Before he reached the bottom she had opened the front door and gone outside. He paused, caught his breath and followed her into the sun. It was getting late but the day was still hot, the air dusty and stale.

He loaded the body onto the rear rack of the buggy. There was barely room for him and Mrs. Peyton in the driving seat designed for one. She nestled against him and directed a course across a field of parched alfalfa to a spot where a lone thorn tree had managed to grow out of the caked earth. In the shade beneath it stood two wooden crosses.

"My family," she said without looking at the graves.

He took a shovel and a pick from the tool box in the rear of the buggy and dug a three foot deep grave beside the existing ones. Any deeper and he would have hit solid rock. He dried his brow and manhandled the corpse, still in pyjama bottoms, into the hole in the ground.

They stood over it in silence for a moment. Mrs. Peyton crouched and scooped up a handful of dirt. She weighed it in her hand before tossing it into the hole. Then she picked up the shovel and began ladling dust over the dead man. Greg grabbed her wrist, took the tool from her and finished the job.

In the meantime she had fashioned a cross by tying together two twigs from the tree. Now she planted it and turned away. He helped her climb onto the rear rack of the buggy, and she rode back in place of the corpse.

Night was falling fast as they arrived at the farmhouse.

“It’s become too dark to ride the buggy back to town now,” he said. “It doesn’t have running lights and I can’t afford to wreck it. I’ll sleep out in the yard, if I may. Drive home in the morning.”

“Stay in the spare room,” she said. It seemed a plea as much as an invitation.

For the third time that day he followed the blue and white dress indoors.

They drank more pomegranate juice, and ate a silent supper of mutton stew strongly flavored with thyme and rosemary. In sympathy with his jaws, words chewed in his mind. Rosemary. Mary Rose. Touched. Untouched.



Afterwards they did the dishes together and Mrs. Peyton showed where he could sleep. It was a child's nursery with toys escaping from a box at the foot of the single bed, and pictures of windmills and steam trains on the wallpaper.

He fell asleep thinking of his own lost children, but when he dreamed it was of Mary Rose. He had just come home from working on a particularly difficult irrigation job. A sluice had broken and a farmer's whole crop was going to waste in the sun. He'd worked all day to fix the sluice, and now he was exhausted. But Mary Rose just smiled and ignored his protests as she pulled off his work clothes and filed him towards the shower.

He half-woke in a state of arousal. A woman lay tight beside him in the tiny bed, her breasts and stomach against his side. His hand explored. The woman was naked. He woke enough to remember where he was. At first he wanted to push the woman away, but her hand grasped him between his legs.

He stirred and sought out the woman's face with his own hand. Her skin wasn't as smooth as he remembered Mary Rose's. In fact, it was more like sandpaper. As he explored he realised the woman's neck and shoulders were covered in a small hard rash. Like pebbledash.

Regardless, he bent and kissed her right nipple. It had been forever since he had made love to Mary Rose. His hand wandered back and forth over her breasts, exploring avidly. But these breasts were wrong. Different. They weren't Mary Rose's at all. His hand recoiled.

"Oh, don't stop, Lew," said the woman, using Eileen Peyton's voice. "Promise you won't ever stop touching me."

Fully awake now, he was going to correct his name, but it didn't seem important any more. No one could mind if he pretended to be Lewis Peyton, as the man in the pyjama bottoms had before him, the man who now lay alone beneath three feet of dust and a thorn tree.

Greg Duvalier clasped the frail woman to him and smiled into the darkness. "Mary Rose," he said, "I promise I won't ever stop touching you. No one should ever be untouched."

Steve Slatter

## The Contortionist

His pudgy flesh held taut by his neck-bone  
like fish squirming against skin in a jet stream  
driven in from the highway. I won't Mammy,  
the boy hisses, where i' she? The man squares: Your momma  
- somewhere better, the man bites off—  
thinking on the pale face—her fevered cheeks  
drained of life. Every road he passes  
runs together:  
Goodwill Hope, Hope Church Mountain,  
Goode's Country. Beams Truelight Baptist.

C'mon, the man says, his fingers circling  
the little arm,  
fingernails biting back. Limbs wriggle to strike sixty to  
twenty degrees,  
to one hundred and eighty angles.  
The boy's back digs through his stomach, trying  
for his sudden release. No, escapes his lips, the darts  
clutching  
at empty air. Then, the man grabs and drags the limp boy  
through stained glass being suffocated in muggy pews;  
brown  
breath from antique crosses,  
barely diluted by modernity.

Sit, the man commands,  
the two crucifixes framing  
his scarecrow suit, rearranging the crooked stained tie.  
The diseased glow of the sun paints pictures  
across the glossy lacquered woodwork  
so the boy squanders his time, the feet lifted on the pew  
performing acrobatic stunts in the shadow  
of the man kneeling,  
the sweat dripping down through his ragged gray trousers.

The man slumps beside the boy,  
one of the boy's legs  
rounding his left ear. The man slaps the leg,  
show some respect. The boy repeats,  
I wont Mammy.  
The man points at the empty bench. The boy frowns  
to creep up the aisles, dusty eyes staring through him  
on his walk to the wooden box. He looks in: Mammy?

The hair appears waxy and her eyelids  
seem to hide cobwebs.  
He is too embarrassed to run,  
twisting with his toes  
cutting back and forth,  
waiting for the man to take him away.  
That not mammy, he whispers later. The man looks at him  
twisting pretzels in the backseat,  
and holds his tongue.

Paul Piatkowski

## Consensus

As the gray of pre-dawn crept through a cabin window, the three Noble brothers snapped ammunition clips into their deer rifles and attached canteens and hunting knives to their belts. They poured whisky into flasks and stashed beef jerky and chocolate bars in coat pockets. When all was in order they stepped into the fresh mountain air and moved along a partially overgrown pathway. Wind rustled leaves in shedding Aspens and fog lingered in low areas.

Clyde, the oldest at fifty, had a red knit cap pulled over his ears and a moth damaged wool coat buttoned to his chin. A backhoe operator, he lived on a rural half acre, collected anything that would rust, and had a wife who was a nickel or two short of having the right change. “Nippy,” he said, hunching his shoulders and stomping his feet.

“She’ll warm up here purty soon,” Will, the youngest, offered. In his mid forties and ruggedly handsome, he was layered in flannel shirts with a plaid cap tipped casually to the side. A part time carpenter with seven children spread across three failed marriages, he lived in a rented trailer, drove a pick-up with a bent frame, and extracted from life what a game of pool, weekend hunting or fishing trips, and endless one night stands had to offer.

“Forecast said snow,” Bert, the middle brother added, buttoning a stylish down vest and adjusting a wool scarf. An insurance agent, he made a good living selling policies to people who didn’t need them. Married to a controlling, ambitious woman, it was all he could do to get away once a year for the deer hunt.

Through the early morning hours they combed the knolls and valleys beneath imposing, treeless mountain peaks. They’d been coming to this remote, barely accessible region since they were teen-agers. Not expecting to encounter others or even hear the sound of rifle fire, they were startled when they came around a sharp curve on a narrow trail and ran into a lone hunter headed in the opposite direction. The man was of medium height, slightly overweight, and wore a yellow parka and a fur lined cap. His rifle was sheathed in a

handsome, hand-crafted leather case. Introducing himself as Bruce Mitchell, he said he'd driven up alone from the coast to try his hand at hunting deer. After briefly chatting, he moved on.

"How'd he get clear the hell up here?" Bert asked.

"Didn't know no better," Clyde said.

"I don't like it," Will added.

In the afternoon as clouds gathered, they walked along one side of a narrow ravine and Bert spotted a buck in an opening on the opposite hillside. The rack on the deer was perfectly symmetrical with more points than could be easily counted. He could envision the head mounted on the wall of his game room.

Dropping to his knee to steady the rifle, he anxiously fired before he had the shot properly lined up and raised dust behind the deer. The frightened buck bounded along the hill, disappearing into a stand of pines. "Damn," Bert exclaimed and angrily ejected the spent cartridge.

"We'll see 'im again," Will said. "He's in that stand somewhere."

Making their way into the ravine, the brothers paused in some thick shrubs near the pines. Dusk settled in and restricted visibility. Hawks soared overhead doing with ease and grace what the brothers were attempting with ponderous effort. Sudden movement near one end of the trees attracted Will's attention. "There he is," he yelled and the men shifted position and began firing. The shots crashed through the evening stillness and echoed about the mountain walls.

When movement in the pines ceased, they lowered their rifles. "Must a got 'im," Clyde said with a satisfied nod.

Jumping over shrubs and scurrying around rocks, they made their way up the narrow rise and into the pines. They searched the area but there was no sign of a dead buck. "I'll be damned," Will said, removing his hat and scratching his head. "We couldn't a missed from that distance."

They continued shuffling around the base of the trees until Bert stopped short and his face turned white as Aspen bark. "Jesus," he said and absently took a step back, his rifle dropping to the ground as though he'd forgotten he was

carrying it. Clyde and Will moved toward their stricken brother and followed his gaze into a small clearing. Lying motionless against the base of a tree trunk was the twisted body of the man they'd met earlier on the trail. His head was wedged grotesquely against the tree and one leg was draped awkwardly over a rock. The yellow parka was stained around several well defined bullet holes.

Clyde reached up and reverently removed his cap. Bert turned away, looking skyward as though searching for guidance. Will rested his rifle against a tree and approached the prone, apparently lifeless figure. Leaning down, he removed a glove and checked for a pulse. "He's a goner," he announced, shaking his head and pursing his lips.

"Knew that when I seen 'im," Clyde retorted. "Comes up ta do a little huntin' an' we blast 'im ta kingdom come."

"For Christ's sake, Clyde, it was an accident," Will snapped.

"You directed our attention ta the movement," Bert added.

"Yeah, an' I suppose I pulled the trigger on yer rifle," Will shot back.

Accusations and recriminations passed back and forth like rapid jabs in a boxing match, focusing at first on the matter at hand but soon expanding into family history and personal lifestyles.

When the allegations and insults were exhausted, silence once again settled over the grim scene. Resentment and chafed feelings hung in the air like a penetrating haze. Will moved away from the dead man and sat on the ground with his back resting against a tree trunk. Clyde stirred dirt with the toe of his boot. Bert moved closer to the clearing and sat on a fallen log. No one was willing to reinitiate conversation. Clyde pulled a flask from his pocket, took a long draw, and offered the others a drink. They refused with gestures instead of words, reconsidered, and each took a healthy swig. "What're we gonna do?" Bert asked, breaking the silence. "Nothin'," Will responded as though the answer was self-evident. "Leave 'im here like we never found 'im. Stray bullets got 'im."

"Naw, that's no good," Clyde countered, spitting on the ground and wiping a sleeve along his lips. "We gotta bury the

poor bastard; can't leave 'im fer coyotes and buzzards."

"Bury 'im!" Will repeated with disbelief. "With what?"

"Believe there's a shovel back at the cabin," Clyde said.

"It'll be dark in a few minutes," Will responded. "We'll be lucky to find the cabin and sure as hell couldn't make our way back here."

"Better notify the law," Bert interjected. "Git a ranger up here."

"So they can pin a manslaughter charge on us?" Will asked.

Dusk turned to night and a cloud cover blocked moonlight.

Without a word of explanation, Clyde laboriously hefted the dead man on to his shoulders while his brothers watched in confusion. He hobbled away, swerving from side to side under the weight.

"Guess we're leavin'," Will said with a gesture of helplessness as he and Bert followed.

Clyde struggled with the dead man and the darkness. He tripped over a tree root and Mitchell flew into a large boulder like a tossed rag doll. Passing too close to a low branching tree, Mitchell's arm snagged in a crook and he was yanked backward as though jerked with a rope. Crossing a small stream, Clyde slipped and Mitchell landed face down in the mud.

After wandering around for the better part of two hours, the brothers stumbled on to the cabin by what could only be considered luck. Clyde placed the corpse in an enclosed firewood space beneath the porch. The dead man looked like he'd been mauled by a bear or dragged behind a runaway horse.

"It'd be over now if we'd jus' left 'im," Will whispered to Bert.

"As it is, we got a stiff under the goddamn porch."

After a dinner of canned beef stew and hard rolls during which there was no discussion and little eye contact, Will moved to a cot and removed his boots. "I'm goin' huntin' first thing tomorrow," he announced and pulled a blanket over his head. Clyde soon turned in as did Bert after he surreptitiously tried to call the ranger station only to find his cell phone didn't work in the remote mountains.



When Clyde awoke the following morning, he found both his brothers gone. "Guess Bert went huntin' with Will," he reasoned aloud. The weather was unusually tranquil and warm with a dense cloud cover, the calm before a snowstorm.

Clyde found a shovel and set out to find a place to bury Mitchell. Locating a spot about a hundred yards from the cabin, he began digging. Fortunately the ground was not yet frozen and the soil was mostly decomposed granite. He thought about how easy it would be if he had his backhoe - five minutes and he'd have the job done. As it was, it took over an hour of steady work. "Yeah, this is the thing ta do," he assured himself as he walked back to fetch the corpse. "They'll write this Mitchell off as missin' an' that'll be that." When he reached the cabin snow was just beginning to lightly swirl down. Dropping to his knees, he pulled the small door to the firewood area open and reached in to grab the dead man. But Mitchell wasn't where he'd been placed the night before. Clyde scratched the stubble on his cheek and stood up. When he turned around he came face to face with Will. "Damn it!" Clyde said with alarm. "Like ta scare a guy ta death."

"Mitchell ain't in there," Will announced with a sly grin.

"I seen that," Clyde said. "Where's he at?"

"Hauled 'im back ta the woods."

Clyde slowly drew the back of his hand across his mouth, digesting what he'd just heard. "Where's Bert at?"

"Ain't seen 'im all mornin'," Will answered casually. "Believe I'll do a little huntin' now Mitchell's taken care of. The snow'll bring the deer down lower." He strode off into the pines, a new leather rifle case slung over his shoulder.

The snowflakes increased in size and density. Clyde went inside the cabin, put a match to some wood in the fireplace, and poured a shot of whisky. At least the matter was finished now but he couldn't chase the image of Mitchell's body being ripped apart by coyotes.

Three hours and several whiskies later he opened the cabin

door and gazed in astonishment at a new world of virgin white. Snow was piling up on the ground and lacing trees and bushes. Visibility was limited but he could see a figure with a deer across his shoulders staggering though the snow and underbrush toward the cabin. "Guess Will got one," he mumbled. But as the figure moved closer it became clear it was Bert instead of Will and he was carrying something other than a deer. Clyde recognized Mitchell's yellow parka bobbing up and down on his brother's overburdened shoulders.

Bert hobbled to the porch and arduously shoved the body underneath. Wet, cold, and unable to straighten up, he pushed by Clyde without a word and made his way directly to the fireplace. Gazing into the flames, he began to speak in an oddly detached way. "Thought he'd put somethin' over, but I slept with one eye open an' seen 'im sneak out an' haul Mitchell off. Followed 'im a mile or two and seen 'im leave the stiff propped up against a tree." Bert paused, pulling off his gloves and warming his hands. "Had a helluva time packin' the dead weight back in the snow. Got lost an' jus' happened ta see smoke from the chimney here." He strained to pull his body out of the wet clothes. "Believe I threw ma back out," he complained. Wrapping himself in a blanket, he lay down and with an exhausted moan closed his eyes.

The day's events and the whisky left Clyde disoriented. He felt he should do something before Will returned or they'd be back in the same place as the night before. The storm was intimidating but he could probably haul the body to the grave. Filling in the dirt would be easy enough. He wasn't sure what Bert had in mind and didn't want to ask.

Clyde dragged Mitchell from the enclosure and draped the body over his shoulders. Slipping on the wet snow, he fell flat on his back with Mitchell landing on top of him. A cold, musty face rubbed against his cheek. Pushing the body off, he stood and back-pedaled away. Shivering with abhorrence, he vigorously rubbed his face trying to remove the feeling of

death clinging to his skin.

He decided to drag the corpse and avoid a recurrence of what had just happened. Unable to see more than a few feet ahead, he meandered around until he came on the grave suddenly and almost stumbled in himself.

Just as he toppled Mitchell in and was collecting the first shovel full of dirt, he heard the growl of a high-powered truck engine. "Now what?" he asked himself, peering through dense, swirling snow. Like a behemoth from another world, Bert's Dodge Ram crashed through the shrubs, skidded around trees, and stopped with headlights shining directly on Clyde. Bert stepped from the cab and slammed the door. Stooped over with a hand resting on his back, he hurried toward his brother. "Gimme the shovel," he said.

"Ain't done," Clyde responded.

"Gimme the shovel," Bert reiterated and held his hand forward. Clyde complied and Bert tossed it into nearby shrubs. "We ain't buryin' no one," he said. "I'm takin' 'im down the mountain ta the ranger station an' straighten this mess out."

"We never agreed on that," Clyde complained.

"We never agreed on nothin'," Bert responded and climbed into the grave, moaning at the pain in his back. "Well, give me a hand here," he said. "Can't lift this stiff by maself." Clyde lowered himself into the hole and together they tugged and grappled until they had Mitchell back on the ground. They maneuvered the body into the bed of the truck and closed the tailgate.

"They'll sue us for negligent or some damn thing," Clyde warned. "Take everythin' we own."

"Well, that ain't much in yer case and nothin' at all in Will's," Bert replied and hoisted himself into the cab. Twirling the steering wheel and popping the clutch, he turned around and drove off. Snow flew in all directions as the truck slipped, skidded, fishtailed, and bounced off trees. After about a hundred yards, the growling, churning vehicle bogged down on an incline. The tires whistled and spun but couldn't gain traction. Above the whine of the engine, Bert heard a sharp crack that resembled the sound of a discharging rifle. A

moment later there was another crisp bang and this time there was no question as to what it was. The truck settled on to the front wheel rims. "What in the Sam Hill?" Bert said and twisted in the seat. He could just make out the vague image of his younger brother at the back of the truck. The tailgate was down and Will had hoisted Mitchell on to his shoulders. Looking to the cab, he raised one hand with the middle finger extended and disappeared like a phantom into the snow blown woods.

"Son of a bitch," Bert yelled, slamming his palms into the steering wheel. Forgetting to turn the engine off, he tumbled from the cab and followed his brother's tracks through the deepening snow.

Stan Hollingworth



# Breaking Curfew

**INWOOD**  
**INDIANA**



