



# Salem Cemetery





Salem Cemetery  
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Mark G. Lyvers  
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MANDOLYN  
*Carrie Ryman*

Cindy hated her name, almost as much as she hated Uncle Bemis. She hated her name because it was soft and cute and cuddly, all the things she strived not to be. She thought about the creaky barn door on their farm in Sugar Creek, Ohio. That door never stayed closed. Papa said the door wasn't hewn right. But Cindy Sievers knew it wasn't the door's fault. The door was made just fine. It just didn't fit there in that jam. That was the way it was with Cindy's name. It just didn't fit on her.

On her ninth birthday, she heard the whispers.

Cindy had gone to bed early that night because she wasn't feeling well. It was on account of her decision to linger at the supper table and have a second slice of Mama's apple cake, which she had made special for Cindy's birthday. Since it was Sunday, and family day, they were expected to spend the evening socializing. No sulking in her bedroom with her diary or playing with her new record player. It was either a second slice of cake or one of three other choices... help Mama with the dishes in the kitchen, go into the parlor and play checkers with Papa, who would surely whoop her since he was a master checkers player and never let her win like most older folks, or go for a walk with Papa's brother, Uncle Bemis and her older brother, Louis. She knew Louis would dart off somewhere on his own and she'd be left alone with her uncle.

Despite her sour stomach, she knew it had been a good decision to have a hankering for more apple cake. But something else made her stomach ache, too. She dreaded another nightly visit from Uncle Bemis.

She yawned again and again, but pinched herself to stay awake and clenched two blankets up to her neck, too many blankets for such a hot night.

And then the whispers started. They floated in from the farmyard below. The voice, slightly feminine in nature, was enticing and mysterious, and the moonlight was inviting through her open window. Cindy dug under her bed to find her rubber boots and tugged them on, then crept out of her room. She used the back stairs, which were on the opposite end of the house, far from the other three bedrooms, where Mama and Papa and Louis and Uncle Bemis were sleeping.

As eager as she was to get outside, Cindy inched down the stairs, placing each foot toe to heel, toe to heel. If she woke anyone, she knew the whispers would stop, and her secret adventure would be over. Her right boot squeaked on the landing by the kitchen, and she stopped, scrunching up her face and listening. But the only response from the household was a sputtering from Papa's throat, mid-snore, and the continued breathy murmur from the farmyard. The white kitchen curtains glowed neon blue in the moonlight and billowed inward with every whisper. She began to make out the words. Well, one word, to be precise.

It was Mandolyn.

When she first stepped outside, it was quiet, save for the crickets' rhythmic chirping and the beckoning calls of, "Mandolyn... Mandolyn..." But as she walked past the chicken coop, the hens started clucking and Daisy, their milk cow, started mooing from the barn. It was quite the ruckus, and Cindy expected to see Papa or Uncle Bemis charging outside with the shotgun any second, fixing to shoot whatever varmint was sneaking about. Uncle Bemis had been staying with them for about a month now, and the only thing he was good at was drinking beer and shooting poor critters. Luckily, all the bedroom windows remained dark. The animals settled down again, and Cindy breathed a sigh of relief.

She followed the whispers, and in her haste, she leaped over the ravine and slid down into the mud, ruining her nightgown. A smear of river sludge darkened the pale pink cotton from hem to knees. Cindy was rehearsing credible excuses to tell her Mama the next day, when a flicker of light caught her eye from the top of the old Ash tree. The spot of light was pulsating and green, and as she neared the tree, something vibrated in her. The whispered voice was endearing and hopeful.

Was it the tree itself or something in the tree calling to her? Cindy didn't care which it was. She threw her arms around the tree, pressed her cheek against the cool, rough wood and listened to the voice calling, "Mandolyn..." Cindy played with her dolls or read her storybooks beneath that tree almost every afternoon from the beginning of summer to the end of summer. Papa threatened to cut it down because it was full of so many bugs, and it was old and gnarly. But his biggest concern is that its long branches were a favorite perch and vantage point for black crows to spy on his precious corn. Every spring, when Papa waved his axe and hollered at the corn thieves lining the branches, Cindy tugged on his arm and begged him not to do it. And so the tree stayed.

As she hugged the tree, she asked, "Who are you? What is Mandolyn?" "That's you," the voice said, much louder than before. Cindy looked up and saw a green beetle that glowed like a nightlight. It was about two inches long with enormous, orange eyes, and it crawled down one of the tree's largest branches. It was coming toward her, but she wasn't afraid. She liked bugs. She had always liked bugs and never stepped on them or tortured them the way Louis did when he was bored. When ladybugs got caught in the house, she gave them a bit of sugar water and let them go, and when she was making bouquets for her mother, she never picked red clover because she knew the honeybees savored it.

When it reached the end of the branch, the bug fluttered two little blue wings on its back, and it hopped onto her forearm. It was a strange sensation, not like a caterpillar or an ant feels when it crawls across your hand. It was warm and tingly. The bug vibrated the way their barn cats did when they were lounging in the hayloft.

"What do you mean, that's me?" she asked the bug.

"You are Mandolyn," the bug said.

"Well, it's a nice name. But I'm Cindy." And she shrugged. "Even though that's never felt quite right." Mandolyn. It was a good name. She wished it was true.

"It is true," the bug said, blinking its eyes.

What kind of bug has eyelids, she wondered. And what kind of bug can read minds? The funny thing is it felt perfectly normal to stand there talking to a bug in the middle of the night. After all, she was only nine years old and didn't know all the rules yet. Then again, maybe it wasn't a bug. Maybe it was some kind of alien.

"Truth be told, you're the alien," he said. "We were here first. We've been populating this place for many millennia, a lot longer than you have." He said it matter-of-factly and with a soothing, pleasant hiss. Cindy realized he wasn't whispering at all. It was just the way he talked. "That's why our kind has your kind outnumbered. Just look around, Mandolyn."

"Yes, there are a lot of you," she agreed. "But why am I Mandolyn?" Every time she said it, a smile teased her lips. Her hand raced up to cover her mouth. It was tempting to smile, out here in the dark, where no one could see except her new alien bug friend. Smiling or wearing pretty dresses brought unwanted attention.

"You have always been Mandolyn. I should know. I'm the one who named you. You may be Cindy in human terms, but to us, you are Mandolyn." He hummed a little, wiggled his wings and then said, "Consider it your warrior name."

"I am Mandolyn," she said with more conviction in her voice. Her warrior name. And it fit, all the way from her toes to the top of her head.

He introduced himself as Jaspar Kohodinan and said that he would be her guide. "We have met before," he said. "I came to you on the day of your birth. I was drawn to the light inside you."

"A light? What color is it? Is it as pretty as yours?" Cindy jumped up and down a few times, and Jaspar had to cling on to the sleeve of her nightgown for dear life. "Your light will be beautiful, but you cannot see it yet. Now, let me tell you why I summoned you," Jaspar paused to groom one long black antenna and fluttered his blue wings. "I have three messages to give you, one tonight. I will return with a new message, once every five years, until you are grown. Are you ready for the first message?"

"Yes. Tell me! Is it a secret message?" Like all nine-year-old girls, Cindy loved secrets. Well, most secrets. Some secrets were harder to keep.

Jaspar crawled up to her shoulder and murmured in her ear. "You are smart, as all warriors are. And you will find the answers. Stop troubling your mind. Just close your eyes and listen, and the answer will be there."

He blinked orange eyes at her and then said, "Goodbye, Mandolyn." He opened his wings and flew straight up into the darkness.

She watched the fading twinkle of green light and sighed with a heavy heart. They'd only just met, and he was already leaving her. She repeated her new mantra as she walked back to the house. "I am Mandolyn. I am smart." She was fixing on being a lot smarter from here on out.

Just as she'd hoped, over beside the porch, an assortment of laundry was waving from the clothesline. Thankfully, Mama was a little more relaxed about chores on Sundays. Cindy snatched down a pair of her overalls and a t-shirt, removed her soiled nightgown, and redressed in the clean clothes. The ground was still wet from a recent rainstorm, and she got an idea. She ran over to the side of the house and found the hedge that stood beneath her bedroom window, then stuffed the nightgown down into the mud behind the hedge. She would tell mama it blew right outta her hands when she was dressing and flew out the window. That would explain the muddy stain. She felt smarter already.

Once inside the house, Cindy yawned and closed her eyes, and the answer was there, just as Jaspar said it would be. She snuck over to the kitchen counter and poured herself a mug of Papa's strong black coffee. The first gulp was awful and bitter and burned her throat. But the rest went down easier after she squeezed her nose shut between her fingers, like she did when Mama made her take cod liver oil.

Well, the coffee did the trick and it kept her awake alright. When she heard Uncle Bemis outside her bedroom door at one o'clock in the morning, she hollered out for Mama. She heard Mama and Papa's bedroom door fly open and the thud and crash of Uncle Bemis's beer bottle on the hallway floor. He cursed and she heard them talking for a spell, and Uncle Bemis went back to his own room. Mama, of course, came in to see what the cause for all her racket was. Cindy said she saw a monster under her bed. After four nights of this, and varying shades of the same story, except sometimes Cindy said it was a rat she saw skittering out from under her dresser, things started to change in the Sievers household. Anyway, she guessed Uncle Bemis got caught outside her bedroom door one too many times, and Papa asked him to find his own place.

Her brother, Louis started giving her funny, longish looks after that and was a lot nicer to her, even letting her tag along when he went off to the fishing hole with his buddies. Any kind of sibling clinginess on her part was a cardinal sin before, and she wondered what had changed. Still, it was a nice change, and Cindy embraced it. She and Louis became a lot closer that summer.

She continued to recite her mantra for the next five years, "I am Mandolyn, and I am smart." It helped her ace many a math test. And she made honor roll every year, well into sixth grade. Cindy doodled her warrior name in her diary, on her school notebooks, old t-shirts, the rubber tips of her sneakers. When mama saw the word, "Mandolyn" and asked her what it meant, Cindy felt it would dishonor her alien bug friend to tell a lie. She answered, "It's my warrior name, Mama." Her mama just laughed and said she had quite an imagination.

On her fourteenth birthday, her family had a picnic to celebrate. Everybody came. Her Mama, Papa and Louis, of course, and much to her chagrin, Louis's new girlfriend, Annette, who was a bit too perky for Cindy's liking. But Cindy tried to be nice to her, all the same, even if the girl's breasts did sort of point at you. Cindy fluffed out the front of her oversized t-shirt. The thought of her own breasts being on display made her cringe and scrunch her shoulders forward.

Also at the picnic, were Aunt Gladys, who was her mother's sister, cousin Harold and Uncle Bemis. Cindy said a curt hello to Uncle Bemis, but hugged his new wife, June, and Ruthie, her four-year-old daughter from a previous marriage. Cindy liked her new aunt and adored Ruthie. When they came to visit, Cindy played Ring-around-the-rosey and Patty cakes with the little girl, who tossed back her head of blonde curls and giggled at almost anything.

They had a feast. There were BBQ ribs, slathered in Papa's special sauce, and corn-on-the-cob, freshly picked from their own fields, huge slices of beefsteak tomatoes and cucumbers and Mama's homemade potato salad. And Aunt June baked her a chocolate birthday cake, which was leaning a little to one side, but that was okay, because it tasted like heaven. Cindy unwrapped a dozen or more birthday gifts, including a microscope from her parents.

"Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!" She raced over to her parents, showering them with kisses for the unexpected gift.

It was exactly what she wanted, but Papa had been teasing her all week about getting her something “pretty.” She loved all the gifts, except the frilly dress from Aunt Gladys. As the day stretched on, Cindy thought about Jaspar and wondered if he had been a childhood delusion. A visit from Jaspar would top off a perfect birthday. Perhaps he only came at night?

When everyone was busy chowing down on birthday cake and fresh slices of watermelon, Cindy heard the whispers, and knew it was her old friend calling. She excused herself from the party, saying she had to check on Daisy, and snuck off to the other side of the house, to the end of the farmyard.

Jaspar was perched at the top of the tree when she reached it. He was a sight for sore eyes, glistening emerald in the afternoon sun. He was even more beautiful in the daylight. Five years was a long time to wait.

Her alien bug friend flew down and landed directly on her shoulder this time. “Jaspar. Finally,” she said, with a long sigh. “I was beginning to think I’d imagined the whole thing.”

“Hello, Mandolyn. I see you have grown into a fine, young maiden.”

She blushed at his remark. “Thank you. And you haven’t changed a bit. Tell me, Jaspar. Why can’t I see you every day? Or at least every year? I missed you!”

“I have other work to do, you know. But you are one of my favorite charges, I must say.” He jittered his wings and stood up on his back legs. It seemed as if the distance between her shoulder and her ear had increased since their first meeting. “Now to the order of business. The second message. Are you ready to hear it?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Young Mandolyn... you are brave, as all warriors are. You will stand up for what is right. You will fight against what is wrong. You will not be afraid to speak the truth.” She smiled at him as he moved down her arm and onto the tip of her index finger.

“I am brave,” she said. “Thank you. But do you have to go so soon?”

“I’m afraid so, my friend.” He flew away.

When she got back to the picnic, Cindy noticed Ruthie sitting in Uncle Bemis’ lap. He tightened his hold around Ruthie’s waist, and flashed Cindy a smile. Every encounter with Uncle Bemis happened in slow motion, and she remembered them in great detail. She wished she had the benefit of a poor memory. She knew what his semi-toothless sneer meant, and it sickened her. Was he visiting Ruthie’s bedroom at night? The little girl’s red polka dotted skirt was bunched up, and he blew raspberries into her soft neck. Ruthie didn’t laugh, but Uncle Bemis did it again and again.

“Ci Ci!” Ruthie spotted her and called out in her baby gibberish way. “I want Ci Ci!” Her pudgy little arms were outstretched toward her as she walked past. Cindy dipped into the ice chest for a beer and handed it to Uncle Bemis.

"A fresh brew, Uncle Bemis? It's okay. I'll take Ruthie for a while." She didn't give him a chance to protest and pulled Ruthie up into her arms. "Come on, sweetie." Cindy snuggled Ruthie and carried her around on her shoulders for a while. Then, seeing Uncle Bemis looking their way, she carried Ruthie to the front porch where her Mama and Aunt Gladys were sitting, where it was safe.

Mama said, "Oh! What a little pumpkin you are. Come to auntie!"

"Oh no! You had her for quite a spell already," said Aunt Gladys. "My turn!" Both women held out their arms, competing for Ruthie.

Cindy handed her over to Mama, deciding it might earn her brownie points the next time she was late feeding the chickens. Aunt Gladys stuck her tongue out at Mama. Jasper's words came to mind. "You are brave, as all warriors are."

Cindy turned and headed straight for Aunt June and asked if they could talk. And she did as Jasper advised. She wasn't afraid to speak the truth. Until that day, Cindy had never told anyone about Uncle Bemis, but that little girl's life was a good reason to start talking. At first, Aunt June was agitated, even angry, when she heard what Cindy had to say about Uncle Bemis and his nighttime visits. But then Cindy saw something in her eyes that said maybe she'd think about it, or maybe some things had already happened at home that made it worth thinking about, maybe keeping an eye on. She knew how much June loved her baby girl, and she'd do right by her.

It wasn't long after that June kicked Uncle Bemis out of the house and filed for divorce. Uncle Bemis called Papa, trying to bunk at our house again, but Cindy guessed Papa had a long memory of the last time he came to stay with them, and Papa said no.

After that, Uncle Bemis moved upstate, and they didn't see much of him. But June and Ruthie stuck around and continued to be part of the family.

Louis went off to New York and was studying law. Cindy graduated from high school and received a full scholarship to the College of Agriculture - University of Kentucky, where she studied to become an Entomologist. Her plans were to discover new, humane methods of pest-control, which were organic and non-toxic. She owed it to Jasper and the alien bugs on their planet. She legally changed her name from Cindy Sievers to Mandolyn Sievers, which confused both her parents and her brother, but they adjusted. At last, she felt like her true self, wearing her warrior name every day.

On a visit home in August, she and her parents celebrated her nineteenth birthday. Louis couldn't make it home that summer, and everyone knew it was because of a girl. Mandolyn thought he was selling out. She had yet to feel any attraction toward the opposite sex. She kept her head in the books and on her studies. And though she exhausted every resource, asked every professor in the entomology department and poured through numerous field guides, there was no reference to a species of glowing green beetles. Finding one with the capacity for language and telepathic powers was definitely out of the question.

On the night of Mandolyn's birthday, she heard Jasper's whispers again. They drifted in through her open window, and she followed them to the tree. His voice was a little tinny, a little hoarse, compared to previous visits, and she wondered if alien bugs aged. Jasper crawled very slowly down the branch and onto her shoulder. "Happy Birthday, Mandolyn. I was happy to learn your human name and your warrior name are one and the same, as it should be." His glow was barely perceptible now, and a thin peach-colored film shrouded his once-bright orange eyes.

"Yes, I am a warrior, through and through now. I have changed so much since our first meeting. I used to be afraid of so many things." Mandolyn kissed the tip of her finger and touched his domed back. "Thank you. I'm so happy to see you, my friend!"

"My time is short. Let me give you your final message."

That was Jaspar, always getting to the business at hand. "I am ready."

"Are you ready?" He asked again, peering up her with clouded eyes.

Mandolyn's heart ached. Perhaps Jaspar's hearing was going, as well as his eyesight. "Yes, I am ready for my message," she said with complete reverence.

"You are beautiful, as all warriors are. Your light shines from the inside. Do not conceal your inner light. Let it out and stand proud. Let the world see your beauty."

"Beauty? Warriors are not beautiful." She almost shouted it. It felt like her last message was a complete farce. She waited five years for this?

"It is not a farce," he said.

Damn. Mandolyn forgot his powers of telepathy.

"And I can hear every word you're thinking, despite my auditory deficiency."

"Sorry," she croaked.

"Yes, warriors are beautiful," he said. "Anything that is both wise and brave is also beautiful because it inspires hope in others to achieve the same greatness. Think, Mandolyn. One cannot stop gazing at a bright light. It is mesmerizing. You have that light in you."

He flicked his wings and descended her arm. "Your final message is to be vulnerable, allow your light out so that it can inspire others to equal greatness. If you fail in this, you will have wasted our decade together. And yes, your children will have that same light."

"Me have kids? Yuck," she said. "I think that decision is up to me."

"You will marry and bear children, and your daughter will come to this tree. And she will receive her first message from my son. That's the cycle of life."

"Far out," she said, with a little more enthusiasm, but also a touch of sarcasm. But who was she to question an alien bug prophet?

"Time to go. Our last goodbye." Jaspar curled his antennae up and lifted off.

As his light faded high above her, Mandolyn realized that her life would have been vastly different without Jaspar, and she wondered if his last message, however silly it seemed, would have as great an impact on her life as the others had.

The answer is yes. But it took a while longer than the others to put into practice. At first, Mandolyn hesitated to heed Jaspar's advice. It was such an alien -- pardon the pun -- concept. Beauty had never played any part in her life. But she came to realize that a true warrior walks in the light, not cowering in the shadows.

Over time, she embraced her beauty. Mandolyn started by dressing like a girl. For the first time ever, she bought a dress and wore it out in public. Dressing pretty did invite attention, but she laid her fears to rest and blossomed into a true warrior woman. During her final year at college, she met a fellow entomology student and fell in love. His name was Raif, and he was kind and good. And he shared Mandolyn's love of insects. An opportunity arose when her parents retired and moved to Florida. She and Raif had been married a few years by then and were thinking about buying their first home. Moving into the farmhouse in Sugar Creek made complete sense.

The farm needed some fixing up, and the first thing on their list was the barn. That old barn door still refused to stay closed. And so they took it off and found a new home for it, where it fit perfectly. It became the front door to their new office. And on it, they mounted their company sign, which read, "Jaspar Organics. Healthy bugs mean healthy food."

Swinging on the front porch one cool April evening, Raif reached over and held Mandolyn's hand. With her other hand, Mandolyn rubbed her swollen belly and looked out across the farmyard toward the old Ash tree. She saw a tiny green glow at the very top, and Raif said, "Look at that. It's early for lightning bugs."

And she said, "No, he's right on time."

HELEN  
*Matthew Dho*

Making my way to the bathroom, I stop and peer out of my bedroom window. To my left I see 12B and Hawthorne intersecting and the old Salem Cemetery just caddy corner to the house. The cemetery scared Helen at first when we moved in. She has always been so much more superstitious than me. She'd hear a creak or a crack in the night, the house settling or animals or kids doing things in the fields.

"What was that? Did you hear that?" she'd say, waking me up with a shake.

"Huh? What? It's nothing, just the house or something. Go to sleep." I'd say.

"I don't like that cemetery."

I told her, "The dead are dead, Helen. They stay that way. Your imagination is getting the best of you."

After a while, she stopped being so scared of the cemetery. Nothing around us really but that cemetery, this house, green fields and that God awful eye sore of a propane tank staring right back at me through the window. I don't know why a high tank of gas next to our house doesn't scare her and a bunch of dead bodies does, but I guess people are silly that way.

In the kitchen, bread from Helen's sandwich began to mold. She had not touched the sandwich in some time. "Helen?" I called. No answer. She must be at the market, I think. Helen and I have been married for 52 years, and we moved to Inwood in 1982. The first week we moved in, she went to the market that Tuesday for something, I can't remember. Went back again that Thursday when our boy got the flu, and she has been off to the market every Tuesday and Thursday ever since. Must be Tuesday then, I think. I take the plate, being careful to not touch the green mold growing on the bread and toss the sandwich out.

After throwing the sandwich out, I, myself, am hungry so I pop the fridge open and find some fried chicken and potato salad saved in Tupperware. I don't really remember us eating potato salad or fried chicken recently, but to be honest my memory is not as sharp as it once was. I nuke some of the chicken and sit myself down in front of the television. I eat.

"You going to spend your entire retirement on the couch, Jim?" Helen yelps, waking me up.

I grumble awake. "What? Oh, no. You wouldn't let me enjoy my retirement would you? Always making me do this and do that."

"Ha. The last thing I saw you do was take the trash out last week." she says.

"I get it. I'll take it out."

"Thank you, Dear."

I sit up and swing the foot of my La-Z-Boy recliner back into its stationary position. I slide my TV tray out, giving me room to move. I stand and walk towards the kitchen. It is slow moving these days.

"I left a little surprise in the freezer for you yesterday when I went to the market." Helen says.

"Oh?" I ask.

"You'll see."

I walk through the dining room and open the kitchen door. The kitchen is bright with sun shining in from a large window above the sink, which is full of dishes. Across from the sink are the table and white washed cupboards. We have a new stainless steel refrigerator that Jerry, a new kid at the Sears, sold us. He's a good kid. Now what was I doing? Oh right. I hobble on over to the fridge and pop open the left side. The freezer side of the fridge is pretty barren except for an open container ice cream Drumsticks. Ice cream Drumsticks are my favorite treat in the entire world. Creamy vanilla covered in rich chocolate and sprinkled with roasted peanuts. Then they take it and slap it on a cone. Helen does the shopping because she knows if I went I would buy them every time. Something my doctor insists will give me another heart attack.

"You were not kidding about the surprise!" I say. I peek in and see that one is missing. Helen must have eaten one already while I was asleep on the couch. Strange, though, as she doesn't really like ice cream. "Just couldn't resist, huh?" I sit down at the table and bite in. Wonderful. No other words are really necessary when explaining the taste of the ice cream Drumstick.

A few minutes of bliss and the dance with my Drumstick is done. I take my wrapper and walk to the trash can. I push my foot down on the lever that makes the steel lid on the can flip open and I throw the wrapper into the can. It floats all the way down the bottom to join its ever evolving friend, the moldy sandwich. Now what was I doing? I head back to the living room to sit down for a few minutes and flip on the television.

"You going to answer that?" Helen asks. I grumble awake.

"What? The phone's ringing?"

"No, the doors banging." She says.

Helen is well into her crocheting and I wouldn't expect her to stop and answer the door on account of my dozing off.

"How long was I asleep?"

"Not sure." she says.

Mary, our eldest, is at the door. She lives in Tulsa and rarely has time to come see us. She married Bill about a decade ago and they gave us two nice grandsons. Bill is a sales executive down there and Mary is a teacher for children who are deaf.

"Well, hey there, dear. Your mother didn't tell me you were coming." I say.

"Dad." Mary says.

She steps in, sets her luggage down and hugs me. It feels like forever since she hugged me. I look at her face; it's tired and sad.

"You ok, dear?"

"I'll be ok. Just got to get through this, you know?"

"Sure, I understand."

"But how are you, Dad? Are you holding up?"

"Me? I'm doing just fine, dear. Don't need to worry about us." I say.

"Don't hold her up at the door the entire time, Jim. Let the poor girl in." Helen says.

"Right, right," I say, "I'm sorry, dear. Let me take your bag and you come in and take a seat."

Mary comes in and sits down, but I can tell right away something is wrong. I, too, sit on my chair and wait for her to say something. Helen continues to crotchet and Mary isn't even acknowledging her. She sits straight up and is stiff. Her hands are not relaxed at all; instead they are balled in fists placed near her stomach. She feels distant and cold. Helen and she seem worlds apart. I sit back in my chair, close my eyes and try to calm myself down for a minute or two.

"You going to eat with us or not?" Helen says.

I perk up and look into the dining room. Helen is sitting at the table with Mary. Mary is waiting to eat some meatloaf and peas. Helen has no plate.

"You're not eating?" I ask.

"I couldn't wait for you. But your daughter was nice enough to, so get over here."

Mary looks confused. "I'm waiting, Dad."

"I see, I see. Sorry, must have dozed off again. Thanks for waiting."

"Sure Dad."

We eat and I don't really talk. Helen and Mary are not talking at all and I start to feel again like something is not right.

"Did I do something?" I question.

"What?" Mary says.

"Why are you not talking to your mother? Why are you sitting so stiffly and acting nervous? Is something wrong? Are the kids ok?"

"Talking to mom? Dad I am here because I can't talk to mom, I have to talk to you. I've spoken to you on the phone multiple times, but your neighbors say it makes no difference," she says.

"The neighbors? What neighbors? Nicole and Hank down the road? Now that you mention it they have been snooping around. I told you mother—."

"Dad, they are not snooping around, I asked them to watch after you?"

"Why? I'm fine. I'm eating right and everything is normal."

"Eating right? Dad, besides chicken that Nicole left in the fridge, only drumsticks are in that thing," she says. "I had to go out just to get this food to cook meatloaf."

Confused, I walk hurriedly into the kitchen and throw open the refrigerator. Empty. I open the trashcan to reveal one completely green sandwich and dozens of Drumstick wrappers. "What is going on?" I cry out. I turn back to the refrigerator and fling open the freezer. Full of unopened and opened drumstick boxes, some of them completely empty. I run back into the dining room.

"Are you two playing a trick on me?" I ask.

"Dad, who are you two? It is just me here," she says.

My heart starts up like a car engine and I'm confused. "Mary, please, I don't feel ready for jokes." I start feeling light headed so I sit down.

"Dad, take it easy. OK?"

"Just... will someone tell me what is going on?"

"Dad, mom is not here. She died two weeks ago, on the way to the market."

"What?"

"I was here, all the kids were here. We went to the funeral and everything, just across the street at Salem. She went to the market and had a heart attack in the frozen food section. She was buying you drumsticks. Do you remember?"

I feel like I could pass out any minute. Helen is staring at me crocheting at the kitchen table. "Stop with the damn crocheting, Helen!"

"Dad, no one is crocheting."

I get up to rip the crochet needles out of Helen's hands. I want to throw them at Mary and yell, "See!" I get closer and fumble through the needles and fall over Helen and her chair.

Since I fell when Mary stayed over and since I had another heart attack I've been moved into a new home. It's not so bad; they do give me Drumsticks once a week. I don't have to worry about taking out the trash. I play poker sometimes with the guys, but right now I am sitting in my room watching the television about to doze off.

"You going to sit around all day or are you going to see about getting me some more yarn for my crocheting?" Helen asks.

I grumble and get up out of my chair, "I'll see what I can do." I say.

I walk out into the common room. It's all still pretty foreign to me. I see one of the guys playing cards. I sit down and wait a hand before I can join in. After some time and too much defeat, I leave to head back to my room. I enter and sit down in my chair. What was I doing?

HANORA  
*Amy Ekins*

I don't understand the rural spaces,  
the places you grew up, with hawthorns  
threaded in your hair, and rowanberries  
staining your cheeks. No,  
the urban slick, with cracked tumblers  
breaking across the sky in points of new  
architectural feats were all I knew  
as a child.

You tell me that up in a cliff-top  
there is a cave, where you stowed away  
all that was important, before leaving  
home. Three issues of an old magazine,  
with paw-prints from an animal unnamed  
across the covers. A plastic bag of conkers  
and sycamore seeds. And something else  
you won't discuss, perhaps more  
metaphorical in nature.

From the shore, you point to home,  
and say that over there will be a man  
with three toes and one eye,  
winking at you with whispers of whiskey  
on his breath. I say that sounds awful,  
but you shrug, and call it necessary,  
a part of a bigger picture – a painting  
of a landscape I cannot access,  
even with your sketching out the details.

I tip-toe round the back of you,  
catch your earlobe with my tongue,  
and tell you this is home now.

## A PRICE FOR HOMEMADE SOUP

*Marc Berkemeier*

My head slams against the window. I open my eyes and see blurred views of the passenger seat in front of me. It's shiny and black I think, probably leather. I hate the smell of leather and don't understand why someone would pay the extra money for leather seats. The car shakes again as it hits another bump on this damn county road. I turn my head to the left and stare at the driver. It's Mike.

I've never been fond of Janey's godson Mike. He's not really the responsible type, having become a lawyer and all, right out of grad school. I don't know why a kid would waste all his money on reading books and regurgitating old stories of lawsuits and legal cases. Seems like there's much better things a guy can do with his hands and mind. I just don't understand the rules of this world anymore.

"You awake back there?" Mike says. He has an unusual happy cadence to his voice. "Now I am, you son-of-a-bitch." I try to right myself in the seat but lack the energy to do so, for some reason. I wonder how long I've been in here. We must have gone to town for a grocery or something. "You'd think after driving these roads for so many years you'd know which bumps to miss."

"Sorry. Just trying to get you home quickly."

"It's not like we have far to drive from Stop 'n Shop. You kids these days are always in such a goddamn hurry to get places. Why don't you settle down for once and just enjoy the benefits He's given to you."

I look out the window and realize there's snow on the ground. That's unusual. I don't recall there being a weather forecast or it being December actually. "Why's it so damn cold outside?" I say. Mike stares ahead and turns the wheel to avoid the next pothole, I guess.

I move my hand to scratch the damn psoriasis patch on my left thigh, although it doesn't seem to be itching at the moment. I've had that thing for twenty years now at least. Janey used to call it my desert southwest. Ha, at least I think she did. I used to laugh at such silly things. I wonder why she hasn't mentioned it in a while.

Actually, I don't seem to be feeling much of anything right now. I try again to sit up straight in the seat but can't seem to get over this leaning towards the window. My mind is awake, but my body must still be sleeping I suppose. I look down at my foot and wiggle it. It moves, but why the hell am I wearing a brand new stinking white shoe? I told Janey I didn't want any new clothes this year – that it didn't make sense. No need to try to replace old things that still work and wear. That woman is going to drive me to the poorhouse one day, you just wait.

"You feeling okay back there, Paps?" Mike says.

"Keep your eyes on that road you nut."

I think Mike laughs or something. "You comfortable?"

"I'm sitting in a damn leather seat. Of course I'm not. These things are slipperier than all get out. What a waste." Mike scratches his head. Keep that damn hand on the wheel. My god.

It's snowing I think. I look out the window and see trees with icy glaze covering all the branches. Well look at that. When did it start snowing out? I thought we were still just cooking barbecues last week and Janey was having a sunbathe. "Why is it snowing in damn September?" I say. I never will quite get this Indiana weather.

Mike doesn't answer. Now I smell his damn peppery cigar smoke scent. He always smokes those things – seems to think they make him a smarter lawyer or something, or at least more credible. More worth that ridiculous hourly rate he likes to charge people. All these kids and their greed. I just don't get it.

"If them roads are slick, you better stop taking these curves so fast," I say. I swear this kid will be the death of me some day.

"We're almost there, Paps. You know the county keeps the roads sanded this time of year."

"In September? My god you're trying to shit with me. Just focus on the damn road."

That Janey and her silly godson. I tell you, I don't know why we ever agreed to watch out for him after that Viet Nam war. Just because a kid loses his parents, doesn't mean he needs a circle of stand-ins to take their place. He was babied so much by everyone – no wonder he likes to wear those really tight suits.

My eyelids start to close. I lean my head against the cold, slippery window. Although maybe my head was here the whole time, and it's just gone numb. I try to keep my eyes open, but they don't seem to work anymore. Everything feels droopy and loose. That's old age for you I guess. You never know when things will give out on you.

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I wake up with a start and feel the pillow sink beneath my head. Janey always did buy feather pillows for some reason. I just don't like it. They drop faster than a dog in a mush pond. Now my neck's got a crick. "Janey!" The room is dark because the blinds are pulled shut. It must be goddamn supper time by now. How long did I fall asleep? Come to think of it, this mattress is lumpier than I remember it. Lumpier or harder, I can't quite tell the difference. My whole back side is feeling numb, and heavy. I'm uncomfortable, though, I know that. These sticky cotton sheets don't seem to be helping. This room is freezing.

I turn my head to the nightstand and see baskets. Why the hell are there baskets of flowers on my side of the bed? Pink and purple or gray? Well I'll be, Janey's gone and tried to sweeten up the place or something. I told her I'm allergic to the damn things. That they make my eyes itch. I can't even see the alarm clock behind them. I cough and run my hand up to my chest to poke it. I don't really feel anything but these silly cotton sheets. "Janey!"

I hear footsteps and then the door opens. I slowly turn my head to the left so I can see her. She wipes her hand across her cheek. Sniffles her nose. See, she's allergic to these damn things too. "What's with the flowers all of a sudden?"

"I'm sorry. I forgot." She walks over to the other side of the room and lifts the baskets off my nightstand. She's wearing a nightgown it looks like, although I can't tell the color. This room is so dark with the windows shut. "Open the blinds too. I'm missing the whole day out." Janey balances the baskets on one hip and pulls a Kleenex out of her pocket. She holds it to her nose.

"Did you know that Mike thinks he's Al Unser, Jr. or something with the way he drives that car? Like he's in the Indy 500 or something, zipping around." I cough. Janey just stands there and stares.

"The window's not going to open itself," I say. Janey wipes her eye with the tissue and puts it back in the pocket. Yup, she's allergic to these silly flowers too. I just don't get it. She walks over to the window by the dresser and pulls up the blinds. There's no difference. The room is still dark and gray.

"My god how long did you let me sleep?" I try to pull myself up into a sitting position, but I just don't have the strength to really move. See, that's what happens when you lay in one place for too long when they let you sleep. Your joints start to lock up. "Are you hungry?" Janey says. Her voice is soft and quiet. She sets the baskets down on the dresser and walks back over to me. She sits on the edge of the bed. I take a breath and fill up with a whiff of her skin powder. It's soft and lemon cake like, as always. I love this smell.

"I really can't tell," I say. I don't feel much at all in my stomach – definitely no growls. "When was the last time I ate?"

Janey's face quivers. Her eyes are getting all allergic again. "Not for a little while," she says. "I reckon I better eat then, shouldn't I, Woodpecker."

Janey smiles and laughs and then sneezes and wipes her eyes. A lot. "I'll get some turkey noodle soup on, then. Your favorite." She slides her hand along my leg and stands up. Grabs the baskets and walks out of the room. The smell of lemon powder and tulips lingers behind her. I take in a breath and shut my eyes. I feel comfortable once again.

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I reach for the remote control and try to change the channel. I honestly can't remember how long I've been sitting here. I must have spaced out – that's old age for you. The mind flickers on and off once in a while. Oh, well. The T.V. is playing a polka party or something. There are people strumming instruments and dancing in circles. I kind of like this show, actually. Not sure why I got the remote to change it. I remember when Janey and I use to polka back in the barn dances back in the day. Gosh that's been so many years, hasn't it? She always used to wear that yellow and red checkered dress. Her ginger hair all pulled up into a bow. Gosh she looked so sweet.

Mike walks into the room. He's wearing a tight white T-shirt and gray sweat pants. His dark hair is all mussed up – like he slept crooked or something. "Well, Mike, what're you doing showing up here like you just got out of bed? Don't you have a nice suit or something that you wear to work?" He looks at me and rubs an eye – what is it with people and their allergies these days? Or maybe he's just woke up, but that's strange.

"Can I get you anything, Paps?"

"No, sir. How about you just get yourself a woman finally. Someone to take care of you and comb that hair." I laugh at my little joke. Mike has never been one to have much luck with the ladies. That's what babying will do to a kid. Make him weak and unattractive to the women.

I lean back into my chair and wiggle my feet on the ottoman. I love this recliner. It's been here in my spot for so long. It knows the curves of my body and how my hip swings to the left a bit. I rest my head back and relax. My whole body feels tingly and numb, but nice. Not sure how long I've been sitting here or how I got from the bed to this seat, but that's old age for you. You sometimes look over the little details. I wonder if Janey ever made me that soup.

"It's a nice day out," Janey says, walking into the room. She looks at me with tired eyes – more bags than usual. She just isn't aging as well these past few years. It'll catch up to you I guess. Turning 79 is supposed to be a milestone, I suppose. But it sure ain't pretty on the eyes. I mean, look at me. All withered and wrinkled and wrapped in this maroon blanket. You wouldn't see me like this forty years ago. I'd be out digging up trees and planting corn and dredging the ditch. Oh, but even such things like that got old after a while. I guess we're all meant to progress into sitting in chairs and watching polka parties on T.V. I guess we're all supposed to slow down and shrink at some point. "Can I get you anything," Janey says. She holds a rosary in her hand. "She'll be here in a moment."

"How about that soup?" I say. "If there's any left over. It was good." I'm not quite sure if it was tasty or not, but it's appropriate to say such things to your lady folk now and again.

Janey sticks her hands in her pants pockets and hunches forward. Come to think of it, that's probably a new outfit. I can't remember her having a blue shirt with black pants. There she goes – out spending all our money on fancy clothes when there's no need to get such things. I'll have to talk to her about that later, after the soup. I just don't have the energy for an argument right now.

"If there's none left, I'll take whatever," I say. "You always know what's good." Janey smiles, and Mike puts his hand on her shoulder. I flinch. For a moment they look younger and stronger and twenty years ago. But that's just these cataracts – messing with my vision now and then. I remember how Mikey used to shiver when watching cops and robber shows. When he'd have a sleep over on the couch. I remember how Janey used to smile at such things.

Janey walks out of the room, and Mike follows. This is such a nice living room – always been my favorite. I like the large sun window and the view of the neighbor's bean field across the way. Not that they're good at taking care of it or treating the soil, but the trees that surround it are always in full bloom, if the season's right. Course now they're just covered in ice and that snow.

The polka party gets wilder as the music speeds up.  
The smell of salt and turkey broth starts to fill the room.

I look at my hand and realize I'm still holding the remote. I move my arm over to the end table to return it to its rightful spot. My skin looks slimy and white. It sags in bunches. Gosh, time sure catches up with you. I don't remember it being that bad before. I must have lost some weight.

There's no room for the remote in its spot. Janey has filled that part of the table with a glass paperweight. In fact, the whole table looks cleaner and new. It is new. When did she go out and buy that thing?

I look around the room and notice yellow drapes, and a brown leather couch. What the hell – did she go on a shopping spree for Christmas or something? The whole room is out of whack. There are photos of family on tables and book cases. My favorite Kentucky basketball blankets and signs are all gone. All of my sports stuff is missing. It's all her stuff now.

When did she go and change everything? How long was I asleep for? My god.

The doorbell rings. I hear the kitchen door open. Then some mumbling.  
A lady in a white outfit walks into the room, carrying a bag. She can't be much older than thirty. Her skin is crisp white. There you go, Mikey. There's a nice woman for you. If you knew how to talk to one.

She walks over to me and sets the bag on the ground. She takes my hand. "How you feeling today, Carl?" she says.

"Who the hell are you?"

Mike and Janey stand over her shoulder. They stare at me. Why is everyone looking at me like this?

"What the hell happened to this place?" I say. "Why did you change everything?"

The woman squeezes my hand and then reaches into her bag. She pulls out a needle and prepares it. Little juices squirt all over as she tests it.

"It'll be okay, Carl," she says. "Okay in a minute."

Janey pulls a tissue out of her pocket. Wipes her eyes. Why is she tearing up now?

"What's going on?" I say. I start to shiver.

Something isn't feeling right about this.

The woman pricks me with her needle. I panic.

Then slowly the world starts to fold. Everything stretches and then goes to gray.

~~~

A sharp pain shoots through my hip. I open my eyes but see nothing. I open them again. Only drips of light and carpet fill my vision. Maybe one more time will do it. I take a breath, but my gut hurts. My whole torso's set on fire. I open my eyes again and steady them. The room is sideways.

"Janey!" I try to turn my head but can't move a lick. Everything is too sharp and too painful. I see the bottom of the dresser not far off. Something brushes the side of my face. It's a blanket, hanging off the bed. My god, I've fallen off the bed. Those damn sticky cotton sheets.

"Janey!" I try to swing my leg over to right myself, but really don't have the energy to move more than an inch. Please, God, give me some help here. I may have gone and broke my hip. Shit. I hear footsteps running down the wood floors in the hall. Coming this way.

"Paps!" Mike says. He squats beside me and then rolls me over onto my back. "Shit, can you move?"

"Does it look like I move? I'm sprawled out like a horny catfish down here. What's with these damn leather sheets?"

Mike pushes lightly on my arms and chest. "Can you feel this?" Janey walks into the room.

"Carl!" She rushes over and kneels beside Mike. Why is Mike still here, anyway? Doesn't the boy ever go home? Is he mooching off all our food and electricity?

"Stop making such a ruckus," I say. I feel some movement in my elbows and feet. I find some will. Thank you, God. "Haven't you seen a guy slide off a bed before?" Pain throbs in my gut.

"Does it look like I busted something? In my belly?"

Mike raises my shirt. His face cringes. "No, Paps. The scars are just a little red."

"What scars?" He doesn't answer, but straightens me some more. What the hell did they pull out of me?

"Should I call an ambulance?" Janey says. She's sniffing again.

"Don't get all so upset," I say. "I'm sure these old bones are fine." Janey starts dialing on the cell phone anyway.

"Just lay there still," Mike says. "We'll find out what to do."

"You guys act like you've seen a polka dance or something." I close my eyes and see the spinning movements of Janey in that red and yellow dress. Jutting her head and arms back and forth. Like a woodpecker.

I find the wonderful comforts of sleep.

~~~

Janey stands next to my father on the platform and squeezes her arms around her chest. She wears that silly straw hat with blue flowers – the one I gave her for our first Christmas. It's hot and sunny out so Janey glows. Her pretty pastel dress is blue and green. She's trying not to lose it again, but tears run down her face. My father puts his arm around her shoulder. He's crying too.

I feel the weight of the backpack and the stiff starch in this new, raggedy uniform. The men at the recruitment office sent it over last week. We took some photos of me in it first, and Janey laughed. It was the only way we could make light of the situation. The boys in Korea need some help. Our forces are spent and the manpower has not rekindled since the battle in Europe not so long ago. I didn't want to do it. I prayed and pleaded and even asked Janey to marry me just to make things harder to steal me away. But nothing worked. They called my number. Picked me out of that damn hat and now here I stand in this line for this train, holding this backpack. Feeling the weight of a nation over some silly battle in some silly far off place. Feeling the heat of the sun and all the tears. I've never seen my father cry before.

I try to be strong. I try to hold out hope that things will end and the war will settle and this trip will be canceled and I can go back to Janey and feel the grip of those two, sweet arms. There's so much I want to say to her. So much I want to yell, but I can't. I don't know how to form the words to speak it. I don't know the combination of love's and you's that will come across in a way that's not considered weak, or corny. I just don't know how to do it. I just don't want to go. I'm sorry, Janey. If I make it back from this trip I'll be good to you. I'll be great. I'll pick you up into my arms and swing you around and we'll laugh and play and then we'll get married and then we'll have kids and then we'll live happily until we're old and gray. Be strong, Janey. And wait for me. I promise you that I will come back.

My father lowers his hat and wipes his brow with the back of his hand. The blue denim of his overalls starts to circle with sweat. His face is gray. His face is weak. I barely recognize him. I don't know what to say.

~~~

I look up from the patch of dirt and see her walk onto the porch. The wind kicks dust into my face, and I sneeze. It's the mid of summer and still no rain and this silly garden has cracked and croaked. I don't even know why I try to plant more. Try to raise vegetables and beans and corn. I don't know why I do any of it. Janey puts her hand on her hips and leans against the metal pole that supports the roof over the porch. She looks towards me but doesn't notice. I just can't believe it happened.

I drop the packet of seeds and rest on my knees. I look at the gray hair that suddenly has decided to creep into the dry patches on my forearm. I smell the dirt and the crisp oniony flavor of gardens gone by and produce of old. I look back at Janey. She still tries to keep it together.

I should be up there with her, holding her tight and putting my arm around her shoulder. I should be consoling her. Explaining that it's okay. She lost the baby and that was that. There won't be any more options for such sorrow. Not after what they did to her – to save her all for me. I know it's tough but we know tough and we will stick with it and we will carry on. I know she cries. I know she hurts.

I don't know why I can't stand up. I don't know why I can't just drop these seeds and these tools and forget about the looks and the guys and the farmhands and my brother and just walk over to her and hug her and tell her not to worry. Not to give up. I wish I could just move.

"I'm not making anything for supper," she says. She shouts it in my direction but by the time it fights with the wind that blows it reaches my ears in just a whisper. I remember – I told her in response that I've been working hard and that I deserve a nice meal for all that I do for her.

I can't believe I'd say such things at a time like that.  
My stomach hurts.

~~~

I'm staring at a black crack that juts across the bedroom ceiling. It's splintered in two and both of its arms seem to stretch the length of the room. This old house is settling – almost as old as me, in some ways. Mike walks into the room carrying a pillow.

"You okay there, Paps?"

"This house is going to fall apart around us. Going to split in two."

"I brought another pillow to put under your lower back. The nurse said it could help."

"I don't know no nurse and don't give a damn about a pillow."

"C'mon, Paps. It'll make things feel better."

Feel like what? I've been laying in this bed for hours now drifting in and out of sleep. My body is in the center of the mattress, deeply encroaching into Janey's half. It doesn't matter. These pillows are heavy, and I have no ability to move them, or myself. I'm trapped.

"The nurse said you have to stay flat for a little while longer. Just until the bruising gets better," Mike says. "I don't know nothing about any bruising."

"You had a nasty fall there last week. We thought it might be the end of it." Mike stands at the side of the bed and pulls back the cover. He pushes the pillow in my direction. He's wearing only a tank top and shorts. Why would he be here wearing that in this cold weather? And it looks like everything is two sizes too short. I really don't understand this boy.

"Shouldn't you be in court or answering a phone or lawyering right now?" I say. Mike leans over me until I feel his breath on my face. He smells like cigars. It makes me cough. I see my body jump up and down as he slides the pillow under me, I think. He taps me on the head and says something. I don't know. Then he walks out of the room – his footsteps have a hurried pace.

I feel the mattress spin and then the room. I turn my head towards the window and there sits Janey. Not sure if she's been there the whole time or if this is new. She has on her glasses with silver rims that match the colors of her hair. She's got thick hair. It's pulled tight in curls from her perm, but it's nice. She wears a pink sweater over a yellow nightgown and watches me.

"I don't know," I say. It's harder to speak than it should be. My throat is dry and sore.

Janey shakes her head back and forth. She holds her gaze on me.

"You thinking you need your half of the bed back?" I say. "Well have at it. I never asked to be lying like this."

"Oh . . . Carl."

"What's all this business about, anyway? I need to go out and check the garden and make sure everything is done by supper."

Janey leans back in her chair. Crosses her arms.

"Is that all you're going to do? Sit in that chair and stare at me? I'm surprised you're not out shopping – buying all these new clothes and furniture. No need to get my permission first?"

"Carl, you have to take it easier."

"Of course you'd say that. Now get me out of this bed and get me some soup and some supper. Goddammit, why is it that all you people do here is stare?"

Her skin starts to quiver. I shake my head and feel a wave of pain in my waist. Then it's gone.

When was the last time I went to the bathroom? When was the last time I did anything?

"Janey." Suddenly I can't seem to control myself. "What's happening to me?"

I feel like my body is gone and all that is left is my head.

Janey's face rolls up into a frown. My mouth is dry. I click my teeth, trying to search for moisture. Search for anything but the taste of nothing.

"Dammit, Jane, what's going on?"

"I can't keep telling you this."

"Tell me what? I'm trapped here like some damn hostage person."

"You shouldn't be upsetting yourself like this. You have to rest."

"I can't feel anything, Janey. Why can't I even feel my hands?"

"It's the medicine. You know that."

"Know what? I don't even know how I got here."

"Carl." Janey slides closer to the bed and takes my hand. "It wasn't supposed to be like this. It wasn't supposed to take so long."

"What are you talking about? Has Mike got you in some kind of cult?"

"You weren't supposed to suffer. They told me it wasn't going to hurt you like this."  
My neck goes stiff. What is she talking about?  
"What wasn't supposed to hurt like this?"

She closes her eyes and more tears dribble. How many times have I seen her cry? How many times have I made her? I'm so sorry, Janey. I shouldn't have said that. I shouldn't have ever upset you. I'm sorry.

"They said they couldn't take out any more. They just had to stop the blockage. They said there was nothing more they could do."

"I know I shouldn't have asked you about supper," I say.

"I'm sorry. They said you wouldn't have lasted this long. But you're so tough. You're so ornery." She laughs. "You always were a strong old cuss, and now look at you. Hanging on so much longer. You're so stubborn."

"Janey, why are you crying?"

"Don't you remember, Carl? It's taken over you."

What is she even talking about?

Janey squeezes my hand and raises it to her forehead. She brushes my knuckles across her face and cries.

What does she mean? How could any of this possibly be right?

I turn to look at her better but my eyes won't open. I turn to stare at her pretty face and that silvery, thick head of hair. But I can't see it. I can't see anything but this field of black. I feel empty all over.

My body's giving out on me. I'm weak.

Oh my God. Please don't let me go.

~~~

I walk across the hardwood floor and down the hall towards the living room. My feet are light, and I trip and stumble, but I have enough strength to support myself with the wall. I have tons of strength. I'm super strength. Suddenly I feel like twenty-two. I'm not sick or dying. This whole talk is nonsense. Why does everyone want me to be so old?

The television is on – I hear the daytime talk show yacking even before I reach the room. Janey is sitting there by a card table, working on a puzzle. Separating the pieces into little red bowls so that the outside edges are apart from the trickier middle sections. She's wearing a sweater – a bright new pink and green sweater that looks freshly knit and clean. Another purchase, I suspect. Whatever happened to the cardigan I got her for that 40th birthday party? I better go to the bank and get some more money. I better invest, and I better be frugal. How else are we going to make it another twenty years?

Something's bubbling in the kitchen. Baking in the oven or simmering on the stove. I smell the sweet concoction of berry and apple. I used to love those pies – my mother would make them. Dad would yell when I tried to help – he said no boy of his would do women's work. But I just wanted to help my Mom play with the fruit.

A lady on television shakes her finger in front of the face of one of those black men.

"That kind of program will rot your brain," I say. I enter the room – lean against the wall to keep me upright.

"Carl, what are you doing?" Janey pushes away from the card table and rushes over to me. She grabs my shoulder.

"Get back. I'm not some cotton-picking invalid."

"Carl, please. You'll fall again."

"I feel stronger than I have in years. I feel better than I have in ages. Come on, Woodpecker, let's polka."

I reach for her hand in an attempt to spin her around. She grabs my wrist and presses it against the wall.

"Mike!"

"He can't hear you from across town."

"Mike."

A door opens from past the bathroom and, well looky there, here comes Mikey.

"This boy will be the death of us," I say. I laugh.

My head is light and fluttering and dizzy.

"Yee-haw, boy. Come on, I'll teach you how to dance."

"We need to get him down," Janey says, still holding onto my hand. Trying to keep me pressed against the wall.

"I can pick him up and take him to the chair," Mike says.

"What is this? A bunch of fruits, that's what." I try to step away, but my legs fly in the air and Mike is holding me in his arms like some feathery girl and he carries me across the room past the card table and then onto the brown leather couch.

"I'll slide off this damn thing. You watch."

"She'll be coming by soon. I'll tell her there must be something wrong with the dose," Mike says. His face is red, and his brow is sweaty. For some reason, his skin is tan and smooth.

"Don't let Janey go and get more sweaters," I say. I rest on the couch and look up at the table behind it. There are photo frames and flower baskets and now there are even candles and boxes. "What's with all this junk?" I say. Mike and Janey stand in the corner and whisper about something. Probably his shiny new tan. That boy ain't right.

I stare at the table and look at the pictures. There sits me on a tractor in the field. There sits Janey in a group of women playing cards. There stand both of us at an altar wearing white. There we both are, smiling and laughing.

Those boxes are candy dishes – I gave them to her for her birthday one year.

Those baskets are handmade – they were done by my mother, back when she was trying to help keep the farm. Those candles aren't candles, they're trophies. My trophies. From fishing derbies and card tournaments and silly horseshoe contests at the fair. They're all mine. Where did she find these things? I look back at Janey, but she and Mike have left the room. Someone rings the doorbell.

I remember. I remember it all.

Oh my Christ, I remember the fatigue. The stomach pains. I remember the aches. I remember the doctor at the veterans' hospital saying it may be malignant. I remember them admitting there was nothing they could do. I remember them taking me away in an ambulance. Up to that hospital and those white sheets and those sharp knives. I remember the old folk's home. Surrounded by all of those sick and dying people. I remember the room. They trapped me in there and hooked me up to machines and sat there and prayed.

I remember my Janey, watching over me and holding my hand. I was so scared.

I remember. Janey's right. Oh my shit, Janey's right. I'm sick and there's pain and I'm on medicine and I'm not right. Please, God. Don't let this be happening. Please, God, let them find some way to stop this.

I can't leave Janey alone. I just can't. She's all I've ever had and ever got. That young woman in white walks into the room carrying her bag. She sits it on the ground and pulls out her weaponry. She attaches something to my arm and pumps. I slowly close my eyes and fade away.

~~~

I haven't been a good husband. I haven't been a good man. I've yelled for no reason and I've cursed and I've spit. I've controlled everything that Janey does. I've prevented her from spending and laughing and doing the things she wanted to do. But, oh, she so deserved to be happy. She deserved to enjoy rich things. She deserved so much more than I was able to give her. I've been such an awful person.

I don't like who I've been. I don't like who I am. I don't like laying here and wasting here and wilting away into some tiny shell of a man who once was. I can't use my legs. I can't use my thing. I don't even know what it looks like anymore. My manhood is gone. My strength is all gone. Everything tastes bad, and everything smells like petroleum jelly. Everything looks like it has a grayish tint. Everything feels rough and coarse and dangerous. All of the sounds around me are faint. I can't sit through this much longer. I can't take this any longer.

And young Mike. He's a good boy, and he's been good for Janey. He gave her the opportunity to be a mother in many ways. To love a child. To have a child. Gosh, why have I been so hard on that boy? Sure, he's soft. And he's pretty. And he doesn't understand women. But he's watched out for us and for Janey and now he'll be all that she has left. I've been such a terrible person. A terrible father.

I need to repent. I need to pray, and I need to ask for your forgiveness. I need to get ready. I need to accept that this is it for me. That I'm dead. I need to finally realize that life is not lengthy and I am not invulnerable and I do not have the world at my fingertips any longer. This is it. I can't feel a thing, but I know what this means. My time is now counted by seconds, not years. I really need to gather the strength to just say it. I really need to tell Janey I'm sorry. That I'm awful. I just don't know where she is. I don't know anything anymore.

~~~

Janey lays next to me on the bed. It causes the mattress to ripple and shakes my head loose until I wake up and open my eyes barely and see the darkness of the room. I don't know how long I've been asleep. Don't know what day it is or what month. Janey slides closer to me but not under the sheets. Her shoulder rests against mine.

I've been dreaming. Dreaming of hot sunny days with her in the woods. Bright shiny moments walking down the gravel lane holding hands. Laughing at corn crops and dragonflies buzzing through the fields. Looking at her and seeing all of the warmth. I want to tell her so much.

I try to turn my head, but nothing works any more. I can't even seem to move a finger or a toe. I open my mouth to speak, but I can't get the lips to separate. There is no sound in my throat. There is no energy in my soul.

Janey shakes the bed in an attempt to get comfortable. I know I'm still encroaching into her territory. That I'm taking up too much of her half. But I'm sorry. I can't move, and I suspect that this is where Mike put me. She makes a sound – a giggle perhaps? It must be so late in the evening.

I'm sorry, Janey. I love you so much.

"It's been so long since we've just laid here," Janey says. By the scent of wool and corn syrup, I can tell she's wearing a housecoat. A warm, blanket jacket that she sometimes uses to keep her warm in her evening clothes. Her night garments. She has two of them, both of which are starched and red. My little woodpecker.

"It seems like ages ago that we used to enjoy it," Janey says.

I want so badly to talk to her. Please, God, give me some strength to say these words.

"Of course, it's not like you'd let me get much of a say in it," Janey says.

I just want to hold her and start again. Start anew.

"But I put up with it, you old cuss. I sat there and I was quiet and I obeyed and I listened," she says.

I know, Janey. I know.

"But you never seemed to acknowledge it. To really appreciate the efforts I gave. And now, here you are."

Yes, I know.

My throat is scratchy and dry. It starts to squeeze.

"Oh, look at you, Carl. Look at us. Laying here like two overripe peas in a pod. Two pieces of corn all decayed and shriveled up. That someone forgot to pick. Who would have thought you would have lasted this long? Who would have thought we'd go out like this?"

I can't say anything.

"I'd had it with you, Carl. I'd had enough. You may never have noticed, because you didn't watch for or care about such things, but I stopped trying twenty years ago. I stopped working at it. You always had your ways and your comments and your rules, and that's that. It's like I never meant more to you than just a houseguest."

The squeezing in my throat spreads. I can't breathe.

"But I stayed loyal. I stayed honorable. I know you never were equipped to be the romantic. Or the partner. You and your father. You and all of you men. Always looking like we were just there, to take the place of your mother. To take care of you. To keep you entitled. But I never complained, did I, Carl. I never fought back."

Janey, please stop. You don't mean to have this tone. I'm so sorry.

"And then they said you were sick. That was two years ago, Carl. Two long years. They said you were sick and that it was the end and there was nothing much more they could try to fix it. And you didn't care. You didn't believe them. You said it was shit and meant nothing and that I should just pick you up and take you home and make you supper and that's that. But gosh, Carl. If it really was the end, then why did it take two years? Why was it so long?"

Please make it stop. This can't really be happening. This is just another one of those delusions or those dreams.

"And I celebrated. That's right, Carl, I celebrated. The moment they said it had spread and it was the end, I took a sigh of relief. It was the first time in ages I felt peace. I felt relaxed."

I can't breathe.

"Of course I felt bad. You can't live with someone for fifty-some years and not at least feel a bit of affection. And remorse. But I endured it so long, Carl. Your apathy. Your lack of sympathetic gestures. Your rudeness to poor Mike. And not once could you even say how much I meant to you. How much you cared. It was just thank you now and then for being that mother. For taking care of you like I should have been able to care for a child."

Janey shakes. I'm shaking, although I don't know if my body even registers it. If it shows any signs of life. This is too much.

"But you had to hang on. They put you in that home and they said it would only be weeks, but it wasn't. They said it would just be another few days so I better make my peace with it, so I did. I prayed for you so much, Carl. Despite everything. I prayed and I worshipped and I forgave and I cried. Of course I love you, Carl. How could I not, when that's what a girl of my upbringing was trained to do. But at some point you have to give back, Carl. You have to just let me live and let go.

"And I did things. Oh, I did things. As soon as they said you'd never leave that home I started forgetting your rules. Your strict edicts. I went out and spent money. I bought clothes. I bought furniture. My god it was the first time in forever that I was free. That I was able to act for myself and feel like a woman. And I gambled – I went to the riverboat and the bingos and the card matches. I know you hate all of that. That you'd just rather have me stay home and wait for you. But I didn't, Carl. And I don't regret it." My head is spinning, and the room is losing all color.

"And I'm sorry, Carl. I'm sorry that I wasn't able to soften you. To assist you with such inherent roadblocks that prevented you and every man of your generation from appearing human. For showing affection. But that's not just my burden. It's everyone's. And I wish that just once you would have given in." I'm starting to feel my toes and my legs.

"But I do love you still. I love you, and I miss you. I miss that young man who went off to war on that train. I miss the promise and optimism of what we'd have when you came home. Of the family we'd start. Of the joy we'd share together. But it never happened, did it Carl? You barely wrote to me once you were over there. And it took you two years to get back. And once you did, I was broken. I had worried too much. I had prayed. And all I could do was fall back into your life and your arms and I said yes. We were married but nothing turned out the way it was supposed to, did it. And yet, you still hang on." I feel the dry patch of skin on my left thigh. I feel the throbbing emptiness of whatever they took out of me in my gut. Whatever foreign obstacle now grows there. I feel my chest and my beating heart.

"I mourned you long ago, Carl. I mourned that young man I thought you were and what we could be. But he never truly existed did he? Not really. And now, here I am, 79 and all alone. And then they said you should come home."

I feel my arms and my fingers and the last breaths in my chest. I see clearly. I hear and smell. I think a billion thoughts all at once. A billion memories. All of them with a focus on my dear Janey.

"You have to go, Carl. You have to let me live. I'm not angry, not anymore. I'm not hurt. I know, in your own little way, you did care for me – even when you demanded me to just cook and clean. I understand you. I know you better than anyone, and I was subservient. I was loving. And I was supportive. But you have to stop it now, Carl. You have to give me a chance to be my own."

I feel the tingling and the separation as the things inside me start to close, start to shut down.

"Gosh, please just let me go," Janey says. She's crying, and she's beating the bed, and she's shaking.

My head feels heavy and dull. My head feels like mush. The movement in my chest stops. I take the last taste of air that fills my nose and my mouth. It's Janey's corn syrupy scent.

She rolls over and grabs my hand. She kisses my head. I can feel it. "You have to go, Carl. You have to do this for me. I forgive you, but you have to finally go. Please." My eyes close and then I swirl and then suddenly I'm afloat. I rise up in a swish, and I separate from the body and bone. I turn over and look down at Janey from a few feet above. She's glowing in a shade of blue and white. The whole room fills with particles of light. Dancing optics of a million colors and shades.

"My god, Carl, I don't even know how to live without your burden."

Janey curls up next to my body as I float. I feel the warmth and the brightness behind me, pulling me upwards. No, don't let me go. Don't let me leave. I just need to tell her I'm sorry. That I love her. Everything she's just said is true.

Janey sobs and squeezes my hand. "Oh god, Carl. You finally may have listened."

She cries and cries while my whole spirit floats. I reach out to her. I brush her cheek with my hand. I send her a kiss that I wish I would have given her every moment of every day. Oh, Janey, I love you. I love you, and you deserved so much better.

I rise through the roof and into the sky, but I still see her. I draw up to the sun and the moon and the heavens, but I still feel her. I still need her. God, please let me have another chance. This is not the way to live a life. This is not the way to love a person.

Janey sobs, and I hear her as I go. The sounds of laughter and wails and a baby wait for me, and my parents and brother. But all I really want is to be with Janey. All I really want is another chance, another life with her.

But it's done.

TOWN COP  
*John Grey*

Cop knows every one of us.  
It's ESP or something.  
Can't speed without him clocking the MPH.  
Can't smoke cigarettes or dope behind our own barn  
without him sniffing the smoke  
from his tiny cramped fan-blown office.  
Linda and I park by the lake at night,  
and it's his reflection rippling in the water,  
not the moon's.  
If a kid takes something that  
don't belong to him,  
it's on his rap sheet  
before it's in his pocket.  
Cop's writing tickets in his sleep.  
He's already wise  
to who he'll hand them to.  
Cop can read us  
like a cop used to read him  
when he was our age.  
That's how he learned to be a cop.

FALL  
*David Frazier*

Trees have lost their leaves,  
All have fallen to the ground.  
Dry and dead, devoid of life.  
Green in summer,  
Colored red and yellow in fall.  
Trees like skeletons, stand alone in fields.  
Surrounded by their dead children,  
The fallen leaves.  
Mice nest among her departed children,  
Trying to stay warm.  
As cool nights descend.  
Children cover dormant lawns giving  
Protection from snows,  
Soon to follow.

TONIGHT  
*Brion Berkshire*

I went to Culver  
and sat on the rim  
of Lake Maxinkuckee  
breathing poems

into the early evening air  
and they didn't hang  
there like castoff fruit  
or the oddball moon

no, nor did they frighten  
the dog who was nosing trash  
as if it were a living thing  
along the frozen waves of sand

nor even dart gracelessly  
down into the green world  
of the small fish that hover  
there about the pillars

of the peer, no, they just  
disappeared as if they were  
never really there at all,  
as if their existence were

some trick of my imagination,  
as if their lives were dependent  
on the chance of my mind's folly  
and not the solid wood of a ship

I had sailed my life away on

SHE AND I  
*Ken Leland*

"There he is. Three rows down, over by the wall."

"Which one?" she asked.

"The big redhead with glasses, next to the threshing machine."

That autumn morning, years ago, scores of university students filed into Hobson Auditorium. Prodigious murals decorated the lecture hall. On the walls around us, Industry swept from floor to ceiling. On the right, farmers harvested wheat fields, behind us sturdy laborers tended assembly lines, and to our left, hydroelectric dams subdued mighty rivers. She and I waited for the semester's first lecture in Economics 101 to begin.

She peered at him. "That's your new roommate?"

"Kevin's from The Region," I told her.

I knew The Region. In the mid-1960s, its steel mills belched red clouds, its refineries flamed at night. A friend from first year told me of his summer job in a mill, cleaning slag from a furnace. He entered too soon, before it cooled in July's heat, and had to be dragged out head first. Still, it was good money, he said.

On Kevin's first day at university, he told his own Region story. That summer, he fell from a refinery scaffold. Immediately, he left for church in a cab, cradling a broken arm. As a Christian Scientist, he believed wholeheartedly in the Goodness of Man, and of God. A prayer group gathered to heal his bleeding, compound fracture. It mended instantaneously. Kevin pulled up a shirt sleeve, a few inches above his wrist, to show the scar. Restored by God's Grace, he assured me, and not a day lost from work.

Kevin and I, all of us living on scholarships, were dirt poor. In my case, the dirt was real – a farmer's son, an only child, raised by my father and grandmother in a decaying farmhouse. Our scholarships required we work for bed and board in dormitory kitchens, earning a dollar an hour. This was during Capitalism's death match with Communism, when the Soviet Union led the West in Space and in Technology. Even America's impoverished youth were called to serve, either in the halls of academe or the jungles of Southeast Asia. But if successful as scholars, young men garnered precious deferments from war.

As we waited for Economics to begin, she watched Kevin intently then asked, "Who's the girl next to him?"

"That's Ann," I said. "They're engaged."

"Good God! You're kidding."

I kept my peace.

Eight months earlier in January, my father and I stood at Inwood's bus stop. Together we leaned against his rusting Plymouth. Dad wore winter overalls and a red, sweat-stained cap. When the Greyhound arrived, he patted my back and slid my suitcase into the luggage compartment. I climbed the steps, then the coach pulled away. Shifting into second gear, the bus wallowed over uneven railroad tracks west of town. I staggered and clutched the upper storage rack, hoping not to fall into a stranger's lap. All seats were filled except for a few towards the back.

A petite blonde with long eyelashes turned from her window. Doubtless she had seen my father and me. Perhaps she learned something about us in those few moments, or maybe she remembered a leave-taking of her own. Whatever her thoughts, as I approached she motioned to clear away a non-existent something from the empty seat beside her. And so I asked, "Would it be OK . . .?"

I didn't speak after sitting down. I always carried a book. But a mile or two later, she found an opening. It was an artless question about something beside the road. "It's a culvert," I said. "You've never seen a culvert?" A city girl. We began to talk and realized we were both in first year at the state university. Later she admitted being on a full ride, an all-expenses paid scholarship without work requirements. She, too, was an only child, but of post-war, European refugees.

Eagerly, playfully, over the next few hours, we shared our lives and hopes. We spoke as if dear friends reunited after many years. It was evening when we arrived. Campus dining halls were already closed, and reluctant to part, we walked into town for supper. Afterwards, wrapped in winter coats, we strolled unmindful of the cold. Our conversation slowed, and then came to an end. Now there were lingering silences that did not frighten, moments of calm and trust. Finally, we stood facing each other in the night. She touched my coat sleeve and said, "I'm not like these others – women wanting to fall in love, to find a great catch. Better you run from me." She was right of course.

At semester's end, I argued with her, suffering deeply from unrequited devotion. Forlorn, I returned to my father's farm, she to a summer job in the city. But early September brought another school year and for me, a new roommate; the previous having lost his military deferment to failing grades.

Kevin, the red-headed, bespectacled newcomer overtopped me by a head. He was a smiling, earnest mountain. He showed me his miraculously-healed, compound fracture, and introduced his fiancée. Her name was Ann. She was a tiny washboard of a girl with brown hair that plunged to her waist, straight and unadorned. With tenderness, Ann ruled Kevin absolutely. Companions in high school, both secured work scholarships so they might attend university together. Their parents, Kevin confessed, were against a marriage, that union remaining more a promise between them than an impending reality. Ann wore no engagement ring.

As we ate lunch, they sat side by side, oblivious of all but each other. When I left them, I wandered through the campus, filled with misgivings. Their entanglement tempted Fate to destroy dreams of a better life . . . and yet, when plain, timid Ann looked at Kevin, there was such affection. Truly, I would give my soul to a woman who thought of me that way.

Later, when I returned to the room we shared, Kevin said, "Someone called while you were out."

"Someone?"

"She wouldn't leave her name. Said you'd know who she was."

Kevin was unaccustomed to such reticence but indeed, I knew.

"What did she say?" I asked.

"She'll be in Dunn Meadow under the sycamores. You know where that is?"

"Yes."

"Three o'clock if you want to meet her."

That afternoon beside a shaded creek, we made a pact, she and I. She spoke. I listened. Until finally, I said what she needed to hear.

It was that or she would end it between us. And so I lied when I told her, "No. I don't love you anymore."

Surely, the Econ Prof had lost his way. Around us, students were restive. As we waited, she leaned against my shoulder, staring across the room at Kevin and Ann. "He's you," she decided. "You have yourself for a roommate!" She laughed and shook her head. I said nothing. She turned to me. "Is that what you wanted? For me to be your infatuated pet?"

In the months that followed, Kevin and Ann sometimes registered at a motel. In those years, lovers would be expelled if such behavior came to light, and because of eternal war, the risks for Kevin were high. They dared all for a few nights in each other's arms. Just before Christmas, a time came when they could no longer live apart. Kevin announced they must leave at term's end. He would go back to the refinery and beg deferment as a conscientious objector. Ann would do what she could until the baby came.

When they left for The Region, I loaned Kevin what I could, enough perhaps to buy a wedding band.

When I told her, she looked into my face. "Your money's gone you know."

"Does it matter?"

"I suppose not," she said.

She pressed her open palm against my chest. "I'll buy supper then. All right?"

## IN THE FAMILY HOME

*Helen R. Peterson*

A crash, the tinkle of shattered glass skittering across the floor tells me the chandelier in the nursery above has fallen. People have told me it was an odd piece for a baby's room, my husband himself has pointed to bending supports, the decay of years. But it was where I'd slept, safely, as a young child, and my mother before me.

My sleeping daughter shoves her little fist against my chest. I wrap my arms around her back and try to pull her close against the weight of those tightly curled fingers. I was right to take her to bed with me. Leo is working late, we're all alone. The air upstairs has become heavy; I can no longer fold a basket of laundry without having to lay down on the nursery floor, curled up on a roadmap rug of ABCs and 123s. I knew this would be the night.

The strength of the avarice that draws long dormant love to hate is a mystery. Ten years have passed since I last heard his footsteps, crunching through the sand and into the lake. Lover of water, we'd spend every summer at the beach, and I would tease that he was more fish than human. On that day however I was engrossed too long in a new salad recipe, a fashionable new layout for Nantucket style kitchens, maybe an article on spicing up your love life after childbirth. Whatever the article was, I never saw his face again as it passed from joy to horror as a wayward motorboat pulled my darling boy down into its undercurrent. The casket was too narrow, the memorial service too brief before the dirt covered the hopes of a young family, the guilt of a mother. The heat that summer was oppressive, and no one wanted to linger over a fresh grave when there was lemonade to sip, kites to fly, and seashells to collect. Time had been enough for the living to tear itself apart and heal, but now it was apparent the dead never forget.

Now, nothing in that room is safe as the soft groan crescendos into a shriek of defeat enveloping the empty crib, now in splinters. Here with me my little one is safe, there are still places in this house where love conquers jealous hate, even the hatred of the dead. I whisper to the black, "Sister. This is your sister." The floorboards mutter and twist in reply, and then all is silent.

## AND IF THE DEAD CARE NOT FOR MARIGOLDS?

*Adam Cheney*

The sun finished fading below the ridge of mountains like a scream's dying fall. Twilight was fully upon the bare trees, the wet snow, and the young woman struggling along. In the lack of light, the moist bark took on a metallic quality, giving the trees the aspect of tall, straight bars of iron that hindered her escape. The young woman, Marigold, was so out of breath she could do little more than scabble through the snow and heavy woods on all fours, but she scabbled through the iron trees and dying sunlight light as fast as her frozen feet and frost-bitten hands could propel her.

She was moving up the slope of a short hill. Fear still drove her, but as the adrenalin began to taper, so did her fear. She began to hope she had lost him by now. Far behind her came the low, light laugh again, and she surged on.

She felt a burning in her arms and legs and was heartened by this until she realized that what she could still feel was not the increase of circulation but the deeper, more leaden burning of overwhelming fatigue. She knew that she had many cuts and bruises, but she could not feel them. Her breathing was ragged, her gait ponderous and broken. She pulled her wet hair out of her face so she could see where she was going for a moment. She was halfway up the hill. She figured she could make it at least to the top. She put her head down and forced herself to keep moving.

At the hill's top, she stopped to rest. Gasping and leaning heavily against a tree, she raised the object clutched in her fist up to her eyes. She could no longer feel her hand or what she was holding, but the bracelet was still there, gripped tightly in her fingers. The pale green jade almost felt warm.

Marigold looked carefully at the writing on the inside of the bracelet and tried to understand the strange script. Her mind was foggy, and the characters swam and played before her vision. She saw that her hand was shaking and that her fingers were pale, almost blue. She gasped, jerking her hand to keep it still, and the bracelet fell into the snow.

Marigold shrieked in dismay. She fell to her knees and thrust her hands through the crusty layer of snow into the white, wet mush beneath. In broad, exaggerated gestures she swept her numb hands around, not so much feeling for the bracelet as hoping to knock it into motion so her eyes could catch it.

She heard the laughter again, and it was not so far removed from where she winnowed the snow. She began to weep, but she couldn't leave the bracelet. Motion unlike snow on snow caught her eye. She snatched up a handful of white and saw a smooth hint of green. She clumsily brushed away the snow with her other hand whose fingers were reluctant to work, and she looked at the writing on the bracelet again. The words swam into place, and she could read them. The words told a riddle. For a moment she felt a glint of hope that she would be able to find the answer; that she would discover the word that would make the bracelet work, but that hope quickly turned back into despair. She was too fatigued to even understand what the words meant.

She struggled to her feet and tried to move forward again, but her feet were numb and she mis-stepped and fell, continuing to bump and tumble down the other, steeper side of the hill. Her already torn blouse and skirt snagged and ripped even more on the iron-black trees and sharp rocks. When she finally stopped tumbling, she came to rest against a dead log and could not make herself move. She considered giving in and staying where she was, hoping the thing would not find her, but she knew remaining where she was would be suicide.

The wind carried to her the easy, vicious merriment of her pursuer's laughter. She thought of letting him find her and begging for her life, but she quickly dismissed the thought. She wasn't so far gone that she couldn't remember those cold eyes and sharp smile, no matter how briefly she had glimpsed them. That moment where she had glanced back over her shoulder as she ran had convinced her that the quality of mercy was nonexistent for this creature. Marigold was resigned to the fact that she was not going to escape him. She knew she was going to die. But she was going to make sure she was dead before it got to her.

Marigold tried, but she could not get up. She lay where she was, too tired to even weep any more. She had reached the point where terror was too much effort. She tried to will her arms to drag herself up, her legs to support and propel her, but her limbs felt like they no longer belonged to her. She wanted her father, but the only sound she could manage was the sound of her ragged breathing.

Only an hour before, Marigold remembered, she had been riding next to her father in the back of their limousine. Her mother had been there, too. Her father was smiling despite the unhappy circumstance of being escorted out of another city, and he was trying to cheer her some--or at least distract her--by showing her the green bracelet of jade and helping her work on the words inscribed on the inside of it. She was working them out, haltingly as always, but the characters were becoming more familiar every time he practiced with her. She was beginning to feel that understanding was within reach. Her father was again telling her she would get it one day. Her study of the writing would reveal the riddle, a riddle whose answer was a single word that would let her use the bracelet. She and her father were working on deciphering the characters of the riddle while her mother was quietly sitting and holding her hand, smiling the way only a certain class of wife could.

Her father was slipping the bracelet back on over his hand and settling it around his wrist. Her mother was saying, "It will be all right. It's not like we haven't endured being escorted out of a city before. It's not like we haven't survived being conducted somewhere new." Her father, nodding, smiling back and answering, "Of course." The car stopping like hitting a wall. Her mother and her father mixed into one jumble and no way up or down or right or out of the car.

Then the laughter.

Her mother screaming. Her father shouting. The laughter. Then outside the car, and a pale green flashing from her father's hands held high against the evening sky and wilderness and highway. An inhuman screaming and another burst of light. Then her mother falling, her father running to her. Marigold being shoved. The bracelet in her hands, coolness that burned when she touched it. Her father screaming for her, "Run! Run!" Her running, him screaming, "Bond with the bracelet! Bond with it!" and the sudden stopping of his voice. Her stumbling off the two-lane road into the woods and snow and falling and running and freezing hands and shoeless feet but still running.

The silence, then as now. She felt the silence as the absence of everything. She no longer felt the cold of the snow or the breeze. She no longer felt the fear or the disorientation. She no longer felt her heart beat or the presence of the shadows of the winter woods. Night had almost fully fallen, and within its darkness the laughter came singing along the air like the trickle of mucky water across freshly-fallen snow--trickling, wriggling, slithering among the interlocking fingers of a thirsty, tight blanket of perfect flakes of snow.

Marigold heard the trickling continue even after the laughter had ebbed. She recognized it as the sound of real water. It wasn't far off. She remembered that the thing chasing her couldn't cross moving water. They were afraid of water. Moving water. It was this kind who feared water? Not the other kind with hair and paws and a man's mind? But maybe it was both, or maybe neither. She wasn't sure anymore of her own thoughts. Running water. The sound pulled her out of her foggy memory, and she resolved herself to this one last hope.

She held the bracelet tightly, looked at it to make sure it was still in her grasp, and then she concentrated on making her limbs obey. She made herself crawl, and then, with excruciating effort, she rose up to stumble from tree to tree. Not even the burning in her limbs was there. She felt nothing.

The laughter sang in the air, coming from everywhere. Pure, crystalline laughter. The snow crunched underfoot in an arrhythmic refrain of her motion. She shut her mind and concentrated on the sounds of the water and moving through the snow. From tree to tree she stumbled, the by-now familiar terror newly welling up inside her and threatening to explode into a plume to fill the forest.

She was at the water's edge and her heart sank. It was a slow river, slow and misleading as it gurgled a stream-like song along its snowy banks. It was very wide and seemed very deep. Had she been warm and rested, she could have swum it without much trouble. She cast around, thinking desperately that at least death by water was a better alternative than the death her parents had found. She thought of what she had heard behind her at the limousine when she had been running into the woods. That bodies could produce such sounds sickened her.

She edged closer to the water, resigned. She wanted to stop being so tired that it hurt and so continually in fear that it frayed her. Her eyes discovered for her another way. Farther up the bank on her side of the river was a fallen log. Only it hadn't fallen. It had bent itself over to touch the river with its upper branches, and where the tips touched the water far out into the river, driftwood had gathered in abundance until a small, artificial island had formed. Marigold told herself that the bracelet would be safe on that island. She would be safe on that island, safe to die cleanly and whole. Footfalls came crunching through the snow, closer than before.

Marigold made it to the log. Glancing at her hand to make sure she still held the bracelet, she crawled. She moved so slowly along the smooth, dead wood that oceans of water must have flowed beneath her for each inch she gained forward. But she was dizzy and couldn't feel the wood beneath her numb hands, so she continued to move surely and slowly.

She was halfway to the island. She could breathe better, more than just gasps, and a flow of elation already warmed her some. Here, she remembered, her follower could not come; the beast could not cross running water. She heard the laughter--real and whole and located in one spot--and she glanced back. The creature was at the end of the tree bridge behind her. He looked human in every way except for its cold eyes and sharp teeth, the same cold eyes and sharp teeth Marigold had glimpsed when fleeing the limousine. The thing was dressed in dark colors that were stained with unmentionable substances. He smiled its sharp smile to her then blew her a kiss and stepped out onto the log, one bare foot after another.

She caught her breath, bewildered. "But you can't," she stammered. "You can't." He threw back its head and laughed. He was having fun.

Marigold let go and fell into the embrace of the water. She was under only a moment before she felt air and earth again. She could make out trees through her dripping hair, but she could not feel the one she leaned against. She could only tell that something was keeping her sitting upright. She remembered what must have plucked her from the river. In panic, she tried to move, but she couldn't. That last surge which had gotten her to the river had spent everything she had left.

"Ah, my dear Marigold," said the thing. "Such a wasteful, easy death?" His voice, low like its laugh, was soft and smooth.

She tried to bring her hands up to cover her ears. She tried to huddle into a ball to protect herself and make his voice disappear. Her body was dead weight.

"You proved stronger than I thought," he said. "This chase was amusing, but now I am an-hungered. Come, let me grant you the last kiss you should ever feel."

She saw more than felt him bend next to her and pull the hair from her face. She saw him smile at her. He bent closer and pressed his mouth to hers. She tried to turn her head away but could not. His lips met hers, were colder than hers, and she tried to resist the distressing desire to kiss him back.

"You are a strong one," he murmured in her ear. He unbuttoned the top few buttons on what remained of her silk blouse and pulled back the collar to bare her neck. She leaned her head over to protect herself as much as she could. "No more games," he said.

He grabbed her by the hair and roughly forced her head the other way to re-reveal the unblemished flesh of her neck. He struck and drank. Somewhere inside in an unknown and shadowed recess of her wants and feelings, Marigold found herself enjoying the sensations despite her every known desire. He pulled away.

"You are so young and beautiful, though. Rather than emptying you completely, maybe I should let the change take you now that you've been bitten. I could just stand back and watch it happen, watch it overtake and transform you. I could use a companion to replace the one your father has killed."

She tried to speak, but all she could manage was to mew a syllable or two as she sat exposed to the thing, her back against a tree. She wanted his lips and teeth on her skin again.

His dark face reflected his thoughts. "No . . . You would prove too willful, I think. More a pest than a companion. Let us finish this now." He bared his teeth--the canines more prominent and sharper than any man's--and he leaned toward her. She could only barely move her hand in a feeble attempt to resist him. He froze half bent to her neck the second time, eyes locked onto the green jade against her blue fist.

"The bracelet," he whispered hoarsely. "That's not supposed to be with you." She saw in his eyes a fear and the reflection of the circlet of jade, and the bracelet pulsed with icy warmth which spread through her dead hand. She concentrated on that feeling which alone existed outside the cold of the snow and her surprising desire for the beast's touch. She pulled that warmth up her arm and into her center. She willed it upward past the ache in her neck and into her dry mouth. The bracelet's markings became clear in her mind's eye, and she suddenly knew the answer to the riddle. She uttered the soft, short word.

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When the forest rangers found her, they thought she was dead. She was cold and had no pulse, though neither condition was curious considering she had spent the night outside barely covered by a knee-length skirt and the remains of a blouse. What puzzled the rangers was the circle of trees that had been flattened out thirty feet in every direction while the one she had been found leaning against didn't have a mark on it.

The young ranger looked away while the older ranger took off his coat to cover her up. "You wanna go call this in, Dean?" said the older man. "Look," said Dean. She breathed and her eyes fluttered for a moment.

They hurriedly got her to their truck and wrapped her in blankets. Dean began to strip out of his clothes.

The older one said, "What are you doing?" "Take it easy, Zeke," said Dean. "She needs body heat, skin to skin." Down to his boxers, Dean climbed under the blankets with her. He couldn't believe how cold she was to the touch.

Zeke clicked his teeth, but said nothing more as he put the car in gear and drove. He stopped the car when he heard Dean yell.

"What? What is it?" asked Zeke.

"She bit me!" said Dean.

"What?"

"She had some kind of spasm and bit me. But she's okay now. Just keep driving."

Dean felt the place she had bit him. She had managed to break the skin. But that didn't bother him nearly as much as the fact that she seemed to be draining the warmth right out of him. Because this rescue was already turning out to be strange enough, he didn't want to make it any stranger, and so he ignored the fact that the jade bracelet around her wrist had its own odd heat.

At the hospital, doctors and physicians were puzzled by Marigold's complete lack of appetite and the way her body operated just fine at a temperature well-below normal. They could not say why the needle-point punctures on her neck refused to heal, though they administered anti-venom as a precaution.

But she did recover from her night of exposure. She seemed to improve every time the young ranger visited her. At first her progress was slow, but as she was more and more able to visit with him, the quicker her strength seemed to return.

Once, just before she was well enough to be released, the young forest ranger passed out in her room. He was admitted for bed rest and intravenous fluids and released the same evening with the admonition that he should not work himself so hard, no matter how pretty the patient he visited in the hospital was.

## GINGERBREAD CHRISTMAS

*Doug Robbins*

Smiling gingerbread warm and gooey.  
Smile little gingerbread man.  
Bite off their heads little monsters.  
Gingerbread genocide.  
Sad Christmas

## FAMILY BUSINESS

*Terry Davis*

Jake was by far the youngest person at the funeral. At only seven months of age, he had no idea that his dad lay in the closed casket his mom stood beside. The nature of the accident that killed Nick meant viewing was not an option. As much as she wanted to cling to him, Julie was not able to hold Jake for any length of time. Her grief was partially numbed by the Valium she was taking. The pills helped her get through the funeral, barely. Her normally wide engaging smile was replaced with a strained mask.

Julie's mom busied herself by looking after Jake. His incessant wiggling gave her something to do. She took him out to another room for a while. The lighting was muted. Mozart's Requiem played quietly. It had just enough volume to fill up the awkward moments of silence. The sign, "Nicholas Bowers, 1934-1960", directed those who came for Nick's funeral to the right and kept them separate from those coming for "Mildred Crawley 1869-1960", to the left. The two funerals attracted very different groups: The old lady's funeral was sparsely attended by a group of elderly people who were somewhat frail, but very accustomed to seeing their friends die. Nick's family and friends were much younger and, for many, this was their first experience of death in their own generation. Clusters of people stood around quietly talking; an occasional ripple of laughter would surface (there was no shortage of Nick Stories), but the room would quickly revert to the low murmur of subdued conversation, as the guests continued struggling to pass the time.

Some of his friends from college had come, together again for the first time since graduation almost five years ago. They were in the same fraternity and had all majored in Political Science. However, Nick was the only one who had actually entered politics, having worked until recently on the staff of Joseph Clark, Jr., the US Senator from Pennsylvania. Julie dated Nick for the last two years of college, so she knew these people, and they had kept in touch. None of them wanted a reunion like this, and the emotions flowed freely. Each of them had different remembrances of Nick: one remembered his great jokes; another recalled the phone call he got from Nick the day he was hired by Clark, his raw excitement about landing the job. A third friend recounted the all-nighters that ended up producing remarkably cogent papers. None had any idea how his marriage had been strained in the last several months.

Others at the funeral were strangers to Julie. Some were from Nick's new job. When one of them would approach her, she felt herself pull back, and became much more reserved. His whole new career path had never seemed quite right to Julie. She and Nick had made the decision jointly, dispassionately and, they thought, for all the right reasons. However, as much as Nick loved the intense world of politics, they had concluded it was not a stable platform on which to build a life. The arrival of Jake had changed everything. To bet his career and his family's security on the next election just didn't make sense. So he chose to take his dad's offer to go to work for him at Consolidated Warehousing in Philadelphia. It was an offer he had steadfastly refused for years. Nick had been proud of forging his own pathway and not relying on the family name for security. Taking this offer was an about face for him. As President of Consolidated, Ray Bowers had always wanted Nick to join him in the business. So when Nick resigned his post with Clark and took the position, he had finally come of age. And he knew his wife Joan would be proud.

One of the few people Julie knew from the office was Christine, Ray's assistant. She was one of the first to arrive at the service, but was so upset she had yet to approach Julie. For fifteen minutes Christine was quietly crying at the foot of the casket before she could find the strength to approach Nick's widow. Christine Maguire had been with Consolidated for five years, mostly as Ray's secretary, although she did many other jobs at the warehouse. Julie met her last August at the annual company picnic, which she and Nick attended for the first time since he joined the company in July. Christine was about Julie's age, although their backgrounds were quite different. There was something about her low-key and slightly irreverent sense of humor that Julie liked. But Christine looked very different now. It was more than just the fact that she had never seen Christine in a dress instead of slacks. She looked devastated.

"I don't know what to say," Christine sniffled as they embraced, her long auburn hair draping over Julie's s back. "This is all so weird."

"Sure is. Nick told me you've been helping him a lot at work."

Another wave of grief came out of nowhere and engulfed Julie as she once again realized that Nick was gone. The conversation ended with the two simply holding hands, facing each other, shoulders shaking, and crying.

Julie dreaded the arrival of Nick's parents. Ray and Joan had been the ones who broke the news to her at her home. Ray had witnessed the accident, and was still reeling. Joan had driven him there so he could tell her in person. Julie was in total shock initially, but in the ensuing days leading up to the funeral, she had become increasingly angry. Her ambivalence about this job, and some of the stories Nick brought home about the seamy nature of the warehousing business, had been making her more and more miserable. For the last couple of months, Nick had been quietly investigating the disappearance of TV sets from the warehouse. He told her he suspected the sets were being stolen, and that it was an inside job. He had been spending more and more time at work in the evening and early morning trying to track the inventory and figure out how who might be involved and how the sets were leaving the warehouse. On two occasions, he had been offered several hundred dollars by one of the union stewards to lose interest in the problem. And now...this. If Nick had only stayed with his passion for politics, this never would have happened.

"I am so sorry, Julie." Although she had never met Josh Fox, she knew this must be the man Nick had hired several months ago as an operations supervisor for the night shift. Tall and thin, in his mid-twenties with a hatchet face, he looked out of place in a coat and tie. The business shirt was about two collar sizes too large, and the extra-wide tie, although fashionable, did not suit him. Nick had also described his buck teeth and unkempt thinning hair. "You must be Josh. Sorry to meet you like this," she said looking up at him. "Me too," he said, staring at the floor. Both were struggling for something else to say, but neither came up with anything. Mercifully, one of Nick's cousins was the next in line and pressed a big hug on her, allowing Josh to move on.

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Since the accident on Tuesday Ray had little if any sleep. As he and Joan were being driven by friends to the funeral, all he could do was to continue what he had been doing all week, reliving that awful day. The April weather was threatening; pewter skies overhead were giving way to more ruffled clouds and some mid-day darkness toward the west. He and Joan had hardly spoken—partly because they were both so devastated, and partly because he had not really let Joan know all there was to know about his business.

Ray had done so well because of his ability to get along with the Teamsters and the Longshoremen who made up a large segment of his workforce. He asked no questions and dealt with them on a need-to-know basis. In fact, he had negotiated some contracts that were significantly better for the workers than other, bigger, warehouses had been able to obtain. This earned him labor peace, and even a degree of loyalty. He even had some real fans. In fact, late one evening Gianni Schiavone, one of the teamsters he had done a small favor for, pulled Ray aside and quietly said into his ear, "Thanks for what you did for me, man. You're the best. If you ever need any help—you know, the kind that's hard to get—give me a call. Here's my card," he said as he raised his eyebrows, looked over his glasses, and slipped a small business card into Ray's hand. Ray never turned down a gesture like that. As he took the card, Ray noticed a large pinky ring on Gianni's left hand. He smiled, ruffled Gianni's hair, and slipped the card into his pocket.

Joan knew none of that side of the business. Ray had figured he could teach it to Nick bit by bit. But all of that came crashing down last Tuesday. The day started out well enough. Ray had come up from their beach house on the Jersey shore where they had vacationed together as a family for spring break. Nick had come back on Monday, and Ray had taken an extra day at the shore to mull a decision about an offer he had gotten to sell his company. He had received many such offers, but had rejected each one in the hope that he could convince Nick to join him, and ultimately turn the business over to him. Now that Nick was actually coming on board, turning down the most recent offer was easy.

As he sat down behind his large solid cherry wood desk that morning, he looked and felt successful. Medium height with a stocky build, his ruddy complexion was framed by thick salt-and-pepper hair. He looked a good five to ten years younger than his fifty-five years of age. Ray remembered surveying his office on that day. Built-in bookshelves were filled with leather-bound versions of classic novels he had purchased one by one from the Franklin Mint. He had never read any of them, but they looked great. And he thought he might start actually reading them as Nick took over more of the business. Big brass Stiffel lamps were on his desk and the side table, and two large oil landscape paintings, one of the Jersey shore in a storm, and one of Vermont in the summertime, adorned the walls.

"Mornin', Mr. Bowers. Coffee?" Christine asked. She always perked up Ray's mood, as she bounded into the office. Beams of sunshine streaming in through the window caught her long silky dark hair as she turned toward him, quietly chewing her gum. She was wearing the same outfit she usually wore: gray corduroy slacks, a long-sleeved black turtleneck under a button-down shirt with the top two buttons opened. Her broad, slightly mischievous grin revealed very white but slightly crooked teeth, which were curiously endearing.

He nodded as he picked up the daily inventory report. Suddenly his mood turned sour. Once again they were short on the Philco TV sets. This was their biggest account. Lately, sets had gone missing, and the inventory count that Philco provided was higher than the number Continental got when they did their own count.

"Christine!" he shouted out his open door. "What the hell is going on with this goddamn inventory?" He banged his fist on the desk for emphasis.

Christine hustled back into the office, closely followed by Nick. "Nick's here to see you. He asked yesterday for some time to discuss the inventory with you."

Nick was dressed in his usual manner, somewhat above the workers, but below the upper management: brown corduroy slacks, an orange hooded sweatshirt, and sneakers. The orange sweatshirt made him quite visible, and that is what he wanted. He figured that if everyone could see that he was out and about among the stacks keeping an eye on the workers' progress, forklifts, freight cars at the railroad siding, and other activity, everyone would be a little more efficient. In this manner Nick became ubiquitous.

Nick's eyes followed Christine out the door as he laid a clipboard on Ray's desk and turned it around for him to see. At least twelve sheets of inventory had been underlined, circled, and noted. Half of the notations were in Nick's handwriting and the others were Christine's. Ray was familiar with her left-handed slant.

"I've been thinking a lot about this, Dad. Three weeks out of the last five we have had a manual count of the Philcos that is about fifty less than they say we have. I looked at every factor I could. Chrissie helped me a lot. We compared the weeks we were short to the weeks we weren't and there was only one common factor--Josh Fox."

"Josh Fox? Who's that?"

"He's the Operations Supervisor we hired a couple of months ago. Used to work across the river at Cherry Hill."

"What's going on?"

"Might be as simple as Josh's not doing the math at the end of each night shift and comparing our count to the Philco numbers. That's what I did when I was in his boots. If there was a discrepancy I could deal with it then and there. He may just not be keeping close enough tabs on things. I'm not ready to say the TVs are walking off by themselves somehow."

Ray knew he needed to talk to Josh. He watched Nick's orange sweatshirt heading briskly down to the floor. Ray knew that his son was a dedicated man after his own heart. He had no idea that this would be their last conversation. Up to this point, Ray's recollection of the day was bearable. But the rest of it became surreal and increasingly bizarre. The last thing he wanted was to keep replaying the scene in his mind, but it wouldn't go away.

Ray had not been to Josh's office before. It was a small space, sparsely furnished with Josh's metal desk facing the door. Two folding chairs were placed in front of the desk. Behind Josh the entire back wall of his office was Plexiglas looking out over the warehouse floor, from which much of the activity could be observed.

"Mornin' Josh," Ray said as he walked over to him with a businesslike smile and outstretched hand. Josh accepted it warily. "You got a great view from here, don't you?" "That's why they call it The Control Room," he replied, trying to figure out why Ray was there.

Ray was momentarily fascinated by the view and all of the activity. There were several workers just under the window. Off to the left side a railroad car was being loaded up. Straight ahead was a huge scaffold, at least thirty feet high, in front of a large stack of crates containing Philco TVs. There was no one on it, and he wasn't sure what it was doing there. He made a mental note to check it out.

"Josh, tell me about your inventory process," he began, hoping that Josh would volunteer that he had noticed the discrepancy, and would provide an explanation.

As Josh began talking, Ray's eye caught Nick's orange sweatshirt as it came into view through the Plexiglas. He was having an animated conversation with Christine. Nick was looking straight at her, but her eyes were cast down. For a moment, he put his hand on her shoulder, and she put her hand on top of his. She moved back, and disappeared into the stacks, followed by Nick. A few minutes later he re-emerged by himself.

"I've been really bothered by the shortage, Mr. Bowers." Josh's answer brought Ray's attention back to him. "I've done a couple of things to..." Ray's comprehension of what Josh was saying began to fade as he watched Nick, clipboard in hand, climb up the scaffold. As Josh went through his new checklist of things he would be doing in the next week, Ray became more and more focused on Nick, who was now on the top of the scaffold, his orange sweatshirt a bright contrast to the gray crates behind him. Despite the absence of any safety rail, Nick seemed quite steady as he wrote on his clipboard. When the big Clark forklift, also orange in color, first entered the scene from the right, Ray's mind immediately flashed back to the toy forklift Ray had given Nick as a little boy. He loved that little orange toy. Ray wondered why it had taken so long to convince Nick to come to work for him.

At first it looked like the forklift was heading toward the railroad car being loaded up on the left side of the floor, but it seemed to be moving very fast. Suddenly it veered to the right and headed directly toward the scaffold. Ray could only watch in horror as the scene unfolded before his eyes. When the forklift finally made contact, the scaffold immediately began to disintegrate. Ray remembered the rest of the scene in slow motion. For a moment, Nick seemed suspended in space with no structure underneath him. He slowly pitched forward, his arms flailing at the air. He held onto his clipboard at first, but he finally let it go as he accelerated toward the cement floor. He hit the floor head first, then his body was completely enshrouded by his orange sweatshirt. Horrified workers quickly rushed to the scene, their mouths making sounds that Ray couldn't hear. Nick's body was motionless. A small pool of blood expanded outward from his head. The forklift had come to rest nearby, and the operator ran over to the crowd around Nick.

Ray could not remember much after that, although snippets of the scene continued to haunt his memory. He remembered Christine throwing herself on Nick's inert body. Someone must have taken charge, because Ray had no idea who called the ambulance, or who had initiated the resuscitative efforts. He did remember the white plastic sheet being put over Nick's body. Although he didn't remember calling Joan, she did, and it was all she could do to drive in to pick him up, and go over to tell Julie what had happened. All of this ran through Ray's mind yet another time as they drove toward the Creighton Funeral Home through gathering storms on that horrible Friday in April. He did the best he could to put it out of his mind as he and Joan entered the viewing room.

Julie immediately noticed Ray and Joan as they walked in. Many others did also, and the volume in the room decreased, allowing Creighton's canned music to re-assert itself. Something in a minor key from Gustav Mahler had replaced the Mozart. Julie just wanted to get this part over, so it seemed to take forever for her in-laws to sign the book and come toward her.

It actually took about twenty minutes for the Bowers to make their way through the people from Consolidated to get to Julie. She had so much to say, so much to ask, that her mind was swirling by the time they reached her. Nick had given up a job that was admittedly financially insecure for one which, as it turned out, was physically perilous. Why hadn't they known how dangerous this job would be? She felt as if Nick had been pushed into it without full understanding of all of the ramifications.

Joan gave Julie a big hug. It was sincere, and it felt that way to Julie. Despite her misgivings about Joan, at this moment they shared a major loss. Ray also gave Julie a hug, but to her he seemed much more detached. Even as he whispered to Julie about his sorrow for her situation, and Jake no longer having a father, she saw his eyes scanning the room. At that moment she had a thought that would bother her for the rest of her life: at least I won't have to deal with this asshole now that Nick's not around.

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Ray's overburdened mind was having trouble dealing with it all. As he and Joan came up to Julie, he really had nothing to say that he felt could comfort her. What was upsetting him the most was the question of how such a thing could have happened. There had never been such an accident at Consolidated. In fact, he had never heard of anything similar occurring anywhere else. Just as he and Joan approached Julie, he saw Josh Fox, with whom he had witnessed the terrible accident. In all of the incessant mental replays of that scene, he seemed to remember that Josh was not as devastated by the horrible scene. All of this he recalled when he saw Josh at the funeral.

As he came up to Julie, Ray noticed that Josh was not alone. He was with an older man. He made the connection at once. He was Morrie Fox, owner of a small warehouse, Cherry Hill Moving and Storage. They were not a real competitor for Ray. They were mostly a residential operation. They had no real commercial presence, nor did they have railroad siding or the ability to aid in distribution of products. But it was a small world, and people in warehousing, particularly Ray, all knew each other.

Even as he stood holding hands with his son's widow, his tormented mind was struggling. Seeing Josh together with Morrie Fox, he made a connection. After spending what he thought was an appropriate amount of time with Julie, Ray went over to Josh. Questions were still festering in his mind about this guy. Nick's last conversation with Ray was about Josh.

"Meet my uncle Morrie," said Josh. "Morrie Fox? Cherry Hill Moving and Storage?" Morrie nodded. He was a man of medium height, but looked to be about three hundred pounds. He was wearing a black suit that looked like he bought it when he weighed closer to two-fifty. He was breathing heavily and his forehead was sweating profusely. His thinning hair was slicked back over his bald spot and held in place by Vitalis. "Pleasure, Mr. Bowers. Josh speaks highly of you." His attempt at a smile revealed his yellowed teeth with a wide gap in the middle. He was looking Ray over very carefully as he shifted from side to side. "Sounds like you had a terrible week. Horrible accident!" he said, shaking his head and looking down at the floor.

As they continued the required small talk, Ray noticed that Morrie was beginning to sweat more. He was breathing more heavily, and his fetid breath was starting to annoy him. Something about Morrie alerted Ray to the fact that something didn't seem quite right, and it caused a shot of adrenalin to go through his system. It helped Ray to have an excuse to politely conclude this conversation when he saw Christine approaching him. She looked very different, something in her had changed. She wouldn't look directly at him as they shared an awkward embrace.

"He was so wonderful to be around. He meant the world to me, to all of us. I can't believe...."

"Christine, I have no idea what we'll do..."

She fumbled around in her purse and pulled out a small envelope with "Mr. Bowers" written on the front in her backhand script. She pressed it into his hand, turned away, and faded into the crowd. Ray put it in his coat pocket.

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During the brief service the weather had begun to deteriorate outside. Cold winds battered the poorly insulated windows of the chapel. As they left, the skies were ominous, and minor spitting of rain portended a deluge to come. Julie, Jake, and her mom hurriedly entered the black Lincoln Continental just behind the hearse for the procession to the cemetery. Ray and Joan got into the next car. Joan was quietly crying as she had been throughout. As the casket and flowers were being put into the hearse, Ray opened the note from Christine.

Dear Mr. Bowers,

I had to write you this note because I didn't know if I could tell you directly. Nick meant the world to me, and all of us. Right now I am very confused and I don't think I could face the warehouse. I have been talking to my sister in Boston who invited me to come and stay with her for a while. I think I'll do that. I'm sure you'll be able to find someone to take my place. Sorry. I'll keep in touch.

Christine

This caused Ray once again to remember Tuesday, this time beginning with the scene of Nick and Christine in the aisle beside the scaffold. "What's that?" Joan asked. "Nothin', honey. It's a note from Christine. She just said she needs a little time off." Ray tucked the note back in his pocket. A flash of lightning followed quickly by a clap of thunder brought him back to the moment.

The rain was beginning in earnest, as the procession slowly pulled away. Out his side window, Ray saw Morrie Fox waddling toward a white panel truck, with Josh at his side, coats pulled up over their heads against the rain. They scrambled into the truck. The rain was intense, and it was dark, making it hard to read the logo on the side of the truck. For a moment, the windshield wipers held back the deluge. A bright flash of lightning allowed him to make out "Morrie's TV and Appliances" as they slowly rode by.

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Ray's heart was never again completely in his work. Although he returned to the office on a Monday in early May, it could never be the same. Christine was gone, replaced by a frumpy, middle-aged assistant, Francine, who, although being very efficient, did nothing to lift his mood. Christine's sudden departure and his memories of Christine and Nick together just before the accident made him wonder if there had been something going on between them, but that was a that he didn't really want to entertain.

But it was on that Monday that it all fell into place. Ray had Francine bring him the employment record of the forklift operator involved in Nick's accident. It was strangely short; it seemed that his former employer was none other than Morrie Fox. Morrie had given an excellent recommendation for him, despite the fact he had only been at Cherry Hill for six months. Why would he have changed jobs so soon? It wasn't for any major increase in pay. A statement in the interview record said he wanted to on this side of the river, closer to family—but Consolidated was not that much closer.

The accident that killed Nick happened only a week after he started. At that moment Ray recalled seeing the sign on the van that Morrie had driven to Nick's funeral and he understood everything. Morrie wasn't just in the warehousing business; he was in the TV business as well. He was siphoning the TVs from Ray's warehouse to sell at his store, and Nick was getting too close to figuring things out.

Ray pounded his fist on his desk so hard it almost drew blood. Jaws clenched, he got up from his desk and walked over to the window. Swaying back and forth, hands thrust into his pockets, he stared intently into the distance for several minutes. Slowly his taut muscles relaxed, and his countenance changed. He walked back to his desk, deep in thought. Standing there, he reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. Deep inside it he found the tattered card of Gianni Schiavone. The first small smile on his face since Nick's funeral slowly emerged as he dialed Gianni's number. "Gianni! Ray Bowers here..."

MY WHOLE  
*Michelle C. Wright*

It had gotten to the point that I was sniffing his underwear. I wanted a wedding and a baby; and there I was with my nose to the crotch of my fiancé's boxer briefs. My friends believed that all the signs were there and that I should leave him. But I wasn't so certain. His cell phone was never locked. The one reddish-blond hair on the seat of his car could have been from his sister's dog. And surely that sweet scent perched on the shoulder of his shirt was a medley of shaving cream and Spring Rain laundry soap.

But then there came to be something on the back-end of that scent on his shirt—a foreign, feminine aroma, seductive like jasmine or patchouli. It was the hint that lingered. It held me in a perpetual daze. I couldn't work. I couldn't sleep. Coupled with his frequent business trips, the scent, even though it was the most fractional of an incalculable trace, represented more than a possibility of his cheating. It became my keeper.

Whenever the scent waved, I followed. It steered me to his laptop and car; I searched both. It directed me to my recipe book; I cooked his favorite Mediterranean dishes. It guided me to his office; I surprised him with a visit. It told me to comb his bank statements; every day online I did. The night he called saying that he wouldn't return until tomorrow (he never went out of town on Wednesdays), the scent led me to his dirty clothes hamper and pointed to his last night's underwear. Without question, I brought them to my face and sniffed for the smell of another woman.

It was a low point, yes.

"I just want to know for certain," I confessed to Marna, the elderly woman who lived in the condo on the ground floor. I visited Marna on most evenings when I was alone. The colored candles that she lit and the garlicky smells from her kitchen competed with the scent, abating its control over me. But I could see it by the door, waiting, readying to give me my next command. "God what is happening to me?" I began to cry.

"Dearie, here." Marna handed me a tissue. Although she was somewhat senile, Marna was still a lady. She had fixed her white hair in a purple scarf, wore golden earrings made of peacock feathers and green eye shadow.

"I love him so much." I cried into the tissue. "But I just want to know the truth."

"Are you sure?" she asked, handing me another tissue and then another. "Do you truly want the truth?"

Her question or maybe it was her urgent tone sunk to my stomach, stopping my tears. Did Marna know something that I didn't? I lifted my face from the wad of tissues and stared at her. The light from the many candles penetrated the deep lines on her face, making her entire countenance glow like golden crinkles. Marna knew something.

"Easy, pretty girl." She smiled softly and then pointed across the room. "These old eyes have trouble making out those posies there. I promise they haven't seen the proof you need to determine whether he's unfaithful or not." She sighed and patted my leg. "Sometimes when the heart's on the line, especially a young heart, it's easy to ask for one thing but want another." She grabbed my hand and held it surprisingly tight. "Do you truly want the truth?"

"I'd pay any price," I said desperately, knowing I lacked the resources to back my words. I had wanted to hire an investigator online, but the scent teased me daily about how I hadn't made enough commission lately to have a manicure let alone to retain a worthy spy. I heard the scent by the door, snickering, and looked, seeing it pointing at me. "I need help, Marna. I smelled his dirty underwear tonight."

Marna's eyes widened, increasing the ripples across her brow. "Dearie, you've got it something terrible." She smacked her thin lips. "Yes, I think it's time." She motioned for the pad of stationary and pen on the coffee table.

"Time?" I took up the pad and pen and started to hand them to her. "Time for what?"

"An old fashioned dinner." She gestured for me to keep them. "You write."

Even the scent by the door perked its ears. I put the pen to the paper as Marna pursed her lips.

"Let's start with a lettuce mix. That already prepared kind in plastic."

"Bagged salad?" I asked eagerly.

"Yes, bagged salad. Get two. And mayonnaise. A large jar."

I wrote as Marna called out items, things that became more and more ordinary than I had hoped. I wanted domestic magic, a secret recipe for a truth-telling stew that had been passed down from woman to woman over the ages, baked goods laced with a homemade, low-grade sort of poison that made a man drool and rendered his sexual equipment inoperative for a day or two. But Marna seemed to be making up the list as she went on. She decided to make a pot of beans and ham and needed bananas, bread, and toilet paper, copious amounts of toilet paper because you could never have enough toilet paper in the house. The scent had curled up by the door and closed its eyes with a smirk.

"Now where was I?" Marna looked dazed.

"Toilet paper."

"Oh yes. I'm sorry. I tell you, appreciate your young parts because time sure makes a mockery of them later."

"That's okay." Marna might have been old, but she was always sweet to me, listening to my misery and giving me time away from the scent.

"So is this all you need?"

"Of course not, silly girl." Marna smiled and shook her head. The peacock feathers swung from her large lobes. "Two things, smoked ham hocks and a whole da dreval."

"A whole what?"

"A whole da dreval." She spelled it for me and then said, "It's for you, for your troubles anyway."

"Alrightie then." I tore the list from the pad, not knowing if this was what I had been praying for or if Marna's mind had fizzled out like one of the candles on the coffee table. Not wanting to insult her, I didn't ask. I just told her I'd go in the morning; and she directed me to Southdale Market. At that I wasn't too thrilled. Southdale was the dumping ground for whatever normal stores didn't want or couldn't sell, specializing in scratch and dent and black-market produce. My fiancé refused step into the place after suffering the most horrible stomach flu.

"Be careful," Marna warned as I stood and folded the list. "Even at Southdale, da drevals can fetch a high price the more involved it gets. Get only a whole."

I nodded reassuringly, seeing that the scent had stirred since I last checked. It was crouched down with its tail whipping back and forth. Reluctantly I wished Marna goodnight and left with the scent chasing after me. Its wild growls echoed louder than swamp frogs. It was particularly agitated tonight and tried to claw me several times to keep me from sleeping. But I kicked it from bed, not caring how much it whimpered and wined. For a change I had other things on my mind.

What the hell was a da dreval?

It took three rounds in Southdale's parking lot the next morning to secure a spot, which by then, I felt my stomach turn. Thursdays were 2-for-1 Day, per the large sign; and the market was overrun with discount shoppers, and worse yet, tourists. I plopped my purse in the seat of the cart that a Mexican man offered me on my way in, a wobbly-wheeled cart that went clunk-shunk, clunk-shunk as I pushed it. Armed with Marna's list, I passed through the double doors in a down-surge of hot air and entered of the flea-market of foods. Bargain shoppers abounded under the dim, artificial lights, pushing around babies and groceries in other wobbly-wheeled carts. One baby had a worried look on her chubby face as if trying to warn me, "Don't shop here." The scent must have read the same thing. It hugged me and closed its eyes.

Keeping my cell phone close, I headed to the produce section. I planned to shop for Marna's things while looking out for the da dreval, if it even existed. A quick internet search offered nothing but the suggestion to search the term "dare devil" instead. I weaved around swarms of shoppers through a labyrinth of fruits and vegetables and found the bagged salads. A mother and her son were there; the mother was trying to find the right leafy mix.

"If you're good boy while Mommy shops," she said, rooting through the shelves. "Then we'll go to the waterpark after."

"Is Daddy coming too?" the boy asked, waving a white feather in his hand.

"Of course, Daddy's coming too."

"Yeah, family time!" The boy waved the feather and then pointed. "Look Momma! The Easter Bunny!"

Dropping two bags of salad into my otherwise empty cart, I heard the gleeful gasps of others and stretched up on my toes. All I could see were two white ears sticking out from the horde of excited parents and children. Going after the bananas, I was able to view flashes of white fur, a pastel-colored vest, and one mammoth basket of eggs. I selected a bunch of bananas, eyeing those eggs. I don't know why; they were golden and glittery, shiny treasures in a supermarket maze of nothingness. The Bunny must have connected with my despair because, as I was backing out, I saw his smiling face heading in my direction. The wave of admirers parted. The Bunny came and handed me a golden egg.

"Thank you," I said.

The Bunny clapped his furry paws. His large eyes were the precise color of milk chocolate.

"I want one!" the children shouted.

Golden egg in hand, I felt accomplished and went and selected bread with a grin on my face. It was silly, I know, but good feelings shouldn't be shunned merely for their lack of complication. Even the scent seemed renewed. It was bouncing off the cart and shelves, swinging on my purse straps. I checked my phone quickly, making sure that the signal had not been lost inside the market. Seeing four green bars, I knew it hadn't, which bothered me. My fiancé usually tried to reach me by now, telling me that he got in okay.

I decided to go the meat department and headed in that direction, but got caught in the thick stream of shoppers in pursuit of the Bunny. The scent went crazy, jumping up and down, bouncing off my head. I knocked into a tower of toilet paper, which luckily I caught before the whole thing came down.

"Can't take you anywhere," I said under my breath, but the scent didn't care. It had found a treat and was straddling the frontend of the cart, gnawing away at something.

Trying to ignore it and my silent cell phone, I began zooming around shoppers and their heaping carts. "I'm sorry." "Excuse me." "Coming through." For the most part it worked, although the scent wouldn't stop clinging to me, I managed to find everything except for the smoked ham hocks. The butcher told me to give him a few minutes to package more. I took this as the perfect opportunity to inquire about the da dreval. Despite his bushy hair and smattering of blood on his white coat, the butcher looked to be a knowledgeable, reasonable man; however when I asked, he said, "No da dreval here" and disappeared behind the swinging door before I could determine if he thought me crazy.

Not ready to give up, I decided to try the vendor section in center of the market. It had expanded since I had last been to Springdale, three to four regular aisles wide. People of all ages sat on lawn chairs or stacked crates around packed tables in between bins of oranges and other souvenir-type things like sunhats and baskets. A few folks on the end saw me and smiled. Some were waving white feathers.

"Do you have a da dreval?" I figured if it was anywhere, it would have to be here.

A petite lady asked, "Sweetie, do you mean a dreidel?"

"No, a da dreval," I said.

The petite lady and everyone around her shrugged.

"Da dreval?" I repeated, walking further down. One man who could barely stand upright waved me over and led me to his crates.

"Da dreval," he said and pointed to a pile of tee-shirts with the cartoon Tasmanian Devil.

Frowning, I shook my head and kept going. The front wheels of my cart started squeaking on top of the clunk-shunk, clunk-shunk sound. All that aggressive shopping had taken a toll. I didn't know what had gotten into the scent. "Stop it," I scolded. It kept trying to eat the merchandise. Again I checked my phone; no text, no call, which irritated me. Why hadn't he called?

There was activity at the end of the aisle; the Bunny and his faithful followers had made their way to the vendor section along with a new friend—a six-foot white chicken. "Conejito de Pascua!" some cheered. The Bunny was doling out his golden eggs, bringing large grins to little faces. Already having a golden egg, I started to turn around, seeing the scent vaulting off a mound of melons. I flung out my arm, fearing an avalanche. The scent landed by the cart, and as if by calculation, stuck out its wicked tail right as the Bunny came by.

White fleecy feet wobbled and kicked out. The crowd gasped. The Chicken rushed to help but didn't arrive in time. The basket and golden eggs went airborne. And although the smile never left his furry face, the Bunny crashed onto the floor—and in one motion, his big-eared head popped off, exposing the pimply-faced adolescent inside. Red-faced and covered in sweat, the poor teen lunged to regain his happy head; yet the floor offered no traction; and he slipped again.

Small children began to cry. Their parents brought them into their arms, hiding their innocent eyes, not thinking to stop the smiling head from rolling. It rolled and kept on rolling. After several attempts, the adolescent made it to his over-sized feet, largely thanks to the hard shove from the Chicken. The two took off, chasing after the runaway head to the sound of high-pitched sobs. Having just retracted my arm from the melons and standing at the hub of the mishap, everyone looked at me and glared. I scowled at the scent, which batted its eyes at me and smiled as if proud. We left the vendor section immediately.

I wanted to disappear, to check out and go home, and would have done so if it wasn't for needing to return to the meat department for Marna's beloved smoked ham hocks. "Heathen," I called the scent. It had laid its head down in the cart and gazed up at me looking pathetic and pale. At the meats, I decided to inquire one more time about the da dreval and did so as politely as I could; but when the butcher said again, "no da dreval here," I wanted to wing each and every item inside my crappy cart at his bushy head. I narrowed my eyes. "Do you know where I might find a da dreval?"

"Do you truly want one?"

"Yes," I nodded emphatically.

"Follow me."

"What?" I struggled to understand. "Why did you lie to me?"

"No lie," he said. "Didn't know you truly wanted one."

The butcher led me through the swinging doors and told me to leave my cart with a few others. I refused. There was no way that I was leaving my cart now.

"Suit yourself," he said. "But there is one rule . . . no photos, video, or media of any kind. No going beyond the designated area. No leaving without payment agreement. And do not put your fingers in the cages." His dark eyes stared at me unblinkingly.

I nodded.

He stared longer.

"Okay, sure," I said, realizing that he was seeking verbal confirmation. I wanted to ask how all those things was one rule—there seemed to be at least five or six to me—but he didn't look like the type that appreciated extended conversation.

"This way." He gestured with incredibly large hands.

I followed him, pushing the cart through two rooms. The second door blasted me with horrible air. "God what is that smell?" At first it seemed to be a massive amount of garlic; but then there was something organic about it, like something rotting. The scent started shaking uncontrollably and took to hiding under a package of toilet paper.

Down a well-lit hall and into a warehouse where at the far end workers sorted boxes of fruits and vegetables, I followed the butcher. The floor and a nearby wooden table were wet. Someone had recently sprayed them down. The butcher pointed to the cages on the opposite wall. "Da drevals over there."

I pushed the cart towards the cage fronts and stopped, trying to refrain from gagging. There were hundreds of them. With my hand over my mouth and nose, I went to one of them on the end, struggling to process how horrendous it truly was. A frog and a prehistoric bird mated; and this was their Frankenstein offspring. A large, crusty beak affixed to an amphibian face, clusters of barnacle-like warts followed by dirty, drippy wings. Never had I seen such a vile creature; except for its magnificently sad eyes. They were silvery black saucers, reminding me of the shoplifting mirrors in dingy corners inside gas stations on the bad side of town. Although it was impossible to look at this caged thing without disgust, it was its eyes that horrified me. In them, I could see a contorted image of my face.

"This is a da dreval?" I asked.

A couple dressed in business attire held their eyes as wide as mine. "Yes, aren't they beautiful?"

"You want a whole one, yes?" the butcher asked.

"Oh I . . . well, they were first." I pointed to the crazy people who found beauty here.

The couple shook their heads. The butcher explained, "No, they are waiting. You want one or not?"

"Um," I gazed at the butcher, trying to determine what I would do with it? An old-fashioned dinner? Was Marna out her frigging senile mind? I wanted to call my fiancé and scream. Do you know what you have done to me? If he hadn't come home with that scent on his shirt, then I wouldn't be standing in front of this nightmare. The awful smell, definitely rotting flesh, was the only thing grounding me in reality. Then I thought of something that could save me. "How much?" I asked, knowing that whatever price he quoted I would not be able to pay even if I wanted to.

"No cost," the butcher said, "as long as you keep it forever in your possession and share with those who truly want."

"Oh." Not a single person I knew would want this. "And if I leave?" I thought it was a fair question; but when the couple turned and looked at the floor, I guessed it wasn't a question to ask.

"No leaving." The butcher glanced at two bulky guys at the door. He cracked his large knuckles on his large hands. "You said you truly want a da dreval. Here it is."

The fear of this thing using its dagger-like beak to make an old-fashioned meal out of me was no longer a concern. I wanted this grocery shopping trip to end. "So bring it to me," I said.

He opened the cage and grabbed the thing by its neck. The feathers like rungs of fungus on a rotting tree broke from it in clumps. Slowly he brought the fetid thing to me and set it on the handle of my cart. My pulse was in my throat watching as it balanced itself by its razor-sharp claws and blinked with strange eyelids that gathered at the sides of its eyes rather than the top. As the lids retracted back, it tilted its crusty head and looked at me, or rather into me. Staring into its gigantic eyes, I walked into inky blackness with a light ahead. I continued towards that light not knowing what terrors were behind—beside—all around me. I had to get to that light; for in it, I saw my fiancé's face. He was somewhere laughing, saying something. I could not hear what; the projection was so vivid that I did not need volume.

I watched him, my fiancé, sitting on a reclining chair. He was shirtless. The sky behind him was the deepest blue; and the early afternoon sun lit up his face until a sudden shadow eclipsed the brightness. My fiancé smiled and closed his eyes. I watched another woman climb on top of him and kiss him passionately. The woman was naked and had reddish-blond hair.

"No!" I cried, choking on rancid air. "Take this thing away. I can't see anymore. What evil is this?"

The butcher rushed to me. "No evil," he said.

"Just a da dreval. You said you truly want one, yes? Do want a half? Would that make it better?"

"Please," I uttered. I could barely breathe. "Yes, please."

He jerked the frog-bird from my cart and carried it away by its neck. It did not resist or make a sound, just hung limp in the butcher's grip, staring at me. The butcher flung it on the table and began to pull its wings and legs a part. From a drawer, he produced a meat cleaver bigger than I had ever seen; it made even his hands look small. Still the creature made no motion just held its gigantic gaze on me. As the butcher raised the blade high above his head, I saw tears fill those silver saucer eyes. The frog-bird was crying. I looked into my cart and saw that the scent that had been haunting me day and night for months was gone.

"Stop!" I shouted.

It was too late. The cleaver came down and split the frog-bird in two, well almost. The sound of the cleaver hitting wood, the cracking of bones and beak, was nothing compared to the squawk the frog-bird made upon being struck. It shot into my ears and echoed inside my head. Even the workers on the other side of the warehouse came to a momentary halt. I covered my eyes as the butcher sawed through the tendons and ligaments that still connected the fleshy parts. The frog-bird started to caw—a gurgling, fluttering sound. Looking through my fingers, I saw that the two severed wings were more than animate, but flapping wildly, wobbling around like a top on a broken axis.

One of the parts began to thrash about, shattering its one saucer eye. Its mass expanded and contracted. It continued to bash its bloody self onto the table with such force that I could no longer see it despite my proximity. It fell over, newly formed, smaller but whole, and pristine white. It shot upright and started to chirp—while the other part laid sinews showing and dead.

The butcher stood back, cleaning the blood off his face with a towel, and smiled. He brought the bird creature to my cart. "Half a da dreval," he said.

It was pretty thing with a twitter that was soft and easy. Hearing it lightened my mind like a few glasses of good wine. A breeze blew, making my hair dance, tickling my neck. I walked barefoot on a beach with my fiancé. Although we weren't holding hands, I felt so close to him as if we were in the darkest of rooms yet shared the only light. We sat and watched distant waves rolling along the horizon. He told me how he loved me, but how he had met another. He assured me that it hadn't gotten physical or anything. He was just confused and needed time, just a short separation.

Tears ran down my cheeks. How could this be? If he loved me enough to be honest, then we were going to make it, right? "Please stop! Stop it from singing," I cried. "I can't hear anymore."

"A quarter of da dreval?" the butcher asked, taking the bird by the throat. "Will that make it better? Yes?"

"Please," I said, wiping the tears from my face.  
"He can't leave me. I love him so much."

The butcher gestured for a stocky man to come; and the man did without hesitation. Each held onto the wings and began to unfold them midair. It was an incredible span—six feet or more. The bird jabbed at them fiercely, but they had already taken up the ends of its wings and begun to pull. The bird writhed and squawked as they stretched it, doubling, tripling its size. The men grunted, digging their feet on the floor. White feathers floated down, a white downy rain. The business couple went and quickly collected the feathers from the floor while the bird shrilled out, telling me how my fiancé still loves me, that I should fight for him, that all I need to do was believe.

"Stop!" I shouted.

I was not in time. Upon the most gruesome crackling snap, the butcher and the man ripped the bird apart. They flung the two chunks on the table; and no sooner than they did, the torn chunks began to flap about. Cleaver in hand, the butcher chopped twice, thump, thump; and though they were not precisely the same size because the butcher's precision had been undermined by the difficulty of slashing through such zealously moving targets—there were four.

A war broke out. Each part rammed into the other, jabbing ferociously, using bone and cartilage as weapons, sending blood and tissue to the floor. The chunks fought until only one remained, which thrashed about in a stormy blur. Its mass expanded and contracted. Then it fell to the table, whole, new, and absolutely gorgeous, smaller but with the brilliant plumage of a peacock. It jumped up, pecking around, eating the carcasses of the motionless, murdered others.

"Bring it to me," I said, not wanting to wait until the butcher cleaned himself.

Without delay, he did. "A quarter da dreval," he said.

Although a tendon connected to a sizable piece of flesh dangled from its beak, so striking was this cobalt creature that I wanted to embrace it. It smelled like the cake batter my grandmother made from scratch. I gazed into regal eyes and listened, waiting to be taken to another place, to forget the scenes and sounds I had thus far witnessed. It lifted its sea-green head and sucked on the tendon, bringing the muscle to its mouth. It opened its exceeding jaw and swallowed it; and as if by invitation, it widened its magnificent mouth for me to put my head inside.

I did; and the sights and sounds I experienced there were incredible. My fiancé had been planning a surprise anniversary party for me. I saw us happy, doing household chores together, grocery shopping, watching movies, walking on the beach, laughing. Our wedding would be in the fall; our babies, twins, would bless us late next spring. And sex was better than most people dream. He loved me . . . and only me. How had I ever doubted?

Of course, I took my da dreval home that instant. It rode in the precise spot where the nasty little scent had been. Marna couldn't have been more wrong about the high price. I got a quarter of a da dreval basically for free, which is the reason I stopped visiting Marna. Sadly, similar to how the children learned that the Easter Bunny is actually a sweaty, pimply-faced adolescent, I realized that old people are not nearly as wise as they are made out to be.

I did, however, deliver her groceries. I am not without gratitude. I left the bags at her door along with the golden egg and rang the bell. Marna called and left several messages to thank me and invite me to dinner. But I didn't respond. I was busy planning my honeymoon—an island getaway. My fiancé's suspicious behavior stopped. The evil scent hasn't returned; and I haven't smelled his dirty underwear again.

On her last message Marna went on and on about how she was worried about me and hoped that I was safe and happy; and I truly am. On the nights when I'm home alone—my fiancé works unbelievably hard and his overtime hours have doubled lately—I have my quarter of a da dreval to keep me company. He's my whole. It opens its gorgeous mouth; and I crawl inside. And although my skin has developed a few open sores and I don't see much of my friends anymore, I can't think of a better place I'd rather be.

THE JOURNEY OF A MILLION APPLES  
*Christian Riley*

At the commencement of a tender existence, one-million apples now litter the massive canopies from which they were cultivated in. They are found in suspension, with an array of colorful smiles and brilliant flavors, all deemed glorious to the hunger of a morning sunrise. And as a motley of gasping vehicles comes to a stop over dust and gravel, a thousand men pour out and greet these apples with a warmth all their own. They descend upon the orchard like an army of ants.

These men bring with them long sticks and tall ladders, as they begin their harvest dance of picking and plucking, sifting and sorting, and ultimately, the careful placing of these ripe fruits into the worn canvas of favorite sacks. Upon inspection, many of these apples are found to be lost into the soil with which these men easily wander. Some are observed lounging over patches of soft grass, healthy and golden, like miniature effigies of their mighty creator. Others are discovered in pits of mud, cheerless and desperate as their faces are caked-over with a dirty husk. Knowing that a good bath would render the promise of a delicious crunch, these gems are gratefully recovered and deposited into the vast jumble amongst their siblings.

And yet still, there are even a smaller few who are offered nothing but the saddest of glances from these working men. Their faces pocked and cratered by a thousand pecks of cruelty, these apples are simply left alone to hang in the cold Autumn breeze.

Borne away on weary strides, the apples are lifted and poured into the open arms of ancient wheeled crates. They get jounced and bustled amidst their own hurried laughter, as these machines ramble along over uneven roads. After a short and comfortable ride, the apples are then dumped into great tubs of water, where they are sluiced of the grit and grime from which they have carried thus far.

A brown cardboard box welcomes them next. Here they are packed away and hoisted up onto large trucks, which carry them off onto a swift and dull highway. While on this journey, some of these apples discover for the first time a certain heartbreak. One that yields a great lurch into the air, followed by a shattering explosion of juice and pulp onto the unforgiving pavement below. At the end of this long trip, each box gets pulled off the trucks in a rather unceremonious manner, leaving the apples in awe over this strange sense of melancholy they are now feeling. From here, they get dipped and sprayed to the likeness of a common desire, and once again packed into another cardboard box, then hoisted up onto another truck. Except that now, the apples find themselves separated from what they once considered were familiar faces.

This final trip for the journey of a million apples takes them to a destination which honors their respective capacities. Most will be thrown to the side on account of the bruises they've acquired from their great passage, resulting in the predictable fate of further bruising, and the ultimate finale of becoming pounded and mashed into oblivion. Others shall be regarded with high esteem, as they are gently crowded together into tidy rows, displayed for, and pondered over by nameless prospectors. But yet again, a smaller few will become mounted like trophies, enameled with a sweet stickiness, then placed into postures reminiscent of the days of their youth... And theirs is a destiny envied by all, as they shall be adored and gaggled over by the gleaming spirits of little people.

## SUMMER SENSES

*David Frazier*

Smell fragrant flowers  
which bloom beautiful.

Taste vegetables garden grown.

Hear thunder in the distance, rumbling.

Feel cool raindrops  
hitting your face.

See crystalline orbs  
of morning dew upon grass green.

Make my summer senses keen.

## POET HUNTING

*B.T. Joy*

sometimes I go poet hunting  
which is not a reference  
to idle Sunday mornings spent  
searching for titles in the basement  
room of a second-hand bookshop  
rather I hunt poets  
the way one might a large mammal  
each unique, but plentiful  
enough that one would not  
be missed if captured  
I want to catch  
the poet's essence, that part  
that can be trapped in words, perhaps,  
but nothing else  
that part to which each stanza is a cell;  
each line, a bar  
neither the solitude  
nor the confinement concerns him  
the jail room is the same scriptorium  
where Wilde wrote the verses of a ballad;  
and the detainment camp, dark in snow,  
the same stage where Litten  
recited Thoughts Are Free  
at times I seek the poet actively  
through the shady hill-countries of the mind,  
over and between sunspots of allusion  
and pools as deep as secrecy  
and sometimes I strap  
that heavy carbine of analysis to my back  
and follow the markings of the black  
ink across the arctic page  
like a telling spoor in the white  
and naked earth  
but mostly  
I simply set a trap  
I bait my heart with praise  
and Rumi comes  
a wheeling musk deer; coat lined  
with the scent of paradise  
I bait my heart with absurd pain  
Bukowski stalks in, a white,  
cross-eyed, tailless cat; full of the strange  
wisdom of things breaking, and not broken  
I bait my heart with pride whatever comes  
I see Lucille Clifton; her large eye-glasses  
and her twelve fingered hands: coaxing me  
daring me to celebrate  
I bait my heart with death  
and Goethe arrives as a butterfly  
with resurrection  
and Eleanor Ross Taylor travels through me

on her musty old mare, back to a clean beginning;  
to her parents' kitchen in the country  
bait your heart with what you will  
there are poets with every appetite  
and once they enter, that trap that is the heart,  
there is no chance of parting  
for the one who came;  
for the one who beckoned

**THE BLOOD CONTRACT**  
*Leonard Tremen*

"That's right I'll buy your soul for 50 dollars," Jim said smiling as five homeless men gathered around him for crack money.

"What do I have to do for fifty dollars?" asked a sixth homeless man coming to join the fray.

"I just need a drop of your blood on this contract and I'll give you the fifty bucks."

To each of the homeless men this seemed like easy money and they gave their droplets, no questions asked. Three hundred dollars later, Jim had the contracts and was headed back to the corner on which the masked man sat.

Upon Jim's approach, the man who was facing the other way to look at a poster quickly turned to face him in a jolt like motion. "Welcome back Jim. I see that you didn't run away with the money I gave you," the masked man said.

"Indeed, I did as you asked purely out of curiosity," Jim said eyeing the masked man. There had been rumors of a magic man in the streets that made up the underbelly of Detroit. The rumor was that he could grant wishes if you did his bidding.

"Well Jim, what did you want for your service, money, or would you prefer something that would make even a billionaire jealous?" the masked man said emphasizing the word jealous in a slow raspy voice.

"You have my curiosity piqued," Jim said.

"Well then, take this contract home with you and when you wake up you'll have a surprise," the man said and handed Jim back one of the contracts. Jim looked at the man unable to tell if he was bat-shit crazy or if he really believes the shit, he is piping.

Jim nodded and headed back toward his apartment with a twinge of disappointment. There was nothing to say, magical contracts; the man was clearly a fraud.

"You doubt me, but not for long," the masked man said. Jim could hear the glee in his voice. Even with the mask on, it was easy to tell the man was smiling.

"I do," Jim said.

"Well, have you ever heard the term, put your money where your mouth is?" the man asked.

"I have," Jim, said now remembering how the man put up three hundred dollars to get that paper.

"Ok, well seek me out when you want more," the man said stepping away from the wall into the street. Jim went to say goodbye but a 16 wheeler was headed right for the crazy man. "Lookout!" Jim yelled as he ran towards the man trying to save him. The truck whooshed by and the man had apparently been caught or dragged. The strange part was, not a single drop of blood was to be found. Jim pulled out his phone.

"Hello, this is 911, what's your emergency?" asked the dispatcher.

"I just saw a man get hit by a semi-truck, on Old Woodward. I think he is being dragged under the truck. I can't find any trace of him."

"Where approximately on Woodward are you?"

"Near Elm Street," he replied.

At that moment, his contract's blood started glowing. It was a dark red, but now it was a glowing plasma color.

Jim dropped it and literally fell over when it fell to the floor.

The contract fell down right next to the phone as Jim fell on his butt. The magnitude of the brightness of the contract amplified as the moments passed. Its dull light turned into a brilliant inferno of radiance and then the contract emitted the most horrible sound. It sounded at first like metal grinding on metal then, as time passed it turned into a more human gut-wrenching scream.

The noise was beginning to draw attention Jim had to get off the street. Jim grabbed his cellphone and made a dash for a nearby alleyway as the scream continued at the same pitch.

It must be getting louder Jim thought as he continued to run.

There was a dark red light coming from behind him when he realized that the contract was following him, flying by itself through the air. As soon as he turned around, he stopped, gawking in amazement at the horrid sight of the now burning piece of bloody paper following him.

It seized the moment of gawking to latch itself onto Jim's right wrist. Jim screamed in agony as the burning paper welded itself into his flesh and became a giant letter resembling an e. While it took its shape; Jim writhed on the ground in agony. The hot paper had turned into a metallic substance and seared itself into his flesh.

After ten minutes passed, the police were checking out the corner from which he came investigating the scream. Jim himself was just able to stand. The e shaped symbol was hot against his flesh.

The police started down the alleyway towards Jim.

Jim walked up to them.

"That's a hell of a tattoo, you've got there!" the officer said.

"Thanks," Jim said, he had never been one for tattoos. He was trying to feign it being a tattoo to avoid telling the officers it was a demonic curse mark or whatever it was.

"Did you know anything about a scream?" asked the police officer.

"No,"

"We received a call about a scream, a madman running who fits your description and another call about a man hit by a truck,"

Jim looked around desperately trying to think of something to say.

"I called you about the guy hit by the car," Jim said.

The officers tone changed, "You know it's illegal to prank call the police?"

"I do, but" Jim began, suddenly interrupted by the officer.

"There were screams reported and I want to know what exactly is going on, you'll tell me or find yourself in the back of my squad car," the officer said.

Jim was sweating; he didn't know what to say when his arm started burning. His arm lifted itself up and pointed itself toward the squad car. The car began to shake violently and the police officer turned around and stared at it saying, "What the hell?" in surprise.

The car began to shake even more violently and the tires all popped then the glass shattered. Shards of glass flew everywhere.

The officer said "get down!" tackling Jim to the ground as the squad car that was apparently on fire, exploded sending metal shrapnel everywhere.

"Some weird shit is going on here," the officer said reaching for his radio to call for backup when a giant claw reached from out of the fire, snatched the officer, and pulled him into the fire. The officer screamed as his flesh began to cook.

Jim sat in horror as the even unfolded into a nightmare.

"It needs fire to be summoned," a voice said behind him.

It was the masked man. His demon mask might have held a bit of truth to it.

"Did you want to earn another power?" asked the masked man.

Jim fell to his knees. He never could have imagined anything so strange, so horrifying, so wonderful.

"How could I refuse," Jim said.

HE ANSWERED TO RAY  
*John Grey*

He chained his German shepherd to a rusty pole.  
His right arm was red where mosquitoes had bit.

He slept on a bunk with three empty bottles,  
in the wheel-less trailer with the weed-patch out back.

He drove an old Chevy whose guts churned and cracked.  
Every cop siren he figured meant him.

Each tattoo had its own forgotten meaning.  
He hung out. He panhandled. He dealt now and then.

Someone said he was a veteran with a bullet in his skull.  
Others' version - a dropout too crazy to serve.

Alcohol, drugs - he was all the time recovering from something.  
Or trying something new to recover from later.

Parents steered their kids away from him unless they had a point to make.  
He was exhibit A - there was no need for B.

He od'ed eventually, wasn't found for days.  
So if you add that to the years no one bothered looking...

ROSES  
*Patrick Faller*

The foyer was empty, which would have comforted Jersey, but Darby kept stumbling as they climbed three flights then shuffled the length of the hallway. While she struggled to shoulder him up, Jersey kept thinking about her mother, right before she'd slapped Jersey's face and ordered her not to come crawling back. That had been a month ago, but her cheek suddenly flared, as though her mother had reached across time to touch her again.

They reached the door. Darby scarred up the wood around the bolt lock's casing, rooting for the lock with the key, and she wondered how much he'd had to drink before coming to pick her up, how much drink it had taken him to get up the nerve to go and do what he'd done. Maybe it hadn't been enough, she thought, judging by his state. He'd gone slack-kneed as soon as his left foot touched the slip-slabbed pavement of the parking lot outside, and she'd had to pull him from the seat and shove him across the sunken lane where the rain always pooled to the door, and then up the stairs to where they now stood, fumbling about in the dim hallway, for any one of their neighbors to come out and see.

Taking his hand, and holding him though he tried to recoil from her touch, she asked as calmly as she could for the keys. He let go of them, then waited patiently to be let inside, quiet as mouse. His eyes were large and seemed to shudder in their sockets, shaking by twitching muscles. She let him in first, and shut the door behind her and turned the lock and then stood there pressing the door closed as if against some intruder, trying in vain to gather up a connected thought though all that came was the look on her mother's face:

Flat brow, eyes like dimes on a table.

"You're a child," she had said, then slapped Jersey's face. "All you can see is roses."

She nearly retched on the floor between her shoes, eroded by the fryer grease slicking the floor tiles, spattered and then smeared into the rust-red tiles by Jersey as she poured out the fries into the larger basin beneath the warmer lamps, made up large and small containers, and chicken nuggets for the kids' meals. The smell of her clothing cloyed at her nostril, her stomach churned again and she coughed and spat, unable to help herself.

Darby had dug the pistol out of the crotch of his jeans and slumped into an armchair by the window, and wordlessly watched as Jersey hurried into the bathroom and stared at the sink's drain. Nothing came up, and her stomach tilted but held. She still felt sick meeting her eyes in the mirror: dark-rimmed; round as quarters. She touched the glass, smeared a finger across the spotted pane, and figured she'd looked this way probably all night, from getting off at work to riding with Darby back through the town, past the nicer houses toward the shabbier ones, and past those to the trailer homes, abandoned and otherwise, where he parked and got out and was back into the car inside of three minutes, huffing.

"You know what I can't figure?" Darby said, gazing dumbly at the curtains when she returned to the main room, which was also the bedroom and the dining room. The kitchenette nestled just past Darby against the back wall. "Why he didn't get up and try to stop me. I walked into the place and he was just sitting there, and I pointed the gun at him and told him to stand up, but he didn't."

All but his buzz's edge had worn off now. Dragging his finger across his teeth, he looked at her—for the first time actually seeing her, it seemed, the way his eyes and lips shrank. With the gun, he pointed at the bed. "Sleep a while. You'll feel better after a nap."

She paced the room, hands bunching up in the waistband of her flannel shirt. The walls were textured, choked with speckled bits of paint. It had appealed at first; now the speckles looked like flecks of grime. "You want to wait?"

"What else?"

She stood there, at a loss. She should be packing clothes, running. She didn't have a car, and maybe three hundred in a bank account.

Darby closed his eyes, leaned back in the chair. "No one in this hole knows or cares one way or another what happened."

She hugged herself to keep from shaking. When she'd gotten into his car earlier, she hadn't known he'd brought the gun or that he had any intention of confronting the guy, someone Darby'd split a shift with at the plant, someone Jersey hadn't known from Adam. He and Darby had gotten into a fight a week before, out at a bar, over some misunderstanding, something the man had said about Jersey being jailbait, underage. Something, too, about Darby robbing the cradle. A few days later, the guy keyed Darby's Riviera, an old boat of car Darby'd kept running out of pride more than lack of means.

If Darby hadn't been laid off, maybe the guy's comment wouldn't have mattered so much.

"He died, didn't he? Did he die?" She stood over him, hands-on-hips frantic, stomach burning. She had sat in the car. She hadn't seen the man fall. "You're beyond-a-doubt positive?"

His hands trembled, the gun bobbing uselessly in them. "So what?"

"Well, we've got to leave, don't we? Shouldn't we run before this gets too hot—?"

"You're thinking about a cop show," Darby said, and laughed, then swore, then was silent.

Jersey hadn't been, but she was now: detectives piecing together clues, asking questions, getting rough with suspects if the situation called for it. She went over and sat on the bed, like Darby'd suggested, but her knees quivered with nervous energy, so she got up and walked into the kitchenette and stood there.

"Are we going to go? You were talking about Raleigh, your uncle and the construction work he could get you. Right? That was serious, right?"

Her neck went cold when she realized she'd turned her back on him. She didn't move when he spoke.

"Serious as a shooting," he said, and laughed again. "That was a while ago. Maybe it'd still be a go."

"What," she said. "Did you just think this would be like any other thing, it'd happen and the world would just forget about it?"

"Mom," Darby sneered.

Jersey winced. "Jesus, why did you do what you did?" she said, turning and walking back to him, stalling when she saw his hands still around the gun.

"That car was the one I'd always wanted, back when I was a boy, when my dad had one a few days and then wrecked it. A big boat of a car, but it had—" Darby stopped talking. "Whatever it had, now it's got a big key scar the length of it. It's got that and that's all it's got now. A key scar."

He met her eyes. "Maybe I took a little too much crap as a kid. Maybe—" he pulled up his shirt and showed her the scar across his stomach, "this isn't something I want to let happen to me again."

Jersey watched him lower his shirt and then watched him slide a finger along the length of the gun's barrel. It was a gun out of a cop show, a snub-nosed little pistol, like a lighter or a letter opener. She didn't understand how the scar and the asshole from the bar were connected, and she didn't know how to ask. Darby'd already made up his mind, anyway. He was past answering questions.

Cursing, and ignoring Darby's command to stop whimpering, she went to night stand, opened the drawer and reached inside, but there wasn't anything where the little satchel should have been, the piece and the glass beside it. A new ache settled into her stomach.

"No sky rockets in flight for you tonight," he said, lifting his eyes to the ceiling. "Not like it was yours to begin with."

"We bought it with money from my job." Again she tried sitting on the bed, but her hands were shaking to match the trembling in her knees now, and she could no longer stand the sight of the grimy wallpaper or the rattling of her heartbeat as it echoed up into her head. "I don't understand," she said, her voice a yelp she struggled to get back under control.

Darby looked dragged-out opening his eyes, hardly the same man whose hands knew where to touch a car's engine, how to make her come. He'd never hit her, never once shown her violence. Rumors were he'd once knocked a kid's jaw up into his head with one solid punch. The year before, he'd done time in juvie for dealing. He'd been with another girl then, but that girl had cheated on him, and Darby had got rid of her, and Jersey had been there to talk him through things. He'd danced with her once, in the living room of this very apartment—held her close and led her through what he'd called a rumba, and she was so young and so sick of her mother's boyfriends eyeing her every time she walked through the living room, she'd been grateful to be treated like something worth handling gently. Darby'd shown her how to fly. He'd been the one to put in her mind the idea she was more than just a girl, or a piece, or a hanger-on.

That gun in his lap made him something else.

"You said you could buff and sand a scuff out of paint job," she said, "that you'd done it yourself when you worked in the garage at Apollo."

"Principle of the thing," Darby said. The shade of the lamp fell across his cheeks. He didn't say anything, likely he knew that she knew what they were against now.

Then he lifted the gun, pointed the black notch of the barrel at her face.

"You'd go to the police," he said. "That's what you're saying."

"Cut the shit," Jersey said, heart hammering, sweat breaking out along the length of her spine. Tears came and she begged him to put the gun away. She backed into the bathroom and begged.

"I need you," he said, "and you turn into this." His lips quivered, and he lifted the gun barrel to his temple, hefted it there, but she saw his fingers all around the hilt, the trigger untouched. He puckered his lips and blew out a garbled spit-bang.

She took the gun off his finger, dropped it into the trash can, then pulled out the desk chair and sat, listening to the wash of traffic outside the window.

"What are we going to do," she said.

Darby stood, slipped around her into the bathroom. Through the door she heard the water running, the sound of one deep, dry heave. He came out of the bathroom and tugged the jacket on, asking her for the keys, finding them where she'd left them on the nightstand. Jersey followed him into the hallway, then stood at the stairs and watching him shuffle down the three flights to the main floor, pressing a hand to the wall to help him balance. From the window overlooking the lot, she watched him lumber into the side of the Riviera, leaning against it for support as he dug the keys out of his pocket and unlocked the door. He climbed in. The brake lights glowed as he backed the car into a wide turn, the front quarter panel inches from gouging the Mustang beside it. The old car shuddered between gears for a minute, and Jersey could see him struggling with the gearshift, his free hand pounding the steering wheel. He slammed his forehead against the wheel. He gripped the wheel and she could see him mouthing curses at the car and his lousy luck and his shit life. Soon, he got control of himself, figured out the problem, and then he pulled out of the lot and drove in the direction of the freeway.

She slumped against the glass wall and tried to catch her breath, struggled to keep from crying. She didn't want to be heard, in case anyone was around. She wanted to hide, and to stay hidden. Her own face in the mirror came back to her, and she couldn't imagine having to stand in front of another person, anyone besides Darby, and speak in her own defense. Her mother would have nothing to say to her, Jersey knew that. She had set the line and Jersey had already crossed it.

It had grown darker outside, and the sconces filled the hallway with wan light. Standing up on stiff legs, she walked back to the room. The door was open, resting against the jam. She paused, hand on the knob, and imagined opening the door and confronting the business end of the pistol raised to her face. But Darby was gone, and no one had come up the stairs or even entered the building since he'd left, so it was silly, hysterical fear, and once she realized this it was easy to shake it off and give the door a healthy shove. A wave of light from the sconces spread across the carpet of the empty room. Heartened by the sight of the room as she'd left it, she pushed open the door and crossed without hesitation to the trash can, reached down into its stained and cruddy guts and pulled out the pistol. Then she sat on the bed, cradling the gun in both her hands. It had an angular handle that fit the palm, slender trigger guard, a barrel with a sliding sheath she pulled back, finding a round still chambered. It was still warm from Darby's hands on it.

Her shakes temporarily forgotten, she turned over the pistol in her hands, her fingerprints marring the barrel's greased surface. She wondered what would happen if Darby did come back, what he would want to do, with her, with himself. She figured there would be one way, one right way—the way it had to be, now. Running made you guilty, was worse than an admission because it was an action and actions spoke louder, more loudly, than words did. Taking hold of the grip with her right hand, she pointed the gun at the center of the television's screen and then shifted her aim to the window, toward a stand of trees bordering the interstate. The gun fit perfectly into the groove of her palm, making it easy for her to imagine its kick were she to pull the trigger and send a bullet through the glass and out into the damp night air. She made the sound of an explosion in her throat, lifted the barrel to her lips and blew away the imaginary plume of smoke curling up out of the bore, then dropped the pistol to her lap, laughing in spite of herself—exhilarated by the childish gesture.

FLANK  
*Amy Ekins*

"Autumn is my favourite",  
I tell you, with a sniff of the air.  
"But then, you call it Fall, don't you?"

You nod slowly, your dark blonde hair bouncing  
like heavy branches about your face.

"I don't understand Fall –"  
(I'm sneering)  
"I mean, the leaves fall, yes, but  
in Spring, they bloom, and we don't call Spring bloom."

You shake your head, and the branches  
catch your nose with your slow swings,  
heavy as your eyes, which are brimming with rain.

"I think that's the problem with Yanks"  
(my voice is nasal)  
"always got to have the simplest things,  
else they get confused."

You have two blue streaks down your cheeks,  
and your lips are stained with sloe,  
snow-cold shivers passing through you  
with exhaustion.

"Do you call winter 'The Big Cold' over there?"  
(I'm going too far)  
"I bet you do. Gee mom, The Big Cold sure is cold!"

You stub the orange from a leaf with your toe  
until it's all mud, and rot, and not  
what it once was.

"And Christmas, what's that, Jesus Day?"  
You sigh, and pick a branch from the ground,

I presume to tap in weighted frustration  
at your own American-ness. Your difference  
is too much for me to bear, and I am bowed,  
like a sapling, with frost, and ice, and my helplessness  
has cast me Snow Queen in this scenario.

I watch as you flex your fingers around the bark,  
coughing, and pursing your lips, as though the taste  
of something bitter lingers about your mouth.

Then all is black, and searing, like a cow  
on a summer grill, criss-crossed about the cheek  
with lacerations. There is red flying in wobbling pebbles  
through the air and into the incinerator. It is my own.

I think the last thing I heard  
was "yee-hah".

A GHOSTLY POEM  
*Shirley Smothers*

I faintly hear someone  
say we are here at  
the cemetery at  
Inwood, Indiana.

I open my eyes  
and what do I see?

Ghost to my left,  
ghost to my right.  
Ghost in front,  
oh what a fright.

Ghost behind  
ghost all around.  
How did I get  
in this ghostly town?

I look at my hand.  
What is this?  
What do I see?  
Oh my,  
I can see  
right through me!

## THE OLD CINEMA PALACE

*John Grey*

It was a flea market for a time:  
costume jewelry starring  
Steve McQueen and Ali MacGraw.  
A little theater group took over,  
Neil Simon with a tattered screen backdrop  
and fifteen rows of gum-encrusted seats.  
A developer looked around, shook his head.  
Hadn't the heart to convert his first date  
into office space.  
It was vacant for ten years.  
Some people still brought it back to life,  
in their heads and via occasional conversation.  
Kids pressed their faces against its glass doors,  
saw nothing but half a concession stand  
and shreds of a poster for "Godfather II".  
They had no idea what they were seeing.  
It leaked. It ran with rats.  
Gilt peeled. A homeless man moved in,  
Two red velvet balconies  
were boarded up, declared unsafe.  
So much can kill the past:  
cheap glitter, bad acting, uselessness,  
ignorance, the rot of time -  
the list is long.  
If they've not hit your yesterdays yet,  
they're a coming attraction.

EERIE INWOOD  
*David Frazier*

Inwood, Indiana is where I lived.  
Grain silos and a saloon survive.  
Buildings once lively are  
Abandoned, rotting, and in disrepair.  
I roam from one to another  
Searching for one who killed me.  
I haunt the town, howling each night  
Carrying chains, one link for each year  
I have lingered on earth,  
They clink and clank as I float  
Through each empty structure,  
A mist is all I am.  
Fogged, thinly veiled, wispy apparition.  
Wandering, hunting,  
For a killer.  
I will haunt this town forever,  
Until I find the one,  
Who stabbed me with his knife.

## HELLO MISTER

*Brian Sullivan*

He was a scurrilous old man, disguised in plain clothes: a red plaid shirt, khaki pants and dusty beige work boots. He knew what he was doing. Those old guys, they've been around the block. They're manipulators and masters of every coarse and fine granule of living and dying. It was no accident. He looked. He knew the sum and substance of it. Of that I'm certain.

A deserted country lane on a bleak New England day? Of course. He knew the loneliness of it, and how to work it to advantage. He could have smiled. He could have raised an eyebrow. He knew their impact. He was scheming. He was testing. What did he want of me? My life? My soul? Not recognition of his existence; he wanted more. I'm sure of it.

He saw me coming forty yards away. He had all but to execute his plot. As I approached, he stepped off the road. How dramatic; histrionic if you ask me. He waited till my car was twenty feet away, and then he looked straight at my eyes. Straight. There was no warmth, no emotion in him, but for sure a devil was dancing on the point of a pin inside his head.

A look so blank, but he looked. I should have waved; I should have called his hand. What was the worst that could have come of it? Would he shoot me? Would he laugh? Instead, I didn't wave and passed him by. He got his way; his calculations were working. He's playing with my mind, twisting it in his grip, and planting in it doubt and guilt.

I saw him again two weeks later, walking the same road. Again, he moved his head and cast that same calculated look into my eyes. It locked my mind and body into a cramp. I tried to wave, but could not. I passed him by. His calculated look obsessed me. I could see it day and night. There would be no relief until I waved at him; for better or worse, for life or death; there would be no relief.

I drove that road on many days, but didn't see him again. I needed to wave and to see his reaction. Instead a devil dances on the point of a pin inside my head.

Unsuspecting on a cool autumn morning, he appeared on that road again; he, the old man spinning an insanity inside my head. The sight of him made me squirm. I hit the brakes. He saw me and cast his penetrating blank look straight into my eyes. To appease my sanity, I stopped, left my car, and accosted him. A spark appeared in his eyes that lured me to him. I could not discern the difference between his being an evil demon and my own demon devouring the sanity in my head.

He suppressed a smile as he began to speak, "Hello neighbor, I see you driving by on many a day." His voice was calming like that of every old man. The fever in my head began to abate.

"I live here," he said as he waved his hand across the expanse of a farm.

He put me at ease as I decided to take the time to talk with him and be neighborly.

He pointed his finger through the morning haze at some figures moving near a barn in the distance. "That is my family and some guests. We have lived here for many years."

My imaginings now seemed ridiculous. A calmness overtook me. I decided to talk with him and become his friend.

He gestured to me to walk with him. "Come and meet my family. I have mentioned you to them. They will be glad to meet you."

I walked with him along the edge of the farm and through a small opened gate.

"This is our little bit of heaven on earth," he said as he turned and swung the gate. As it closed, I saw the sign on the gate from the corner of my eye. It said Hell.

As the old man turned and looked at me, the spark that was in his eyes turned into an eternity of flames. His mouth opened wide into an enormous cavern of deathly fire. He sucked me into it and set me dancing on the point of a pin inside his head.

## THE BURIAL

*Andrew J Hill*

Four brass bugles sounded the death march at a countryside cemetery just outside the precincts of Stevens Point, Wisconsin. The red, sandy soil of the Upper Middle West was soft under the feet of the on-lookers, friends, and close relatives of the deceased. The sky bellowed forth with a grand feeling, coupled with the rays of the hot sun. The atmosphere hugged close to the grass, and below, the hole awaited the body and casket. Under the shade of a soft-needled pine-tree, a minister was giving the eulogy.

"We are gathered here today to bury a man of the military, a man of the church, the husband of a wife, the father of three children, a personal friend of mine, and a friend to many others . . . Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. . . let these simple words remind us of the comfort the Lord might bring us on such an occasion as this."

A shot of rifles broke through the quiet afternoon. The soldiers marked the death of their fellow soldier with these shots. Into the air, they fired. A simultaneous cry of grief broke out; the soldier's wife Margaret Humphrey wept aloud. The inner pain overflowed onto her face. She brought a handkerchief to her eyes, dabbing the tears away. She blew her nose. Her youngest daughter, Stacey, was holding her closely. As the casket was lowered, Mrs. Humphrey looked into the sky; she could not stand to watch the lowering of her husband's body into the earth. From dust to dust, she thought. Years in the church, service after service, hymn after hymn, and so this was her natural thought. Dust to dust.

The luncheon after the funeral ceremony was cheerful despite the triumph of death over Mr. Humphrey. He had lived his life well. As well as it could be lived. He fought in the Second World War, taking the wounded from the field of battle to military hospitals set up on the front. He served two years away from his wife, whom he had married six months before his departure. He returned a victor over the Germans, and the father of a two-and-a-half-year old son, Oliver. Oliver himself was now married to a beautiful wife, and they were both at the luncheon eating disinterestedly at one of the many tables spread with the food.

"My father was a good man!" exclaimed Oliver. "His unrelenting sense of loyalty has forever remained with me."

"Why, it's true," echoed his wife Ophelia. "Only last week, Oliver couldn't tell what he called a 'lie' to his employer, who had asked him to accomplish more than he could handle. He simply said, 'No, sir, I can't do all that. It's too much.' Why, you could've told him 'Sure, I'll do it,' and waited until he got on your case about finishing it too late." "It's true, it's true," repeated Oliver. "I just can't tell a 'lie.'"

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Thinking back upon the last year, Oliver's thoughts meandered. Ophelia's thoughts were entirely elsewhere. Her father-in-law, Mr. Humphrey, had loved his son very much. True. And this love had overflowed. It had overflowed onto Ophelia. The first time she had met him, she had been timidly nervous. His dark-brown eyes glowed upon her comely figure, in part easing the tension of the first meeting. She grew accustomed to his larger-than-life personality over time. His loud voice slightly perturbed her quiet sensitivity. She recognized the harsh personality of Mr. Humphrey in her own husband. The father and son held together in their family ties of years in the same household. Ophelia felt it was set against her. This is how it felt to her, but it was not so.

Ophelia ruminated further. She thought about a Christmas holiday several years prior at the Humphrey's home in Stevens Point. Ophelia and Oliver had just arrived after an hour car-trip from their small home in Neenah, Wisconsin, in the Fox Valley. Having sat in the car for an hour, their leg muscles were stiff. They got out of the car slowly, stretching their arms, their backs, and their legs. Too cold to remain outside stretching, they hurried to the front door. Snow covered the frozen ground. Mr. and Mrs. Humphrey greeted them at the screen door, swiveling open at the front of the one-story red-painted wide-paneled home.

"Good to see you both!" hollered Mr. Humphrey. He smothered them both in separate hugs. The hug left Ophelia breathless, the caress seeming more appropriate for Mrs. Humphrey than her, the daughter-in-law. She did not say anything about her discomfort. It was not a real sort of discomfort. It was one imagined. So she thought. "Welcome!" shouted Mrs. Humphrey, who was busy hurrying about the kitchen, preparing food for the afternoon lunch. The smell of ham drenched the atmosphere; baked potatoes were in the oven. The meal was almost ready. The plates, forks, knives, and glasses sat neatly arranged on the darkly varnished oaken table. After taking their coats and hanging them in the walk-in closet at the front door, all four gathered in the parlor next to the kitchen. Mr. and Mrs. Humphrey sat on their prized antique sofa. Ophelia and Oliver sat opposite on separate cushioned chairs. All four were physically living in comfort. The oven bell dinged.

"The potatoes should be ready now," said Mrs. Humphrey, as she stood up and went into the kitchen.

"She is a fine, fine cook," boasted Mr. Humphrey. "Isn't that right?"

"She sure is. I grew up with the best hot meals in the neighborhood." Oliver declared, thoroughly convinced.

"It's true," said Ophelia, non-committal. Suddenly, Mr. Humphrey asked Ophelia to move over to the antique sofa.

"It's far more comfortable than the chair you're on."

"Oh, no, Mr. Humphrey!" exclaimed Ophelia, "I am more than comfortable over here."

"You should try it, dear," interposed Oliver.

"Really, dear, I'm fine in this chair," she countered. She shifted nervously.

Normally, she was as calm as a purring cat. She was a bit frazzled by their insistence. Luckily, Mrs. Humphrey came into the room, announcing the afternoon lunch.

"Time to eat!" she cried out joyously. She felt a strange tension among the three but ignored it in her excitement for the praise she would get for the fine meal. Another fine meal, of course! Without a doubt, they will love it!, she thought.

At the table, Mr. Humphrey sat at the head of the table. On his right was his wife. On his left was his charming daughter-in-law. He was the king of his house, a man's man, his sole and unconscious desire. Unconscious, because he himself did not recognize it. Only Ophelia perceived some of his less appealing traits as a man. His ego was the size of a baseball stadium. But who could blame him? Who has no ego? Unfortunately for Ophelia, it meant bouts of feeling uneasy, and it cost her stable nerves. She was not unkind - but to deal with it without saying anything to her husband? Without saying anything to her father-in-law? Mr. Humphrey was a womanizer, and he did not even know it. She felt under his gaze. He looked down her shirt, and his eyes lit up. His passionate drive was aroused. She herself was horrified. She felt bore down. The weight was immense, overbearing and grotesque.

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The rest of the meal at the funeral passed without her gaining consciousness of herself. Oliver asked her how the food was; she sat motionless.

"Dear, dear, what's the matter? Why do you sit so, without uttering a word?" In a climax of dissatisfaction and profound feeling of being betrayed, she projected,

"He wanted to touch me! He wanted to touch me!"

"Who, dear? Who, dear? Who wanted to touch you?"

"Your father!"

LITTLE BLACK DOTS  
*Peter Barlow*

Everywhere he looked: sand. Golden, blinding in the midday sun, small clouds of it blowing in the breeze, and he was buried to his neck in it. He could tell he was closer to the ground than usual; the dunes looked different than they would have were he standing up, and he could feel the sand prickling the underside of his chin. The real clue came when he tried to stretch his arms, bend at the knees, and wiggle his toes. Nothing. He cried for help, help, could anybody hear him, he was stuck in the sand, and it was during these cries that he woke up screaming for his wife Laney. She wasn't there, wasn't going to be there, and he didn't know what to do.

Jack Trundle sat up in bed. The writhing he'd done before waking scattered the sheets half off the bed. He'd gotten used to the small layer of sweat, the tears he felt coursing down his face. He looked at his bedside clock: half past one. That dawn was still hours away only made him feel worse. The following day was supposed to be his first back on the job after a sabbatical to clear up Laney's affairs, and to grieve and get his life back together. He'd been hoping to get a full night's sleep, but that hadn't happened in weeks. Now he would turn up feeling like a blunted pencil. On the set, at least, he had the help of make-up. The hairdresser made his hair neat, Wardrobe put him in a smart suit—never the same one twice, except for that nice one he wore every Christmas—and when the red light came on, the city got the Jack Trundle it knew and loved. Detroit's favorite morning anchorperson having nightmares? Impossible!

Trundle made his way to the master bathroom that opened off the bedroom. His foot hit an unexpected obstacle, a carton of sympathy mail he'd forgotten in his exhaustion. The day after Laney died, his co-anchor on the show (the attractive younger woman to his educated older man) made an impassioned plea for support, and the public had responded with letters of well-wishing too numerous to count or adequately store in his townhouse. Trundle hadn't read most of the letters. The one time he'd tried, he teared up after three letters. After that, he wanted to avoid them altogether. Despite that the mail cartons were cramping the floor space, Trundle found he couldn't throw the letters out either. To do so, he felt would imply that he didn't care about the public's concern, even if no one but he knew he'd not read the letters before tossing them.

As soon as Trundle turned on the bathroom light he turned it off again. The bright light reminded him of the desert sun he was trapped beneath on a nightly basis. Besides, he knew where everything was, knew where all the fixtures were, and knew what was what by touch. Trundle turned on the cold water tap and splashed some on his face. It brought him back to where he was and who he was, and once upon a time that would have been enough to push a dream out of his head. This time, it did nothing. Jack Trundle was being buried to the neck in a desert on a nightly basis by his subconscious. Three hours later, he was shivering. He agreed to come back on two days' notice to do a remote location shoot, even though it meant standing outside at dawn on Woodward in below freezing temperatures, because the story was too big to ignore. The station provided him with a heavy winter coat, thick wool gloves, and a fur-lined hat left over from the last Soviet Army. Still the three-degree wind-chill managed to find its way through these and every other layer Trundle was wearing.

"We're here live at the Detroit Institute of Arts, where tonight an unprecedented display of undiscovered artistic talent will be exhibited." This he said with a popular Trundleism, the knowing right index finger pointed upward, the uncapped black pen gripped in the web of the hand, forming a V with the finger. "Former Senator Brent Hawkins is displaying what he calls his real life's work, art and sculptures that he has created over his lifetime, here tonight."

The museum was closed, off limits to everyone except Hawkins, the curator, and a guard; all of whom were unavailable for interviews. Hawkins had hinted in press releases for weeks that he would take one member of the press on a personally guided tour of the exhibit. The identity of the reporter hadn't been announced yet, but at the moment, the only thing on Trundle's mind was the next commercial break and the warm cup of coffee that would be waiting in the van.

Trundle recited the rest of his speech, prompted the weather person to give the day's forecast, and another reporter to run down the national and international news (gas prices up, unemployment down, war on the other side of the world, and quick sports highlights) before some playful banter with his co-host back in the studio, and the commercial break. After that, nothing for twenty minutes while the co-host did an exposé piece about corrupt government officials.

The red light on the camera went dark and Trundle stopped pretending to try to smile. The cameraman—Hugh, who had gloves that covered his fingertips—relaxed the shoulder holding the camera as Trundle stepped closer. "How you holding up?" Hugh said.

"Fine, I guess."

Hugh looked him up and down for a moment then said, "Let's get you back in the van." A minute later, Trundle was pulling the door shut on the passenger side. Hugh handed him a Thermos full of coffee and lit a cigarette. "Didn't get much sleep last night, huh?" Trundle poured some coffee into a Styrofoam cup and stirred in some sugar. "Some. More than I have been."

"Buried in the sand again?"

Trundle had told Hugh about the dreams a few weeks before. "Yeah." He put the cup down on the table and started to rub his eyes. Hugh rolled down the window half an inch and tipped the ash from his cigarette onto the street.

"I don't mind so much, you know, the dream. If I could sleep, if I knew what the dream meant."

"Something to do with your wife, maybe."

Trundle didn't respond right away. If there was a connection between Laney and the desert-scape, he couldn't see it. They'd never been to a tropical climate together, no places with sand that didn't have a large body of water nearby. "Maybe," he said. "I don't know."

Hugh took another long drag on his cigarette, flipped the butt out the window, and motioned for the Thermos. "You'll figure it out. I know you will."

"Yeah," Trundle said. "Yeah."

Almost as soon as Hugh opened the Thermos, his cellphone rang. He checked the number before answering, but Trundle didn't see who it was. "Yeah, what's up? Uh huh. Uh huh. Yeah. I'll tell him." Hugh closed the phone and sighed. "Hawkins picked you. Twelve thirty, front entrance."

The last time he brought Laney to this museum was for the opening of a group of local women artists that she'd wanted to see. Trundle went more out of a sense of husbandly duty than anything else. His appreciation of art was uninformed. He could recognize a fine painting when he saw it, and the paintings and sculptures were fine, to be sure; but after four rooms one painting seemed very much like another. The truly artistic eye belonged to Laney, who was at one museum or another every other week it seemed. She was on her way to developing a fine collection of her own, displaying new acquisitions in places of prominence in their townhouse. People complimented Trundle on the art during parties, and he gently deflected each commendation toward Laney.

Three months later, Trundle found himself outside the doors to that same museum, peering inside to see if he could get the attention of a security guard. He was presenting himself at the prescribed hour, ready to get his interview, and very much wanting to be somewhere else, anywhere else but there. Trundle hadn't been back to the museum since, hadn't had the inclination to go. It had been bad enough out at the curb that morning during the live broadcast, but now that he was up close to the thing, Trundle desperately didn't want to be there. Thoughts of Laney here and the art event bounded through his head like rampaging cattle.

Trundle looked toward the street where the van was still parked from the morning shoot; students from the adjacent university dotting the sidewalk in packs of twos and threes, ants in a colony. The sun peeked through the clouds and bathed the entire street in a wash of light. Trundle shielded his eyes and blinked, and opened to see the street covered in sand, the buildings gone, and the ants going about their business in the open desert. He rubbed his eyes and blinked again, and the city was back.

A guard pushed open one of the front doors from the inside. "Mr. Trundle?"

Trundle turned. "Yes?"

"You can come in." The guard stood to one side as Trundle entered the building. "He's waiting for you in the gallery," the guard said, and resumed his position to one side of the main doors.

Trundle looked around the main foyer. The entrance to the gallery with Hawkins's installation beyond was on one wall. Trundle could see a few walls, but nothing in the way of actual artwork. After a moment he turned back toward the guard. "What's this all about?"

"Sir?"

"Why the secrecy? What's he got going on back there that he's not letting us in on?"

"Can't say. I'm not much on art. All's I was told to do was to let you in the front door at twelve thirty sharp, and no one else until six." The guard shifted on his stool.

Trundle chewed on that for another second, then said, "My cameraman. He's getting his gear together. We thought we might do a sit down interview with Hawkins. Let him in, will you? He won't come any further than the lobby."

The guard nodded and Trundle went off to explore the gallery. Even the doorframe was decorated special, everything in merlot. For two dozen rooms that twisted and turned through the complex, paintings and sculptures of varying quality lined the walls. One of the paintings jumped out at him. It was almost entirely of sky blue, putting it into stark contrast with the wall behind it. Thoughts of the last event here with Laney, of the painting she'd tried so hard to get him to understand, came flooding back into his mind. Laney tried to educate him at every turn. She knew he was somewhat of a lost cause, but she wanted to share her appreciation. "See this piece," she said that night, gesturing at one of the paintings. "Look at the brush strokes there and there, soft, trailing off into the horizon. It seems like an unfinished thought, but it's all over the canvas. It's meant to convey distance, how vast the world is at ground level."

"Uh huh," Trundle said, and leaned in close to the painting as if to examine the portion she was talking about. To him, it was a large light blue area toward the top and a large beige area at the bottom, with some little black dots where the two areas met. He didn't give her the chance to explain the picture more fully, as she'd moved on to the next piece. Six days after that she was gone. Trundle turned his attention to a nearby sculpture to stem the flow of memories. He studied it, lost in thought, until he could sense someone standing behind him.

There was a minute's worth of silence before the other person spoke. "You've found my attempt at a Venus. Not very good, I'm afraid. I've never been great at sculpting. This one took half a dozen tries to get right. I kept over-sculpting. Typical. I'd be going along just fine for a bit, get the ears done or something like that, and then whoops, I've accidentally chopped off her nose. Ah, well. Gotta break some eggs. But you should see the scrap pile. What a mess that is."

Through all this Trundle had been standing with his back to the man, but he knew the voice. "I'm sure it's not so bad as all that, Senator."

"Take my word for it, Mr. Trundle, it is. Do you like what you see?"

Trundle shrugged. "Art was never my thing."

The pause that followed suggested a handful of things to Trundle: annoyance, amusement, a decision to redirect the conversation. "Pity. Do you have any questions?" Trundle turned around to face the Senator. "Several. My cameraman's setting up in the lobby."

"In due course. First I want to ask your opinion on something. Come into the next room and look at something for me."

Hawkins exited into a short hallway that emptied into a room with nothing in it save for a life-sized stuffed camel. Trundle entered the room, saw the camel, and stopped. Two walls were painted a dusk blue, a fading sun was portrayed on a third, a city wall exterior painted on the wall the camel was facing, a small opening in the center of that wall to a fifty-foot long tunnel, five feet to a side, painted in complete black. The floor under the camel, under Hawkins, and under Trundle, was covered in sand.

"This room took me three weeks to complete, most of it doing the city wall there. The hard part was the texture. Go ahead up and feel it. I had some rocks from Egypt shipped in special for the wall. I was trying to make it as real as possible, give whoever sees this the feeling they're actually in the desert with the camel."

Trundle looked around the room, not moving from the doorway. For a moment, he thought he was buried to the neck again, trapped by sand on all sides and tortured by his own mind. "What— How—?"

Hawkins stroked the neck of the stuffed camel. "I just wanted to see if you got the reference." Trundle was still trying to wrap his mind around what was in front of him. He couldn't shake the feeling of being restrained. The spotlights in the room burned his face as if he was back under the sun, back in the desert.

"No? 'And again I say unto you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than it is for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.' Book of Matthew. This is the popular version of what they were talking about, though. This tunnel here—which wasn't quite so long at the time—was referred to as the Needle's Eye. A lot of biblical era cities had them. After the city gates closed for the evening, the only way in or out of the city was through one of these. As you can see, it's hardly big enough for a fully loaded camel to pass through." Hawkins motioned to the tunnel.

Trundle bent double and went through. On the other end was a room, twenty by twenty by twenty, completely black except for some stars, little glowing dots on the walls, floor, and ceiling. He felt almost weightless then, as if someone had pulled the ground out from under him but he'd forgotten to fall, forgotten how to.

"Do you know what this is, Mr. Trundle?" Hawkins had quietly entered behind him. He wanted to say something, but his mind was still trying to wrap itself around what he'd seen in the last room, and now in this one. "No."

"What most people see when they close their eyes. Certainly no artistic rendering will ever do it justice, but something like this."

Trundle stared at the dots, slackjawed.

Hawkins ducked back into the tunnel. "That's what I wondered. Thank you very much, Mr. Trundle."

After a moment, Trundle went back through the tunnel to the room with the camel, unnerved by the floating sensation the room with the stars gave him. Hawkins was nowhere to be found. The feeling of being enclosed in the sand came on him again, and he left the room quickly and headed back to the museum foyer, his disbelief hanging over him like a shroud.

The formal opening of the Hawkins exhibit was strictly a black-tie affair. Only four hundred of the nation's elite and their spouses, all dressed to the nines, were extended invitations; power lobbyists, Congressmen, and three former Presidents had run the tight security brigade in support of one of their own. To the surprise of some, the invitees were not party-specific, but those that knew him best knew that half of Hawkins's Wednesday golfing foursome sat on the other side of the aisle. The main entrance hall had been made over in the course of the afternoon, gold and white balloons lining the ceilings and the balustrades, a full course buffet flanked by ice sculptures, garçons and garçonnettes wandering this way and that with their trays of hors d'oeuvres. "So, this is how the other half lives," Hugh said, taking it all in. "I've never hadda wear a tuxedo to do my job." He wriggled his bow tie for effect.

The station had known about Trundle's invitation to the opening before he had, and sent Hugh duly armed to get some shots of the interior that the other networks wouldn't have for another day. Still, though, when Jack Trundle walked into a party, no matter how formal or informal, he was used to being recognized by at least a few of his fellow partygoers. Tonight, nothing. A concierge showed no sign of recognizing who he was as his coat was taken in exchange for a ticket, or possibly didn't want to admit it. Trundle looked around the room again, hoping someone would break from the pack, come over, shake his hand, welcome him, but no one did. Hawkins himself was nowhere to be seen. Suddenly, Trundle felt like he didn't want to be recognized, didn't even want to be here. "Relax," Trundle told Hugh. "Try to look like you belong here. Come find me in half an hour and we'll tape the bit they asked you to."

Hugh nodded and the two went their separate ways. Most of the crowd was gathered in the general area of the entrance to Hawkins's exhibit, some queued up awaiting entrance to the rooms beyond, others chatting in groups of two and three as they absently ate hors d'oeuvres and drank champagne. Trundle went instead to another smaller open space further back in the museum, where the exhibit of the local women artists was still set up. Every step he took echoed off the hardwood floor and marble walls like Trundle was in a cave. Almost by accident, he found himself on a bench in front of the painting Laney had explained to him, with the brush strokes that led off to nowhere. Trundle sat there, stared at the painting, and Laney's explanation played over and over again in his head. It's meant to convey distance, how vast the world is at ground level.

"Strange, isn't it?" said a voice from beside him. It was Hawkins. "Room full of people all looking for conversation, all looking to make an impression on me on the one night I'm trying to be something other than what they're used to seeing. Suddenly I wish I'd done this in a more low-key sort of way, maybe even used a pseudonym or something."

Trundle didn't jump at the sound of the voice. He'd almost been expecting it.

"I heard about your wife. I'm sorry."

Trundle didn't know what to say. He was shocked that Hawkins had taken the time and effort to find out anything about him. Surely the Senator had greater concerns than Trundle's personal well-being.

"Good woman, I take it," Hawkins said.

Trundle nodded.

"I'm told she enjoyed art. Came here often."

Trundle shifted his head slightly toward Hawkins, wondering how he would have known something as trivial as that.

"I play poker once a month with your boss. That's strictly on the QT, of course. If the media found out a Senator and a local news executive played poker every month, they'd have a field day with it. You won't tell, will you?" The smile on Hawkins's face was evident in every word.

"She liked this one," Trundle said, and lifted a limp arm toward the painting. "Tried to tell me about it, what was going on, what the brushstrokes of it meant and all that."

"Think about her a lot?"

"Every day. Every—every minute. I still think of her in the present tense, still expect her to come through the door sometime in mid-evening. And eight, nine o'clock comes and goes, and I remember Laney isn't coming home and why, and that just makes everything worse."

Trundle ran his hands through his hair and looked at the beige of the painting, the little black dots sitting atop it like so many afterthoughts. His waking and dreaming lives had started bleeding into each other, and it was difficult to tell the difference. Was this painting before him real, or the room he'd been in earlier, or Hawkins? He searched his mind for reasons why this would happen, signs that it was or wasn't, and came up nil. Maybe I'm meant to work it out for myself, he thought.

"It occurred to me, last night, that I'd forgotten what that sounded like, Laney coming home. She'd done it every night for twenty years, and now she doesn't." And yet I saw your painting today and it reminded me of this one, and what Laney said. I hadn't thought about that day since it happened—barely thought about it while it was happening—but I can see that moment clear as anything in my head. I can't remember the sound of her coming home, but I can remember that one little nothing moment."

"It's like that, sometimes. You get older and find yourself remembering things about your loved one that you'd forgotten, little scraps that were so much flotsam at the time, and something in the now calls it back up. And maybe you're remembering it wrong, but you're remembering something." Hawkins sat on the bench next to Trundle and considered the painting before them.

"Every night since Laney died, I've had this dream I'm buried to my neck in the desert." Trundle lifted his arm at the painting. "That one. And your full-room one too. Just me and the sand and the sun. And something my wife said when she was talking about this painting. 'How vast the world is at ground level.' And I feel so small and helpless. And alone. And when I wake up it takes me a minute to remember who I am, and where I am, and why there isn't anyone next to me in bed. And I saw your rooms today—I saw—" He shook his head, trying to find the words. Trundle looked at the painting again. "I don't want Laney to fade away, but I want to hope again."

Hawkins said nothing for a long minute. "Someday the stars will come back." Around them there was only silence.

Everywhere he looked: sand. Same as it had been before, except now he was buried to his waist. Trundle swiveled, trying to determine what else had changed. No, that dune had always been in front of him, and the wind was still blowing little sand clouds around. Trundle tried to leverage himself out but the sand was packed too tightly around his legs. He began to scoop sand away from himself, fling it as far away as he could so it didn't roll back into place. But the surrounding area caved into what he had just emptied out, and the sand would blow along and level it out again. Trundle began taking bigger handfuls, tried throwing them farther, and the hole began to grow, slowly at first, then more steadily. Soon he could shift his knees, at which point he tried muscling himself out again. This time it worked.

Trundle stood a few feet away from the hole and looked at the landscape around him. There were three dunes behind where he'd been buried; one situated between and beyond the other two. And what was that on it? A person? A camel? From this distance it was impossible to tell. All it looked like was a little black dot upon the sand. What it was exactly Trundle didn't know and didn't care, but he started walking toward it. Whatever it was, it was a sign of life.

MUSA MEMORA (MUSE, TELL ME)  
*Jack Caseros*

I don't know how long I had been standing there. It had been a long trip, and I wondered what exactly I was doing. It didn't matter how long I had been, or how many miles I'd driven, or whether it was about to rain. What exactly brought me here?

The easy answer was Brennan. He was funny, clever, and handsome. He was the first three things I would use in a dating profile. He had everything I did not—and for that and many more reasons I loved. Loved him like a dog, maybe a little too much. I would travel to the ends of the earth for him, so in terms of that metaphor, that was why I had driven to rural Inwood, Indiana.

I had never been to Indiana. In fact, Brennan was the only person I knew from Indiana. We met in Chicago, somewhere around the time when I accepted I was gay and didn't care what Rush Limbaugh had to say about it. I worked at a cafeteria; he became a regular.

I first noticed he was gay when he told me, blatantly, when I became familiar enough with him that I asked if the beautiful lady was his girlfriend—"No," he said, "she's my sister. I'm gay."

And that was that. I slipped him my number with his receipt, which he usually never took. I insisted. Told him it was a new policy. We print 'em, he takes 'em, does what he wants with 'em. Brennan nodded heavily and told me he would take it up with the manager next time. I told him I was the manager. "I know," he said, "and I'm going to book an appointment with my lawyer." He handed me his heavy-stock attorney-at-law business card with a wink.

That wink captured our whole relationship. It was a six year blink and every time I thought I knew my man, my prince, he became darker, more cynical, twisted, enraged, something like an animal but much more bitter. Then I saw him the way he was, pitch black, an impossibly sexy sinkhole. Then I saw him clearly again, the way he was. But I still loved him.

Turned out Brennan wasn't in the same guilty nun game as me. When I saw him punch the fridge, I told him I was sorry for burning supper. When he couldn't figure out our electronics, he smashed them to pieces. He was irrepressibly jealous, the kind that almost came to blows when other guys checked me out—I just thought I was a compulsive flirt.

So six years, complete with an exciting wedding after state law got its thumb out of its ass, we were the first gays in our group of friends to get married. We were pioneers on the brave bold frontlines.

No wonder we ended up as battered as we did. The frontline is no place for lovers.

We were also the first couple in our group of friends to divorce. Brennan was already removed from my buddies, so at least I had them—they understood, even sympathized, and almost convinced me to orchestrate a conspiracy about domestic abuse. Just to screw him over. I almost believed it. More dangerously, I almost admitted that he had actually beaten me, twice.

After a brief divorce process (owing to Brennan's lawyer peers), he ended up with our apartment and I ended up with the car, the cat, a nice settlement, and the keys to Brennan's summer home just outside of Inwood.

Indiana sounded like a condensed globe: Plymouth, Warsaw, Kokomo, Peru, all within driving distance. Small towns were strung together by two-lane highways. Graveled roads intersected the landscape mathematically, laying a convenient drivable grid to hamlets, farmyards, and backwoods. I followed the Lincoln Highway northwest, cruising alongside semis crammed with livestock. It was five in the morning—rural rush hour.

I missed the turn in Bourbon and kept westward. For city eyes, the countryside can be mesmerizing or boring—two sides to the same coin that flipped forever but never landed—so for me, I felt numbly serene by the rolling fields, like seas, with tree bluff islands and houseboats.

I stopped to drive through Inwood, which according to my lawyer was empty. A handful of streets formed a triangle off the highway. I drove around the town in under three minutes.

I took South Hawthorn Road right to 12B. There was a cemetery at the T intersection. Fortunately, there was no traffic, because I sat studying the cemetery in the middle of the country. Salem Cemetery. Images of witches and puritan belt buckles floated into my head. Maybe this is where evil came to die, here in the middle of the country, enmeshed with the ground, with Americana fluttering around it like a sparkly pinwheel. And this was my new home.

So that was the easy answer to what had brought me here. Brennan's family owned this quarter with the cemetery on it. His dad died years ago, and even though he had banished Brennan from the family, Brennan was all he had. He gave him everything, all in a weepy will that Brennan liked reading before bed, before we had raunchy sex.

I walked the rows of headstones. They were historic, pioneers and turn-of-the-century homesteaders. But right at the back of the cemetery, closest to the two trees, were two new headstones. I was drawn to them. They looked so lively, so vivacious against the ancient mossy tombs.

I recognized Brennan's name right away. Underneath it was chiseled, "Musa memora." I remembered Brennan having said that before, but I never understood it. I was too embarrassed to ask. Now I would have screamed the question.

His date of death was months ago. There were wilting flowers on his grave, sparkling with dew. The grass overtop his plot was thin.

I stared at the other grave, trying to decipher the name. It looked foreign. But then I realized it was my name. That was my name. And that was today's date following my birthday.

Maybe I had slept too long. Maybe I should have stopped in Bourbon for coffee. It was a long trip. I had come a long way. Maybe I drove off South Hawthorn Road, lulled by the hypnotic fields and twilight—maybe I fell asleep at the wheel, and after everything, I found the one place where I could be with Brennan again.

## LYCANTHROPE

*Carrie Ryman*

The cacophony of chickens rang out through the moonlit farmyard. Their high-pitched voices warned of certain catastrophe as Simon crossed the wooden footbridge that lead across the river. As stealthy as he was, the chickens somehow always knew he was coming. It had been raining earlier and the bridge was wet and slimy. His furred paws slid to the right, and he nearly fell into the water below. Sometimes he wished he were a cat, able to unsheathe and use its curved talons for gripping. But his own were still handy for tearing flesh from bone. He steadied himself, reached up to balance against the mangled body of a tree that sprouted out from the river, then continued at a slower pace toward his nightly smorgasbord.

Simon knew he could dine excessively but he was scrupulous, only taking what he truly needed to nourish him. The lust incited by the golden hued night compelled him forward and made it difficult to control his pace. For a brief moment, he envisioned himself tearing into every clucking fowl in sight, like a child at his first birthday party, joyfully pressing his face into the iced confection before him. There was a beauty in total abandon. There was perfection in holding nothing back. But he was not entirely animal and it was that other part of him, the humanity in his heart, which gave him this compassion to only take what he needed. The tantalizing scent of fowl tickled his nostrils, teased his senses, as he grew closer.

The soggy hen house door creaked open as he pushed it, and he deftly snatched one not-so-sacred chicken from its roost. He was almost past the fence when the grumble of his stomach made him turn back for more, to snatch a few eggs as well. Out and into the yard again, the neon yellow moon spilled onto his face, gnarled and furred, for he had not shaved in weeks. It felt good to discard the pretense and be the real me. It was good to be Simon the Conqueror once again.

His accountant job at Hickle & Sons was mundane. The only power that accompanied his position was when the boss put him in charge of ordering more office supplies. Power surged through him now. It was a euphoric and ancient calling to his spirit that he reveled in. The long hairs on his neck and back prickled against the alien fabric still clinging to his canine body. His hunger and the thrill of another successful hunt drove him to a faster pace. He ignored the bridge entirely on the way back, vaulting to the side of it, splashing across the river. He reached his beige Volvo, partially concealed by some high brush near the side of the road. Simon unlocked the car and then straightened. He fixed his eyes on some indistinct object out in the farmer's fields and then snapped the neck of the squawking hen. He wrapped it meticulously in the pristine white towel and strapped it into the car seat. Then he drove back into the nebulous suburbs to the gray ranch house his wife called home.

Standing on the cold linoleum floor in a glow of yellow light, he breathed in the smell of fresh kill and sighed with pleasure. Being a lycanthrope had its merits, he thought, as he relinquished his grasp upon the dead fowl, dropping it with a thud, down onto the kitchen table. Simon stretched his weary hunter's limbs and prepared to feast.

"Simon!"

The icy shrill of his wife's voice sliced through his thoughts like the knife he held in his hand. She called from the living room. Her voice had a ragged edge from too many Marlboros.

"Are you finally back? Did you remember to get more laundry detergent?" She stood in the doorway, hands on hips, her cigarette wriggling between her lips as she spoke. "I told you three times to get more laundry detergent!"

Simon said nothing, staring blankly at her squat form in the doorway, and then something captivated his attention. It fell from the end of her cigarette, a perfect half-inch cylinder of gray ash. It landed on the very tip of her pink house slipper. Why hadn't it crumbled on the way down? It just stood there, erect, like a tiny gray skyscraper. Even as she bounced from one foot to another, her flabs of fat shaking from neck to cankle, the fragile thing stood strong and unchanged by the forces around it. He was mesmerized.

"Simon! Did you hear me? Why do I always have to ask everything twice?"

He flinched and then peered down at plastic-wrapped chicken breasts, bloodless and white on a sky blue Styrofoam platter. He laid the knife to one side, gingerly picked up the package and put it into the refrigerator. Simon exhaled defeated and returned his attention to the groceries, which stood in tall brown bags.

"Yeah, I got everything on the list, Joyce, everything you wanted."

THE BRAID  
*Katherine Gehan*

Anna Hansberg's braid needed trimming. She sat in her hotel room in Vienna with the braid on the table before her, stroking the thick blond rope of hair while she considered increasing its length. The braid lay nestled against the walls of velvet lining in a narrow wooden box. The severed hair had grown over a foot since Anna had last opened the smooth, dark case. She saw the braid, tied at each end with tattered red ribbons, was now curling against the confines of the shallow walls of the case. "I snipped the ends nearly two weeks ago," she said to no one in particular, for she was alone in the hotel room.

Anna was staying at the Zakeri House on Waringherstrasse while visiting her fiancé Josef, who attended the University. She resided in the small Alpine village called Modane, where both she and Josef had been children, attended school together and spent their winters sledding down the mountain hills holding hands even as they careened down tiny paths at treacherous speeds, narrowly missing ancient fir trees. Anna was now a lithe, sensual young woman of twenty, with blue eyes that pierced Josef whenever he was near. She was to meet Josef later that evening at a jazz club on the outskirts of the Ringstrasse, not far from the Zakeri. Anna became increasingly agitated with the wait.

The braid did not belong to Anna in the usual sense, in that it had not come from her head. It was not her hair. Counting on one hand, Anna determined she had been in possession of the braid for approximately four months. Each time she and Josef had spoken on the phone, Anna in Modane and Josef in Vienna, Anna tried to tell him about the braid but she found herself unable to do so. At every pause in their conversation she would begin to describe the events leading up to her ownership of the braid, but either Josef interrupted with a sudden need to speak with a professor passing by the payphone, or Anna chose to stall and instead shared a story about another teacher at the school where she taught young children.

As she sat at the little mahogany desk, Anna examined the soft rope of hair as if for the first time. She petted the thick interwoven plait with her long delicate fingers, allowing her naked fingernails to slope into the crevices of each neat tuck, and to follow the journey of each yellow bundle in and out of its folds. The hair was smooth and shiny with a light coating of natural oil, unlike Anna's own hair, which, although also blonde and without a single piece of gray, sat short on her head like a halo of meringue. She could not have grown a braid like the one before her, and as her fingers moved along the hair from end to end, Anna's face came closer and closer, until her small nose grazed the braid, and she jumped back in her seat, startled out of the spell the braid had cast upon by its familiar scent.

Anna quickly closed the case, not checking to make sure that the ends of the braid were properly tucked within the confines of the velvet interior. She demanded fresh air, and hurriedly closed the latch of the box, which was about the size of a flute case, and put it into her bag before she laced the long strap over her shoulder and left the room. Anna turned right at the hotel doorstep and walked toward the Inner Ring of the city. At the sweet shop next door, Anna watched three elementary school children squeal and chase one another in a tight circle, their plump hands fervently diving into crisp white bags filled with treats. Their nursemaid ignored them and spoke with the florist's handsome helper, who sprayed the sidewalk with a hose and flirted with her in kind by playfully spraying too close to her feet. These games reminded Anna of Modane and the days when she and Josef lived a less burdensome existence.

Anna paused fifteen minutes later when she reached the Votivkirche at the mouth of the boulevard. She was flushed from her quick pace and turned into a café for refreshment. Happily, the afternoon was waning and in only a few more hours she would meet Josef. Anna placed the braid in its case on a café table and ordered a hot chocolate and a piece of sweet bread. Something about the children's candy, and the vibrant purple and red tulips reflecting like living rubies in the wet sidewalk light outside the florist's shop had made her hungry for a sweet taste. Anna absentmindedly ran her palm over the wooden box, and when the waiter placed her order before her she was startled to see the sweet bread was a light honey-brown color and braided. She took a hurried sip of the chocolate and burned her tongue.

"Damn it," she exclaimed to no one in particular, as the café was empty but for an elderly woman in a lode green coat, who sat with her miniature terrier in the back of the room.

Anna traced the shiny curve of the bread with her finger for a moment before she picked it up and took an aggressive bite. It was dry and not as sweet as she expected. She opened the wooden case once she noticed a few blond strands poking as stiffly as horsehair through the crease of the box where it opened. Astonished, Anna picked up the braid and held it out at arm's length.

"Why, you're another six inches long!" she said to it. Anna pretended not to notice that the tattered red ribbons remained at the edges of the braid, rather than becoming closer to the center as the hair grew inside its velvety womb. The braid grew as if its knots were multiplying out from the center rather than the unknotted edges of the hair growing outwards as one might expect. Anna finished her chocolate in two large mouthfuls and left the bread half-eaten. She called the waiter from the far side of the room, interrupting his boring conversation with the woman in the green jacket. After paying the bill, Anna fled the café with as much composure as possible given the circumstances.

Outside, the afternoon had paled and the colors of store signs and of passerby's clothing seemed in need of a dusting in the increasingly dim light. Within her shoulder bag, the wooden case grew heavier on her shoulder. Anna passed by the Votivkirche, resisting the sudden desire to enter and pray beneath its gothic buttresses. The need to be near living, growing things compelled her to the garden—perhaps if the braid were in an environment with trees and flowering bushes that grew in smaller, more modest increments, it could be persuaded to slow its ambitions to match those of the natural world. Anna sat on a cold marble bench beneath an archway of roses that had been tamed to climb a lattice and opened the box on her lap.

"Do you see?" she said to the braid, which lay in its soft open bed. She gestured to the flowers in their soft beds. "They have been trained to climb and grow in beauty in a steady, controlled rate."

The braid was now long enough to hang over each end of the box, its blond edges touching the smooth polished stone beside Anna's leg. She leaned her face down towards it and turned her ear close to its center as if waiting for a whisper in reply. When the braid spoke, it was in her mother's whisper. It told her that it could not help but grow. It told her that though the body from which it had been cut lay entombed in a graveyard in Modane, its love for her was now the cancer.

Anna corrected her body from its position folded over the braid so quickly she nearly knocked the case from her lap. She looked up at the twin spires of the Votivkirche and made the sign of the cross. Then Anna looked at the quiet, growing braid, in its deep velvet case, and slowly untied each of the red ribbons. She removed a one-eighth section of the braid and carefully made a smaller, thinner braid out of the hair. Anna retied the long ribbons around the ends of the new braid, folded it in half, and placed it into the case. Anna placed the case into her bag, one hand clenched around the thick, unfurling hair that remained.

She knelt in the nearest flower bed, placed the hair beside her in the dirt, and furtively dug between the tulip beds, dirt stuffing itself beneath her fingernails. When the hole was sufficiently deep, Anna laid the blond hair in it, kissed her blackened fingers and touched the hair, and then covered the hole. She hoped the braid would learn from the purple tulips and learn to control itself.

As she walked away from the church park, Anna glanced back and believed no one would notice the little mound of dirt among the flowers that indicated her planting. She would wash her hands at the University and place them on Josef's cheeks and greet him with enthusiasm. She would mention nothing of the braid, what it had said how she had partitioned and buried it.

Throughout the many years of her happy life with Josef, Anna would keep the braid as her one secret. When the smaller portions grew thick and long enough to have a voice, Anna re-divided the braid and buried the heft responsible for the whispers in various church gardens around Vienna. But she carried the case with her always and over the years said to no one in particular, "I am unable to bury my mother's love."

## QUESTIONS I HAVE ABOUT WATER

*Ashley Dean*

trickling over eyelids and working under fingernails to the beds  
it isn't necessary to be immersed in water to be cleansed  
the sky water catching with St. Elmo's fire on the wings of planes  
flightless land mammals tasting clouds and gin  
with paper napkins folded into hats and worn only once  
as the disappointing acid rain pools on the flat roofs of pubs  
on the out flung skirts of council estates.  
And I drink of that water and wonder how cities feel  
with their natural showers and unnatural plumbing infrastructure.  
Do those pubs know that they are like sharks' eyes?  
Does the water in those taps remember mountains  
or caves and transparent fish with eyes like lamps but lacking electricity?  
I don't think they do, those pubs and taps.  
They only know domesticated water.

## RESTING PLACE

*David Frazier*

Colored leaves fluttered in a fall breeze  
At my resting place, Salem Cemetery  
Inwood, Indiana.  
In 1862 I was the blacksmith of the town,  
Bending over a red hot hearth,  
Pumping the bellows.  
Hammering hot iron into horseshoes,  
Wagon fittings, plowshares, and other farm implements.  
Hear the clanging of hammer against anvil.  
I made tools of destruction  
As the civil war raged on,  
Brother against brother.  
Political disputes abound.  
I was killed by a stray ball round  
Fired in anger at another,  
As I labored in my shop.  
Laid to rest at Salem Cemetery.  
It was the fall of 1862,  
When the colored leaves fluttered.

A HAPPIER TIME  
*Shirley Smothers*

Kathy is on her hands and knees scrubbing the kitchen floor. It seems like she has been doing this for years. Her back aches. And the left side of her head hurts like hell! Her mind wanders to a happier time when she was a little girl. She and her brother would swim at the lake in Inwood, Indiana. The cool water would wash away the heat of the day.

She looks up to see her husband; his face is twisted in anger. He kicks her in the ribs and she falls over writhing in pain. "You stupid bitch! How long does it take to clean the floor? Get off your lazy ass and finish. Then do the dishes. There must be a hundred in the sink!" Kathy replies, "Yes dear." She holds her ribs and rolls over onto her knees. Her ribs feel broken but she knows not to complain. She finishes the floor and then starts on the mountain of dishes. Her hands are raw and bleeding and her feet are so swollen that she feels they may fall off at any moment. And the left side of her head hurts like hell!

Her mind wanders to a happier time. Kathy loved the rain, especially a cooling rain. When the rains came, she would run outside and dance around pretending she was a fairy. Her brother called her a loon, but her parents would laugh with delight. She loved the smell fresh rain made on the grass and trees.

Kathy feels a blinding pain at the right side of her head. She leans over the sink to gather her strength. She turns to see her husband; his face is twisted in anger. He has a large frying pan in his hand. "You stupid bitch! How long does it take to wash dishes? Finish them then clean the toilet. It smells like someone took a dump in there!" Kathy replies, "Yes dear." She feels the right side of her head. It has a large lump on it. She feels like she has a concussion. But she knows not to complain. She finishes the dishes and then starts on the toilet. She feels like she is going to vomit the stench is so bad. Her arms are heavy and feel like lead. And the left side of her head hurts like hell!

Her mind wanders to a happier time. It was Christmas morning. She opened a large box to discover the popular doll of the season. First she cried and then shouted with excitement. She asked how her parents managed to get this doll, as the stores had been sold out for weeks. Her father winked and assured her that he had his connections.

Kathy can't breathe. Her head is being held under the filthy toilet water. A hand grabs her hair and roughly pulls her out. She falls to her knees, gagging and trying to catch her breath. She looks up to see her husband; his face is twisted in anger. "You stupid bitch! How long does it take to clean the toilet? Finish the toilet and then vacuum the carpet. It looks like someone poured sand all over it!" Kathy replies, "Yes dear." She can barely breathe. She feels like she is going to catch pneumonia, but she knows not to complain. She continues to clean the toilet, but a thought pops into her head. 'Keep thinking how much pain and misery I'm in. No happy thoughts.'

She sneaks into her husband's study. Her spine feels like it's going to snap in two. She goes to her husband's desk and pulls out a drawer. And the left side of her head hurts like hell! She removes his handgun and inspects it. It is fully loaded. The thought of freedom makes Kathy smile. A happy thought! Kathy feels something cold and hard pressed against her left temple. "You stupid bitch! I have two guns." Kathy sees a bright splash of color and hears a whooshing sound...and then... Kathy is on her hands and knees scrubbing the kitchen floor. It seems like she has been doing this for years. Her back aches and the left side of her head hurts like hell!

## FOX HUNTING

*Jaya Misra*

Our room is lit  
like a chapel.  
The light is soft and evident  
on your face,  
scruffy and doe eyed.  
You've left one hand  
in the middle of my chest  
like a magnifying glass.

In the dream preceding reality  
I have tumbled  
through thickets and hills.  
I am the fox  
and you are the equestrian  
who can smell out my heart  
better than the hounds.  
Whenever you catch me,  
you remove my heart with a knife,  
watch it shiver in your palm  
and slice it into halves  
before placing them on your tongue.  
And then  
it is the beginning again.  
A heart springs up beneath my ribs  
and countless times  
I let you find me.

THE LONELINESS  
*Patrick Jamieson*

He watched her lie through  
pane glass,

Sighed, collapsed at last and  
drew his own.

She lay submissive in the snow,  
like yesterday,

Just like tomorrow, crafting angels  
made of bone.

## VANITY: NOT JUST FOR HUMANS ANYMORE

*Beau Johnson*

Out of the coffee shop, through the second of the establishment's two doors, Martin said: "Subject has been tagged. I repeat, Subject has been tagged." What he thought was something altogether different.

Come on, Big Boy, don't let me down - time for you to step up and shine.

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Barlow did not stand when the human outstretched his hand. He felt it was beneath him to do so, even though he continued to play with his prey. A funny little man, he thought, as he watched the human scratch its right ear as it exited the coffee shop. Perhaps weird would be the better description, he decided. Because, really, what was that about? In all his years, Barlow had never had such an encounter, the human so...wound. Not that it mattered, not really, it just wasn't something Barlow was used to. Not a bad thing when you got down to it - just...weird, the situation not unlike the human itself.

But that was where the fun came in, was it not? Yes, it was. And was it not the entire reason he began answering the ads in the first place? Another yes, the reason for this nothing more than tedium, boredom - that Barlow longed for something new. That wasn't entirely true, not all of it, because most of what the hunt entailed remained the same. All that had changed was the way he went about it now, though it might prove more intimate a setting if he lured his prey into a manner of friendship before striking it down. In Barlow's opinion this did something to the meat, producing a product far more tender than anything he had eaten before. Not in his three hundred years.

Center mass, he thought, his thoughts again turning to the human, this Martin. The more he thought about it the more he began to smile. What the hell was that? Really, what? For the second time he found himself wondering about the story the human put in his hands not minutes after they sat down. Who does that sort of thing? A human, apparently, and Barlow again produced a smile. If anything, he had to agree with certain parts of Martin's story, especially about the center of a prey's chest. From experience, Barlow knew it to be where the flavor pooled, there within the heart and lungs. More than delicious, it was why evisceration had become the norm. In all honesty, it was better than cake.

And soon it would be time, he thought, finally rising to go. Leaving, he went over what he might say to Martin tonight, perfecting what lies he would spin in regards to the preparations he had made for the engagement the human wanted him to speak at. Barlow chuckled at that, pleased at just how slick he had become in all his years. Why hadn't he thought of it fifty years sooner? He didn't know, but then thought better of it, thinking he might. Fifty years ago the world wasn't as it was now, not as known; what the humans called the information super highway was a far off thing yet to be built. What people knew of werewolves was received through books and movies and plain old word of mouth. Nowadays everything was viral, where not a stone could be left unturned. Chat groups formed, groups becoming clubs. These clubs would come to have chapters, Barlow noticed. Ones like Martin's, who met every second Thursday of every second month. Barlow found that some of these chapters took out ads requesting speakers. When he did, he began to think of cake, and then of the one thing to him which always tasted better. Soon, he thought, soon.

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"No, I really do," Barlow remarked. "With a little more polish, and once it is finished of course, I can't see why it wouldn't be published." They sat in the front room of the house, a coffee table full of magazines and comic books between them. To his left, tight to the chair in which he sat, was an end table piled high with even more comic books, more magazines. On the walls were framed pictures of dogs playing cards, and one of a bird eating what Barlow took for being a mouse. The human was disorganized, slovenly, in fact, dirty glasses there, and empty plates here. On the couch across from him, Martin beamed. It was a look Barlow had seen many times before, on more than many faces.

"Now I know you are feeding me some horseshit." Martin Udeski challenged, but only playfully so. "Another beer?"

"No, thank you. I have to drive."

"Smart man, can't be too careful these days."

"Agreed."

"You want to run it by me then, what you're going to say?"

"That would be fine," Barlow said, thinking of where to begin. He wanted to time it just right; wanted the human at the peak of surprise. "Since your chapter isn't that big I'd like..."

"Hold on there, Chief. What do you mean we ain't that big? Dude, we are eighteen thousand strong. Nationwide! Between you and me, I'd say that's a fair chunk a change."

"Martin. Come now. Out of fifty-two states? Do the math; seriously. I do not do this to poke fun. I do this because I'm a realist. Can we come to agree on that?" The stocky man looked at him, stared at him, and finally smiled.

"Settle down, partner; was only messing with you." Martin said and leaned forward, elbows to his knees. "I know we ain't a large group, not like some of those others. We ain't the Vampire Nation, that's for sure. The League neither. Just a strong bunch of guys infatuated with what the werewolf might embody. Hell, some of our members actually believe in them! How's that for crazy?"

Barlow laughed, chuckled, really.

"What's so funny?" asked Martin, a crease now across his brow.

"You," Barlow answered. "And all who are like you."

"Come again?"

"Did you or did you not tell me that my appearance tomorrow night was a surprise, that you and only you know I am your guest speaker?"

"So what; what's your point?"

"No point. Just playing my part in the game."

"Look, Barlow. Maybe I'm a little confused here..."

"Then by all means, let me shed some light. I am going to eat you, Martin---my teeth to rip and tear and rend through your chest and heart and lungs."

And there it was: terror. Barlow witnessed it upon the human's face as its eyes widened, widened more. He would only have to change now, the transformation doing what it did best: drawing the fright, releasing the fear. Once screaming, he would only have to pounce...Funny, he thought, wondering why he had yet to register the scent.

"The sweat gland," Martin told him. "It's what you're trying to figure out, right? Why you can't smell the fear on me? It's because we're not afraid of you, Barlow, me or my crew. In fact, I pretty much despise what you and your kind represent." Strange. The human's heartbeat remained the same. Steady. Flat. He was telling the truth. Interesting. "I must admit, I am intrigued," Barlow informed. "It's far from every day that a human like you appears."

"Oh, I will give you that; you have never met someone near the likes of me."

"Quite an actor, too, I must concede." He was referring to Martin's voice and how the delivery of it had changed. The human itself as well, if he was to be honest, the man-boy no longer as self-deprecating as it once was, and far from the bundle of wires it had appeared to be when first they met. No. The meat was proving to have layers.

"I am not a modest man, Barlow; I have been hunting you for years."

"The advertisements you placed in the paper - these were your in?"

"Figured a creature like you, I'd play to your vanity. Sooner or later I knew we'd catch up."

"It seems you have all the answers."

"No, Barlow. Just the ones I need."

"There are others, you know, more like me."

"A few, yes. But they're young and we know they are yours. We call you Infector Prime, Patient Zero. It also stands to reason that by killing you, your lineage ends. This was the goal. To find you - the First one. And by the way, I have to ask, what's the deal with only one name, seriously?"

"I am a trend setter, what can I say? And long before your celebrities found it fashionable, I might add. And despite what your information tells you, I am not the First one. Old? Yes. He who is the First? No."

"Not what the history shows."

"It would appear we have reached a stalemate then. In a story, quite near the time a physical confrontation would ensue, no? When your team of men storms the house, their entrance preceded only by their breaking of the door - each member hoping against hope it is they who slay the beast? Is that about right? What Hollywood has ingrained?"

"Not particularly, no - planned on doing you myself." Barlow laughed at that, chuckling as if amused. And then he lunged, leaping up from the chair and high, his hands now claws extending for purchase, his mass doubling as he went, tripling, bones breaking through all of him and reforming just as fast. Transformed, the creature roared, his true teeth long and sharp.

"I will have your throat!" It growled, low and between the noises it made. Martin only watched the creature, waited for the opportunity he knew would arise. Over him, on him, Martin brought out the Taser just as the werewolf slashed through his shirt and into his vest. The beast went down hard with a thud, its weight smashing the coffee table into pieces and shards. Like challenged birds, comic books flew upwards in response, glasses and bottles doing exactly the same.

Standing over the thing which called itself Barlow, Martin smiled, taking pleasure in seeing the creature unable to stop the spasms running through its frame. "That's ten thousand volts there, sport. How you like me now?" Then, putting his hand to his ear and enabling the com, "Subject is down! I repeat, Subject is down! I want a collar and manacles on site asap! I repeat, I need a collar and manacles in less than five!" Bending down, he spoke directly into the wolf's ear, "It ends here, Barlow, now and today. You will take no others, not one more child. I promise you, we have taken back the night."

From the floor, still in his true form, Barlow could only listen and observe; he watched as the humans stormed forward with their metal and chains, every hand they had upon him, the moment the very beginning of an imprisonment he knew he would be hard pressed to escape from, if at all survive. They wore jackets, these men, with big yellow letters imprinted upon their backs: M.E.A. He didn't know what these letters stood for, but he knew they were meant for him. And that they had been for longer than he could probably imagine.

Vanity, the human had said. Inside, Barlow howled.

OLD BETSY  
*Christian Riley*

Nineteen sixty-nine Chevy Chevelle, four-door sedan with an army green factory paint job, and a "three-on-the-tree" standard transmission. She had a deep impression on her left rear fender, as well as a small "Semper Fi" sticker on the adjacent window. The dent, I never questioned. But that sticker was a tricky beast. I used to imagine that it smiled back at me, smug-like, as if it knew all along it had been stuck on the wrong car. We had Betsy when I was a child, growing up in San Diego, California. I don't remember when my mother got that car, but I'll never forget that I spent countless hours in the backseat of her. She was nothing but green, inside and out, except for a little bit of chromed steel on the door handles, bumpers and ashtrays.

The sticker had been misplaced, because Betsy was the mildest mannered car you'd ever ride in. Nothing about her resonated Hoorah! She was peace loving. You could see it on her smile. I know that I'm not the only person who's observed human features on cars, and trucks, and other vehicles. Headlights for eyes. Front grill for a mouth. Betsy always had a smile on. And from behind, she had the look of a small child who had just fallen fast asleep.

I spent those countless hours inside Betsy because my mother was a single mom, with little or no income. She moved us around from one bad neighborhood to another, almost every year, in search of a safe place to raise her children. But that was always the challenge for a poor family in a large city. Looking back now, I realized that I must have shared that same fear that kept my mother spinning her wheels. The same anxiety that prevented her from collecting stuff, knowing that someday soon, real soon, she'd have to get rid of it as we'd be moving on. I know this, because the only safe place I can recall while growing up as a child, was in the backseat of Betsy.

My mother believed in miracles. She was a devout religious woman, belonging to no particular denomination, but a firm believer in God. We went to church on occasion. We said prayers every night, and sometimes during the day. And we experienced two miracles in the years of my youth, both while homeless, living in our green Chevy Chevelle.

The first one was as simple as pie. Driving south from Riverside, my mother realized that Betsy was running a little hot—sick with a fever, perhaps. She pulled into a gas station two hours later, somewhere in Mira Mesa, and then just like that, we found out about our "miracle." Some gas stations still had onsite mechanics back then. Staring from the backseat window, my eyes blew open as one particular mechanic, talking with my mother, suddenly threw a wrench onto the ground, cursing the fellowship of his trade. Somewhere in Los Angeles the previous day, Betsy had had an oil change, and her oil plug had been left loose. Along the stretch of Interstate 5 between Los Angeles and San Diego, there five quarts of oil had been painted across the road that afternoon. Yet no one could figure out why or how Old Betsy kept on running. That nice old mechanic never charged us. He filled our car with fresh oil, and smiled as we left the station. Looking at my face in the rear view mirror, my mother simply announced that the Lord has just provided.

The second miracle was a little more interesting. It had a few more pieces to it. I was fourteen years old, and my older sister, who had just turned eighteen, was living with her boyfriend at the time. So it was just me, my mother, and Old Betsy there on the streets of San Diego. It was the end of October, and our plan was to get into another apartment before winter hit. We needed a deposit, along with first and last month's rent, which was murder for a family on welfare. Living in our car was the only way my mother could save that kind of money.

Since we had recently moved out of our old place, we were broke as hell, and had just begun the process of saving. Then, on the evening of Halloween, we drove into the parking lot of a Twenty-nine cent Hamburger stand, prepared to sleep for the night. Our stomachs growled, and we laughed at the irony of it all: stranded next to a restaurant where hamburgers cost pennies, where even that was more than we could afford. The next morning my mother would get a welfare check deposited into her bank account, and then the fast would be over. Until then, it was pure endurance.

But then my mother got the idea to send me out to go trick-or-treating. She took an old sheet, cut holes for eyes, and then handed me a pillow case for a bag. I went as a ghost. A pathetic looking ghost, I'm sure. Despite the glow of porch-lights, I believed I was invisible that night. That nobody could see through the sheet and notice the disheveled clothes, or ragged shoes I wore. Nobody could see my face, hungry as it was, from behind the obscurity of a ghost costume. I remember I had fun walking through a strange neighborhood, collecting candy. I was in the perfect disguise, my adolescent mind had thought.

But perhaps I was wrong about the anonymity of being a ghost. When I got back to the car, my mother and I counted out four dollars and sixty cents in change from my collections. Never in all my life as a child had I been given money while trick-or-treating. I've never even heard of such a thing. We ate like royalty that night, there inside Betsy. Hamburgers and fries and a ton of candy. "The Lord always provides," said my mother.

I can't say that Betsy was the reason why I experienced those miracles. But she was definitely there for them, along with many other events that have burned a permanent fixture into my childhood memory. She was family, driving us from one neighborhood to the other in search of a safe home. Providing shelter for us on those weeks when we didn't have one. On some nights, I would lie in the backseat and pretend that Betsy was a hidden alcove on the streets of New York City, or Chicago, where thugs, bums, and hookers would walk past, completely oblivious to my secret spot. I'd have a view onto the grimy pavement, hear the shouts and screams that you'd expect from that kind of place, yet none would be the wiser to my hide. And on other nights, I'd just pretend I was lying under a canopy of trees somewhere on a country farm.

When I turned fifteen, finally, we found an apartment that gave us five solid years of relative safety. I was able to finish high school in one place, which was wonderful. I made best friends that I still have to this day. And Betsy was still with us, yet even now, when I think about the role she had played in my childhood, it was during those last few years of high school that I realize she had slipped into a simple subservient role. It was like I had forgotten that that car was part of the family. She still drove us to the grocery stores. The malls. The movie theatres. But I never slept in her backseat while I was in high school.

Maybe it was me that had changed. Maybe my transformation through teenage puberty cast a permanent shadow over the beautiful innocence of childhood imagination. Or maybe, it was just her time. Perhaps she'd completed what it was she had been built for. Hoorah!

I'll never forget the last time I saw Old Betsy. My mother bought a newer car, and sold Betsy to this guy we knew down the street. His name was Ed, a young man who liked to work on cars. Betsy had something wrong with her engine, but he figured it out real quick. He even transferred her shifting column to the floor. Drank a beer and laughed in the afternoon shade of the patio in front of his house, and declared that that Chevelle was no longer a "three-on-the-tree," but a "four-on-the-floor."

I stood and watched that Friday evening, from the front of our apartment complex, waiting for a friend to pick me up. We had plans to meet some girls at an arcade. I waited, and stared at that scene in front of Ed's house half-a-block away. Ed was having Betsy doing donuts in the vacant lot near his house, and some of his friends were hooting and hollering on the street, beer cans raised to the sky. I caught a glimpse of two things at that moment, watching Betsy spin her wheels for the last time. I saw that Semper Fi sticker catch a ray of the descending sun, and remembered thinking that it had been smiling back at me, as always. And, when I spotted Betsy's front grill, and her headlights, I thought that her face had changed somewhat. It was like her perpetual smile, the one that I'd grown up with, had suddenly fallen into shadow.

The next thing I knew, I was riding in another car; my best friend's 1968 Grand Prix. The music cranked to Metallica, and he peeled out once I sat and closed the door. We had a good time that evening, capturing memories of a different kind that I'll never forget. But I was saddened the following morning, when I learned that Ed had killed himself the previous night. Driving drunk, he opened Old Betsy up and crashed her straight into a telephone pole on the other side of town.

SHELL GAME  
*Zach Wagner*

Turtles have life  
figured out better  
than people.

They make  
a living, but pay  
no taxes.

They all own  
homes, yet have  
no mortgages.

And in their  
economy being  
underwater  
is no bad thing.

A PATCH OF EARTH, A SPOT OF SKY  
*Gary Smothers*

Job had wanted to see the ending of the baseball game before leaving for the cemetery to visit his grandpa. But the game was tied in the 10th and it was getting late. The snaggle-toothed foreman at the coal mine wouldn't give a care less if a red-hat rookie was late for whatever reason. Leaving the television on, Job snatched his keys from the kitchen counter. He stood outside for a moment and listened to the muffled game before heading to the truck. A year seemed a right fine time to visit the graveside—he'd seen that sort of thing in the movies—but hoped no one else had the same idea. He didn't want anyone to say his name in that sad way they did, come to him, place an arm around him, offer one of their prayers. "You did the right thing," someone would inevitably say. "He was in pain." But most of all, he wouldn't want them to see him crying. Which he would not do anyhow. The old man never did.

He listened to the game on the way to town. On the other side of Taylorville was the cemetery—if he could find it. He remembered the route cutting through a hoitree toitee neighborhood that he'd been unable to pay too much attention to when driving there a year before. The cemetery was stationed atop a gentle green rise in the middle of yellowing corn. Midway through Taylorville, he stopped at a roadside flower shop and sat there idling in the truck, staring at a wooden wagonload of tacky plastic floral arrangements, the reflection of him staring at these ornaments looking him back through the dirty store window. You did the right thing...

Checking the traffic, Job eased back onto the road just as the game was entering the bottom of the 11th. Grandmother's house was a block away. He cut that way, but chose to pass it by. It seemed right to stop in and offer her a ride out, but he couldn't take that look she'd taken to giving him since the early morning her husband had passed. At the edge of town stood a bar he'd been to once before but barely remembered what it looked like on the inside. He steered onto the gravel lot with a sudden curiosity he realized was bullshit. There was time for a beer. Or two. He talked to a stranger with a lisp for two innings about the mine and baseball and the big titted bartender. Eventually bored with the conversation, Job lied and said he was off to work. Then, for show, he stopped down the bar and took down the bartender's number, offering a victorious wave to the man he didn't particularly like or dislike.

The daylight struck him. Job was surprised at the buzz he'd copped and was immediately thankful for already being on the edge of town—near the cemetery. He took a series of wrong turns and ended up in a cul-de-sac only to spend a few minutes chatting with a man about his Harley Davidson he was polishing and affixing a sale sign to. He had no intentions of buying it, but the man was nice and very knowledgeable about seemingly everything. Wondering how the game was progressing, Job turned the key and heard the crackling radio signal, the din of a crowd miles away, the announcer speaking about a game he'd only once seen go this long.

"That game still on?" The man asked, standing and walking pensively over to the truck. Job nodded. "I'll be. That's gotta be a record."

As if the radio man heard the query, he announced the middle of the 15th inning.

Job laughed, offered a hand, which the man took in a hearty shake. "Nice to meet you. Nice bike. Anyhow, I gotta see if I can make my way outta here."

"Outta here. Yeah, it's pretty wound up back in here. The cemetery."

"The cemetery?" Job started the truck.

"Yeah, betcha you're looking for it. My street, it's like a drain along the way there. All these windy roads, like some bad plumbing that sends people lost and looking for the cemetery to me. Had an entire funeral procession end up down here last spring when I was out trimming my hedges."

"Yeah?"

"Who you going to see?"

"My grandpa."

"Sorry to hear that. Been long?"

"A year. Seemed right to...come out."

The man stood there, nodding, as if weighing the stable of correct answers. "How'd he pass?"

"He was in a lot of pain."

"Cancer then."

"So how far away is it?"

The man gave him easy directions and Job arrived. The green rise jutted out like a woeful old sore amidst the desiccated stalks of corn. The cemetery was a small plot of land, three one-hundred yard lengths of gravel road separating the grass and small shrubs, a giant opened bible monument sitting in the dead center. Job pulled onto the middle road. He was pleased to see he had the place to himself, save for a man off in the distance mowing the grass on a rider. He stopped at a small redbud tree that looked familiar, although it was difficult to remember precisely where his grandfather lie for the long row of cars that had lined the road, the black tent jutting around the hole in the ground, the booze he'd soaked himself in before leaving for the funeral.

The bases were loaded, bottom of the 16th, they still had nine innings to go in order to tie the all-time record. Job wanted the Cardinals to win, but, at the same time, he didn't want this game to end. He sat in the truck and rooted the Pirate on the mound, bases loaded, no one out. He rolled the window down, shut his eyes and listened to the din, remembering watching a game with the old man, no special game, just a dusty snippet from a moment of time. The mower hummed, the breeze blew through the thin branches of the tree.

His grandmother, she didn't want Dusty's life to end. But Job had managed that. The old man's final comprehensible utterances, offered with a rubbing of Job's shaved head, "Kill me, buddy." So Job had simply gave the morphine as ordered by the hospice nurse—against his grandmother's wishes, tricking her into letting him spend the night so she could rest, then sneaking to her bedside and taking the morphine to grandpa. And in the morning, as the nurse had predicted, he'd slipped away.

When the next three Cardinals struck out and the game was extended, Job exited the truck to look for the grave. He walked in two rows deep, looked left, looked right, then opted to walk towards the entrance. Staring down at the ground, he looked for the flat bronze grave marker he'd heard grandmother complain about as being in need of a good polish. Job walked on and on, confusing himself at times at the directions he'd already came from. Finally he decided on walking a grid: five grave markers north, then five west, five south, five east. But he couldn't find it. He stared back at the truck for some perspective and was surprised to see the man who'd been mowing standing by, the battered rider sitting off in the distance by the huge stone bible.

"Looking for someone?"

"My grandpa. I'll find him, thanks."

"What's his name?"

"Take you long to mow this?"

"Hells bells it does. About six hours. It's a job."

"I reckon so. Well, I'll be seeing you. I'll find him."  
"Give me a holler if you need me!"

Job continued his plan for perspective and looked back to the truck, shot a glance about him, and headed back toward the road. He found the grave marker, mottled and dim as his grandmother had said. He stood there staring down at the plate on the ground, the name and the dates. In the distance, the rider fired back up. A motorcycle came up the lane billowing a cloud of white dust behind. It slowed to a stop. A man and a girl climbed off and headed directly to a marker. Not knowing what to do, talk to a patch of earth or pray to a spot of sky—these both seemed absurd—he returned to the truck and idled past the stone bible, the man and his daughter, the man with a job. In silence, he made his way directly back to Taylorville.

In the dimness of the mine locker, alone for he'd missed the cage down, he donned his pit clothes, rubbed his head feeling the old man's frail hand palming him. He cried, but was quick to wipe the tears and don the red-hat when the foreman barked out from the cage for him to hurry his ass up. On the way down, the foreman complained about the Pirates winning the game in the 19th inning.

## THE WITHERED ROSE

*Prateek Agarwal*

I stand here  
On this lonely road  
Amidst the sands of snow.  
No sense of time,  
Fog rises 'round  
The Maple and the Oak.  
Certain, you won't  
Be here today;  
Certain of my fate,  
Certain of my  
Seared longing;  
Withal, I wait,

A bird takes flight  
From a near-by tree,  
Some stardust snow  
It showers on me,  
I shiver under  
The dim sunshine,  
The shiver stirs  
My memories,  
A petal falls  
On the snow,  
From the withered rose  
That I hold,  
The sun gets warmer  
Secretly,  
The sun borrows  
My memories,

The rose smells  
Different today,  
Unlike it smelt all  
These years,  
When't was  
Fading away,  
Silently,  
In my copy of  
Shakespeare,

A harder wind,  
Blows my way,  
The fallen petal,  
Blows away,  
May it find you  
And your way,  
Certain, you won't  
Be here today,

The withered rose  
Heaves a sigh,  
And I sigh for you.  
I sigh, too, for  
The withered rose,  
For, it can't find you.  
I sleep peacefully,  
Every night, for  
I e'er dream of you.  
Certain, you won't  
Be here today,  
And so let us  
Keep the rose due,

And sure I am,  
A day would come  
When my body turns a heap,  
Will you see it then,  
That my epitaph says,  
'He's not dead, but asleep?'

HEAVEN'S CLAUSE  
*Robert Finch*

A man dies. Whether the bullet was in the shoulder, the chest, or the neck is not a matter of recall for him. He lies on the pavement in an urban land, sun sweltering upon his corpse. The screeching tires of tanks and transports rush by him, and death spares him the agony of waiting for help that would come too late. Before his flag draped coffin his family would agree, he was a man not ready to die.

His soul remembers well the time when the heavenly judges read through his final thoughts, his passions, and considered the ties he left behind, his parents, his wife, now alone without him. It's fuzzy where he is. Everything seems amorphously gray, like cigarette smoke, the men, the chairs, and the tables reminding him of a court room. The long bearded figures cloudy, ever shifting, like the view through a grainy television screen. The judges speak softly, yet drone a recitation in a voice that sounds like his own. The judges come to the same conclusion; the man is not ready to die.

Four years later, in a room rank of incense and full of people chanting in a language not understood, a little girl looks to the brown ceiling and realizes who she is. That she had died as a casualty in a foreign land, and now lives again. For years he has been living as Hailey Jane Oswald, beloved daughter of four. But now that he knows, he is once again Roger Thrumman of the U.S. Marine Corp.

This sudden realization brings Roger's tiny eyes to tears. Sitting with her on the bench among golden idols and calming mantras in the temple is the mother of Hailey Jane Oswald. She also has been crying, but Roger can see only the remnants of tears, the sobbing could not be heard among the prayers. Roger looks up and his cheek is kissed. Carolyn Ann Oswald holds her daughter close.

Stroking her crying daughter's long brown hair, mother is just a second closer to the reason she feels empty. She doesn't know the problem, though the grief comes regardless, but she does see the solution. She utters a whisper not unlike a melody in her daughter's ear, and within the minute, the tears stop following. Roger looks up "What is the meaning of life?" and Carolyn Ann Oswald says, "Cope". But that spurs another question, how should Roger cope?

Buddhism has been one of many failures of Carolyn to find peace through religion. Driving in a minivan, the tires making their own heart beats as they thump against the gravel, mother and daughter reflect on what they have learned. The reincarnated Roger, sitting in a child's seat in a state of wonder, ponders what to do with his new truths. Now that he knows who he really is, there is so much knowledge at his disposal. He looks to his "mother", his caretaker in those four years of darkness, and out of spontaneity and excitement he says to her "I know everything."

Carolyn holds back a chuckle. "Honey, no one knows everything." "But I do! I do know everything!" Roger frowns, the words hadn't come. As has happened and will happen in the future, his four-year old brain is unable to convey what he wants to say. For one thing, his young skull has never comprehended the word reincarnation. Looking down, his apology comes out as "I'm sorry Momma"

Carolyn smiles as she looks through her rear-view mirror. "It's okay sweetie, you'll know more someday." But Roger stops for a moment and wonders "What now?". If he can, he wishes to see his loved ones once more. But how can he do so now?.

He looks ahead at this woman, now his mother, as she drives, every once in a while glancing at Roger through her mirror. Carolyn enters the garage with her minivan and gets out to un-strap her daughter, only to find that she has already unstrapped herself, something that has never happened before. "Hailey, we don't do that, you have to wait for me." Carolyn lifts Hailey out of the seat and closes the door behind her. Roger frowns, for his mother doesn't notice that now, something is different.

As Roger enters the house, he realizes he knows this place and feels comfortable here. Feeling energetic and unable to control himself, he starts running, screaming, daring his mother to catch him. But is she his mother? His memories, his thoughts attained within these past four years, label her as such. But he knows so little about her, his prior memories, unenlightened, picture her in a mixed lens. He remembers his "mother" as someone able to dispense good in the form of gifts, and bad in the form of punishments. He knows her habits, what she likes to eat, that she works part-time as a doctor's assistant, and that she loves for her to ask questions. He knows that his father, a businessman, has died, whisked away out of his life.

Carolyn stops smiling once her daughter stops, staring out into the distance. This isn't normal for Hailey, who is always running and playing and talking. This silence disturbs. "What's wrong honey?" Roger frowns in seriousness "I need to show you something." Carolyn follows Roger as he goes into the closet, and comes out with some paper and pencils. When papers drop from his small clumsy hands, Roger pauses to pick them up. Another oddity Carolyn notes, as Hailey has never been one to clean up after herself, and calls to clean up have often been met with tantrums. Roger sits at her child-sized chair and table, sets down the paper, and begins to draw. It is a crude looking box design, but the intent is clear. "Honey, that's a helicopter."

Roger continues to draw. He is frustrated by his child's inability to draw perspective or anything complex, but is satisfied by drawing stick-men with army-hats, just as he had when he was a child, back in his past life. He draws mosques and tall buildings, and with his limited artistic capability, does a four year old's version of a military roadblock in colored pencil. Perhaps that should convince his new mother of who he is, perhaps then she could help him.

"Honey, what are you drawing?" Roger looks back at Carolyn stoically "Army men" "Well you shouldn't be drawing army men honey, it's not nice." Roger experiences a frustration that overwhelms him, ripping the paper up in anger and running over to his room, sobbing a bit and subconsciously grabbing and then hugging the giant purple teddy bear, something Hailey had done since she could grab... Carolyn leaves her alone. "If she wants to throw a tantrum let her" she thinks, and goes on to make herself and her daughter some lunch.

Despite his initial zeal, Roger finds himself quite distracted for the rest of the day. He plays puzzles, watches television and repeats along with the screen at all the right cues, easily sucked into this seemingly simple game. He avoids the jump-rope he had happily played with in his previous four years, and refuses to play house, but finds himself dutifully occupied with board games, arts-and-crafts, and playing ring-around-the-rosie with his mother. His mother is dear to him; memories of happiness and even a bit of loneliness cause him to want as much time as possible with her.

When night-time comes, Roger goes to bed when told, feeling sleepy anyhow and not feeling the need to prove to his mother that he's more adult by staying up. However he wakes up with a start. He is tempted to go to his mother for help, but determines that this isn't something Carolyn would understand. He opens the closet, looks under the bed, and runs all around the house looking, but not finding, the gunmen of his dreams. Finally convincing himself that all is well, he falls fast asleep.

The next morning, Roger wakes up at the crack of dawn. Feeling an overwhelming strangeness at being alone, he walks over to his "mother's" room and nudges her awake. Carolyn has to wake up anyways, so she makes the two of them breakfast. "But I don't want to go Momma!" Going back to preschool is the last thing Roger wants to do, he needs more time, and he has to convince her. "Honey you have to go, Mommy has to go to work."

The two arrive at Hannison daycare in Wayne, Pennsylvania. Roger marvels at his good fortune, that he is only a state away from New Jersey, where his family may still live. With an uncharacteristic attitude of inevitability, Roger gives a childish pout as he is dropped off.

The day starts with children, wandering about with supervision, playing with toys and sometimes talking with other kids and adults. Roger begins to play like the rest of them, mesmerized by age appropriate toys and communicating enthusiastically with others. Farrah, a child of middle-eastern decent, approaches Roger. She has never bothered Hailey before, why should she bother her now? But as Roger watches her approach, the toys, the sterile smell of the nursery is replaced by the mustiness, and the towering buildings of a desert city. Memories abound, stones are thrown from the street corner by children just like Farrah. Roger holds his head and crouches, holding his spindly legs, saying "D-don't come any closer..." Roger trembles, but Farrah does come closer. "What's wrong?" Roger hears shots in the air. A man is on fire, and a building is razed to the ground... Roger lets out a piercing scream.

But the adults had gotten him to forget about it, in time. Though Roger would not approach, talk to, or play with Farrah, he would certainly draw, listen to stories, and run around just like the other children did. Roger however would not touch dolls, skip rope, or play house. These actions were humiliating to him, and although he is drawn to childish things, here he draws the line. He makes an effort to play with trucks and action figures, but finds no interest in them.

This behavior is noted by one of the caretakers, who takes Carolyn aside. "I admit this is rather sudden, but I thought you should know about this." And thus Kate explained to Carolyn Hailey's behavior. Carolyn discounts it all "We're going through a tough time Kate, you know that Frank died a few months ago, it's not uncommon for Hailey to act out." "I understand Miss Oswald, maybe you're right. Perhaps she'll have a better day tomorrow."

Carolyn has had a busy day at work. There was a day's worth of work due to a snow storm the previous week, and they had filled in the dislocated patients today. Seeing that Hailey was happy, smiling, and singing to herself in the car, Carolyn didn't see a reason to push the matter. Today, like many days, would be a day when Hailey would get all the TV time she wanted.

"Mommy, is the war still going on?" Carolyn's heart skips a beat "W-what do you mean sweetie?" "The war, is it still going on?" Carolyn takes a deep breath, and explains to her daughter that war happens, and that as far as she knows, there will always be people who don't get along, and there will be fighting. But this isn't it for Hailey "Is the war still going on?" Carolyn now regrets that she watches the evening news with her daughter. "Honey, Mommy doesn't want to talk about it."

Roger had wanted to know if all that fighting had been in vain. If his buddies were still there, or if the war had been won. But in her childishness, Hailey had never really understood the news, and thus she does not remember. Roger stares out the window, wondering how he will ever get his "mother" to understand what has been revealed to him. The car stops, and Roger is unstrapped and carried over to the T.V. Roger stares at rapt attention, and forgets why everything else had been important.

Roger soon grows bored of watching TV. Knowing that his "mother" is busy, he has a surprising moment of clarity, and draws a woman in a white wedding gown, just as he remembers her. When Carolyn comes over to check on her, Roger is staring at the piece. "Who is this?" Roger is crying and looks up at her "mother" "Emily." Carolyn cradles her child and asks what is wrong. But Roger is inconsolable. Carolyn feeds Hailey her favorite animal crackers, and soon she has forgotten the whole thing munching on the creature's legs, bodies, and then finally the head.

Roger finds that he has no self-restraint. He happily maims and plays with the animal crackers, making various noises before they are eaten ravenously and monstrosly. One by one the cookies march up to Hailey's mouth. Hailey talks to them, gives them names, and then bites off their heads. Carolyn watches her daughter play as she always has, and being that there is no company to embarrass, she allows the destruction to continue.

Carolyn looks enviously at her daughter, happy in every way as she imitates the cookie monster. She remembers the temple where she cried, and tries to forget it, should tears come again. For the most part she's been strong, for crying in front of Hailey would be unfair; the child shouldn't suffer as the mother does, for crying begets crying. She wishes she could pray to God and feel relief. But she knows now that no matter what religion she prays in, she cannot shake the idea that it's still the same God laughing at her. Yet she wants to feel like she's being watched over. She wants to feel that's she's loved. She smiles as she eyes her daughter, crumbs on her face, and recognizes the love that comes from Hailey, smiling a wide toothy grin. Carolyn wishes she could always be with her daughter, if only to squeeze as much love out of her as possible.

That night, Roger dreams of his wedding day. Like his dreams always have been much is blurry, the bridesmaids have no faces and all the young men from his high school look alike. But the faces that matter are there, Emily's, pale with a shy glowing grin underneath her veil; his father's portly face with a businessman's mustache; his mother's visage, wrinkled and pleasant, thin and wise. He himself wears his army fatigues; he will be shipping out for the first time not soon after the honeymoon. Emily lifts her veil and Roger kisses her prematurely. The preacher protests but the guests laugh regardless. They know that in more ways than one ,the couple is married already. Roger never could remember exactly what he said to Emily in his vows, or what she said herself, but he remembers what the kiss means. The kiss means forever, till death do us part.

Roger wakes up bawling, his young mind not yet trained to hold back the tears. Carolyn holds him tight, and she whispers happy things, things he cannot hear due to his own cries, but he knows that they are happy and he begins to calm down. He thinks happy things, of Emily on their honeymoon, of Emily pregnant with their child. Roger decides then that he will find them somehow. He doesn't know how he'll do it, but he'll tell them how much he loves them.

Carolyn gives a sigh of relief as Hailey suddenly stops wailing. But she makes a note to herself to stop delaying and call the child psychologist. Carolyn had thought her daughter would never stop bawling, she hadn't cried for that long since before she could talk. Whoever this "Emily" Hailey was crying about meant to her, it sounded painful, a pain even an adult should have to feel. Once Hailey closed her eyes, her favorite bear in her arms, Carolyn left a message on Dr. Edet's answering machine.

The days go by rather normally for the week, with some eccentricities. Carolyn finds that her daughter has been playing with the phone again; a phase that she thought Hailey had grown out of. Hailey continues to draw army men, and her ban of "girl" toys continued. Carolyn couldn't even get Hailey to look at a doll, none the less play with one. Carolyn convinces herself that it is just a phase, some sort of a side effect of Frank's absence, but she eyes the circled date with anticipation. The 30th at 5:30 is when the session will start.

Roger kicks his legs once his "mother" leaves the room. Why is he uncomfortable? This is his chance to explain himself, someone PAID to listen to him. Yet he looks away, mouth closed, his cute round face stuck in a perpetual frown. Dr Edet speaks first "Now Hailey, do you miss your father." Roger thinks no at first, but then remembers his kindly smile, how he would hoist him on top of his shoulders and hang him upside down. But with his new focus, his new view of things, he answers honestly and shakes his head.

Dr Edet adjusts her horn-rimmed glasses and jots down some notes in her sketchbook. "Now when your mother was alone with me she said that you've been drawing a lot of army men, even though she's told you not to. Do you like army men?" Roger instinctively nods. "Have you been sad recently?" Roger nods and begins to snuffle, the tears coming back at the mention of it. He has been having nightmares that leave him in a cold sweat when he wakes up in the morning, and the worst part is knowing that he can tell no one of the violence he sees in his dreams, the faces he saw in the war. His classmates didn't understand it, his teacher's discouraged it, and his mother flatly denied any talk she deemed not suitable to a four year old's delicate image of a fair world.

Dr Edet gets up and sits next to Roger on the couch "Honey, it's okay, tell me what's wrong. You'll feel better." But Roger looks down. He does not want to tell her, she is a stranger. He cannot explain why, but his reason is there. Dr. Edet stops asking hard questions, and Roger begins to gab about his favorite colors, his favorite games, of all the things that interest his four year old mind. As he exits the clinic holding his mother's hand, he regrets that he could not tell her more, but perhaps there will be a next time.

Carolyn watches her daughter draw with some worry and some amazement. Hailey has been getting better, particularly with faces and the basic body shape; however, Hailey ALWAYS draws army men. Carolyn has stopped watching the news with her, but still the Humvees, the desert, and the extra-large sun that looks ready to fall on the always grimacing soldiers. Dr Edet says that it's most likely just a phase and that it doesn't take much to trigger obsession in a child's mind. But Carolyn doesn't like it. A child shouldn't think about such sober things. But still, she's getting better, more vivid in her expression. She'd rather Hailey draw army men than not draw at all. It's a habit she conducts alone, which gives Carolyn a break, and it's better than her staring aimlessly at the television. Carolyn sighs and wonders if she should give in and stop worrying. It's not violent if she doesn't hit someone, after all.

A week later, Roger bites Farrah on the arm. Farrah had hit first, and although it wasn't the most dignified of a defense, it came as a reflex, unprovoked by his mind. But he had wanted to hurt her. Then again, he had called her the worst name in his vocabulary, a poopie-head. He had tried avoiding her, the memories hadn't stopped, and he had begun to wish that he didn't remember so he could be spared the pain. But she kept on approaching him, asking "What's wrong" over and over. She had brought it upon herself Roger thought. He had just taken the next step, to tell her that she wasn't wanted. Roger just wants Farrah to stop screaming and the adult to stop lecturing. He just wants to play...that way he won't have to think about how much he misses his wife anymore.

Carolyn looks through her rear view mirror at Hailey, who is pouting and staring at the ground. Finding that Hailey felt no remorse for what she did angers Carolyn as she drives, the patter of rain on her dashboard serving only to anger her further. Dr. Edet had said that a patient had canceled and that she could fit Carolyn in and Carolyn knows why. It's a terrible day to be outside. Hailey looks out the window, quiet as a dormouse, which serves as another worry, for this is not the first time. Hailey has not been talkative lately, and Carolyn no longer knows what is on her mind. Carolyn makes a swift push at the brake pedal, the red of the brake lights barely visible, but Hailey makes no sound, not even a whimper. Carolyn hopes that Dr. Edet can make sense of it. The last thing she wants is for this to get worse.

Dr Edet listens to the situation from Carolyn and then tells her to wait outside. Roger looks down moping. He knows exactly why he is here. Dr Edet asks him why he bit Farrah, and he answers the best he can with the language he knows. "She hit me first." Dr Edet smiles, causing Roger to relax; he's seen enough frowns today. "Now Hailey, we only bite someone if we are in danger, were we in danger?" Roger shakes his head, hoping that the Dr doesn't go further with this line of questioning. Dr Edet smiles "Good, it's good that you understand. Now your mother tells me that you've not been talking to her as much, is that how you see it." Roger sighs and answers truthfully "She's not my mother" Dr Edet's smile disappears "Than who is your mother?"

Carolyn is called in to Dr Edet's office. "Now Carolyn, are you Hailey's biological mother" Carolyn nods, and responds with trepidation "Why do you ask?" Dr Edet sighs "Carolyn, your child is adamant that her mother is a woman named Elizabeth Myra Thruman, do you know such a woman". Carolyn is alarmed "No, NO! I have not heard of her. Why doesn't Hailey think I'm her mother?!"

Roger resigns himself to the fact that his mother thinks he's nuts. After weeks of affirming his beliefs, determined to convince her that he really is Roger Thruman, he resigns himself to defeat, because each time his claims are met with tears and cries of "You don't love me anymore?" Roger surprisingly finds that he still does. In a way, she really is his mother, if only his second one. As the days go by and he settles into his new routine, the nightmares begin to fade, and he stops looking for soldiers in the basement. But the visions of Emily never disappear, only the tears stop.

Years go by and the changes are subtle. By 8 Roger starts choosing his own skirts rather than fighting to wear jeans. By 14 he starts applying a little bit of makeup, a defeat coming from the urge to be seen as a young woman rather than a girl, and by 16 he kisses his first boy, resigning himself to the obvious facts of his chemistry. He stops seeing himself as a guy, and in a way, becomes Hailey. But she never really forgets.

Hailey gets her first car at 17, a benefit of saving and working as soon as the law would let her. She finds that her memory has not faded. After the long drive to New Jersey she finds herself in familiar territory. Sure the local pharmacy has traded owners, but the water tower is still there, and the street signs are still the same. In no time at all she turns her car onto Sunrise Street and sees the white shingled rustic old house with the garden out front and the rose petal tree. As she watches, a young boy exits the garage and goes elsewhere on a bicycle. Tears come to Hailey's eyes. Emily is no longer there.

Hailey had hoped to see her once more and perhaps to have seen her grown child. And perhaps she still can. She could knock on the door, find out where the previous owners moved to...and then knock on the doors of the new house and reveal everything. But who would believe her? Her mother certainly hadn't, and an anonymous note would surely lead to confusion rather than a revelation. She had decided that before she went to New Jersey, that her old life was behind her, that she would not try to make contact. She had only wanted to see Emily's face one last time.

As she drives home, Hailey is reminded of the college tours she did with her mother. With her good grades, many schools offer scholarships for her, a privilege she had not had in her previous life. Before she had skipped school, and got married before she could graduate. But now she knows that she has plenty of time before she has to settle down. Hailey finally arrives home, pulling into the drive way and hugging her mother as she enters the house. As Hailey drifts off to sleep in her flower patterned bed, she thinks of her future, a future she will not have cut short.

The judges look down on Hailey from above, smiling. They have faced many years, and from where they reside, no wrinkles can weather them. They are glad once again that they were right in instating Heaven's Clause, that none shall come who is not ready to die. They were afraid at first, for past memories can weigh down a body not prepared for it. But all has progressed smoothly. When the Judges meet Roger again, they are sure he will be ready. For life truly is only training for the life beyond.

## SANCTION

*Spencer Golub & David Hancock*

The smell of the Diamondland Zoo haunts Mishka—in his sleep, while he is walking in the woods, on the train. He tries to escape the pull, but there is no logic when it comes to that part of his brain. He is driven to return to the zoo in cycles, like the tide. He goes there to feel the less human parts of his soul. He stalks there. He prowls. He growls and snarls and drools and eats warm flesh. The smell of urine from the different species blends together into an aromatic porridge. He can't keep his mind off porridge, or honey, or salmon. He thinks like this, dreams like this, in a sort of stupid poetry. Mishka may be as dumb as, well, a teddy bear, but he can kill. He can't add, but he can tear a man's head off. His other self, Wesley Hunter, is not there anymore. Hasn't been for a long, long time. Mishka has injected himself with so much anabolic steroid, so much Bighead juice, that his human self is nothing more than a faint memory of cigarette smoke and Jazz.

Mishka has killed so many times that it is no longer enjoyable. At first he loved killing. It made him feel less human and that was good. But with being less human comes a lack of joy at taking another human's life. There is just necessity, and he performs his trick over and over again. Mishka doesn't hate killing. It's just something he does. It's his job. He gets paid for it. He vaguely remembers Wesley Hunter: a whiff of after-shave, the turtleneck sweaters that scratched his neck. But this evening marks the last time he will remember who he was. Tomorrow is the first day of the rest of his life as a bear.

The zoo is closed for the evening. Mishka has scaled the high brick wall that separates the animal park from the city. The moon is out, the full Harvest Moon. The reddish glow illuminates the other animals in the zoo. They are restless and call out when Mishka runs past them. He is all too familiar with the wide assortment of cages and displays. Each animal he knows, knows the soul of the creature. They call to him as their leader, the only one among them who has experienced both freedom and necessity. Past the Egyptian pyramid enclosure with the camels, on to Parrots' Lane, Goat Rock, the European Birds of Song, through the Japanese Tranquility Garden, the African Savanna—even the lions treat Mishka as the king of kings. He arrives at the Wolf House, pauses to catch his breath, and then moves on all fours past a birdhouse known as The Ravens' Castle and the Children's Farm, with its old heirloom breeds. These animals know Mishka from the dark times, when humans first domesticated beasts. They know him from the deep forest. And they fear him.

Mishka arrives at the small café that sits next to the Small Mammal House. His chest cavity is filled with an intense throbbing. His lunch burns his stomach. His flesh feels like worms are crawling beneath it. No. Not worms. Cockroaches. Too much adrenaline. Mishka can't sit still. He's been injecting himself too often with the serum he stole from The Farm. The café seems deserted at first, and then he sees her, sitting at a table in the moonlight. It's a woman he knows but doesn't know. A woman who rests at the bottom of a deep well, incognito, calling him. He doesn't remember her. But she knows him. She is not frightened by Mishka, which confuses him. She seems disappointed that he has shown up, instead of someone else, but she approaches him like a lover. This startles the bear. She whispers his name, his other name: Wesley. A werewolf will return to its human form if it is called by its real name. But this does not work with Mishka the Bear. He is too strong. She almost fooled him, but not this time. He cuts her neck quickly, too quickly for her to react. Her head flies off her neck and hits one of the café chairs.

Mishka picks the head up by the hair and runs with it to The Ravens' Castle. He climbs the castle stairs and places the head atop one of the towers. He then returns to the body. His heart feels like it is going to explode. He tosses the headless body over his shoulder. He carries it with him into the night. Mishka is no longer an undercover agent. He has gone rogue. He's got no strings to hold him down. They have been cut. Mishka is staying at a fur importer's warehouse at the edge of Diamondland. He carries the body up the stairs and into his den. He devours the woman's flesh. He is very hungry. He cracks the bones and sucks the marrow. In some ways, he feels that this body belongs to him anyway. It is as if by being eaten she is returning home. This act is brutal and fierce. There is no joy to it. Just hunger. And breath. And saliva. He is about to chew on the woman's left arm when Mishka notices a gold wedding band on her index finger. This sparks one of those distant memories. He may have known this woman at one time. In that other life. He is about to remove the ring, thinks about it, and then devours the hand without taking the band off. It will be disposed of properly. In the woods. Later. When the moon is not so bright.

The woman who Mishka the Bear has killed and cannibalized was, of course, "Carlotta," one of the undercover aliases of Diane Hunter. Did Mishka, in decapitating "Carlotta" also decapitate Diane? Or had she bifurcated and become two, possibly four, separate people? Did Mishka act under his own power—has he crossed the imaginary line that separates assassin from serial killer—or was Mishka programmed to kill "Carlotta" by Control or even The Shadow Farm? Did he have a motive, a human motive like revenge, or were his motives simply animalistic? Hunger. Fear. Necessity.

Mishka the Bear dreams human dreams that night, hibernating deep inside a large bundle of furs in the warehouse, his stomach full and digesting. He dreams of a woman; her head appears as a refrigerator with a combination lock chained to the door handle. What is inside the head that he cannot get to? Mishka dreams of Doctor Josef Mengele, who gives him a Christmas present. Mishka wants to open the present, but has to leave it under the tree because there is a bus to catch. But a bus to where? He dreams of saliva and hair. He dreams of The Farm, the smell of the cages where he was kept and studied by the men in the white coats after a night on the prowl. That farm smell is an even more powerful smell than the zoo. It calls him home. In Mishka's hibernation, the chamber at the fur importer's warehouse transforms into a manmade cave, inside a manmade mountain, in a bear cage at a zoo. Mishka has returned home with the body of the woman he once loved.

The next morning Wesley Hunter wakes up on a park bench in Amsterdam. He is far away from home and cold. He doesn't remember much of the night before. His head hurts, like he is hung over. He has blood on his hands. He vaguely remembers the zoo and killing a woman. But he doesn't know if it was a dream. He has been wandering back and forth across the void, entering and leaving Diamondland frequently and with no apparent motive or pattern. He is lost. Lost without Diane and lost without Lola and his other children. He can no longer grasp the meaning of his life as a Hunter. He knows Mishka. But Wesley has slipped through his fingers when he wasn't looking, when he was too busy being other people for those who didn't care about what happened to him. This truth is difficult for Wesley to swallow. He has fallen into a deep well of loneliness where he is tortured in ways that only he knows how. Like Wesley, I too carried the burden of undefined loss, a vague sensation that I was missing something from my past—a memory, a name, a smell—and that if I only followed the trail left for me and solved the mystery, I would be given or given back the missing piece to my life.

## UNDER A CRACKED MOON

*A.J. Huffman*

Sarah entered the cemetery on bared feet,  
each step marking time to chime of church's bell.  
One. Her sisters were hanged. Two. By men  
who wouldn't know a witch from a rose. Three.  
Rebecca because she was married. Four. To a pillar  
of power who believed in free speech. Five. Because  
they were devout. Six. But did not follow Parris.  
Seven. Or share the Putnams' beliefs. Eight.  
Because borders and boundaries are questionable,  
never as finite as walls. Nine. Mary suffered  
because of her blood. Ten. Lineage was seen  
as disease. Eleven. The fools let me survive.  
Midnight. She stopped on the final toll,  
faced the stone markers of her kin, lined  
tools of the dark arts like surgical instruments.  
Knife struck her own  
vein, bled down entwined lengths  
of hangman's ropes. Her blood mixed with that  
of her sisters, as she placed the evidence as X  
between their graves. Next, she placed three  
chicken bones, the tongue of a frog, and  
the eye of a newt in inverted point, facing north.

Shedding cloak and clothes, she danced to her own  
chantings, the guttural utterings of the dead. She stopped  
when the night's eye receded, watched the sky for first sign.  
Two red stars fell, burned like comets across the black  
expanse. She smiled at the thought of their faces  
as the ground began to tremble. She waited for them  
to investigate, watched them shudder as dawn rose  
over empty graves, held her wrists out willingly,  
curious to see if they had the balls to try  
a witch they knew was real.

# PHOTOGRAPHY

Mark G. Lyvers

Salem Cemetery 2013













