



The Horror Zine
Magazine

Fall 2018

THE HORROR ZINE

Since 2009, The Horror Zine has published exceptional horror fiction by emerging talent and today's leading authors. Editor Jeani Rector selects only the most inventive, captivating tales, provocative poetry, and amazing art for each issue. In addition to short fiction, The Horror Zine features horror-themed poetry and artwork.

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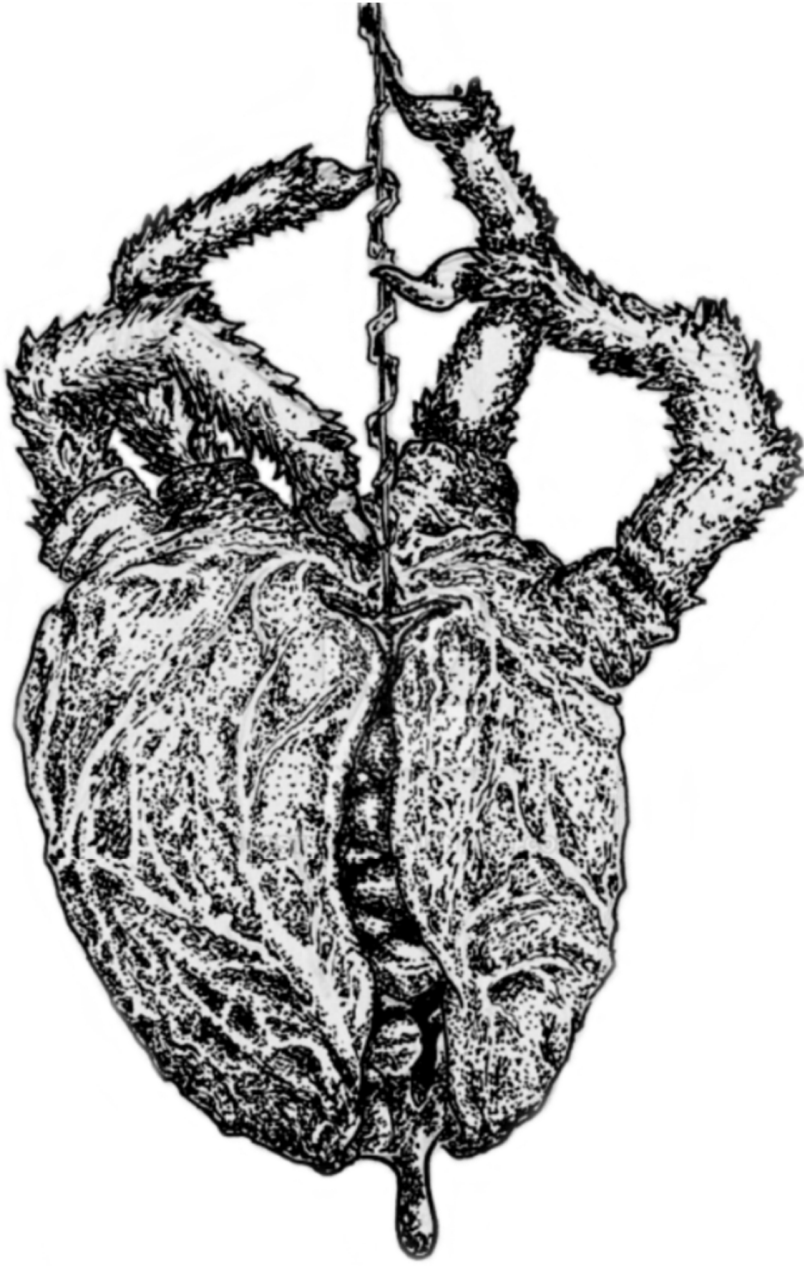
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THE HORROR ZINE MAGAZINE

The Horror Zine's mission is to provide a venue in which writers, poets, and artists can exhibit their work. The Horror Zine is an ezine, spotlighting the works of talented people, and displaying their deliciously dark delights for the world to enjoy.

The Horror Zine accepts submissions of fiction, poetry and art from morbidly creative people.

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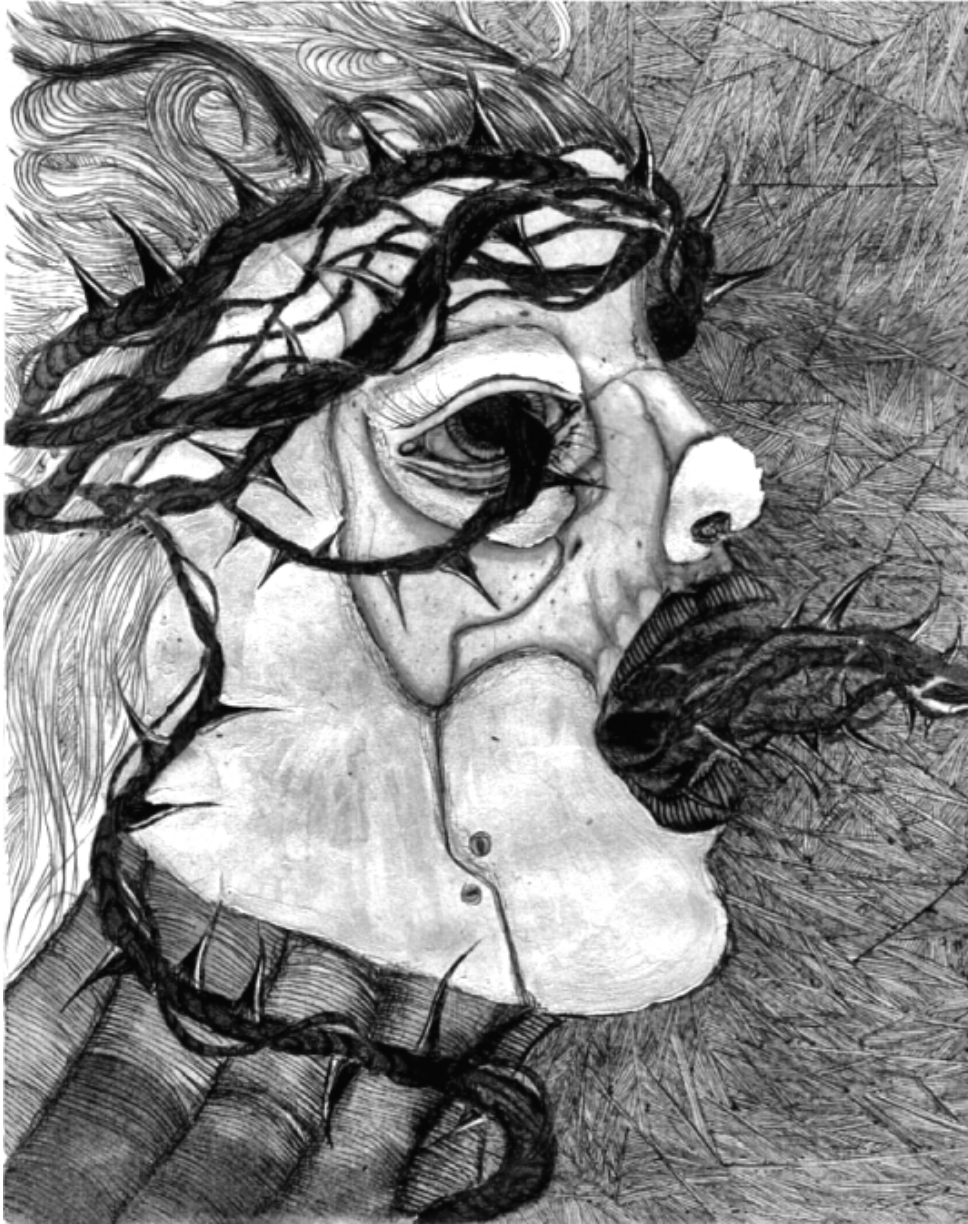
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“Statue of Libertine” by Blake Lavergne

**THE HORROR ZINE
MAGAZINE**

Dark Delights from the ezine

Edited by Jeani Rector

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(Artist bios at the back of this magazine)

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"In a Corner" by Red Tweny

FICTION

THE CYCLE
by Eric Neher

A warm breeze joined with the rising full moon, creating silver capped waves on the surface of Lake Eufaula, as they walked hand and hand across the shadowed beach. Far away, the hoot of an owl was answered by another.

“I love this time of night,” he said, giving her hand a squeeze. “It’s so...undisturbed.”

“It’s like another world,” said Marlene. And for her it really was another world, with many dark secrets, shared through whispered tales of fear. When you got down to it, that’s what fear really was: stories told in the dark.

The rays from Artemis did little to ease that fear. Its light put the world in a state of illusion, casting shadows within shadows, illuminating unrecognizable silhouettes that were there, and then gone. “Do you know what a Blue Moon is?” he said suddenly, as they paused to listen to the crashing waves.

“I don’t,” she lied, this would be her fifty-eighth.

“It’s when there’s a full moon twice in one month,” he said. “It’s very rare, only happens once every three years.”

Marlene smiled up at him. “I thought you said you were a doctor.”

“Astronomy is my hobby,” he said. “I took a few classes in my senior year at Yale.”

Marlene gave him the look that she knew he was hoping for, and said, “So you’re Ivy league.”

“That I am,” he said, and leaned over for a kiss. Marlene pretended to shy away.

“Hey,” she said. “We just met.”

He pulled her close, and she could feel his hardness pushing against her. It wouldn’t be long now.

“Don’t be like that,” he said. “I really like you.”

“I can tell,” she laughed.

“Listen, I’ve got a place on the other side of the lake, indoor pool and movie room. You should let me take you there.”

Again Marlene put up the coy fight that he was expecting, but after a few back and forths, finally agreed to go. Would it happen there? Is that where he was planning on killing her?

They walked back towards his Lincoln in silence. A sudden chill ran up her back. What if this was the last time? What if there was no coming back? A deal's a deal. That's what she had been told all those years ago, and so far it had been true. Still, a deal was only as good as who the deal was made with.

You get like this every time, she thought to herself, as they stopped at the back of his car. Marlene watched as he popped the trunk open and pulled out a tire iron. She didn't try to run or scream; she just stood there as he brought it down, smashing the side of her face. Then came the darkness.

The second time her head hit the top of the trunk, Marlene Staple awoke. The muffled whine of the tires turning underneath gave her something to focus on, something other than her swollen cheek, or her friction-burned hips that were barely covered by her ripped panties. She lay there in the darkness, curled in a fetal position, unable to move. He was taking her somewhere to kill her.

The rope that held her hands bound together was loose, obviously done by an amateur. The man that she had met at The Luna was just that, an amateur. His methods for online seduction left a trail as bright as a falling star. Amazingly, through sheer luck, he had not yet been caught. He was handsome, she had to give him that, and a good talker. Together they had gone through not one, but two bottles of Sauvignon blanc. A hefty bill that he had demanded to pay. A true gentleman. And that was just the beginning.

Another bump bounced her off the roof of the trunk. With just a little effort, her hands became free, and she began crawling them around in the dark until she felt the leather strap of her purse. She reached in and felt the flat, smooth, surface of her cell phone. The idiot had actually put her phone in the trunk with her. Obviously, he thought that she was dead. He had probably done this a couple of times before, and was overly confident, considered himself a pro. But these guys fed their egos with every kill, becoming too focused on their success, and not paying enough attention to the crime...amateur.

Marlene slipped the phone out of her purse. It showed full bars. She switched on the light. To her right was the same crowbar that had put her in this situation to begin with, beside it was a shovel. A little further down was some kind of saw, its long blade sticking out at its cordless base. A blue tarp lay folded over her feet. He certainly had plans. She switched her phone over to camera and took a picture of the tools, she then flipped it over and gave it a wide, black and blue smile. Just another one for the book.

The vibrating whine of the wheel began to slow down, her body shifted as the car turned right. A clunking sound echoed throughout the trunk, as bits of gravel bounced off of the bottom of the car, like an upside down hailstorm. Marlene checked the time, it was 12:45, she then checked her text messages, Mike had sent her three. There would be plenty of time tomorrow to apologize to him for breaking their date. It was her fault for making it in the first place, for losing sight of the

cycle. A deal's a deal, after all. Interesting, considering that everyone who had benefited from that deal were long dead. Marlene placed the phone back into her purse.

The car slowed to a stop and the motor shut off. She listened as the driver's side door opened and then shut. A sudden tingle began to work its way up and down her body, like tiny, electrified, fingertips. The moon must be hovering high up in the sky by now, its silver rays blanketing the ground. A welcoming mat for the one who was waiting.

The trunk opened, and for a second his silhouette stopped, surprised, and unsure of what to do next. Marlene just lay there looking up at him through puffed up eyes.

"Get out," he said finally, reaching down and grabbing her by the hair. Marlene struggled out of the trunk. "Why aren't you dead?"

"Is that what you want?" she said. "I thought we were having such a good time."

The man reached into the trunk and pulled out the tire iron. "Let's go."

"What about that other stuff?" she said. The tire iron slammed into her arm, dropping her to the ground. Marlene felt herself being drug to her feet by her other arm. She found herself suddenly leaning up against this man, her eyes just a couple of inches away from his. They reflected from the moon's light with an emptiness that could never be filled. Two soulless windows with only a black, and vacant, space behind them.

"Let's go," he said again, pointing the tire iron towards the tall, shadowed, wall of trees.

Marlene followed a narrow path that tunneled its way under the dark canopy of oaks and cottonwoods. A sudden rustling came from her right, from some frightened creature scampering off. A silver gleam appeared in front of her, seeming to blink, it was just an empty beer can, crushed and forgotten. From behind her the man was quiet, his steps barely heard over the rustling leaves, like a stalking cat. Soon the trees became thinner, more spread apart, and she suddenly found herself standing on the bank of a small pond.

"Stop," he said. "Take off your clothes." She turned around and looked at him, her face throbbing, her left eye now completely closed. If he was going to kill her then so be it. But rape was never part of the deal. "Take them off," he said again, raising the crow bar.

"No," she said.

"Bitch! I said take your fucking clothes off!"

"Fuck you!"

She brought her hand back to another time zone and let it fly, slapping the man, staggering him back three steps, watching as he dropped the tire iron at her feet. Marlene reached down and

picked the tool up. The man stood there rubbing his face in shock, for a second it seemed as if he had forgotten what he was doing, then he looked at her, and his hand dropped.

Marlene lifted the tire iron and he jumped back. She began to laugh. “You really are a coward, aren’t you?”

She turned, throwing the iron into the pond. The man stood there for a moment, baffled. This woman had the advantage, and for him that’s what this was all about, the advantage. To be the killer or to be the killed. It was a game, a wonderful and erotic game. And she had thrown her winning piece away.

Suddenly a strong urge to flee washed over him, a warning had begun to flash dimly in his mind, growing brighter, as he motionlessly stared at this crazy lady.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “You’re not scared of me, are you?”

She walked towards him, and he began to back up. From somewhere, deep in the woods, a sudden chorus of yipping coyotes opened up. The man’s wide eyes darted from left to right, like a cornered animal looking for a way out. For a moment she thought that she had gone too far, that this man was going to run and leave her unable to complete The Cycle. Losing a murderer hadn’t happened in the over three hundred years since the bargain had been made.

“You’ll do good in jail,” she said. “They like pretty boy rapists.”

Something clicked, she could see it in his vacant eyes, as they suddenly narrowed. He took a step towards her and stopped.

“Come on,” she said. “I’m not going anywhere.”

The man rushed her like linebacker, plowing his shoulder into her belly, knocking her back into the water.

At first he paused, unable to believe the lack of fight that she put up. He reached with both hands, wrapping them around her throat, pushing her head under the water. Still, she didn’t fight, didn’t struggle in the least.

Maybe the bitch is suicidal, like those guys who get shot by cops on purpose. For five minutes he held her head down, until he was sure that she was dead. He then lifted her up by her matted hair, her lifeless eyes looking back at him. He gave her a quick backhand slap, she didn’t move, didn’t blink. She was dead.

The walk back seemed to take forever. He was exhausted and the thrill that he usually felt after completing such a wonderful task was absent. This woman had unnerved him, the way she had egged him on, practically daring him to kill her.

It wasn't natural. Women were strange and confusing; he had known this all of his life. They had teased him from an early age, even his own mother, who liked to walk around naked in their house, just begging for him to touch her, constantly teasing him...daring him. Just like this woman had.

The trees came to an end. The man stopped at the edge, pausing to catch his breath. It had been a long night. The car sat just fifty feet away, its trunk still open, the moon giving it a ghostly quality that he didn't much care for. He looked forward to getting back to his one-bedroom apartment and watching some television, and putting this whole night behind him.

He started towards the car and stopped. A sound came from behind him, something faint but undeniably there. It was probably just a deer, he told himself. He was in the country, after all. Again he began to make his way to the car, and again came the sound, louder this time, closer.

He turned back to the treeline. The only thing he could see was darkness, the trees looked like they had been painted together with long strokes of black and gray.

Suddenly a streak of silver flashed through the shadows. He felt a chill run up his spine. That was no deer. Slowly he began to back away, listening. From somewhere along the treeline, a low stuttered hissing began, the man froze, his heart pounding in his ears.

It wasn't hissing...it was laughing. Bumps formed on his body from head to toe, his knees began to shake uncontrollably, as every nerve ending suddenly fired up at once, screaming for him to run. But he couldn't, something already had him.

It came out of the darkness, like a shimmering silver light. It was floating above the ground, its face rippling, as if he were looking at something from under the water. The man felt his pants grow wet, his entire body now shaking, unable to move. As it drew near he could see that it was a woman, or something like a woman. The body shifted from side to side, there, and then not there, until suddenly, it hovered right in front of him. A smile appeared within its flickering face.

It was her!

The dead woman had followed him back from the pond, her face had aged, but there could be no doubt. The moon was becoming brighter, its light burning into his skin. Suddenly the woman reached out with long, bony, fingers, and latched onto his throat.

The man felt the coldness of her grip shoot down his body, like jumping into a pool of icy cold water. Images began to flash in front of his eyes; a short, dark haired woman, it was his first, who lay buried in a shallow grave just three miles away. She was there now, standing next to him, her ripped paisley dress still hanging from her rotting corpse. Another woman appeared, her throat decorated with the slice he had given her. Never again, he had told himself afterwards. Too messy. And yet another appeared, wandering out of the woods. Like some lost child looking for a way home. It was a child, almost, and he remembered her well.

A scream suddenly rang out into the night, as one by one their faces ripped apart, revealing scale-covered skin, fangs dripping. The woman squeezed tighter, silencing him, until all he could do was watch in terror.

“You have earned this,” the woman hissed. “And for that, we thank you.”

Suddenly she let him go. He stumbled back, afraid to turn around. Finally, he did turn and ran for the car. The three women fell upon him, pulling him to the ground and tearing through his flesh, like a starving pride of lions. He began to shriek out in terrified pain, but was cut short. Soon all that remained was the crimson colored grass, hidden in the bright moons light.

The phone rang just after sun up. At first the man tried to ignore it. Who the hell would be calling this early? Finally it stopped. He breathed a sigh of relief and rolled over. It started again, he sat up and grabbed the phone off of his night stand. He saw the caller ID and he couldn't help but smile.

“Hey you,” he said.

“Mike, I'm so sorry about last night.”

“Hey, Marlene,” he said, palming a yawn. “It's okay.”

“Baby,” said Marlene. “I need a ride.”

About Eric Neher

Eric Neher lives in Blanchard, Oklahoma with his wife Tammy (The Traveling Nurse) and son Garrett. His other two children, Wyatt and Kelsey, graduated from Newcastle High School and left the nest.

He is a continuing contributor to Uniqlahoma Magazine, as well as having numerous short and flash fiction stories published. When not typing out words, Eric works in the construction field as a product consultant and installation specialist, traveling all over the great state of Oklahoma. A graduate of MNTC's diverse and various creative writing programs, he is constantly on the lookout for better ways to hone his craft.

Notable works include: *The Bane of Dave*, *Lump*, *A Haunted Cemetery*, and *Sacred Heart Mission*.

THIRTEEN STEPS TO HELL
by S.C. Rumble

Scott spent fifteen minutes in the car trying to muster the strength to walk. The pain in his stomach was intense, a serrated knife shearing off abdominal muscle one piece at a time. Slicing at his hope. He had tried resting his head against the steering wheel of his '77 Toyota Celica, breathing through the pain. Sometimes it worked, sometimes not. This time it took a while: five, ten, fifteen minutes. The pain overwhelmed his sense of time. Eventually it passed. He decided he was unwilling to keep enduring it.

He opened the car door and staggered into the rain, barely capable of walking. He couldn't distinguish the raindrops from the tears on his cheeks. No need to lock the car. He wasn't leaving. The ground was muddy and slightly slippery. Patches of uncut grass granted stability. He made his way past the old wooden sign: *Maltby Cemetery*.

The cemetery had been around since 1908. It wasn't the oldest cemetery in the area, but it was the one with the most unique history. It housed a crypt known via urban legend as the Thirteen Steps to Hell, situated on a three-terraced hillside. Thirteen stone steps had been placed into the side of the lowest terrace, leading to an old family crypt. The name of the family who was buried there had long been forgotten. A plaque bearing their name had long since been stolen.

There were many rumors about the Steps. One said it was a gateway to Hell. If you walked down the steps at midnight and laid down on the ground, you couldn't get up. Some variations said you'd hear the screams of the damned. Other rumors said you'd be driven insane just by being there. He didn't believe any of them. Scott believed one thing: no one would find him here until they read his note.

Scott once came out to the area on a dare with friends. When he had friends. His illness drove them away. One by one they stopped calling, stopped visiting. Their absence left him cut off and hopeless, like the cemetery. The perfect spot.

As Scott walked to the site the stomach pain got the better of him. He took a knee in the mud to catch his breath. As he exhaled he saw his breath leave his body.

He didn't think it would be that cold. He winced as another round of stomach pain took his full attention. Breathing through it he got up.

The walk to the Steps had taken longer than he expected. The sky darkened. As he approached, Scott saw the stone steps set into the hillside. They were level despite being set in mud. He put his foot on the first step, slipped and fell backward onto the stone path. Despite the clouds he saw stars. Rain soaked on his face. He rolled over to get up, right into a mud puddle.

"Fuck!" he shouted, slamming his fists into the mud. This wasn't going to be easy. Another wave of stomach pain crushed him. He rolled into the fetal position in the mud breathing and waited for the pain to subside. When it passed he slowly got back up.

The rain was intense. He cautiously started down the steps again. He almost slipped on the first step again but was ready for it this time. Stopping on the third step, the rain stopped.

“Finally,” Scott thought.

He continued. As he walked down steps three, four, and five it felt like he was in a dark tunnel. At the sixth step the rain clouds parted. A sliver of moon revealed his path. At the bottom of the steps, he saw a simple, stone bench. The crypt was built into the hillside. The only unnatural part; the door. It appeared to be made of iron and extremely heavy, something you’d see in a medieval castle or monastery.

Scott stopped on the thirteenth step. Unlike the rest of the cemetery, the common area was pristine. He hastily stepped onto the ground. It was then he noticed something odd.

He couldn’t smell the grass or trees. No taste or sound in the air, not even raindrops falling onto the ground or into puddles. He could barely see what was in the immediate area, but not back up the steps. He couldn’t tell where the moonlight was coming from.

A stone bench sat in front of the door. As he walked to sit down on the bench, the ground didn’t feel right. Or—was it more like his pace was different? He couldn’t tell. He put his hand on the bench to sit down and noticed it didn’t feel like stone. It felt unnaturally smooth, like skin.

He sat facing the iron door and thought, “This will be the last thing I see.” He took a kitchen knife out of his pocket. The small kind used to cut steak at dinner. He had taken it from the butcher block at home. He thought his mom would probably replace the whole set after reading his note. Maybe she wouldn’t even notice it missing. He had tried to tell his parents the pain of his illness was too much for him. They didn’t understand how overwhelming it was for him.

“You can push through it,” they’d say. “We’re here for you. Just have hope.”

They didn’t know what they were talking about. The doctor could manage the disease with drugs but not the pain. The pain ate at Scott’s hope like the disease ate at his body. It gnawed ever so slowly, gently. Then it ate voraciously, attacking organs in a feeding frenzy. It left him hollow, but there was always room for the pain. He wanted to end his suffering.

He took off his rain-soaked jacket and laid it on the ground. He extended his arm so it rested on his leg. With his right hand he took the knife and moved it toward his wrist. He felt the knife against his wrist, saw his vein pulse with each heartbeat. He was so cold and numb he doubted he’d feel the cut. He started to cut into his skin as a loud pounding came from the door.

He jumped, “What the hell?”

He stood up and thought he heard something. Raindrops? It was like drops of water on a metal sink from a leaky faucet. He couldn’t tell from what direction.

Along the edges of the door it seemed like there was a slight glow. He walked toward it, and as he moved closer it sounded like he could hear buzzing behind it.

He searched his memories trying to recognize the sound. After what seemed like a few minutes he came to a conclusion. “Bees,” he thought. “It sounds like bees in a hive.” He could feel the slightest bit of heat coming from the door. It combated the chill of his wet clothes. He put his right hand on the door. It felt warm to the touch, pleasant, considering how cold and wet he felt.

“Excuse me,” a voice said from behind him.

“Shit!” Scott exclaimed as he spun around.

“Sorry,” the voice said. He turned around and saw a woman dressed in grey coveralls. “Sorry, I did not mean to startle you” she said as she put a hand on his shoulder to help calm him down.

“Christ! Where did you come from?” Scott asked.

“I work here. Why do not we sit down on the bench? Calm you down a bit. You had a jolt.” They walked over to the bench and sat down.

“Take a couple of breaths,” the groundskeeper said. Scott took the advice. As he calmed down he got a better look at her. She appeared to be in her forties. She had an athletic build, probably from taking care of the cemetery. Scott thought if he saw her in street clothes, he’d probably think she was attractive; for an older woman. Even seated, Scott could tell she was tall. She was at least six and a half feet tall. Her hair was unusual: red with streaks of white. Her eyes were ice blue, almost white they were so light. Her voice was the most unique thing about her. She had an accent that was hard to place; maybe Middle Eastern, and it had a cadence and tone that put you at ease. It wasn’t hypnotic but more musical or rhythmic.

“How are you? I did not mean to shock you,” she said. “It is unusual for me to receive visitors on nights like this.”

“I’m okay. You just scared me. Didn’t think anyone would be here this late.”

“I come around when the need arises,” the groundskeeper said. “I have not been needed here for a while.”

“So, you just take care of the cemetery?” Scott asked.

“I tend to the needs of those who come here. My primary focus is visitors to this particular part of the cemetery.”

“Ahhhh,” Scott responded. “You aren’t from here are you?”

“Why do you ask?”

“You have an accent and you don’t speak normal.”

“Yes. I am not from around here. I learned English a long time ago,” she replied.

“Do you work for the family that owns the crypt?” Scott asked.

“In a way. We have an arrangement that was made a long time ago,” she answered. “May I ask you a question?”

Scott nodded.

“Why are you here?”

“I’m here to kill myself,” He blurted out. Scott’s face drained. He couldn’t believe he’d just admitted that. There was something about the groundskeeper’s voice. It wasn’t like she had asked a question, more like she commanded an answer. The groundskeeper smiled and put her hand on his shoulder.

“You are not the first. You will not be the last,” she answered like she had already known what he was going to say. “Why did you decide to murder yourself?”

Scott thought about the question for a moment, not so much the question but how the groundskeeper asked it. He thought it was odd to say *murder* yourself instead of *kill* yourself.

“I was diagnosed with an incurable disease. It won’t kill me but it keeps me in constant pain. I have good days and bad days but the bad days are getting more frequent. It wears me down. I am so tired I can’t even work anymore. I have to live with my parents. I don’t want to be a burden to them. I don’t want them to see me waste away.”

“You have chosen not to ask for help?”

“No,” Scott replied in frustration. “What good would it do? Keep me alive just to be in pain? That’s not a life I want. I want a life free of pain.”

“All life is full of pain. Some pain is minor and some seems unbearable. You have not considered the consequences of your actions.”

“Yes, I have!” Scott argued, “I’m tired of feeling like someone’s stabbing me with a hot knife in the gut.”

“That is an ironic statement,” the groundskeeper said.

“What do you mean?” Scott asked. This conversation was really draining him.

She ignored his question. “Why are you so certain it will not help? You have not even tried asking for help. You just gave up.”

“No I didn’t! I tried to fight this. You can’t fight something you can’t see.” Scott was really starting to get annoyed.

“When you were in your car suffering from pain, what did you do?”

“You saw that?”

She grinned and asked, “What happened?”

“I was trying to breathe through the pain.”

“Why did you do that?”

He suddenly realized why he had been breathing. “I hoped the pain would go away.”

“You hoped the pain would go away. When you have hope you have the strength to live. You had more hope than you thought.”

“But I’m so tired of the pain,” he sobbed.

The groundskeeper replied, “You had loved ones to help you. You were a part of their life. They were there to help ease your burden. They loved you. You were the sum of their hopes but you gave up on them and yourself.” As she said this, Scott thought he saw a fire in her ice blue eyes. He felt ashamed.

Scott realized how much his parents and friends meant to him. He *had* allowed the disease to make him bitter. They hadn’t left him. He pushed everyone away. He knew he was loved and would be missed pursuing this path. He was dismayed how he could have lost so much hope. He had so much to live for.

He looked at the groundskeeper and said, “I need to get home.”

The groundskeeper grinned and said, “Do not forget your knife.”

Scott hadn’t realized he had dropped it. He got up and felt lightheaded. He tried to walk to the knife but lost his balance. The color drained from his vision and he fell to his knees, confused. Scott saw the knife and reached out to grab it. His hand passed through it.

He didn’t understand what was going on. He looked at his hand, amazed to see a dark liquid trickling off his arm into a puddle next to a body. His body.

“What’s happening?” Scott asked. He turned around on all fours with all of his strength, breathing through each movement to force himself into action.

“Help me,” he begged the groundskeeper.

He tried to look at the groundskeeper's face but couldn't lift his head. It was then he noticed the groundskeeper wasn't wearing work boots or shoes of any kind. There were hooves where her feet should have been. A sliver of moonlight cast her shadow in front of him. She stood. In her silhouette Scott saw not horns but antlers proudly bulging from her head. Bat-like wings fanned him with hot air.

A strong hand rolled him onto his back, giving him a view of the iron door. Firelight emanated from the edges of the door frame. Scott was frozen. His senses, once dull, were now alive. He could hear screams radiating from the iron door as it opened.

Scott realized the stories about the Thirteen Steps to Hell were true.

"I had hoped you would realize how much you had to live for the moment you stepped out of your car. Each step you took buried your hopes," the groundskeeper said. She grabbed him by the ankle, effortlessly dragging him toward the door.

"Just a little nudge, or shock, was all it took to tip you over the edge toward the abyss."

"But I changed my mind! You helped me change my mind!"

"Too little, too late. I do enjoy *playing* with my guests," she taunted. "What kind of Devil would I be if I did not torment the hopeless?"

Scott could feel the heat coming from the open iron door. The screams of the damned filled his ears.

"Someone once said, 'Losing your life is not the worst thing that can happen. The worst thing is to lose your reason for living'" the Devil said as the door shut behind them.

About S.C. Rumble

S.C. Rumble is a husband, father, and former business analyst at a major health insurance carrier in Washington State. He earned a B.A. degree in Law and Justice from Central Washington University in 2002 and returned in 2017 to pursue a B.A. degree in English: Professional and Creative Writing.

CHARLES BUKOWSKI'S COMMAND PERFORMANCE
by Andy Rausch

The Gotham night remained a temperate one, despite the falling rain being pissed from the sky. Having been forced to park his beat up Ford Windstar some two blocks away, Leonard now trudged along, hefting both his knapsack and duffel bag up Eighth Avenue. Still unfamiliar with New York City, he was surprised by the number of pedestrians still making their ways to and fro. He had heard many times that the city never slept, but its inhabitants apparently never went home either.

Finally he came to Twenty-third Street, and he hooked a right. The rain wasn't letting up, and Leonard now feared for the safety of the beloved laptop tucked away in his bag. A short ways in, he now saw the majestic red brick building which housed the Hotel Chelsea. His destination in sight, he started to walk a little more briskly. When he reached the hotel's 222 West Twenty-third entrance, he stepped in, at long last finding relief from the storm.

He shook the water from himself as an animal would, and stood there staring in awe at the spacious-yet-seedy lobby. As he did, he considered the many artists from all walks of life who had inhabited the place at one time or another. The old hotel had seen its fair share of noted talents in its day, from Leonard Cohen to Stanley Kubrick to Andy Warhol. Even Marilyn Monroe had stayed here.

Leonard approached the front desk, manned by a solitary clerk whose name tag identified him as Ray. The twenty-something man with clean-cut, boy-next-door features, said a greeting in a genuinely friendly tone. "Can I help you?"

Leonard said, "I have a reservation under the name Leonard Trillman."

"Trillman?" Ray asked.

Leonard nodded, and Ray tapped away at his keyboard. "And how will you be paying, Mr. Trillman?"

"With cash."

"And you're staying for two nights?"

"Yes."

Ray tapped at his keyboard some more. His gaze moved up to Leonard. "With tax, that'll be \$196.89." Leonard reached into his pocket and pulled out his old tattered wallet. He removed two crisp hundred dollar bills and a ten, handing them to the clerk. Ray gave him his change and turned away for a moment, finally turning back to produce a room key on a plastic black fob. He handed it over. "Can I get you anything else, Mr. Trillman?"

Leonard said no and turned toward the stairs. When he reached the third floor, he made his way down the corridor in search of his room. Once he located it, he unlocked the door and entered.

The room was a good-sized one, pulling off the same trick the lobby had of simultaneously being both spacious and seedy. Leonard took off his jacket and sat down on the bed, his soaked Mumford and Sons t-shirt clinging to his body. He opened his duffel bag and retrieved his laptop. The machine, plastered with band stickers, seemed to be in working order much to Leonard's relief.

The next item he pulled out from the duffel was a baggie containing weed. He extracted a tightly-rolled joint from the baggie and held it up to his mouth. He fished through the pocket of his jeans, searching for, and finally finding, his Bic lighter. He lit the joint dangling from his lips. The burning paper crackled as Leonard drew on the joint, and he inhaled a big breath of thick pot smoke.

He lay back on his bed and closed his eyes, slipping into the inviting darkness of sleep. When he awoke some thirty-five minutes later, Leonard mentally scolded himself for his faux pas. There was work to be done. With only two days in the hotel room, Leonard had to get to it; the Great American novel wasn't going to author itself. He sat upright and went to the bathroom. Once there, he went to filling the large dirtied-porcelain bathtub with steaming hot water. He started to undress. Once he was naked, he took a leak in the toilet and climbed into the half-filled tub. The water was hot, attempting to scald him pink but just hot enough that he could stand it.

Shit, he thought, realizing he'd forgotten something. He climbed out, leaving puddles on the cold tile floor, and made his way to the bedroom. Once there, he went to his bag and retrieved the straight-razor from an outside pouch. He carried it back into the tub, toying with it in his hands. Now sitting in the hot water once again, he turned off the faucet and the cascade ceased to be. Leonard opened the straight razor and stared at it a good long time, eyeballing his shimmering reflection in its blade; maybe it was five minutes, maybe it was twenty. He couldn't say for sure as time was moving at an irregular pace.

Finally, at long last, Leonard opened up the blade, and then his vein. The blackish blood pulsed from the slit like disco lights at a nightclub. He raised his other wrist and followed suit, making sure to slash diagonally rather than horizontally so the wound could be stitched shut when the time came.

He stood up, water dripping from his body, and he walked, still soaked, to the bedroom. His wrists were seeping blood at a steady pace, and Leonard went to work outlining a giant, bloody pentagram on the white tile floor with it. Once he had sufficiently painted the floor, Leonard retrieved his laptop and sat it in the center of the drawn shape.

Leonard went back to his knapsack and searched through it, effectively covering it in blood, producing two hot cans of Foster's and a carton of Benson & Hedges. He sat a pack of the cigarettes and the two beer cans inside the marked area. He then reached inside his bag and pulled out five fat black candles—one for each corner of the pentagram. He carefully laid them out around the design and then lit them. He stood back, looking over his work and admiring it.

He went to his duffel bag and pulled out an old, dog-eared book whose dust jacket may or may not have been fashioned from real human skin. He opened the volume to the book-marked page, and carried it to the pentagram. He sat down near the design and began to read from the book.

The meaning of the ancient words were lost on him, so he enunciated each word as carefully and clearly as possible. He didn't know what the words meant, but he knew what the outcome would be if all went as planned.

Finally he got to the portion of the passage where he was to include the demon's name, and he said "Charles Bukowski," having verified that the author was a servant in Hell through the use of a Ouija board. He went on reading the rest of the gibberish-sounding words.

Once he had finished reading the passage, a cold wind reached out from nowhere, extinguishing all five candles. Leonard watched the pentagram. Now a bright yellowish light started to jut up from the floor in the center of the design, reaching up to the ceiling. He saw the very distinct silhouette of Satan looming over him, and in front of that appeared a second figure, bathed in fire. The thick smell of sulfur was unmistakable. The figure before Satan writhed as if in pain, and then fell to the floor in the center of the bloody pentagram. The fire and light subsided, as did the silhouette of the Dark Lord, and Leonard saw that the man was as naked as he was.

The naked fat man sat up, looking hairy and disheveled. The only thing that looked different about the Ham and Rye author from the photographs Leonard had seen was that his eyes now glowed a fiery red.

"Why have you summoned me here?" the demon Bukowski howled, his voice booming and frightening. Leonard felt as though he might piss himself, intermingling urine with the dripping blood which now covered his legs, but managed to control his bladder for the time being.

"I have summoned you to write for me," said Leonard, trying his damndest to sound as ferocious as Bukowski. (It didn't work, and Leonard's tiny flaccid penis would do little to make him more intimidating.)

Bukowski's face contorted and he cocked his head, his fiery eye holes fixed on Leonard. "Write for you?"

"I brought you gifts, you'll see," Leonard said, pointing a bloody index finger towards the cigarettes and booze. Bukowski's burning-red stare now turned to the beers, and he was, for the moment, satiated. He reached down and grabbed one of the cans with his long-fingernailed hand, popping it open. He raised the container and guzzled from it, Foster's streaming down his face. Next he tore open the pack of smokes, removing one and lighting it with a flame that emitted from the end of his finger. He went to smoking a cigarette, taking long drags and savoring the moment.

He looked up. "What," asked the demon, "do you want me to write?"

“You’re going to write the Great American novel.” Leonard listened to his weighted words, enjoying the stern sound of his own voice. “And I’m going to take all the credit for it. I will be seen as a great writer, like you.”

The demon Bukowski looked at him with those red, hollowed-out eyes, perhaps studying him. His expressions were difficult to discern with his having no eyeballs. “What exactly would you have me write about, Master?”

Master. Leonard liked that. “Surprise me, Charles,” he said. “Write whatever suits you. And make it the very best you can. I command it.”

Bukowski sat Indian-style in the center of the pentagram, his long old man testicles drooping to the floor, and he started banging away at the keyboard madly. Leonard was surprised that the author-turned-demon knew how to operate a Dell laptop as he had passed on to Hell way back in 1994, but he figured that was hardly the most astounding aspect of this remarkable occurrence.

And Bukowski wrote, occasionally cackling at his own prose as he did. Leonard did not ask him what he was writing, knowing the words would be his own in a matter of hours. Once the demon Bukowski had finished downing his second can of Foster’s, he turned and demanded more. “More beer!” he bellowed, his screeching voice sounding inhuman.

Leonard wrapped his wrists with white hotel towels, turning them red in the process, but remaining naked just as the incantation had demanded. Leonard was feeling light-headed now, and he hoped that his demonic slave would complete the manuscript before he passed out from loss of blood. He reached a bloodied hand into the bag and produced another can of Foster’s, rolling it into the center of the pentagram.

Bukowski clutched at the aluminum can, and tore it open, guzzling its contents and once again spilling it all over his face. He threw the aluminum can at the wall with such force that it shook the room, and for the first time Leonard wondered what might happen were Bukowski able to escape from his pentagram prison. He felt a chill run down his naked, wet spine, and he forced such thoughts from his mind. Much to Leonard’s surprise, the demon did not demand another beer, but went on banging away at the keyboard.

Soon, Leonard thought, he would be seen as an accomplished author. He just had to force himself to stay conscious until after the demon Bukowski had completed their novel. Finally, just as Leonard was feeling extremely woozy, the demon spoke in that eery high-pitched voice of his. “Please read this passage. Let me know what you think, Master.”

The light-headed Leonard agreed to read the section, and he inched forward towards the pentagram. Bukowski slid the laptop out from the symbol, and Leonard started to read. The prose he saw there on the laptop was remarkable, one of the finest things he’d ever read and certainly better than anything he could have produced. The words danced on the page. Not wanting to pass out before Bukowski finished his task, he slid the computer back to him.

“It’s amazing,” said Leonard. “It’s one of the best things I’ve ever read. And just think, I’ll get all the credit.”

Bukowski looked at him for a beat, his fiery eyes seeming to stare through him. “Can I tell you a secret, Master?” asked the demon.

Leonard nodded. “Yes?”

“When you slid the beers into the pentagram...”

“Yes?” asked Leonard, biting at his lip.

“And when you slid the laptop into the symbol...”

Leonard didn’t understand. “What, Bukowski?”

Bukowski grinned a particularly fiendish smile. “You broke the plane, freeing me from my prison.”

Leonard realized the mistake he made.

His eyes got big, and Bukowski just went on grinning. The demon stood up and dove towards him, snatching him up in his arms and raising him over his head. Leonard was quite light-headed now, and the room was spinning. Or was that him?

Bukowski slammed him across the room into the old television set, and Leonard’s head went through its screen. He was cut badly, and there was blood streaming down his face. Despite his light-headedness, Leonard’s wounds hurt a great deal. He wiggled out of the television frame, blood in his eyes, his knees being cut by the shards of broken glass which littered the floor. Suddenly Bukowski flung the laptop into the wall beside Leonard, and it shattered.

“Here’s your fucking novel, asshole!” raged the demon.

Leonard whispered, “My...my...novel...”

He stood, swaying as he did, and tried to maneuver towards the room door. He took one step and Bukowski was on him again, clutching at his right arm, the blood seeping quickly now. Bukowski yanked at the arm, and Leonard felt a searing pain unlike anything he’d ever experienced. The demon had torn off the appendage.

Leonard stood there, swaying, bloody and confused. The demon Bukowski raised the arm and swung it towards him like a club, knocking him into the wall. Before Leonard could move, Bukowski was on him, beating him over and over and over again with his own arm.

Bukowski turned and sighed. He pulled another can of beer out from Leonard’s bag and picked up his smokes. He sat down, naked and trembling, in an aged recliner that had seen better days.

The demon popped open the can and took a swig, beer streaming down his chin. He used his finger to light another smoke, and he sat and puffed on the cigarettes and drank the beer his would-be captor had given him. As he did, he wondered where he would get his next drink.

About Andy Rausch

Andy Rausch is the author of more than twenty non-fiction books and several novels and novellas, including *Riding Shotgun and Other American Cruelties*, *Elvis Presley: CIA Assassin*, and *M-Company in the Axis of Evil* (with David C. Hayes). He is also the author of the short story collection *Death Rattles* and the screenwriter of the film *Dahmer vs Gacy*.

REFLECTIONS

by Justin Boote

By their very nature, supermarkets terrified Trevor Richardson anyway. Hoards of people bustling and jostling along the aisles, oblivious to their shopping carts blocking passages. The kids racing around with the cart pretending to be Formula One drivers, crying and screaming when candy or biscuits denied. It was chaos—not organized—and created a sense of claustrophobia and tension that turned a simple operation into a potentially terrifying one.

Especially on a Saturday. Then, the stress became twofold. His nervousness was multiplied by the sheer overwhelming presence of men, women, and kids going about their business as though they were the only ones with business to do.

He'd once seen a movie in which dozens of people were trapped in a supermarket while monsters roamed outside. He found himself standing in a vast queue for the checker, impatiently waiting to pay while others tutted and groaned expressing their own impatience. It was not the recommended place to start having nightmarish visions.

He spotted another line inevitably moving faster than his and was about to make a mad dash to it, when an elderly woman somehow beat him, her shopping cart brimming with goodies. He looked desperately at the other queues, the contents of their carts, and the stakes of changing from one to another, and was forced to accept that the one he was in was probably his best bet.

And so, the waiting game commenced.

He caught a glimpse of himself in one of the mirrors that adorned the concrete posts.

A zombie-thing looked back at him. It was a face riddled with decay and decomposition, dribbles of pus giving weight to the flaking skin that fell lazily to the floor like feathers. A ridiculous yet terrifying smile wrinkled its leprous features, the lips cracking and oozing with unnameable secretions, the smile so wide it threatened to pierce the earlobes. It wagged its tongue at him.

Trevor gave a high-pitched cry of fright. He staggered back, knocking into the elderly woman who in turn began shouting, accusing him of being drunk or on drugs.

He turned around to see everyone was staring at him. Some wore grins of their own, others frowning and shaking their heads. The security guard made a bee-line for him. Sweat appeared miraculously on his forehead and ran down his face in eagerness, replicating the dribbles of the zombie-thing.

To Trevor, it was as though watching it through another's eyes. The people seemed blurry and hazy as he looked in disbelief from one to another, then back to the reflection in the mirror. A chorus of faint whimpers that he was terrified could be his own mingled with those of the snickers and mumbling coming from others, accentuated with the thick voice of the security guard whose words he couldn't interpret.

Among those sounds was a hissing. He looked down to see that he'd dropped the double six-pack and one can was spraying its contents in alcoholic delight, showering his legs and those of the elderly woman. More whimpering and gasps of shock and embarrassment.

He jumped when the guard put his hand on his shoulder, causing him to inadvertently glance once more into the mirror. What looked back now was his own red, sweating face, eyeballs bulging—he wasn't sure what was worse; the zombie-thing's or his own—and that was when he bolted, barging past the others who had frozen in amazement to watch proceedings.

He ran the distance to his paltry little apartment in record time.

If time heals all hurt, Trevor thought he might have to live an eternity to recover from the earlier episode. It was obvious he could never return to the supermarket which was a shame because they sold the cheapest beer and food, but under no circumstances could he risk being spotted by a previous witness. They would surely laugh and point at him. This was petty though compared to what he had seen in the supermarket mirror. And there could also be no doubt that it had been real and not the hallucination of a stressed mind. Because it wasn't the first time it had happened.

The first time had been at work. He had been carrying a tray of drinks to the terrace when a glance in one of the decorative wall mirrors had caused him to drop the tray.

What stared back at him had been a grotesque caricature; a rotting, senile face whose bloodied eyes hung literally by frail threads of nerves as they bobbed on his cheeks. The ruckus had caused Trevor to flee to the toilet and hide himself for several long, terrified minutes.

After smoking one cigarette after another, the conclusion was reached that it had been a hangover-induced hallucination. What else, after all, could it have been? When he finally returned to the restaurant, he managed to convince his supervisor that he had slipped and no, he was not on drugs, and it wouldn't happen again.

And it didn't.

At least not at work.

In the three months since that first incident, the images had come thick and fast, yet never while surrounded by people as in the supermarket. At the restaurant his claims of slipping were perfectly legitimate; it happened often to someone or other and did not provoke unease or laughter among workmates or clients. This, though, was a devastating new turn in events that required serious contemplation as to its origin and reason.

“I am not going mad. I've never taken drugs so there is no chance of flashbacks being the cause, and monsters do not exist. So, what are we left with?” he asked the sleeping cat on his living room sofa. “I'm not going mad. There is no reason for me to be losing it and seeing faces in mirrors, so...”

And then it hit him.

“A brain tumor. That’s it. I have a tumor that is causing me to see things and I am going to die slowly and horribly. Fuck.”

He thought about it for a while. This was both terrifying yet strangely reassuring in an odd way. Knowing the answers—however grim—to one’s problems at least solved the problem of origin and purpose, and usually implied that something might at least be done about it. A brain tumor, though? That was a toughie.

But didn’t a brain tumor usually bring as company constant headaches and migraines, nausea, and double vision? He hadn’t suffered any of these ailments for years. And never double vision.

It was time to see a doctor. In the meantime, he needed courage. That meant a drink.

It was more expensive, but Trevor often considered the little Pakistani twenty-four-hour supermarket the eighth wonder of the world. Certainly, its façade was discreet at best but that beer was available even in the darkest hours of the night. And just as important, no queues were necessary, so he could be in and out in minutes.

As expected, the store was empty except for the owner. Trevor strolled confidently over to the fridge where the beer was kept (another bonus; it was already cold, unlike the bigger supermarket), grabbed himself another double six-pack, and headed to the till. As he fumbled for change, the owner distracted him,

“You want a bag for this?” he asked.

Trevor looked up and screamed. There was a mirror behind the checker.

The face that sneered back at him in the mirror behind the counter was foul. Mountainous warts and obscene growths throbbed and exploded over the thing’s face; a greenish-yellow pus running down it like lava, splashing onto its swollen tongue and running down its throat. The eyes seemed alive, like eggs; as though behind them something parasitic and hellish strived to break its way through and hatch. Obnoxious, rotten black teeth wobbled and swayed as the thing opened and closed its mouth as though trying desperately to escape themselves the surely poisonous river of pus.

He threw a can of his precious beer at the mirror and ran, only vaguely aware of the irate Pakistani’s own screaming.

Experience had taught him that he was not safe in the refuge of his own apartment either. There was now only one mirror remaining—in the bathroom—that was required for hygienic purposes before heading to work; the others he’d thrown to the garbage. And yet, reflections could appear

in the most unlikely of places and in many guises. So, to counter, he grabbed one of his beers and darted under the warm blanket of his bed.

He awoke several hours later in desperate need of the toilet. He staggered from the bed and stumbled towards the bathroom, cursing his throbbing head and throat that felt as though he'd eaten mud for supper.

As he emptied his bladder for what seemed an eternity, he couldn't stop himself from looking into the mirror.

A hand, skeletal and clawed, popped through the glass and reached for him. The other followed, then two long arms, half-way between skeletal themselves and decomposed gristles of flesh, aimed for his neck and slowly dragged him towards the mirror. He resisted as much as incompetent legs and failed strength allowed but knew that it was in vain. A face awaited him on the other side, grinning and sneering with its fabulous mock smile, and he also knew in that moment that it was his own face that reflected back at him.

While the arms of his tormentor dragged him through the mirror into a world where monstrosity and distortion was ruler and abundant, he almost gave thanks. It was a reprisal from those that looked to him with disgust. Now he could finally fit in.

About Justin Boote

Justin Boote is an Englishman living in Barcelona for over twenty years working as a stressed waiter in a busy, central restaurant and has been writing short horror stories for two years. In this time, he has published around twenty stories in diverse magazines and anthologies. He is also moderator for a private writer's forum The Write Practice.

He can be found at Facebook under his own name or at his Amazon Author page.

SUENO
by Garrett Rowlan

Homeless, retired, Chad was a man of few possessions. They fit in a suitcase, which fit into his van where he slept and moved around to avoid being cited or towed.

One day his van died. The engine seized, groaned, and he rolled to the side of the road.

Looking under the chassis, Chad saw spilled oil. A thrown rod, he guessed. There was no way he had the money to fix it—the small pension he received kept him in donuts and coffee, little more—and so he had to junk it, the last link to his old life as a renter, husband, and employee.

The van's loss made him really feel like a statistic. Now he truly was one of 60,000 homeless people in LA County. Feeling adrift without wheels under his feet or one between his steering hands, he was an outcast, a random atom, floating.

He took comfort in junk food. Having eaten four of six donuts he bought at a shop where they reluctantly let him use the restroom, he carried the rest of his box up the street while dragging a suitcase—repository of his last possessions—behind him. He stopped, smelled something unpleasant. And for a man of his lifestyle, that had to be pretty bad.

Chad turned. The man was sitting on the bank leading up to a municipal swimming pool, closed now for the winter. He was bearded, grimy, and emitted a shock wave of stink. While aware that he probably didn't smell so good himself, still Chad felt the insides of his nostrils almost burn with the stench. The man looked over at him.

"I'm hungry," he said. "Can you do a favor for old Doc Fever?"

"Doctor of what?" Chad asked. Warily, he came closer. The smell was like rotting cheese and day-old, dead flesh, and Doc Fever's skin could have been either.

"Miracles," Doc said. "Right now, I'm starving."

"Here," Chad said, breathing through his mouth to lessen the smell. The smell had put him off his appetite.

"Much obliged," he said.

Chad, who had been to the bank and withdrew money from the paltry pension he received monthly, reached into his wallet and handed the man ten dollars and a donut.

"By yourself a new shirt at least," Chad said.

“Bless you,” Doc Fever said. After pocketing the money, he took a bite of the donut and the sugar rush seemed to make his eyes change color, but Chad knew that was his own exhaustion, jolted by caffeine. “I owe you a favor.”

“Sure,” Chad said. “Bring me a car. It doesn’t have to be fancy.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Doc said.

Later that afternoon, Chad was walking in the northeastern part of Los Angeles, having just crossed a bridge over the Pasadena freeway. Looking to his right, he saw a public park that adjoined the freeway. Exhausted, he descended via a footpath, and propped himself up against the first suitable sycamore tree he found. He closed his eyes and slept.

He woke. Night had fallen, and nearby a man stood by a fire. It burned in a small enclosure of rock and concrete. Calling out, the man waved the bottle. “Have a drink, friend.” The clear liquid glowed by firelight.

Chad welcomed the thought. Too late in life, he’d sobered up, but the thought of losing his van made him want to ease his mind. He wandered over. The man was large, with unkempt hair that glowed with the fire at his back. Up close, Chad saw clearly a bright scar on the man’s cheek. The man thrust the bottle into Chad’s outstretched hand.

“Don’t mind if I do,” Chad said. He took the bottle and swallowed. A cold fire burned down his throat. Chad swiped his palm across his mouth. He took a second drink and handed back the bottle.

“Good stuff,” he said.

“Has a kick,” the man said. “There’s just one little problem.” He took back the bottle. “How are you going to pay for that?”

“Pay?” Chad asked. “I’m broke.”

Before he could react, a fist caught him above the eye. Stunned, Chad toppled to the ground. His assailant stood flexing his hand. The other hand held the bottle, the liquid sloshing the way the blood seemed to in Chad’s skull.

Chad staggered to his feet. “Why’d you do that?”

“Anger management,” the man said. “It’s why I never adjusted.” The man nodded, waiting. “You got a problem with that?”

Chad turned and lugged his suitcase up to the sidewalk. The pain from the blow pulsed like a flashing red light above his right eye. Standing under a streetlight, its bluish tone seemed color-coordinated to the hue of misery by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, he wished again he had a car, an escape, and a shelter.

He walked up the street. His forehead ached. Cars passed on his left, their headlights piercing, and to the right TVs, in a gated apartment complex, flickered like lunatic thoughts, throwing themselves against the screens and bars and sliding glass. When he had nearly reached the top of the block, Chad turned and sat on a low wall of pinkish colored stucco blocks. He crossed his arms. He found himself trembling with rage and self-loathing. He'd always avoided confrontation, fights. Skinny in school, he'd been bullied growing up. Passivity, endurance, and caution got him through the teen years. Later, there had been two marriages, disagreements he resolved by giving in. He had sulked, became sarcastic, and drank. By the time he'd dried out, he was divorced and ready to retire—before they could fire him—from the various job he'd held.

Lost in his thoughts, he realized he'd been staring at the car in front of him for several minutes before he really saw it. It had a bracketed look, as if it had been carved into the spot, and yet there was the aspect of a negative space, and something of a camouflage look, too. Its color was indistinct in the street's sodium-vapor lights. It was dusty, and leaves gathered where the windshield wipers had been. Its make, model, and year of production were indistinguishable. It looked abandoned.

Stepping closer, Chad saw, through the dirty windshield, spider webs hanging from the rear-view mirror. A loose seatbelt looped like a dead snake. The rest was hard to see. It was like looking at something underwater.

He reached down and pulled at the handle. To his surprise, the door opened. As no one was watching, he entered the apparently-abandoned car, dragging his suitcase after him. Once inside, he sat behind the wheel, holding it in his hands and giving it little twists like at a kiddie ride. He then wiped away the spider web around the rear-view mirror. The windows were dirty but gave his view of the sidewalk a comfortable selectivity. He saw outside but no one who passed—a dog walker, shopping-bag holder, man in work dungarees—could see inside. He felt comfortable and undisturbed, and he finally grew weary and stretched out.

He woke at sunrise, having slept better than he had in recent memory, even when he had his van. Slumped across the front seat, he rose, rubbed his face where the man's fist had hit, and set off in case the car wasn't abandoned, and its owner would find him inside. That day, Chad went north, found a deserted park where he sat on a bench and read a paperback novel, its cover missing.

At twilight, with no better place to go, he made his way back to the same car as yesterday. It was parked in the same spot. He slid inside the car and closed the door behind him. Immediately, the world, seen through dirty windows, was distant.

Looking back into the rear seat, Chad had an impression of depth, a dimensional recess that the darkness expanded. Curious, he climbed over the seat and dropped, a longer fall than he expected. His ankle twisted slightly when he hit the back seat. Rubbing the ankle, the soreness fading, he found that the feeling of depth didn't dissipate. Glancing through the street-side window to his left, he felt as if he were looking through a porthole in the middle of the ocean, so oddly distant did the passing cars seem.

When Chad turned to his right, he saw that the side window was so dirty that he couldn't see outside, and when he extended his right hand he felt encrusted dirt, thick and hard as tree bark. In fact, the more he touched the window, he found it wasn't a window at all. Its surface was round and ridged, like bark, like a tree, a shape he traced as he extended his hand, and when he twisted his body to feel farther, he found he could extend his hand all the way around.

Soon, he was leaning against the tree—he assumed it was a tree—with his chin pressed to its side, and he was able to slide around the tree, and before he really knew it, he had somehow stepped outside of the car. *I'm not crazy*, Chad said to himself. *This is really happening.*

He was standing in an urban grove, with the same apartments as before but set at a distance, and with tall trees all around. The streetlight illuminated them in a discrete way, like a nature trail would be lit up for a hike by night. In a few steps, he was walking a dim trail that descended.

Soon he saw another light, this one ahead of him. He stopped. He was at the edge of a clearing, in the middle of which was the same man who had hit him. The man was doing a sort of war dance around the fire, kicking up dust and throwing punches while periodically raising the bottle to his lips. It was an odd thing to watch, crude, ugly, and ceremonial.

Leaning forward to get a better look, Chad stepped on a stick. It snapped loudly. The man stopped and looked in his direction. "I told you I had a punch," he said, almost howling. He turned and threw the near-empty bottle. It hit a tree above Chad and shattered.

Chad retreated, bumping into trees in his haste and flayed by low branches. At last, he saw lights ahead. He reached the sidewalk. He turned. The forest had vanished, and the man wasn't following him.

Another man was waiting, however, right in front of his car. This man had a white shirt, a thin black tie, and his mustache and sideburns looked penciled in, like make-up for a high school presentation.

"I see you've taken a shine to this baby," he said, slapping the car's hood.

"I have," Chad said. "Who are you?"

"Cody's my name," the man said, "selling cars is my game."

He extended his hand. As they shook, Chad looked closely at the man. He was not sure, but the features suggested the bum—Doc Fever—he'd seen yesterday morning, though now cleaned up and made to look presentable, though with a used-car salesman's shadiness.

The salesman's smile oozed faked sincerity. He turned to the car. "I'd jump on this deal right away," he added. "This baby is fully loaded. It's got a dual-reality exhaust, four worlds under the floor, and a sound system that can hear for miles."

"Does it run?"

The salesman cleared his throat. “Not exactly,” he said. “Driving is more of a mental event.”

“Anything else I should know?”

“It only works at night,” the salesman said.

“What’s the make?”

Cody “Doc” Fever beamed. “The marketing boys came up with a name. It’s a *Sueno*, which is Spanish for dream. This is a 2017 *Sueno*, fully loaded. It’s a goodcar.” He leaned forward, winking as if to disclose something that management didn’t want the customer to know. “It senses what you want, if you know what I mean.”

Chad grunted, thinking. “How much?”

“One hundred dollars,” the man said.

“Eighty,” Chad said. “That’s the one-hundred I took from the bank yesterday, minus the ten I gave you, minus enough to leave me pocket change.”

“You gave me money?” the salesman said, frowning.

“Sure,” Chad said, “and a donut.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” the salesman said, “but eighty dollars...I tell you, pal, I could learn a few things about a driving a hard bargain from you. Eighty bucks is exactly what this baby will cost.”

His hand went out like a slot, and Chad withdrew his wallet and handed over the money.

“No bill of sale?” he asked.

“You don’t need one,” the salesman said. “But here’s the key.” He reached into his pocket and dropped it into Chad’s waiting palm.

Chad rounded the car. “See you,” he said, looking back, but the man had already vanished, as if evaporated.

Sitting in the driver’s seat, Chad put the key in the ignition and turned. There was a rumble from the engine, a sensation of movement, and the grimy windshield was now crystal-clear. An image formed—trees, road, and headlights gobbling up the broken white line as Chad moved forward. He knew it was an illusion but still he felt as if he were really moving down some dark forest road. The engine hummed, and the seat vibrated faintly.

Soon, Chad left the trees and found himself traveling a moonlight mile beside a shimmering ocean view, with a boat light in the distance.

He passed a gas station, lit up with the isolated brilliance of an Ed Ruscha print, and then there were more lights. He entered a city. All the lights were green, and Chad moved easily in and out of traffic.

“This baby really handles well,” he said. Just then, he felt something hit the front of the car.

Chad braked to a stop. He was back on the street. He opened the car door, exited outside and walked to the front of the car.

Just then, the car’s headlights came on. Standing on the street, he looked up and saw Doc Fever riding shot gun, and another man behind the wheel, steering with one hand while the other held a bottle of booze.

The car inched forward and struck Chad on the knee. It hurt. When the car moved forward again, he jumped back. The car jumped forward, its engine growled.

He turned and ran, the car chasing him. “*Sueno* is Spanish for dream,” he told himself. “Let me wake up!”

The car chased him down the street.

About Garrett Rowlan

Garrett Rowlan is a retired sub teacher for LAUSD who lives in Los Angeles. His first novel, *To Die, to Sleep* was published earlier this year and another, *The Vampire Circus*, is due out soon. He's published some 70 or so stories and essays. His website is garrettrowland.com.

IMPORTANT STUFF

by Kenneth Wise

My eagerness to learn what really happened behind this locked door makes my hand tremble so much that I can't insert the key to my childhood home. I'm here to reassure myself that an inanimate object cannot have power over a person and cannot push someone out of the bounds of their sanity to the point of losing everything.

Or can it?

If this was suggested to me a year ago, I would have laughed, but from what I've seen recently, I'm not sure the concept is so irrational.

Six months before his death, my father lost his grip on reality and drove away all of his family and friends over something he picked up at a yard sale. I'm here to discover if this thing truly had power over him, and if it did...to destroy the thing forever.

I steady my nerves, get the key into the keyhole and turn the knob. I push it open to reveal a dusty living room frozen in the seventies, with a mustard colored sofa on top of a thick, brown, shag rug. Two dark green chairs sit across from it.

My mother died, and all of my siblings are grown and out of the house, so my father was here alone. He was always outgoing and sociable, but towards the end of his life, he only went outside twice a day, in the morning to get the paper and in the late afternoon for the mail.

Last week, while retrieving the paper, he collapsed in the front yard. It was dark, and he wasn't found until the next day when a neighbor was leaving for work. The neighbor saw him and ran over, but by that time, it was too late.

My dad was wearing the same purple polo, jeans and tennis shoes that he had worn the last time I saw him, two weeks earlier. The coroner hasn't been able to ascertain why he passed away. All the report said was "Undetermined." We're waiting for more test results.

His sudden, unresolved death is strange, but everything about him before he died was even stranger. One of the major signs of his recent mental deterioration was his clothes. He always wore the same thing. It was like he was stranded on Gilligan's Island with only one outfit.

The only change was that he lost weight until he was dangerously thin and let his hair and beard grow out until his hair sat on his shoulders, and his beard rested on his chest. I would press him to change and clean up, but he would shake his head and claim he was too busy.

Too busy with what? He was a retired widower on a post office pension, who turned away everyone he knew and never, ever left home.

"I'm busy with important stuff," he would say.

“Important stuff?” I would ask. “That’s all you ever say anymore. What exactly is it you’re doing down in your basement?”

He would think about it as though he wanted to tell me but would stop and say, “I can’t say. All I can tell you is that it’s important. It’s important stuff.”

So now my father is dead. Maybe I can figure things out.

I make my way through the kitchen and down to the basement. I reach out and pull on the string to a light bulb that hangs over the short flight of stairs. The light flickers on and swings back and forth, causing shadows to sway over the unfinished, concrete room.

I walk down the steps and see the object that overtook my father’s life. It’s a large, silver, metal ham radio. After my mother died, he picked it up from a yard sale and installed it down here.

He spent all of his time on this stupid relic and could not be pried away from it. My family would call and call on the phone, but he wouldn’t answer. We would bang on the front door, and he wouldn’t respond. The only way we could get his attention was by yelling through the basement storm window. He would keep his headphones on and swat us away like flies.

And for what?

I think back to the last time I showed up here in my childhood home, a month before my father’s death. The living room had been full of strange people sitting quietly as though it was a doctor’s office. They were all disheveled. One cuddled a framed picture, rocking back and forth, and a man sat with a tissue in his hands, drying his tears. Two of them could have been homeless.

I tried to throw them out, but my father raced up the stairs and screamed at me to leave them alone.

“Who are these people?” I yelled. “What are they doing here?”

“They’re here for important stuff,” he replied.

I pushed past him and ran towards the basement. I was going to get on the radio and finally know what he was doing.

All of a sudden, my father had energy like he had gotten twenty years younger. He chased me down the stairs and got a hold of me, almost tackling me like a football player. He grabbed me by my throat, stuck his face into mine and, turning bright red, he screamed, “You can never touch this radio. I’m the only one allowed to control it. Now, get out of my house!”

I put my hands up to show him I wasn't going to fight. He let me go, and I left. When I told my brother what had happened, he was so frustrated that he came over here, climbed to the roof and took down the antenna, but that didn't stop Dad. He kept talking into this thing. I have no idea who he was talking to, and no matter how much we asked him, he wouldn't tell us.

I walk over to the radio and try to compose myself. What am I going to hear on this thing? What can this do that so consumed my father? I'm so afraid to find out that I can barely pick up the headphones.

I manage to get them on and listen. I hear nothing, not even static. I move through the dial, but I don't pick anything up.

Is this thing even turned on? I lean over the side and see the cord to the radio is lying, unplugged, on the ground with a pile of dust on it. Jesus, what was he doing here all day? He wasn't even talking to anyone.

The pathetic image of my father down here talking into an inanimate object strikes me with so much force that I fall forward onto the table and have to hold myself up with both hands. I should have done more. I asked him to get help, but I should have insisted on it. I should have forced him, but now, sadly, it's too late for that.

Maybe there isn't a big mystery behind his insanity. Maybe he was just a lonely, old man, who lost it at the end of his life and spent his time talking to himself. Perhaps I should take some comfort that this radio might have somehow soothed his loneliness.

But it doesn't explain the strange people in the house. Probably that will always be an enigma.

At least I can take this thing apart, dump it on the curb and get rid of it, so I can forget about that part of his life forever and focus on better memories.

As I reach for the ham radio, I think that I actually hear something coming through the headphones on the table. I stop and listen, but all I can hear is the hum of the house's heating system. I shake my head and chuckle. Maybe I'm losing it too...like father, like son.

I continue to work on disassembling the machine when, I hear a loud crackle from the headphones. I lift them next to my ear and hear the voice of a young girl, "Mommy?"

I freeze. This can't be working. Wildly I glance at the cord...it's still unplugged.

"Mommy, are you there?"

I slowly put the headphones on. I wait, but I don't hear anything else, then, "Mommy, I'm here. Can you hear me?"

I pick up the microphone, push in the button on the front of it and say, "Hello?"

"Hello, is this Larry?"

"No, this is his son. Who is this?"

"It's Maggie. He said my Mom would be there today. Where is she?"

"My dad, Larry, he passed away. Who's your mother? Where are you reaching me from?"

"Why isn't my mom there? Larry promised me she would be there. "

"I just got here. I don't know anything about this." Suddenly, there is a banging on the front door. I drop the microphone and take off the headphones. I slowly creep up the stairs and come out of the kitchen.

Again loud knocking on the door. A woman with frazzled, curly hair sticks her head against the window next to the door and cups her hands together so she can see into the house. She spots me, slams her palm on the window and motions for me to let her in.

I slowly open the door. She pushes past me, seemingly frantic. "Where's Larry?"

"He passed away."

She slaps herself on her forehead. "Am I too late?"

"Too late for what?"

"To talk to my daughter." She pulls up her sleeve and looks at her wrist. "He told me to get here at 9:00 and it's already 10:30." She shoves her watch in my face.

Ten thirty? I got here at 8:30 and have only been here for a few minutes.

The lady blurted, "Larry told me that there would be problems getting here. I left my house at 7:30. I was driving along and got a flat tire. I brought it to a gas station. They plugged it, and, as soon as I started up again, bang! Another one. I ditched my car and ran for a bus, but it was late and then that broke down. I practically ran here for the last three miles. Don't worry, I didn't run into any of the electrical workers. I didn't see a single one."

"I don't have any idea what you are talking about."

"You don't?"

"No, I just got here a few minutes ago."

She throws her hands in the air. “I should have known it. Ever since my daughter disappeared, I’ve gotten calls at all hours of the day. They tell me to do the craziest things like go outside, face north, throw water up in the air and catch it with your mouth and then you’ll know where your daughter is. I’ve done all these things. Every person who calls—I do what they say. You know what it’s like to not know where your daughter is for ten years? Larry called me and told me that he can connect me to my daughter. I asked him how, and he said, ‘Just trust me. This is important stuff.’”

“He told you to come here?”

“Yes, he said, ‘Be here today at 9:00, and you can talk to your daughter.’”

“There was a girl on his radio this morning.”

She grabs my shirt and yanks me towards her until I’m inches from her face. “You heard her?”

“I don’t know who it was, but there was someone on his radio downstairs.”

“Was it Maggie?”

“I think that’s what she said her name is.”

“Oh my God, Maggie!” she screams. She pushes me out of the way and runs into the house. She gets into the living room and spins in a circle. “Where’s the radio?”

Before I can respond, she disappears into the kitchen. I hear her hurry down the steps to the basement.

I follow her and see her standing over the radio. She picks up the microphone. “Maggie, baby, are you there? Can you hear me?”

I stand behind her. She continues, “Maggie, please say something.”

I reach over and hand her the headphones. She puts down the microphone and, with her hands shaking, she puts them on. She says again into the microphone, “Maggie, are you there?”

She stops and stares straight ahead. A single tear falls from her eye. She sinks back into the chair, puts her head down and sobs.

“Can you hear her?” I ask.

She keeps her head down and nods. I reach over and pull out the earphones cord that is hooked up to the machine so the sound will come through the speakers. “Mommy, it’s me.”

She lifts her head, picks up the microphone and says, “Where are you?”

“I’m not anywhere. When you die, you aren’t really anywhere. It’s kind of hard to explain.”

“You died?”

“I did, Mommy, a long time ago.”

“I’m sorry that we never found you. We did everything we could, but we just couldn’t.”

“I know. I could hear you calling to me, but you couldn’t hear when I called back. I have to go, but I need to tell you something.”

“What is it?”

“Uncle Gabe did this to me. He’s the one. He did it.”

“My brother?”

“I’m sorry Mom. I have to go.”

The signal cuts out. The woman screams, “No, no don’t go! Maggie, come back!”

The room remains silent. She says it again, but there is no reply. The woman turns to me. Mascara is running down her face. She takes her thumbs, wipes away her tears along with the makeup, stands up, embraces me and says, “Thank you.”

She slowly walks up the stairs. I hear her go through the kitchen, cross the living room and close the front door.

I remain frozen, trying to comprehend what I just witnessed. I’m stuck in place. Was that the greatest prank in history? Is someone playing a joke on me?

There is a notebook on the table next to the radio. I open it and a loose piece of paper falls out and floats to the ground. I pick it up.

If you are reading this, then I have passed away. Now it is up to you. There is an afterlife. There are ghosts trying to reach us. I, Larry McGovern, bought this radio and realized that these ghosts have a story to tell about their lives, how they died and a desire to communicate with those they have left behind. You have been chosen to bring these spirits into communion with their loved ones.

First and most important, when you are doing this work, you must remember that this is important stuff and should be treated as such. Second, and just as vital, everything about this must remain a secret, and the truth of this instrument must be guarded at all cost.

Beware of the electric company, especially the ones wearing the reflective jackets. Once you step out of this house you are in danger because they will find you.

My dad was down here this whole time thinking he was talking to dead people through a radio he got from some nut from New Jersey and was paranoid about the electrical company?

But I did talk to Maggie. That did happen, and it seemed she had passed away, and her mom did mention something about the power company. If Maggie was out there, then other people that I can contact must be too.

And then something moves inside of me. Something takes hold of my body and sends electric currents shooting through, raising the hair in my follicles. I feel the movement of electrons from one atom to the next for the creation of static charges.

The electricity changes me. I flip through the notebook and get to the end. A newspaper clipping of an obituary is stuck between the pages. There are parts of the articles circled and underlined. Dates and numbers seem to be translated into frequencies. I begin to piece together my father's system. He would break the code in the newspaper, contact the people, get their story and set up a time for the family member to talk through the radio. Maybe I can do the same thing.

I put the headphones on and play with the dial until I get some reception. I find Robert "Buddy" O'Neil, who owned the largest chain link fence company in the South. He was killed by his nephew, who clubbed him to death in his Jacuzzi and made it look like a robbery. I connect with Liza Cunningham, who was killed when her husband put a hit on her. Jacelyn Lanceman disappeared when she went on a hike in the woods. She fell down a ravine, broke her neck and drowned. Her body floated down the river until it washed out to sea.

Through Google and Facebook, I'm able to track down all of their family members. Lisa's sisters hang up on me twice. I track down Lisa's mother, who is in Florida, and she's willing to believe me. The other families hesitate, but I'm able to convince them by sharing things only a person who was speaking to their loved ones would know. I have Buddy and Jacelyn's family coming in tomorrow and Lisa's mom the following day. Buddy's son was so excited, he said he'd jump on a Red Eye to be here in the morning.

Suddenly I hear a knock at the door. I go up the steps and see a young man in his late twenties standing outside.

"I'm Steve, Buddy's son. I arrived at the airport and raced over here. I hope it's okay."

"I thought you were coming from California."

"I did. I flew in overnight."

"That's impossible. I spoke with you a few minutes ago."

"We talked last night. Don't you remember? I raced to the airport and got here. You were right—it was tough traveling. I switched planes twice, and a rental car broke down, but I'm here."

I don't remember telling him he'd have trouble traveling. I look at my watch. It says 8:00. I squint and see that it says a.m. Is my watch broken? Something isn't right.

I lift my head and see a power company truck pull into the neighborhood and stop at the end of the street. A man jumps out and puts on his reflective vest.

"Come inside." I pull Steve by the arm and invite him to sit down on the couch.

A second car pulls up in front of the house. A young man and three women pile out and rush up the steps. They introduce themselves as Jacelyn's family.

I see a second electric company truck pull into the street from around the corner.

I ask Jaclyn's family to come in and I quickly shut the door behind them.

My cell phone goes off, and I see that it is from my wife. I ignore it. I'll call her later.

I look out the window and see the electrical company is putting out cones.

I make some coffee and hand it out to the group, and one of Jacelyn's sister says, "I just want to thank you for contacting me. To be honest, at first I thought it was a sick joke, but the things you were able to tell me made it clear that you know more than anyone could make up."

Jacelyn's daughter wipes a tear from her eye. "We had pretty much given up ever knowing anything about our mother, and then all of a sudden out of the blue you called."

This is what my father had become, a sense of hope for people. This is what I can be now. "Let's get started," I say. "One case at a time, though."

I take Steve down and dial up Buddy. Soon enough the two are talking. His son takes the news hard that a family member killed his Dad, but he's happy to know what happened.

Next I bring down Jacelyn's family, and despite some glitches, we are able to connect them. After the call, the three embrace and cry.

I walk them upstairs and take them outside onto the front porch.

My wife's car pulls up to the front yard. She leaps out of her car and confronts me. "I've been trying to reach you all day yesterday and today. It's 5 p.m. and you haven't returned any of my calls. Your office has been calling all day. What's have you been doing, and who are these people?"

Jacelyn's family steps aside, so they aren't between me and my wife.

"What have I been doing?" I repeat her question.

“Yes, and look at you! You haven’t shaved or showered, and you look terrible. Have you been drinking?”

I reach up to my face and feel the stubble. She’s right. I haven’t eaten or slept in more than twenty-four hours, but I know I’m sober, except for the tingle of an electric current that I still feel.

At my feet is the newspaper. Ignoring my wife, I pick it up and flip to the obituaries. I scan it and catch all the things I never would have seen before. The dates, addresses and ages listed are secret numbers that will let me find these people. The rest of the world can’t comprehend it, but I can.

My wife yells at me. “Hey, are you listening to me?”

“What have I been doing?” I repeat for the second time.

“Yes, I want to know what you have been up to.”

“Important stuff. I’ve been doing important stuff,” I say.

There is a sudden noise from the street. The employees from the power company have stopped their work and seem to be interested in what’s going on at my front porch. The man in the first truck still has his vest and sunglasses on. He gets out of the vehicle, places a cone in front of my house, then turns to me and tips his hardhat. He begins to walk in my direction.

I keep the paper in my hand, jump back into the house, and slam the door shut, leaving my wife on the other side. She bangs on the door.

I ignore her, go back into the basement and, with the new clues I’ve found, I continue my work to find ghosts.

About Kenneth Wise

Ken Wise’s short stories have been published in the anthologies *Uncertain Promise* and *Surprised by Joy*. He lives in Fairfax, Virginia with his wife and two children.

SOMETHING TO CLING TO
by Greg Jenkins

I know for certain that my husband's death was caused by the cockroaches.

Oh, now don't misunderstand me; I don't claim they killed him deliberately, thinkingly. Roaches aren't capable of that! But over the years, their mere presence in our home, despite our best efforts to get rid of them, grated terribly on his raw nerves. Ralph was an excitable man with a diseased heart, and he simply couldn't contend with those sly, scuttling little things that so resisted him.

We lived in a mill town. Our house was situated on a knoll directly across from the gaudy mishmash of buildings, rail spurs, pipes, chimneys, ducts and surreal doodads that comprised the paper mill. Aside from the queer view, our closeness to the site had a number of disadvantages, most of which we considered minor. Twenty-four hours a day we could hear and even feel the throbbing drone of the heavy machines; the water in our aquariums trembled as if struck by a fever. Because of a mysterious radio interference generated within the mill, no cordless phone was usable. Sometimes an odor that reminded me of a dead skunk would rise from the plant, envelop the neighborhood and penetrate our house—ugh! And thick, barmy clouds of steam hissed through the teeth of metal mouths and floated dependably in our direction; we used to wonder what toxins might be lurking in them. The PR people, all of whom lived somewhere else, explained that the clouds were harmless.

One way or another, we dealt with these annoyances. We ignored them, accepted them, defied them outright. Ah, but the mill, with all that delectable starch in its stockpiles of timber, was also the teeming source of the roaches. The roaches, I'm afraid, proved a much more difficult challenge for us to overcome—especially for my husband.

I truly doubt if anyone in this world has ever loathed and feared cockroaches half as much as Ralph did. Not that we had oodles of them, mind you—there were a scattered few in the basement, a couple in the kitchen—and not that many people savor their company.

But let Ralph notice even a single roach in our house, a brownish blur on a tabletop, and you'd have thought the full moon had just gleamed at a werewolf. His eyes would bulge, his face would contort, and he'd let go with this savage, guttural growl. Automatically at such times I would retreat to the farthest corner of the room and try to make myself as flat and inconspicuous as the wallpaper while he stomped, stormed, snarled and spat. He was heavysset and muscular, and quite often he scared me.

"Those damn things are so different from us," he might mumble later in bed, after he'd calmed down. "Completely different. They're armored; they have antennae. They're like...alien life-forms."

"They're insects," I might say. What else could I tell him?

“Peculiar things,” he’d mutter. “Filthy...alien,” and he’d turn away from me.

About twice a week he’d suffer a nightmare that would terrify not only him but me. Bathed in an icy sweat, he’d spring up in bed with a loud series of gorilla grunts and grab repeatedly at his tongue and mouth.

The dream, I gathered, was always the same: that a massive roach had crawled into his open mouth as he slept. So vivid and so disturbing were these episodes that, for a while, he insisted on pressing a length of masking tape over his lips before retiring. He finally abandoned the tape because it impaired his breathing and because he kept having the awful dreams anyway. Never once did we actually find a roach in our bed, and for that meager blessing I’m thankful still. Let me tell you, if we had discovered one, particularly at night, it would’ve been Ralph’s death and mine too, then and there.

Like most of the town’s workforce, Ralph held a job at the mill, where he operated a “chipper.” From what I could tell, a chipper was a large device that featured a high-speed metal disk mounted with knives. It was his duty to direct the nonstop loads of pulpwood through the chipper so the whirling knives could slash the logs down to platelets the size of fingernails.

What must the roar be like? I would ask myself. Equal to the screams of how many people?

Of course, working at the mill created an inner conflict for him, worsening his tensions. He wanted to rail angrily against our roach problem, and indeed he did rail, every chance he got. But what sort of line could he adopt with the executives at the mill? The mill was the breeding ground for the pests, true, but it was also the provider of Ralph’s income.

As he was aware, the feral fits he threw at home might not have been received so tolerantly at work. He needed to remember that the company owned our house and rented it to us for next to nothing. Our money, our home...I can only imagine what the little lightning bolts in Ralph’s chest must’ve felt like every time he asked his superiors to send around an exterminator.

Which they always did, by the way, and without hesitation.

Yet the results of fumigation were never a match for Ralph’s demands. What I mean is, although regular treatments acted to control the roach population, they never could eliminate it. Refusing to be annihilated, the roaches would withdraw for a week or two, sometimes not even that long, and then come surging back, stronger than ever. Oh, and make no mistake, my husband was anything but shy when it came to sharing his frustrations with the poor exterminator.

“What in God’s name have you been spraying ’em with?” Ralph asked sarcastically on that bright, fateful Saturday afternoon. “Vitamins? Steroids?”

He and I were seated at our kitchen table while the blue-uniformed exterminator, a man named Arnold Looper, stood next to the sink looking ill at ease. He’d made the mistake of arriving early and was now waiting politely for Ralph and me to finish lunch so he could carry out yet another treatment.

“Not at all,” said Mr. Looper patiently, wearily, and he began describing a family of chemicals called carbamates, and specifically a substance known as propoxur. “Supposed to be highly effective against roaches that have developed a resistance to organochlorines and organophosphates, which is apparently wh—”

Just then, as if by magic, a long stout roach appeared on the table and stood placidly between Ralph’s plate and my own, its antennae slowly wobbling in the air. My husband shot to his feet, white-faced, shaking.

“Highly effective!” he cried. “Look at that! Look at...”

“I see it,” Mr. Looper said awkwardly. “What do you want me to do about it?”

“I want you to exterminate it!” Ralph yelled. “You’re an exterminator. Exterminate it!”

“Well, but how should I go about...”

“Ralph, please.”

“Exterminate it!” Ralph bellowed.

Frowning, Mr. Looper tugged off one of his stained and clunky work shoes and used it to bash the insect—bang!—right there in the middle of the table. Goopy roach innards went spewing every which way.

No, I haven’t any idea what Ralph was expecting, but this solution had absolutely caught him by surprise; that much I can assure you. His eyes, his entire face, went blank, and in another second he collapsed as if some invisible giant had whacked him with a shoe. I watched in numb disbelief as he bounced off the linoleum. Dead? At that moment Ralph was no more alive than the mangled roach that oozed above him.

Strange the memories we glom onto from such emotional occasions...the phosphorescent details that glow at us in the dead of the night! While Mr. Looper scrambled off to dial 911, I stood feeble guard over my husband’s body. His shocked mouth was partially open, and the possibility that another roach might happen along and do what Ralph had always feared, commit the violation...No, I couldn’t allow it. It would’ve been too gross an indignity. So I kept a close watch until help arrived.

Sometime later, a doctor with hard eyes and a nose that poked at me like a scalpel took me aside.

“Mrs. Earwig,” he addressed me in a knowing voice, “the wonder isn’t that your husband died so young”—Ralph had just turned forty-eight—“but that he survived as long as he did. That ticker of his was worth about a buck eighty-seven.”

The doctor gave me this information as if to comfort me. Can you imagine? As if hearing such words might bring me peace!

Besides myself, only two mourners attended the funeral: my sister Naomi, whom I hadn't seen or heard from in years, and Mr. Looper. Evidently my husband's antics had distanced us even more than I'd realized from our friends, relatives and neighbors. Not a soul from the mill showed up. Commenting on his own moist-eyed presence at the ceremony, the kindly exterminator said that although he and Ralph had not been close, he nonetheless felt a deep and abiding connection to my husband. In retrospect, I don't wonder at it.

Naomi was a widow herself, with a windblown puff of dense white hair that reminded me of those steam clouds the mill liked to send wafting at our house. She meant well enough. After a respectful passage of time, she began taking me here and there, having me do things, meet people, participate in wholesome activities.

The two of us went to plays, concerts, open houses. With her at my side, I donated blood to the Red Cross Bloodmobile, played bingo at church, ate bratwurst at a local ethnic festival, sat in on a singles' meeting held at the library. (I'm no party girl, but honestly—what kind of singles meet at a library?) Naomi, may God love her, seemed to enjoy herself, but I always felt hopelessly out-of-place. Wherever we went, I felt as if I'd stepped out of a spacecraft and onto another planet.

Gently I separated myself from my sister, even as she'd withdrawn from me years before. It was nothing personal. I didn't feel ready to get back into the "swing of things" as she laughingly put it, and frankly doubted that I ever would feel that way.

From living with Ralph, attending to his needs, desires and (shall we call them) eccentricities, I'd seen my own world shrink to the modest scope of our infested house on the hill. My house, I should say. Beyond its walls lay complications, dangers. I guess I'd developed a touch of agoraphobia—is that the word? Whatever, I nursed hardly any bitterness, almost none, at what my state had come to; one's state always comes to something, doesn't it?

Naturally, the roaches persisted, and so the periodic visits from Arnold Looper continued. After the funeral, we never spoke of my husband, of his tragic end. But we were in some ritual way linked, Mr. Looper and I, by the simple recognition that we'd been there for Ralph's demise—that we'd partaken of it.

Our relationship was suddenly more than professional, though maybe not much more. I began to call him "Arnold," and he started calling me "Joyce." We took to yakking with each other for long periods about TV shows, the weather, happenings at the mill. When I asked what had led him to the extermination business, he gave me an impassioned reply about his early and ongoing fascination with science. He was really a very intelligent man.

Handsome, too, with his curly black hair (I wonder if he touched it up), his military-style uniform and his big tank joined to that long dark hose. He was witty, charming—a mesmerizing

conversationalist. Perhaps I let my notions run away with me to tropical places where I shouldn't have gone.

At some point I began to have him come by more often than was strictly necessary to contain my roach problem. I don't think he minded, though; besides, he was accustomed to making frequent stops at the Earwig residence from his years with Ralph. Usually, before he sprayed, I could persuade Mr. Looper to sit with me at my table where we had apple crumb cake and coffee with chicory in it. Sometimes he would use these occasions to discourse, in the confident tones of a university professor, about the various types of pests and the means of combating them.

"Pests go back a helluva long ways," he told me once. "The Bible says: 'Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten.' Moths, you see? Course, the Greeks found they could use sulfur—burn the stuff—as insecticide. And Pliny the Elder mentions that gall from green lizards would protect apples from worms."

"Were there roaches in those days?" I asked.

Mr. Looper munched his crumb cake. "Roaches," he said solemnly, "have been around since the birth of time, and they'll still be going strong when the human race is nothing but dust."

"My goodness. Arnold, tell me again the chemical name for propoxur."

"What?"

"I just love the way it rolls off your tongue."

"Aw, Joyce." His rugged face alight with embarrassment, he had a generous sip of coffee as if to prepare his lips for the effort. "Ahem. O-isopropoxyphenyl N-methylcarbamate," he said.

"Yes . . . Again."

He said it again.

If my husband had been afflicted with dreams, I now fell prey to visions. Lovely visions that teased and haunted me. I was kept awake in my bed by enchanted vistas, hope-filled scenarios, dawn-shaded potentialities. But I won't describe them to you, no, I won't offer another syllable about them, because their fabric was pure foolishness. Dreams, visions—either way, where's the substance?

Mr. Looper seemed both interesting and interested. He was warm, worldly, considerate and responsive—rare traits in an exterminator, I should think, and not too common across the general run of humanity. Yet there was also about him a distinct reserve; he was slightly more formal than he needed to be, a hint more guarded than I would've hoped. Supposing he was bashful, I took a cue from soap operas and assumed the initiative myself.

One day as he was about to leave, the familiar chemical scent expanding mildly through the house like the fragrance of roses, I stopped him in the doorway.

“Why don’t I cook for you some evening?” I said.

He looked at me as if I had just switched languages to Zulu.

“Cook for me? Some evening? Why?”

“Well,” I stammered, “I—I thought we might have a nice meal together. Something more than just coffee and...”

“A date,” it dawned on him. “You’re asking me here on a date?”

I blushed. He lowered the tank he was carrying in one sinewy hand; the hose flopped free. Dangled.

“I don’t think Sharon would approve,” he said.

Now it was my turn to be lost and confused. “Sharon?” I blinked. “Who’s—”

“My wife.”

I glanced again at his hand. “But you’re not wearing a ring.”

“Oh, I hate rings,” he smiled. “But I love my wife.”

Time went by, gradually and then swiftly.

I had adequate money from the insurance—Ralph had done that much for me—and I knew of a grocery store in town that delivered. More than ever, I kept to myself. If I had to venture outside for any reason (to collect my mail, put out my garbage, water my flowers), I would do so only at night. When I needed to communicate with others, something I seldom did anymore, I relied on my phone. I wasn’t so much afraid of the world as weary of its ways, mistrustful of its tawdry tricks and illusions.

I fell into the habit of sitting at my kitchen table late into the evening, all the lights extinguished, staring sullenly at the shadows and allowing my mood to shift from one bleak shade of gray to another.

Thinking, too: thinking what could one cling to in life? Where was stability? Where was permanence? Was there anything, anywhere, that could weather the assaults of time? I flirted drearly with a turn toward religion but realized I had no faith in faith. On a certain Friday

night—by then it must've been early Saturday morning—I decided that my life was an empty shell and would best be thrown away.

Just then, a lone cockroach scooted across the floor, misty moonlight glinting off its folded wings. Passing in front of the sink, precisely where Mr. Looper had spread a liberal dose of his poisons, the roach drove ahead like a miniature M-1 tank. Unaffected.

All at once I began to smile.

That very day I called the library, the same one where those depressing singles had met, and requested that several books be brought to the house. (“But I’m a sick woman,” I told the cranky librarian. “Can’t you please deliver them?”)

Soon I began to acquaint myself more properly with the roach: with its five major, and irrepressible, families—Cryptocercidae, Blattidae, Blaberidae, Blattellidae and Polyphagidae—and with the more than four thousand known species that live and prosper throughout the world.

“Nature’s perfect machine,” one of the books pronounced the roach, and who was I to argue? It could survive gallons of pesticide designed expressly to kill it, I read, ungodly extremes of heat and cold, blasts of radiation that would fry a human being to a crisp. It could eat almost anything or almost nothing. Cut off a roach’s leg, and a new leg will regenerate.

In fact the dismembered leg, if the nerve and thoracic ganglion are kept intact, is itself able to learn simple tasks. Scientists have proven it! And if something unfortunate does happen to a roach—like getting squashed on a kitchen table, for example, by an enormous shoe—the loss doesn’t matter, not at all. In many species, every mature female lays loaded egg cases, or oothecae, at intervals of a week or less. Swarms of new roaches are always emerging.

Toughness. Resilience. Resolve. Indomitability. An unwavering commitment to carry on in the face of countless hazards and pitfalls. The more I thought about roaches, the more honored I felt that they had chosen to live with the likes of me.

I began to collect them, trapping them in quart jars lightly coated inside with petroleum jelly and baited with slices of banana or chunks of white bread dipped in beer. For a while I kept my collection in a medium-size cardboard box; when the colony grew, I drained the water from my three aquariums, scrubbed them out and turned them into upscale shelters. (The transparent glass was a delightful bonus.)

To enhance the appearance of the containers, I decorated them with bright, colorful ribbons and tiny trinkets. At first I used tongs to pick up individual insects for examination; later, the tongs became superfluous, and I used my bare fingers. I spoke to my roaches and sang to them, hoping to make their new home as pleasant as possible.

“You’re my inspiration,” I once told them. “You’re my strength. I love each and every one of you.”

My confession was still hanging in the air when someone knocked on my door. Through the window I saw that my visitor was Mr. Looper. I went to the door and opened it.

He seemed flustered. “Joyce,” he said, “I hadn’t heard from you in a while, so I thought maybe I’d drop by, see if anything was...”

Staring frozenly past my shoulder, he’d fixed his eyes on my aquariums, which were crawlingly alive. “What the . . .”

“My pets,” I said.

For several seconds he said nothing. Finally: “Joyce, you’ve got a problem here.”

“Not so much.”

“You need help.”

“Oh, I’ve got plenty of help.”

I opened my hand to show him a superior specimen of *Blattella germanica*, its integument a warm, autumnal shade of pale yellowish brown. The tarsi tickled my palm. I was about to disclose that I’d named the little fellow after my late husband, but Mr. Looper didn’t stay to hear me.

About Greg Jenkins

Greg Jenkins is the author of four books, the latest of which is the novel *A Face in the Sky*, published in 2016 by Harvard Square Editions. He has contributed dozens of short stories to such literary journals as *Prairie Schooner*, *Prism International*, *Chicago Quarterly Review* and *Mensa Bulletin*. He has also had several plays produced.

HAROLD POSNER'S USED BOOKS
by James Kidd

After the divorce and the settlement, Jim moved to a small apartment not far from where he once lived. His kids visited, but not often, and he had long stretches of time to himself. Free time was something he once wished for, but now he had it in gross abundance.

One afternoon, he got to thinking about all the books he once owned, about the books that really stood out, the books that blazed in his memory like a childhood friend, and he thought about how to get his hands on some of those books again.

It was easier than he'd imagined. He flipped open his lap top, typed in Used Books, his web browser added, Near Me, and up popped Harold Posner's Used Books. Jim liked the name. It reminded him of all the second-hand book shops that were everywhere in New York City back when he lived there. There were dozens and dozens of them, stores, stalls, books by the mile, and most books could be had for the price of a coffee. Not bad when you thought about it.

After a few minutes, he had placed four old friends in his online cart. The total was 36 bucks (free shipping to boot) and they'd be at his door in just five business days. He did the quick math. 36 bucks isn't much to most people, but to a middle-aged divorced man with three kids and a sluggish start to a second career, 36 bucks came dearly. But he really felt he wanted, no needed, these books.

He hit the purchase button, held his breath as the beachball on his computer screen whirled and whirled until his payment was accepted. He'd eat soup for a week if he had to just to see those books in his house again. But, he couldn't help but to worry: Had he changed so much over the years that he wouldn't recognize his old friends?

A few days later, he had a rather humiliating day at work. He drove home in a kick the dog, fuck the world attitude until he saw the package leaning against the back door. The other Jim, as he liked to call his past, would have stopped at a bar and gladly have emptied his wallet there. But the new Jim, who he was struggling to be, made a decision each night not to drink and awoke grateful each morning.

It was pretty amazing how a plain brown box with a handwritten label could change his day. The script was refined, confident with just enough embellishment to make him smile. Words on paper always had that effect on him. He bound up the stairs leaving the shit sandwich of a day on the back porch where it belonged.

He opened the box, and smelled the musty old library smell. Inside was this note:

Hi, and thank you for purchasing from Harold Posner's Used Books. Before you dig in to your new treasure trove, please remember, these are previously owned books. Some volumes may show considerable wear, others may have some markings on the inside, but all the magic is still there.

Jim slipped the first book out and was immediately transported to his younger days. He held the book with a reverence reserved for something holy. The jacket was pristine; he could hardly believe it. He remembered reading this for the first time back when he was a rudderless kid at college.

He cradled the book in his hand, and it opened with the stiffness of a brand-new edition. The first page was stark white and on the top-right corner was a doodle: a red circle, with some kind of curly-cue mark within and an arrow wrapped around it.

“I don’t remember this,” Jim put on his glasses to get a better look. *Wow*, he thought, and knew it hadn’t been the printer’s work, but that of a past reader. Amazing, actually, how precise, and gorgeously compact this little emblem was.

There was another one on the second page, but slightly different. The arrow had shifted around the circumference just a bit, the squiggle in the circle had changed shape, it looked like some kind of alphabet, but he couldn’t be sure. He thumbed a few pages, and like an old cartoon, the emblem in the corner came to life. Jim felt a sudden electricity to the air, like something might happen. He slowly put the book down.

“That was weird.”

He grabbed a diet soda from the refrigerator as he made his way to his old chair, the one the kids joked smelled like a million old beer farts and dog breath, and they were probably right. But the chair gave into him like nothing else ever had. He collapsed back into the chair and let the momentum lift his legs so he could swing them onto the ottoman with a bit of middle-aged flourish, and then opened the book.

The title page had an inscription: *Dear Faithful Reader, what does your heart want? Flip the pages and find out.*

Jim stared out across his small living room and let his gaze fall out the window. It was nightfall. Long shadows were becoming full dark. “What does my heart want?” He asked aloud. He had no idea. He reopened the book and stared at the cover page. *Flip the pages and find out.*

He put his thumb to the pages and like before, the little icon moved fluidly. It had a mesmerizing quality about it. The air gained a certain density and his hair prickled in some kind of anticipation. There was an energy building, building, in search of a release. Jim didn’t move. The pages whipped past his thumb, the circle cartooned some conjurers meaning to the ethereal. And then, nothing happened.

Jim snapped the book shut and laughed out loud. “Oh, boy. You really had me there for a minute,” he said to the book. “Man, I’m either gullible or hopeful.”

He belted out a laugh. “God, that felt good.” He hadn’t laughed in so long that it’s richness was recognized and not taken for granted.

Jim looked at the cover of the book. In this light the cover looked illuminated like some mythic text. The air around him still had that strange charge of energy that he imagined might discharge in a painful arc of static electricity. He opened the book and read the cover page again. Turn the pages and find out. He pressed his palm to the page and when he did, it felt as if a gentle hand from within the book had met his. His hand snapped back, and he stared at the page, but it was just a page, and to make sure, he rubbed his palm across it again.

He started reading, and remembering.

Within minutes it not only felt like the day had caught up to him, but had surpassed him. He rubbed his eyes. Just a few more pages he thought and looked down to where he was reading. The page, for a quick second, swam before him, and he could have sworn the words had looked like a woman turning her head, but when he blinked again, the words had taken their usual linear order.

He stared at the page and gripped the edges of the book. He resumed reading. In the story, Immaculata, the witch who would release the four horsemen, opened her cloak to the young man fighting her. Its lining caught the light, and a dazzling symphony of moving colors, like shadow dancers on silk, defied reality.

“What does your heart wish?” Immaculata asked. The man before her couldn’t answer. “Then come,” she beckoned.

Jim’s heart jumped in his chest as a woman’s hand emerged from the depths of the words. The page bulged, and then her hand broke the surface, like a casual swimmer’s stroke. She reached up and cradled the back of his head, gently guiding his face closer to the book. “Jim,” she said almost breathlessly, “Jim, I need you to join me. Be part of the story.”

The room around him faded away. The book lay open in his lap, but within the book was a reality defying depth. Dark clouds roiled as smothered flashes of lightning lit up an infinite expanse around her.

Behind him, he sensed the air about to discharge, then he registered the fragmentary blue flash that initiated somewhere behind him. He peered into the eyes of the woman emerging from the pages. “Immaculata,” he murmured, reaching for her. His hand entered the page and within it was a desert’s scorching heat. A dry wind stung his skin and he could smell the acrid stench of a long gone fire.

“Yes,” she said, “yes.”

As she leaned back, her eyes shone like the very devil’s, and she smiled triumphantly. She slowly parted the folds of her cloak, the colors danced hypnotically, rhythmically, like Joseph’s fabled garment, pulling Jim like a moth to a flame. He stretched his arm farther and as he took hold of her, the air around him swirled with a skin searing fury. Immaculata snaked her fingers about his wrist and pulled him toward her.

Jim slipped into the book with a natural ease, joining her, leaving his body behind.

Immaculata wrapped her arms about him, pressing her body to his, and she whispered in his ear, “You’re the first visitor we’ve had in years.” Her breath, soft lips, and body pressed against his were enticing, erasing years of longing and loneliness as she murmured, “It’s like we were forgotten, left to vanquish, and fade into non-existence.”

“Who could forget this story, this place?”

“You’d be surprised, Jim. But that’s going to change now. Look.”

She turned him by the shoulders, and he faced the rift in the page. He saw his own dead body sitting there with both hands locked in a hang-on-for-dear-life grip on the book, holding it open, his head was slumped forward and a curtain of hair circled his face. His chin lay upon his chest, but he was not relaxed. This has not been a quiet surrender. His eyes were sprung wide open, blindly staring as if they’d just witnessed an unforgettable horror, his teeth were clenched and his lips, now bluish, were pulled back in rictus grin of pure primal agony.

Jim stared out at himself in utter disbelief. There’s no way he can be seeing this. His eyes, his mind are all back there, on the other side of the rift. How?

From behind him, Immaculata wrapped her arms around his neck like a lover, she put her chin on his shoulder, “When they find you like that, you will live on forever in the whispers of Urban Legend, and the curious people will find us, too. You will never be forgotten, Jim. Never. And now, neither will we.”

“No, not like this.”

“Oh, yes. They’ll say you died of fright reading this story. The rumors will circulate and countless others will come.” She ran a finger through his hair, “And some of those that come, will have to die just like you.”

And with a wave of her hand the rift in the page began to close, Jim struggled against her, screaming wildly, “No, no, no!” his arms and legs thrashed against her embrace, but he had no more physical strength than a wisp of smoke.

The rift became narrow, and he struggled to move his face into the light until it was gone, plummeting Jim into an abyss of eternal darkness.

About James Kidd

James Kidd received his MFA from The New School’s Graduate Writing Program and has had stories published in *Blood Moon Rising*, *Flashes in the Dark* and *The Horror Zine*. His journalism has appeared in several national magazines and newspapers.

ESCALATION
by J.B. Toner

A rain of apes.

They fell mostly on the windy plains beyond Chicago's limits; but thousands hit the streets and rooftops, plunging from troubled skies to douse the neighborhoods in blood and fur. They lived till they landed, and such a symphony of howls and yammerings had not been heard. Many people hungered in the city, but not the most desperate of the poor would try the flesh of those fallen apes, handiwork of the experimenting Archons. Even the crows ate nothing but the eyes.

They were outside of town when it happened—out in the Corpse Lands. Decatur lowered his 12-gauge, raised his goggles, and said, "Rainin' monkeys."

"Ayup," said Tomlinson.

Rookwood spat.

They moved on.

The Dead were getting harder to find. Good news for travelers, bad news for hunters. Also bad news for the species, but that was no longer news. Twenty years since *They* arose, and less news every day.

Father Joe pointed. "Yonder."

Beyond the shale outcroppings, a grove of pines. Half a mile, maybe. Man-forms in rotted clothes were moving. Omaha gave a sharp nod and went ahead through the late afternoon shadows to a clump of dust and old dead grass, just tall enough to prop his M24. The other four fanned out and closed in slowly on the pines.

Omaha's first shot: square in the hip of the nearest one. Kneecaps were too small a target. The Dead turned and crouched and came loping toward Omaha with their skinless knuckles scraping the pebbled earth. Decatur stepped in on their flank, fired the second shot, smashed the pelvis of another one. Then wiry Rookwood's katana and barrel-chested Tomlinson's sledgehammer, pulping and severing. Father Joe moved in with the scooper and started snatching out eyeballs. One got too close; Omaha popped it, center mass, to knock it down, and Decatur smashed its head with the shotgun butt. As it was getting back up, the padre plucked it and it flopped down final-dead.

"Felix!" Rookwood shouted. Behind: three stragglers. Tomlinson shoved the first one toward Rookwood, who pinballed it back to him with a flying spin kick, and it ran straight into Tomlinson's brutal clothesline and hit the ground hard enough to spray dirt-clods. Rookwood drew his Glock 18 in midair and came down raking the knees of the other two Dead with automatic fire. Father Joe pounced and plucked, and the hunt was over.

Omaha came sauntering. “Nother day at the office, huh boys?”

“Ayup,” said Tomlinson.

When the Archons rose from the waves and the world’s electricity died, millions of people died with it. At first, the survivors used fearful names for the victims—the Walking Dead after the TV series, or the Hungry Dead.

But there was simply no need for adjectives. *All* dead men walked, all dead men hungered. Not for brains, not for blood, but for eyes. And only taking the eyes of the Dead could give them final death. So the government (there will never not be a government) issued high bounties for every pair of rotten, soulless eyes.

The sun was bloodying the west. “Let’s make camp in them pines,” Decatur said.

The fire began as the daylight ended. They hunkered and they ate their jerky and their limes. Then they counted up.

“Hundred ’n’ fifty-seven brace of eyeball,” Omaha said. “Good haul.”

Decatur nodded. “How ’bout ammo?”

“That ain’t so good, Moe. Used more’n we shoulda, that fracas.”

“Last three came outta nowhere,” Rookwood said.

“No one’s blamin’. But them bastards back in town’s chargin’ more and more for iron these days. We either gotta conserve or start cuttin’ back on whiskey.”

“Conservation got my vote.”

“You and me both, brother. Speakin’ of?”

Father Joe produced an old scuffed bottle of The Glenlivet. “Bless us O Lord and this Thy Scotch, up on which we are about to get tore.”

“Amen,” said the others, and the bottle made the rounds.

“What about some harmony, Dude?” Decatur said.

Deuteronomy Omaha, late of Barney, Kentucky, dug in his satchel and emerged with his harmonica. “I call this one, ‘Home, Home, with the Deranged.’”

And they drank and they sang beneath the dying moon. More of the Dead might be about, but a time came to stop worrying. Finally, with a pistol in his left hand and a sword in his right, Rookwood got to his feet. “Gotta go piss.”

“First piss of the night!” Omaha proclaimed. “Make a wish out there, Patrick.”

“You know it.”

Thirty seconds later, he came back with his fly unzipped and a strange look on his face. “Guys—come look.”

They followed him from the pine-grove and over the lip of the hill beyond. There they stopped and stood.

“Jesus, Rooks, what’d you wish for?” said Omaha.

In the valley below them was an Archon. No one could mistake that *thing*, a many-tentacled slug the size of a football field, blasphemous and pale in the starlight. Named for the monster-gods of ancient Gnosticism, they had arisen and gone about their own business, never going out of their way to plague mankind—but their business, whatever it was, had sucked up the power behind all technology and brought about the ghoulish obscenity of shuffling undeath which now awaited every living soul.

“Damned filth,” muttered Fr. Joe.

Omaha squinted. “Is it dead, ya think?”

“Let’s go see,” Decatur said.

They picked their way down through the brambles and scree to the base of the hill, fanned out, and advanced uncertainly. When they were within about twenty yards of it, Omaha stooped and picked up a rock. “Hey, you bag a’ shit!”

The rock hit the Archon’s side with a squish, stuck for a moment, and then clattered to the earth.

“Yup, it’s dead,” said Tomlinson.

They had all heard the stories: mankind’s most powerful weapons leaving the Archons untouched, stopped by some unseen aura surrounding them. It was said that the hateful slug-gods had neither retaliated for the attacks nor even seemed to notice them.

Decatur pointed. “The bounty.”

A standing reward had been offered, vast in sum, for any who could harvest their grotesque genetic material. Prized above all would be one of their eyes.

The hunters gathered by the blubbery mass of the creature’s forehead. Three dull grey orbs, six feet in diameter, dribbled reeking pus.

“Patrick.”

“My pleasure.” Rookwood holstered his sidearm and plunged his blade into the socket. The flesh cut away easily, and he began to saw the eye loose.

“You guys ever heard of one of these things dying before now?” Omaha asked.

The others shook their heads.

“Folk say they got no souls—that’s why they gotta take ours. Why, they took all the electric lights. What if they’re runnin’ out?”

“Runnin’ outta what?”

“Us. Ain’t been a baby born in Chicago in near ten years now. We’re going extinct.”

Silence.

“Gimme a hand, Felix,” Rookwood said.

He and Tomlinson grabbed fistfuls of gristle and rolled out the squelching eye. A cord like an optic nerve came trailing after it, and Father Joe sliced it with a Bowie knife.

“Wonder if that’s why they made it rain monkeys back there,” Omaha said, distant. “Trynna make humans. Make souls.”

“They won’t,” the priest grunted. “Only God can.”

“Hope you’re right, Padre.”

“All right,” said Decatur. “Rookwood, Tomlinson—you take these back to town and buy a horse and cart.” He tossed the sack of eyes to Tomlinson. “We’ll stand watch, make sure no other hunters come along.”

“Hold up,” said Rookwood. “I still gotta piss.”

“The hell you doin’, Rook?”

He was hunched down and making his way into the gaping socket. “Gonna piss on this thing’s brain.”

“Man, are you out of your—aw, suit yourself.”

The other four ambled around, gazing up at the massive carrion and the glimmering worlds above. The night wind blew and the peepers sang. A minute or two went by. “Hey Pat, you okay in there?”

Then he came out, flailing. One of his hands was clenched around something, and orange light was spilling through his fingers; the other was clawing desperately at his own face. Blood ran down his shoulders. “Get it off! Get it offa me!”

“What is it? What’s on you?”

“*My skin!*”

Whatever he was holding fell, and he ripped at his arms with both hands, screaming like a man in a pyre. They grabbed him, tried to hold him, but he writhed and kicked and spat until Tomlinson hauled off and hit him with a right cross that made a sound like a suicide hitting the asphalt. Rookwood went limp.

They laid him down and put a jacket under his head. Omaha knelt by the glowing orange jewel and peered.

“Careful, Dude.”

“Ain’t gonna touch it. Just wanna see. . . what. . .” A look of puzzlement grew in his face. Then dawning horror. He started touching his hands and forearms, his eyes widening ever more. “What is this? This shouldn’t—gotta—get this off.” And he started to scratch.

“Dude? Dude!”

Tomlinson raised his sledgehammer, swung it like a golf club, and the jewel went flying into the scrub grass.

“Thought you was gonna hit Omaha for a second there,” Decatur said.

Father Joe knelt and shook him gently. “Dude. Can you hear me?”

Omaha blinked and rubbed his eyes. “Yeah, I—I’m here, Padre. I’m here.”

“What did you see?”

“It was like—can’t rightly—gimme a minute.” He sat down in the dust, and the others followed suit. After a long moment, he spoke: slowly, like a man recalling ancient memories. “It was like seein’ Earth from space. In the old pictures. Except it was all wrong. All this stuff—skin and dirt and bodies—it felt like bein’ wrapped up in a suit made of maggots. The whole, whattayacallit—*matter*. It felt like matter was a prison. Made of barbed wire. I just wanted out.”

Rookwood chimed in, his voice mostly groan. “Yeah. What he said.”

Tomlinson gave him some water. “You okay?”

“Think so. You like to broke my damn jaw.”

“Panicked. Sorry.”

“Sokay, buddy. 'Preciate the save.”

“What the hell was that thing, anyway?” Decatur asked.

“Dunno. It was stuck in the skull, right where the optic nerve came out. Looked pricey, thought it might be worth somethin’.”

Fr. Joe was ruminating darkly. “What you said—it’s what *They* see. Time and space as an abomination.”

Omaha nodded. “That squares with the Gnostic are always saying.” (One couldn’t walk down the street without encountering Gnostic prophets.) “Like the world was one big mistake.”

“Heresy.”

“I ain’t disputin’ that, Padre, but you gotta know how your enemy thinks in order to beat him.”

“Yes.” The priest got up and walked into the dark, following the orange gleam. They scrambled up and came after him.

“Padre, don’t be a damn fool,” Decatur said sharply.

“It’s all right. Felix can always bash me if need be.” He picked up the jewel. “Now don’t let me pull my face off. But don’t stop me the second I look uncomfortable. Give it a minute or two.” He made the sign of the cross. “Lord, by your name save me; by your strength defend my cause.” And then he looked.

They watched. The blood drained from his face, and his shoulders started to move back and forth as if straitjacketed. Almost inaudibly: “No. No, no, no.” They glanced at each other, tense, half-raising their hands every time he twitched. “Not true. It’s not true, not true.”

“Father Joe? You hear me?”

Abruptly, his eyes squeezed shut and he lowered the jewel. “I’m okay.” He fumbled for his hip flask and took a long pull. “I’m okay.” He walked back toward the Archon, unscabbing his Bowie knife. Carved a tiny chunk out of one the eyes. And popped it into his mouth.

“Padre, what the fuckin’ fuck!”

He turned toward them, and his gaze was strange: half-looking past them like a man in a dream, but not unfocused; rather, peering intently at something unseen. “Yes. Of course.”

“. . .What do you see?” said Omaha.

“Their world. They’re amphibians, you know. Half outside. In the spirit world. But they’ve got no spirit of their own.”

“I wanna see.”

Decatur winced. “Dude, come on.”

“I wanna see it, Moe. I done ate worse than this in my day, we all have.” He walked over, carved a piece, gulped it down with a slosh of whiskey. “I don’t—oh. Oh! Whoa.”

The other three exchanged glances. “How do we know it won’t turn our willies into tentacles or some such?” Rookwood demanded.

“You’re the one unzipped hisself inside the thing’s skull, Rookwood.”

“Yeah, I mean—I guess.”

“I wanna see too,” Tomlinson said quietly.

“Aw, why not. They’re gonna eat all our souls anyhow.”

Decatur shook his head. “Like bein’ back in high school. All the cool kids are eatin’ Archon eyes.”

“So, you in?”

“S’pose.”

They carved and they gulped, one after another. And for each of them, the veil of matter was rent. The night became an orange and purple dome, fifty times higher and wider than the cosmos they knew, stretching back through numberless ghastly aeons; the earth underfoot, a pink and green expanse of rippling sea, girded by no horizon, extending through insane infinities. And the five of them stood, minuscule and meaningless, in the flat détente of those abysses of wave and sky.

“Welp,” said Rookwood, “I no longer need to piss.”

Tomlinson’s voice: “Uh, guys? How come I can’t see you?”

“Squint, Felix,” Omaha said. “We’re right here, you just gotta, like—tilt your head.”

“Y’all fuzzy.”

“Spitballing here,” said Father Joe, “but my guess is, the Archons have never attacked human beings because they can’t see us. All they see is souls and energy. So as long as you’re alive, your soul is camouflaged in skin.”

“You guys feel that?” Decatur said abruptly. “That pull?”

Chorus of yeah. The flowing tides beneath their feet were moving urgently westerly. Their feet were planted in the dust of the physical world, but their hearts felt the tug.

“This is what they feel—what we feel—when we die. This is how they suck us up.”

“We have to stop this,” Father Joe said grimly. “Whatever it takes. We have to kill them.”

“Well we ain’t dead men,” Rookwood said. “Let’s follow it and shoot whatever we find.”

“Just keep squinting at the real world,” Omaha said. “We won’t do no good if we follow the pull off the edge of a cliff.”

They moved out on foot, following the maelstrom-like tug. Tilting and peeking and shaking their heads, they managed to negotiate the rocks and dales of the corporal universe; and all the while, they let themselves be reeled along like fish on a black steel hook. At the end of an hour, they crested a ridge and stared down bleakly to the vale beyond.

“The God-damn monkeys.”

From the east, from Chicago, a slow meandering stream: the thin, pale souls of apes. A dozen titan slugs, their mouth wide-gaped to swallow. The Archons had succeeded.

“They don’t need us anymore.”

“No,” said Father Joe. “No, in Christ’s name, no!”

And he charged down the hill, unholstering the sawed-off Remington that swung beside his hip flask. One of the monster slugs was opening its grisly maw to swallow an apely soul: the padre sprinted straight into its darkling maw and fired both barrels into the roof of its unholy demon mouth.

The others stood frozen for half a second. “It’s bleeding!” Omaha yelled. “Let’s go!”

They followed their madcap chaplain into the fray, firing rifles, shotguns, pistols, and derringers into the mouths of the monster gods. The Archons bellowed like the everlasting wrath of Satan, and four of them flopped over dead. The others reared their ghoulish bulk and waved their tentacles, and rocks began to shower from the sky.

“Let’s get the hell outta here!”

Scrambling desperately, they fled the vale as mountains worth of stone came showering down. The Archons, aura-clad, shrugged off the plummeting debris. But now they knew. We knew.

The vision of the Archon's eye was fading. The moon was far above; the night mist hung about them like a shroud. Decatur racked a shell into the chamber, and the empty one went flying. "They're vulnerable when they feed."

"Yeah," said Rookwood. "But also, they can make their own food now. All they gotta do is conjure mountains down on all of us."

"So the war's done escalated. We can hurt 'em now, but they can hurt us more. We gotta get the eyes back to Chicago. Let everybody know."

"Yeah, but—first we get the bounty, right?"

The others glanced around.

"Well, yeah. 'Course we get the bounty first."

"All right then, let's go save the fuckin' world."

"Amen, brother mine."

"Fuckin' A."

About J.B. Toner

J.B. Toner studied Literature at Thomas More College and holds a black belt in Ohana Kilohana Kenpo-Jujitsu. He works as a groundskeeper in New Hampshire and just had his first daughter, Sonya Magdalena Rose. She is currently in his lap.

LAST LOOK
by John Stephens

Gregory Thompson shut off the lawn mower as he finished cutting the last section of grass on the east side of the cemetery. He walked over to the passenger's side of the pick-up truck, pulled out his water bottle and took a swig.

He wiped the sweat off his brow and surveyed the graves around him. Not for the first time in his two years as a cemetery groundskeeper, Greg was fascinated by the fact that every one of the "residents" had once been a living, breathing person.

Now, they were all dead, including his friend, Mike Norton, who never lived to receive his high school diploma.

Greg's thoughts turned to the day of the accident, fifteen years ago; the day that he would never fully get over...

"Earth to Greg Thompson," he heard his co-worker, Bill Ward announce in a mock-intercom voice from the front of the truck.

"He's currently having an out-of-body experience," Greg responded in a trance-like voice, equally fabricated. "Would you like to leave a message?"

Bill chuckled. "You having one of your 'spells' again?"

"Not this time. Just lost in thought," Greg said. He knew that his co-worker was not making fun of him. His "spells" were a form of narcolepsy, thanks to the accident. He eventually learned to joke about his condition, despite its tragic cause.

Greg's episodes of drowsiness were sometimes accompanied by dream-like images or hypnologic hallucinations. These would occur just prior to losing consciousness. At first, these spells were alarming. This was bad enough, but when people got the impression that he was a drug addict or a lunatic, he would become livid with frustration.

Indeed, finding jobs had been rather trying since he had been refused by potential employers. Greg suspected, but could never prove, that he was being discriminated against because of his condition. Medication had proven to be ineffective.

Five minutes later, the two men resumed their work for another hour until their day was over. Shortly after Bill went home and the tools and truck had been returned to the garage, Greg remained to take a last look around to see if anything had been left behind.

Of course, this "last look" was just an excuse to visit his friend's grave, as he periodically did after quitting time.

Standing before the familiar tombstone now, Greg found himself wondering about Mike—not so much about their high school years together but more about what *would* have happened had he survived the accident, or had it never occurred.

Would they have continued their friendship after graduation? Or would they have drifted apart simultaneously the way many relationships do? Would Mike have become a businessman? An artist? Would he have a wife and kids today or be a bachelor? Greg and his pal had never discussed career and family aspirations at length; it was their near future that was more important; summer employment, university applications, dating girls.

From an existential point of view, Greg pondered the theory of Mike's death as being a matter of fate. Would he have died anyway, of some other cause? Would someone else have died had Mike survived? Or was it a tragic, senseless loss, as Mike's parents had understandably seen it?

For some time, Greg had experienced a certain degree of survivor's guilt...guilt for not being the one to die in the accident. Of course, he knew rationally that he himself was not responsible but still, the guilt had lingered. Psychological counseling had been somewhat helpful. The passage of time had also played a role in the healing process.

But some wounds never entirely heal.

Greg's ruminations were interrupted by a sudden rumbling from the sky. He looked up, expecting to see an airplane but there was none. He felt a gust of wind as the sun edged toward the horizon, tinting the western sky a brilliant yellow-red. He dimly heard the rustle of dried-up leaves blowing along the footpath.

The curious rumbling faded then ceased. The wind subsided to a gentle breeze.

Except for the drone of traffic in the distance, there was silence.

A self-consciousness overcame Greg. He felt as though he shouldn't be at his workplace after hours. Indeed, he felt a presence observing him. He turned around; half expecting to see his supervisor telling him to go home but all he saw were the silent tombstones.

And the fading daylight.

He felt another gust of wind, this time without the rumbling. While not overwhelming, the current of air did not feel weather-related; it felt warm, as if it were coming from some sort of ventilation system.

Greg, feeling as if he were rooted to the spot where he stood, made a conscious effort to move forward. The strange wind continued as he caught a glimpse of undulating movement directly ahead of him. Greg wondered if he were having one of his spells.

But this experience felt too real; it didn't have the usual surreal quality that would overcome him whenever he passed out.

Greg snapped out of his trance. He was still at the cemetery; the wind had stopped. He was seated under a maple tree in almost complete darkness. He stood up, feeling his vertebrae crack and wondered how long he had been “out.” He chided himself for not bringing his smartphone to work. He began to walk to the footpath with the intention of going home but he gasped at what he saw.

Along the tombstone of his deceased friend was a large mound of soil.

His heart pounding, his legs trembling, Greg stumbled his way to the front of the grave to confirm that what he was seeing was real. An earthy odour filled his nostrils as he beheld an undeniably coffin-shaped hole in front of the headstone.

It couldn't be! Greg thought. *Who the hell dug up Mike's grave, and why?*

He scanned the area for any signs of the recent exhumation; a back-hoe, shovels, the other groundskeepers. Vandals?

There were no signs of anything amiss.

He peered almost involuntarily into the open grave. He saw utter blackness in the hole. Terror threatened to overwhelm him; he expected a decaying corpse or skeleton to rise. Indeed, he felt as if he were in a horror movie. He *had* to be having a narcoleptic spell.

He sighed, exhaling an unconsciously held breath. He retreated from the excavation. He had to report this— but to whom?

Behind him, he heard a movement. Someone was coming. He wanted to bolt; to run away from the unnerving scene and from whoever was approaching. At the moment, he did not have the nerve to confront anyone who would desecrate Mike's grave.

If he were having a spell, then he wanted to wake up.

Before he could act, however, he heard a groan; a low, guttural sound that seemed startlingly familiar. Greg finally turned around to see who was there. But it wasn't his supervisor, Bill or any other of the groundskeeping staff.

Shambling in an unsteady gait was Mike Norton.

Clad in the same gray suit he was buried in, long ago, Greg's deceased friend was miraculously—impossibly—among the living.

The shape continued to march rigidly and groaned again, as if in response to Greg's desperate query. The timbre of the voice was unmistakable; it was Mike's.

What kind of voodoo is this? It couldn't be!

Greg wanted to scream. He was terrified and felt himself sweating and shaking. His heart raced and he could hear it beating in his ears. His mouth was completely dry and when he tried to speak, it came out as a whisper. “Mike? Michael Norton?”

The resurrected abomination did not seem to hear because there was no acknowledgement. Greg automatically stepped aside, allowing “Mike” to get by. Still overwhelmed with disbelief and fear, Greg somehow managed to follow as the walking corpse bumped into a tombstone, fell to the ground and groaned again. Lying face up, it continued its rigid walking movements, seemingly unaware that it had fallen.

With a decisiveness that surprised him, Greg took hold of the arms and pulled Mike up to his feet. He winced as he heard a series of cracking joints. He steadied Mike when his body nearly fell again.

“Mike? It’s Greg Thompson from high school. Don’t you know me?” he asked plaintively, looking into the open but vacant eyes that seemed to stare right through him. Mike seemed to inhale hoarsely. He tried to walk through Greg, as though the rightfully living being weren’t there.

As Greg moved aside again, he felt a wave of renewed grief. Mike’s body was somehow alive, but it was not the friend he had known. This reincarnation had no will and was apparently oblivious to everything. His soul was gone.

But where did Mike’s soul go?

Overwhelmed, Greg collapsed as the narcolepsy overtook him once again. When he woke up, Mike was gone. Greg wondered, *Was Mike ever really there at all?*

Either way, Greg decided to take a leave of absence.

Neither Greg nor anyone else had detected the spacecraft that landed in the cemetery that night. The extra-terrestrials that had long been observing the planet known as “Earth” and its various life forms had finally tested their rejuvenation techniques. Organisms that have perished plant life, primitive animals, and the ones known as “humans” were able to be revived, if conditions were right.

The extra-terrestrials were seeking Earth inhabitants to bring to their planet.

Since removing living human specimens would be too revealing, only the dead had been chosen—those who would not be missed, like the one named “Mike” who was removed from the ground without anyone’s knowledge. The other human—the one named “Greg”—was not a worry because experience taught the aliens that his story would not be believed.

But there was one thing that the alien beings could not acquire: the essence of the humans that made them dynamic—the “soul.” Without the soul, the creatures had no will, no communication skills and no uniqueness. Therefore, it was difficult to determine what they were actually like, before they died.

In order to accomplish this, selecting live humans who could react to and appreciate a world beyond their own planet would be necessary, despite the risks.

Soon, the selections would begin...

About John Stephens

John Stephens is a freelance writer from Calgary, Alberta, Canada. He writes anecdotal and observational articles with a humorous spin. He also pens fictional short stories of suspense, unease and eerie situations.

His published articles have appeared in *WestWord Magazine* (Edmonton, Alberta); *The Kerby News* (Calgary, Alberta); and *Uterior Magazine* (Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario).

He is a member of the Writers’ Guild of Alberta, and has completed the Creative Writing program offered by the Winghill Writing School (Ottawa, Ontario) in 2009.

RUNNING WITH THE PACK
by Timothy Wilkie

The scene of the kill was bloody and beautiful. So much hunger and so little food was the way of this winter on the ice pack. That was why the sight of a kill was so joyous.

My mate and my first-born shot out of the long, brown tundra grass and the others had fanned out around the old Musk Ox cow, causing her to panic and run right into the trap we had laid out. My first-born was on her in an instant, clamping his jaws into her juggler. Her sweet blood spurted out on the snow as she went down...and then with pure will, forced herself back on her feet.

No! I thought. *We can't lose this one chance at food!*

My mate joined my-first born, leaping on the bellowing cow as she staggered and fell to the ground. This time the others joined in and tore the life from her in a matter of seconds.

I stood back and watched, not bothering to join in. My mate looked up from her feeding and padded across the frozen ground to nuzzle my side and lick my face. I knew she was concerned because I hadn't joined in with the celebration. She tried to draw me near but when she realized I wasn't interested, she went back to the carcass and continued feeding.

There was a dangerous scent in the air as the ice water soaked the pads of my feet. Something was wrong; there should not have been this much water on the ice this time of year. It was too soon in the season.

My first-born howled out his victory, his voice so loud and strong that it startled me. Where my daughters were grown and had pups of their own, my son had stayed near his Mother. He was growing stronger and I knew the day would come that he would challenge me for leader and we would fight to the death. There was no other option and for me to ignore his challenge would mean shame and banishment from the pack.

Enough with such thoughts. It was time to join the others and claim my share of the kill. Still, there was that strange scent on the breeze and it troubled me.

With my tail curled over my head to show my dominance, I approached and the others scattered. My mate hunkered down and then rolled over and exposed her soft underbelly as I passed by. I eyed my son and growled and he backed away. Someday he would challenge me but not today.

The moon was shining and it was a glorious night. Once I had eaten, I curled up on the snow and went to sleep.

I awoke suddenly.

There was a new scent on the wind. This one was strange and exotic. The others kept looking at me. My mate ran towards me and nibbled on my neck. I could understand their excitement but there was another scent mixed in and it was the scent of danger.

Somewhere in my distant past when I was a mere pup, I remembered that scent and a chill went down my spine.

The others growled at me and my mate kept nibbling on my neck. *There is something new and exciting...let's check it out* she was saying.

I snapped at her and she backed away. I had bit her hard enough to hurt just a little and show how serious I was. Yes, there was excitement in the air but there was also danger and if we were going to check it out, we had to be careful.

My son looked at me defiantly and ran in a circle. I knew he thought me a weak, old fool. But the truth of the matter was that our bellies were full and there was no need to risk it. My sister ran past me, letting me get her full scent as she lifted her tail. She was mocking me and her mate joined in the amusement by playfully fighting with one another. My son was intoxicated on the blood of a fresh kill as he continued to spin around in a circle, chasing his tail.

Suddenly my mother came over and nudged me in the direction of the new exciting scent. But what was good for the pack was my decision, my decision alone; the others didn't have any say. Just as it was my decision what females in the pack went into heat and what adult males I would tolerate, those that I didn't would only see my huge, white fangs at their throats.

In the distance, I could see their flames of fire and hear their vocal sounds.

My son suddenly quit spinning around and acting the fool. He went down on all fours his ears pricked forward. At the same time the others stopped to listen. They had never heard such sounds but I had and it struck fear in my heart.

It wasn't yet time to scatter because the danger was still far off. The ancient memories returned about these slow, clumsy creatures. I instinctively understood that these animals were not at home in this world; they were at odds with it and that gave us an advantage.

My pack was quick and hastened to their task. They spread out amongst the tundra grass, squatting low and keeping their snouts to the wind. I took the lead and the others fanned out across the ice pack, showing nothing but their glowing red eyes as we crept forward.

The full moon came out from under a cloud. Usually that was a time to lament and sing but my pack knew with a simple look from me that they must remain silent.

There was a building and inside was brightly lit, but that wasn't what caught my attention. On the very edge of the light just before it entered the conifer forest there was a female creature. Unlike the others, her scent was bitter-sweet. She had long hair that glowed red like fire.

Suddenly she spotted me and I froze. I stared at her and with eyes that glowed and a low growl started in my chest to warn her to stay back. She was the intruder here, not me.

“Go away! They have guns,” she said. “Run!”

Her words were strange to me but her meaning was good and true. Our eyes locked. I could not break away, for that would show fear.

“Run!” she said again in a pleading tone. “Never come back. There is danger here for all of your kind.”

Just then, my first-born shot past me. It was just a blur of movement and then there was a sound that sounded like a crack of thunder and a burst of fire. My first-born screamed in agony and then he was silent lying in a pool of blood in the snow.

This could not be! I thought. *How could they kill from so far away?*

My mate, his mother, tried to get to him but I went up on my hind legs and pushed her down, holding her there by her throat. I could feel her pain go through me as she realized the pup that she had bore and suckled was gone.

The others slipped off into the darkness as a group of men approached. Their scent was angry and brutal. I pulled my mate back behind the tree-line, and after we both took one last look at our first-born being dragged away, we followed the others into the darkness.

Each of us found our own place to hunker down. My mate shared my place and we lay side by side. I offered what comfort I could but I knew it wasn't enough.

We of the spirit eternal had roamed the ice pack for centuries. This was a new game with deadly consequences. Its shadow dimmed the light of the full moon. While once a mighty breed, now we had the added danger of having the white man present.

They were a brutal and invasive species, cruel and greedy in their ways. This is the lesson that I now remembered from my past. Yet the one female human had been different; she had been kind and giving.

Suddenly there was the sound of thunder and the ice beneath my feet shook and then rocked back and forth. Terror tore at my soul—the ice was breaking up. This was way too soon! We hadn't planned for this! The summer mainland was a long ways away.

The others were already up and moving. They would have to run for the shore to the safety of the conifer forest, right to the Europeans. There was no other choice as the ice started to form spider cracks underneath our feet. The run for our lives was on.

As my feet found their stride, my heart pounded in my chest and my eyes watered from the cold.

My mate was right behind me and my mother behind her. My sister and her mate brought up the rear.

As we ran, the ice was sweating under our feet and breaking up. To end up in the water was certain death, but to run blindly across the jagged ice ripped at the pads of our paws and made them bleed. Our hot breath left a steamy wake and the blood on the snow would be easily tracked by larger predators. They would wait until daylight and come for us.

My father had been killed by the white man. I had never had a chance to challenge him; I had just taken over once he was dead. My mother, sister, and I had watched him die most slowly and painfully over many hours. We had waited in the area until almost dawn and then my mother had sniffed at his dead, frozen carcass and signaled us with a low throaty growl that it was time to move on.

There was no power of redemption left in our hearts and no reserve strength to call upon. Possibly we would find safety in the twisted forest of stub pines. They were twisted and stunted from the winds that always blew across the ice pack.

Ignoring the intense pain in my feet, I broke into a full run and the others followed. As we neared shore, there was more ice cold water lying in pools and we had no choice but to splash right through them, causing our feet to freeze over with a painful icy crust.

Life on the ice pack was hard and now because of the warming weather there were bears coming down on to the ice, desperately seeking food. This made confrontation with them unavoidable. It was inevitable that there would be a short food supply but now the competition was much stiffer and more deadly.

To quarrel back and forth was one thing that the pack were never too weary to do and I had not forgotten that even though my first-born had been killed there was still a stronger and much greater threat to me. My sister's mate was much younger and bigger than me and with my first born now out of the mix, suddenly he was sizing me up. I could see in his movements that he was testing me to see how far I would let him go. Unlike my first-born, he would show me no mercy.

Ahead were the brown stems of tundra grass and a dense thicket in front of a stunted forest of twisted pines. Up the slight incline I ran with the others right behind me. Suddenly there was a bellow of rage and a bull moose charged at us. Frightened, we were all able to move fast enough to get out of the way and the old fellow only seemed to have one charge in him as he ran out on the ice pack.

At the very edge of the forest, I braced my legs and sniffed the air. Then there was a loud bellowing sound and a splash. It was followed by the sounds of terror and death. My ears flattened back and down and I looked around all were present. My sister lay on the ground and my mate and my mother flanked me on either side, so it wasn't one of mine.

It was the moose. He had gone through the ice and we all knew he would die out there.

The nights were mysterious and dangerous in the absence of the sun from the sky. Life on the ice pack could end in an instant. A tiny stream flowed out of the conifer forest and slipped down across the ice. I bent down and took a drink. The water tasted ancient for it had been trapped within a glacier for thousands of years. My mate joined me along with the others and we drank until we were satisfied.

From the treeline, I could see the cabin clearly and smell the scent of meat cooking on an open fire. I was quick and alert in the needs of the pack and I knew it wouldn't be long until the tempting aroma drew them near, dangerously near.

As I turned to leave, there was the explosive crackle of feet in the snow. I crouched down and slid silently into the brush. My prints would be easy to track. I stuck my nose in the air to catch a scent. It was not a bear; it was a human that I smelled.

But it was the bittersweet smell of the woman. For a moment I just crouched with my nose thrust out into the frosty air as she stepped onto the porch. Another scent came to me the woman was not alone; she had a dog with her. Some dogs were truly a tuned to their masters, and those were just as dangerous as the humans themselves.

This dog was a big gray husky that could easily be mistaken for family, but its domesticated scent gave it away as not one of us. It ran around for a few seconds and then stopped dead in its tracks. Its ears stood straight up and it started barking. It knew I was there watching even if the woman was too oblivious to notice. It was a wonder that humans had survived at all. For one thing they stood upright exposing all their vital organs. Yet as stupid as they were, they were extremely dangerous.

My mate silently crawled up beside me and observed. The others were near; I could smell them. The woman walked towards the dog scolding him. "What are you barking at?"

Fool, I thought, the woods are full of danger and he's just trying to warn you.

Just then one of the men opened the front door of the cabin and light flooded out from within.

"Are you coming in?" he asked. "We're waiting to start the game."

"It's okay," she said to the dog as she went into the cabin.

It was plain to see as the dog scanned the tree line, he wasn't as easily fooled as she was.

Once the door was closed and they had gone back inside their little box, I saw my sister's mate edge out from the darkness. He moved quietly across the snow to the front of the cabin sniffing the ground as he went. This angered me I knew it was a pure act of defiance.

I shot out of the brush at full speed to cut him off and block his way with my ass in his face. He propped his front legs on my back and I swung around and bit him on the tender area at the very

tip of his nose. He yelped and backed off but the sound alerted the dog inside and he started barking like crazy.

The door flew open and a man stepped out on to the porch with his rifle in his hands. It was the same man that had killed my first-born. Deep hatred flared up inside me but I knew this wasn't the time or place.

We ran for the forest but the dog shot out across the clearing right on my tail. His huge jaws were only inches from me when I turned to fight. I had no time to look around for help; it was just me and him.

His momentum sent me tumbling into the snow. The dominant primordial beast was strong in me but the dog's huge canines were within inches of my throat. A driving wind ripped through me as the cold and wet soaked into my coat. The dog sprang on me with a fury that I hadn't expected and I realized that his teeth were replaced with silver.

He landed heavily on me and I tore into him with slavered fangs and eyes blazing. He turned quick and my teeth sunk into one of his hind legs right to the bone. But these creatures were bred for pain; it didn't faze him at all. We ripped and slashed at each other and in the background I could hear the woman say. "Call him off, Ivan! Enough is enough."

"Get back inside, Woman! That's not one of God's creatures! It's a demon from hell."

"No!" she cried. "It is the dog that you have made who is the monster. It's unnatural to replace his teeth with silver!"

He brushed her off and pushed her inside.

The man broke into a run as we drew nearer to the tree line. He knew that I would draw the dog into the woods where the others would jump on him and rip him apart.

The dog, sensing the presence of his master, let go and backed off. The man raised his rifle and my mate flew from the brush hitting him solidly in the chest. He fell backwards in the snow with her snapping jaws just inches from his face.

Seeing his master down, the dog snarled and sprang on me. I side stepped and he went tumbling into the underbrush. Just then I saw my sister's mate on top of him, ripping out patches of flesh and fur.

I staggered to my feet. My eyesight was blurry because he had gotten me many times with his razor sharp fangs. There was no doubt that there was silver coursing through my blood stream.

I had to concede to the fact that my sister's mate was younger and faster than me. The way he danced around the dog made the canine unable to dominate him like he had me.

Crying in pure rage, my sister circled around the dog and her mate, waiting for a chance to jump in. When my mother joined in, the dog backed off, knowing he was outnumbered.

But it was then that something unexpected happened. The man managed to get free of my mate and grab the gun. He aimed it at my mate and with everything I had left I lunged at him, knocking him to the ground just as his finger tightened around the trigger. I felt the blast rip through me as I clenched down hard on his neck and the brutal taste of his hatred and rage squirted into my mouth.

The sound of the blast sent the dog running for the porch as I lay on the ground, too weak to move. My mate nuzzled my neck and I struggled to my feet and just as dawn was breaking I followed the others into the woods.

I awoke in my sod hut wrapped in blankets, My mate Ahnah and my mother Aga knelt over me and the look of concern on their faces told me how close to death I really was. Just then the woman with flaming red hair entered.

She bent over me. "I want you to drink this it is a mixture of salt water and mustard flour. It will neutralize the silver running through your veins."

When I awoke again the woman was gone and Ahnah was lying next to me. I felt stronger and my fever had broken. "When you are fully recovered we will leave this place," she said. "For now, the humans are gone, but they will return."

About Timothy Wilkie

Timothy Wilkie is a writer living in Kingston New York. He has two grown sons Justin and Blake. In his spare time he is an artist, poet, and musician.

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THE SKIN
by Rob Bliss

Carver couldn't tolerate living in his skin anymore, so he peeled it off and hung it on a hook in his clothes closet.

Instantly, he felt lighter. A hundred small complaints vanished with the removal of his pelt – itches, hang nails, dry skin, rashes, blisters that needed peeling, wiry hairs that always grew back after being plucked, waxed or burned away, and dirt and oil and grime that caught and collected in folds would no longer be a bother. Cool air brushed over and soothed the exposed muscle of his body; he tingled and shivered with a sensation he had never felt before.

It was a sunny and hot July day, so he went out to join his fellow man, walking down the sidewalk, leaving blood outlines of his footprints behind. No goosebumps rose over the surface of his body, and the sunlight and heat didn't make him sweat. Lifting his lidless eyes to the sky, he burned his retinas to see black dots explode and hold on faces passing, which stared back at the skinless man.

Before the black veils faded, Carver preferred to hear the voices without seeing the faces.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?” asked a man's baritone. “There are kids out here—put some skin on!”

An elderly woman's vocal cords passed close to his ears, not stopping while stating, “You should be ashamed of yourself, young man—in this day and age!”

Other voices passed or kept alongside Carver's steady pace.

“Oh my God – is that what we look like inside?”

“What is that? Is that cancer, or is it *supposed* to be there?”

“Somebody should call the cops. Some nudity is okay, but that's just too much. That's beyond nude.”

“Don't touch him, Sally. Just move away, walk into the street if you have to. He probably has a disease. And...it's not nice to stare.”

“He's a demon. A devil, an angel shorn of feathers; a Christ come to display the minutiae of his humanity, leaving his divinity packed into his overnight bag. He won't last long.”

The spots faded and Carver saw the glares and stares, the batted eyelashes and flicking tongues, the hand gestures and signs to ward off ill omens or to invite them closer. The crowd he passed quickly became a dizzying collage of masks, so Carver looked at himself. Flexed a hand and watched the muscles in his forearm move. Dust and dirt that perpetually floated on fresh air

stuck to his wet tendons and tingled. But he didn't scratch so as not to tear open a blood-bulging vein or cut a cord of muscle.

He tolerated the tingle as he tolerated the eyes, and soon stopped feeling either irritant once they built up to a form of thickening crust.

Carver smiled as he thought that if one removed a skin, another would grow. Either it would collect naturally as one moved through life, or the environment and its many species would demand a body wear a skin.

The individual lines of muscle, tendon, vein and nerve soon vanished under a patina of gelatinous flesh that thickened quickly, spreading a dark purple bruise down Carver's body from head to toe.

He saw himself in the front window of a video camera store. A camera on a tripod shot the street and projected passers-by onto a flatscreen television. Carver was hideous; not because his skin was gone, but because it was growing back.

A hardware store was beside the camera store. He went in and terrified and sickened the clerk.

"I need a knife."

A stiff arm pointed him down an aisle, where Carver found every form of knife needed to build or repair a house. He chose a banana knife, slightly curved, with its inward edge sharpened.

Splaying his arms, knife in hand, footprints overlapping in and out of the aisle, Carver showed the clerk his body as an excuse, saying, "I have no money."

The clerk waved away the potential theft, hoping the man would just follow in the wake of the wave of other customers leaving the store.

Emerging back onto the sunlit sidewalk with knife in hand, Carver elicited another scattering of screams. Now armed, being a greater threat, he had to sprint bloody steps down the sidewalk, weaving through clothed people, racing ahead of and behind passing cars in the street, making his way to a park.

Blood from his feet slipped off chemically-waxed leaves of grass and absorbed into earth, so his path was hard to follow. Lovers picnicked by a small pond, swans swam passed bulrushes, a toy sailboat caught a breeze and pushed far from its child captain on shore.

Carver dove into the opaque green water and washed off dust particles, but the growing purple skin stayed. He stood in the shallows and scraped the banana blade up his forearm, strips of skin peeling off his body, dropping into the pond's murk. Yellow and orange koi-rose iridescent scales into view and snapped puckered mouths at the slow rain of skin curls.

More skin fell as Carver maneuvered the knife like a potato peeler across both arms, down and between all fingers, lifted knees and shins to carve away the crust that had grown over his body.

Shivers shot along his nerves and the blood he had released with imperfect slices warmed the exposed muscle cooled by the pond water. Pain felt good unless the knife hacked down too deeply, but then it was a wound easily tolerated and washed clean.

Eyes had gathered on shore, mouths warped by horror and awe circling the water. Carver didn't want an audience. The knife had freed him of enough flesh to keep his body light, so he walked out of the pond and pushed through the crowd, ignoring voices telling him the many things that were wrong with him. He knew, and didn't have to be told. The outside world was no place for him, not yet if it ever would be, so he headed home.

Locking the door, putting on the chain, he sat at his kitchen table and stared out the window across the tops of buildings. Voices drew his eyes to the sidewalk in front of his building door. A few people milled around, talked, pointed at the red footprints smeared across the pavement. Shoe prints had trampled through the blood, people slipping into other people, some into the road.

Carver cracked open the smaller ventilation window below the big viewing window to let in the sounds of the street.

"He's a goddamn menace!" a man's voice rose up with car engines, horns, radios, a church bell. "People are getting hurt because of him."

A woman's voice responded, "Yeah, but what can we do? They're footprints—we all have them."

"Mine are dry. He should get out here and clean up his mess, at the very least. Or maybe hack his damn feet off!"

"Oh please, now you're being ridiculous. You don't cure a headache with decapitation."

"Why not?"

"Stop it. You know what I'm saying. I think maybe we should go—we don't want to become a mob. What are we here for? I don't live here."

"I wanna see if he's coming out. I'll talk to him."

"About what?"

"I don't know. I just want to talk. Can I do that?"

"Talk or decapitate? I'm going. How did I even get here?"

Carver peered down through a crack in the drapes which he had pulled closed during the conversation below. He saw the woman leave, but the man stayed to dip his shoe toes in blood and smear it in circles. He pulled back from the drape and edged the small window closed until it clicked.

He didn't see, but the man outside looked up. Considered retrieving the woman to stand guard and commiserate, but she was just about to step onto a bus. The man had yet to ask himself what he was really waiting for, and why wasn't he, too, getting on the bus. He lived miles away.

Carver clicked on a light. He had blackout curtains because he once worked the night shift and slept in the day. In the bathroom, he used the knife to carve away more of the purple gelatin skin, which had finally seemed to stop growing. The only explanation Carver assumed was that the pond water had cleaned off the dirt, therefore a thick skin was not as needed. He turned the taps on to fill the tub. He would soak and, hopefully, stop all skin growth, be able to do a more precise job of slicing away the new skin.

A voice mumbled from behind a wall. Mistaken as a neighbor at first until Carver left watery blood footprints across the hardwood floor, echolocating the source of the voice.

Opening the closet, he saw his lips splay and stretch to smile at him as the skin dangled from its hook.

"Welcome home, Twin," the skin said. "Mind getting this hook out of my neck? Drape me over a chair, lay me on your bed—is that the bathtub filling? Can I have a soak after you?"

Carver lifted the rubbery empty skin off the hook and draped it over a chair. He turned the chair to face outward, and stacked books on the table against which the skin's head was propped.

The mouth sighed and smiled. Through the hole of the mouth could be seen the bloody inside of the back of the neck. Not easy for Carver to look at, but he was quickly becoming accustomed to the sight of strange forms of flesh.

He pulled up a second chair and talked to himself.

"Why don't you want to wear me? What did I do wrong?" the skin asked, its entire head rippling and sending waves down its body with every word.

"You're just not comfortable anymore," Carver said with a touch of sadness.

"You don't like how I look and feel?"

Carver crossed an ankle over a knee and lightly touched the worn muscles of his sole. Patches of hard, dried blood dotted his tread and were too thick to be peeled or cut off easily. He idly drummed the point of the banana knife against the crusted sole of blood.

“I’ve worn you for too long,” he told his skin. “I want a change. Why can’t you shed?”

“Even a shed skin doesn’t mean the serpent has lost its colours and texture. Is that it? You wanna be a serpent? You can only be one species at a time. Maybe after death, things change, but no one knows for sure. Is there reincarnation? Maybe the lucky ones get to choose their next skin.”

“Why do I have to die before I’m given a second chance?”

The skin’s mouth opened an oblong hollow. “Well! That is the mystery of being.”

Carver got no answers from his skin. He let it lie where it was and plucked his portable phone out of its charger. Thumb-dialed a number he hadn’t called in what seemed like an eon, but which was more likely no time at all.

Paced his apartment as it rang, and no footprints were left on the wood. He had lost a lot of moisture.

“I have call display,” she answered. “By now, everyone has it. So I hope you’re not trying to mysteriously call and hang up like you used to.”

“Emma, just listen.” He heard her sigh and breathe, knowing she didn’t want to talk, but she wouldn’t instantly hang up. She was a good person. “Emma ... I took my skin off.”

“What? Why? You can’t do that. No one can.”

“I did. It’s draped over a chair right now. I had it hanging on a hook in the closet, but it said it hurt. I think the hook put a hole in the back of its neck.” Carver put a finger into the skin’s open mouth. The mouth closed, but without teeth, his finger was only massaged. The skin was playful, so Carver slapped its cheek lightly, not in the mood for games. Through the mouth, his fingernail found and pried up a small chevron of torn skin. “Yep, the hook pierced it. I didn’t mean to hurt it, just to let it hang.”

“Tell her I love her,” the skin whispered.

Carver wrinkled his eyebrow muscles at the skin, and paced into another room.

“Do you think I did the right thing?” he asked. “I’m a little lost right now, so strange actions seem to be the thing to do.”

“You’re on the news, Carver. Turn on the TV.”

“I got rid of my TV.”

“Why? You can’t do that. No one gets rid of a TV.”

“It didn’t offer me anything anymore.”

“Oh my God. That is so like you.”

“I didn’t see any cameras following me when I went for a walk.”

“Why in the hell would you go outside! You have no skin! Stay indoors!”

“You wanna come over?”

She sighed and breathed again. “Carver...really? Did you hear what you just said? And what would happen if I did?”

“No, it won’t, I promise. It was because of the skin.”

“I doubt that. Why did you take off your skin? Just answer me that, and be honest.”

He swallowed and felt breath frozen in his lungs like two bags of ice. Tingling pectoral muscles did nothing to dislodge the sensation.

“It wasn’t comfortable anymore,” he said in a whisper.

“Yeah, well, we all have to wear our skins for our entire lives. You’re no one special.”

“I think that’s why, partially.”

“Carver, I’m not getting into it with you. I have to go.”

“I know. Emma? My skin says hello.”

“Oh my God...I’m not...I’m just not! Goodbye, Carver.”

The phone clicked and Carver drummed it against a thigh as he paced back into the room where the skin sat.

“She says hi,” Carver lied.

“Is she coming over?”

He went to the window, pulled an edge of the drape aside to peer down through the crack. The man hadn’t gotten on the bus; instead, he held a cell phone to his ear. A dozen people had gathered around him, also holding phones to their ears or typed on them sending text messages, or took photos of the apartment building. Carver wondered how the man was able to call and command so obedient a crowd in so short a time.

“What’s out there?” the skin asked.

“A growing mob.”

“Take me out to them. They can still be reasoned with.”

“They’ll tear you to shreds.”

“And that would hurt you?”

He stared into the bloody backdrop eyeholes. “It might.”

“Do you think you’ll be putting me on again sometime?”

Carver peered back through the crack in the drape. Someone saw him and pointed up. Phones were angled upward to photograph, but he pulled away and let the drape fall back into place.

He sat and looked at the muscles in his hands as he wiggled his fingers, then leaned his forehead into the cup of his palm and stared at the floor.

“Why won’t they just let me do this?” he asked himself, but not necessarily his skin.

“The pack mentality both protects and preys upon,” the skin said philosophically.

“This is no time for alliteration, I’m being serious.”

“Neither comedy nor tragedy are ever pure. They each contain the other, if they’re done right.”

“Stop it, I’m trying to think.”

He thought, but the muscles of his head weren’t able to force a revelation into his brain. But his forehead and scalp remained tense.

A knock like gunfire hit his door and echoed in the wood and plaster room. Carver’s muscles contracted but the pulse of his heart pushed his chest muscles outward. He shuffled to the door and touched fingertip muscle whorls to it. Bent an ear.

“Yes?”

“It’s an enemy. How are we going to do this? We know you saw us. You coming out?”

“Who do you want? Me or the skin?”

“We want you to put your skin on. You know that, goddamnit. We got kids out here. We got a civilization to run. You like order? Ever *need* order? You can’t run away. You think I don’t want to? Hell, I’d love to, but if I can’t then why should you?”

“I don’t want to be hunted,” Carver almost screamed, forgetting that he was talking to a door. “When people hunt people, we are all made animals.”

“You pick that up from your skin? See what’s happening? Schism leads to philosophy. That don’t sell tickets to the show!”

“I don’t want to go to the show!”

“Well now you’ve *become* the show, so it’s all back-fired on you, hasn’t it?”

“I want to speak to someone else.”

“Who? There’s no one here like you. You have no peers.”

“There must be someone who wants the same thing. I can’t be alone in this. Go look.”

“If you mean that woman, she got on the bus—she’s gone.”

“Just go and find someone, anyone. Please.”

Footsteps moved away from the door and sounded down wooden stairs. Carver sat back in his chair and stared at the door. Started to rub his hands together, but remembered he was still holding the knife. He tossed it onto the skin and the knife point deftly jabbed into a nipple and dangled. The skin cooed.

Voices rose outside. At the window, Carver saw a girl push her way through the thickening mob which had spilled into the street and surrounded stopped cars like pebbles circling boulders in a Zen garden. The girl yelled back at the voices which yelled at her, then heaved her thin body against the flesh barring her passage until it gave way and she squeezed her way to the front of the building.

The door was open for her.

Carver sat back down and stared at his apartment door. The chain was off, and he wondered if the skin had unlocked the door and thrown itself back over the chair when he wasn’t looking.

Anything was possible. That was sometimes the problem.

The girl didn’t knock. She slipped in and pushed the door closed with a soft click behind her, then locked it and put the chain on.

Her black hair had been hacked, self-cut, and her arms and legs were the shape of linked bones, and white scars of every length and width wormed their way across her skin.

Her eyes were hollow balls of green glass.

She stripped off her soiled clothing and left it in a pile, stepped away from it and showed her body to Carver.

Two long deep purple scars snaked up both of her forearms and a pale, banana-shaped scar hooked under her jawline from her left ear. Carver gazed at her in awe, then smiled. She smiled back. He plucked the knife point out of his skin's nipple and passed it to her.

She cut off her skin from the head down in one long sheath and handed it to Carver. He pushed his feet down the tight tubes of her legs and wiggled his toes into hers. Her skin had to stretch and the scars broadened and swam away from their ancient constellations as Carver put his larger frame into her. Not a perfect fit, but what skin was?

He helped her get into his skin, the flesh hanging in rubbery sacks across every inch of her thin musculature. Roomy. She didn't mind. It allowed for room to grow.

They kissed each other's lips.

"I'm Carver."

"I'm Cutter."

They left the apartment and stood on the stoop of the building before the mob.

The man who had proclaimed himself an enemy spoke for the crowd. "Well, you both look like shit, but that's never been just cause." He turned to face the faces. "Okay, people, show's over. Let these nice people get back to living."

The crowd disappeared. Carver and Cutter went back inside and made love in each other's skins.

About Rob Bliss

Rob Bliss was born in Canada in 1969.

He has an honors degree in English and Writing from York University, Canada. He has fifty stories published in thirty web-based magazines, plus two anthologies. He is the winner of *SNM Magazine's* Author of the Year for 2013.

His first novel, *Cut*, was published in 2014 by Necro Publications.

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PRODROME

by Amanda Leigh

Prodrome: any symptom that signals the impending onset of a disease.

December 3, 2017 11:07 pm

One might say it was just my imagination playing tricks on me, because I was a man sometimes prone to emotional extremes. Maybe it was, but I swear I saw the old man's decrepit frame inching towards me from across the street. The street lamps illuminated his silver hair and darkened his sunken cheeks. I knew it was the old man living below me, because he's the only person I know whose cheeks leave steep valleys in the sides of his face like old Swiss cheese.

I know he saw me too when he turned his cane in my direction ever so slightly, so the knob of the silver wolf handle reflected stars of lamplight across my face.

Much unlike the old men that need boy scouts to help them get across the street, he was gone in the bat of an eyelash all the way back to his musky apartment right below mine.

What a creep.

"Hurry up, Scout," I muttered to my dachshund that was far too enthusiastic about sniffing grass instead of doing his business. I had been outside for so long, I could feel drops of dew forming on tips of my eyelashes, all in anticipation for my dog's one measly bowel movement. I gave up after 10 fruitless minutes. No turd was worth that much of my time.

When I got back to apartment 208-C, my roommate, Riley, was on the couch sandwiched between two average looking women. The trio's eyes were so focused on the white lines of cocaine on the coffee table that it took them a few moments to acknowledge me.

"Sage!" Riley exclaimed, "Which one do you want for the night?" He gestured to the two piss-drunk women next to him.

Both women were bland, without a hint of makeup on either of them. They stared into space with their tired, lackluster eyes. Neither seemed to care about the fact that they were being auctioned off.

The brunette on the left had stringy hair that appeared to have not been washed in days. She kept putting her finger in her mouth to pull out her gum and twist it in circles. The redhead on the right was the more doable of the two. Aside from the fact that she was the color of a sheet of paper, she had perky breasts that were begging to escape from her spaghetti strap top.

"Neither," I said.

Riley's face fell as if I just told him some very bad news. I walked off to my room, but he trailed at my feet. I felt like I was walking two dogs instead of one. He pulled me aside to face him before I could make it to my door.

"What's wrong with you, man? I thought you were always down for a good time," he looked hurt.

"Not tonight," I replied curtly.

He was right, too. My reputation in Epsilon Psi was about as dirty as a public toilet seat, and I never turned down a good fuck. For some inexplicable reason, I just wasn't feeling it that night.

I changed direction. "I think I've got the flu." A blatant lie, but Riley was far too out of his mind to notice. He backed away from me.

"Dude, you should have told me before you shared some of that Four Loko with me earlier!"

"Sorry...I just felt it coming when I was outside. Maybe I just need a good night's sleep."

"I hope so," Riley left it at that. I was glad he did. I really didn't know why I was feeling so down in the dumps, and I didn't feel like analyzing myself. Maybe all I needed was a good night's sleep after all.

December 4, 2017 3:57 am

There was that song again:

*Just remember the more life gives,
the more it must take away.
Even on the brightest of days,
nothing good will ever stay.*

I knew that song. I had heard my dad whistling it in the shower for years. At first, I thought maybe I had slipped through a wormhole in my sleep, back to a happier time when my dad was still warm and alive. I pictured him holding me in his calloused hands. I pictured those same hands placed gently on his heart where the mortician thought they looked most presentable for the open casket.

I was jolted out of my sleep, but the singing didn't stop. It was real, but it wasn't my dad singing this time. The voice singing now was much more fragile, as if a windpipe might break with every uttered syllable.

As I listened closer, I discovered that the voice was coming from below me in the apartment downstairs. I'd never once heard the old man speak, and I certainly had never heard him sing. I would have much preferred not to hear the latter at all. Listening to him screech his way through my once favorite tune was flat-out painful. I thought it would be safe to assume that the singing

would slowly fade out after the old man had given up on struggling to get the words out. Or better yet, perhaps he'd keel over due to cardiac arrest. Someone of his age was due for the death call at any moment.

By the fourth stanza, I'd had enough of hearing the old man fight with his crumbling vocal chords. I went into my closet and picked out an old umbrella; One of those umbrellas that's inconvenient and doesn't shrink down to a compact size. I figured it would make the loudest noise as I banged it against the floor. I gave the carpet several hard taps, sufficient enough to be heard from the apartment below. To my dismay, the old man's singing did not falter. In fact, it almost sounded like his voice got just the tiniest bit louder.

I banged the umbrella again, harder this time. I got similar results. Finally, I resorted to slamming my fists.

"I'm trying to sleep!" I bellowed.

With immaculate timing, as always, Riley opened the door to my room. He got a good view of my ass in the air and my ear pressed firmly against the floor.

"What are you doing? I thought you weren't feeling well." He said.

"I am...I'm just sick of the old cretin that lives downstairs making so much noise while I'm trying to sleep!"

"He *is* pretty damn creepy. I haven't seen him come out of his apartment once."

"Well I have, briefly. Trust me, you're not missing out on much." I shuddered even thinking about it.

"Try to get some sleep *and try not to wake up the girls*," Riley whispered the last part. As if suddenly resorting to whispering after my screaming fit would keep the two sluts from waking up.

I made sure to do an obvious eye roll before he left the room.

December 4, 2017 10:35 am

Professor Myrtle glared through his large spectacles at the class. He didn't look pleased.

"I am not happy about these quizzes." Out of habit, Professor Myrtle simultaneously bobbed his head as he spoke, giving him a striking resemblance to a scared turtle peeping out of its shell, "I would like to take the time to inform you all that I will *not* be curving these grades. You've earned your failure."

"Looks like Myrtle the Turtle woke up on the wrong side of the shell this morning," my fraternity brother, Clyde, whispered to me.

I found it difficult to suppress my laughter.

Myrtle's spectacles worked much better than I had anticipated, "Is something funny, Mr. McKinney?"

"No sir," I stiffened.

"You're right. There isn't anything funny. There's especially nothing funny about your grade. I'd like to speak with you after class."

I could feel my face gaining color by the second. A group of girls giggled behind me. I wanted to turn around and slap them on their foundation-caked faces, but I didn't feel like getting my hand dirty.

After class, I begrudgingly made my way over to Professor Myrtle's desk.

"You wanted to speak with me, sir?" I tried to sound as innocent as possible.

"Ah, McKinney, yes," he leaned back in his chair, "I apologize about my outburst earlier. I really wasn't aiming to call you out. I wanted to speak with you because I am genuinely concerned about your performance."

I simply cocked my head in response.

"In all seriousness, you scored the lowest in the class," Myrtle handed my paper over to me. It was a 33%. "Now, things like this happen and I typically pay no mind to them. Usually it happens to students who don't attend class or just plain don't care, and frankly, there's nothing I can do about that. You, you're different. In the beginning of the semester you were scoring 90's every time. You remember that, don't you?"

I nodded. Of course, I remembered.

"So, what's changed?" He was starting to sound less like a professor and more like a psychotherapist.

"I don't know. I haven't been feeling well. I think I've got the flu."

Professor Myrtle stiffened at my proclamation, "I'm disappointed in you. You were one of my best students. Your fall from grace is disheartening."

What did he expect me to say to that?

When Myrtle swiveled his chair to face away from me, I knew that there was nothing more to be said. The conversation was over. I grabbed my whopping 33% off his desk and shoved it in my backpack. I didn't want him looking at my grade anymore. I was ashamed.

December 7, 2017 2:32 am

*Just remember the more life gives,
the more it must take away.
Even on the brightest of days,
nothing good will ever stay.*

That was the fourth night in a row of that damned song. Numerous attempts of silencing the old bastard below me had failed.

I wrung my hands and walked around my room frantically.

What can I do? What can I do to make him shut up?

Suddenly, my mind flashed back to a prank my fraternity played on one of the pledges two years earlier. The pledge's name was Jimmy Canter. He was completely socially awkward, but he was a third generation Epsilon Psi, so the brotherhood was obligated to accept his bid. Seeing no other convenient use for him, we used him for our entertainment. My favorite prank we played on him happened during a trip to the beach on spring break. Due to a shortage of beds, we made Jimmy sleep on the couch downstairs. At nighttime, because Jimmy was segregated from the rest of the group, we figured it was prime time to play some practical jokes. Between our need for laughs and our binge on Kraken, we came up with a stupid idea. Nonetheless, it was still funny.

Our room in the shack had a cheap Oriental rug. We soon found out it was there to cover the slightly rotten wood underneath. It wasn't so bad that it needed to be replaced, but it certainly wasn't pretty.

While Jimmy was still out at the bar, and after much struggling with a power drill we found out back in the shed, we were able to puncture a hole through the wood big enough to fit a small rock through. We waited for Jimmy to come home and pass out on the couch to put our plan into motion.

Every time Jimmy started to fall asleep, we'd toss a rock down below and watch it *plunk* onto his head. With each rock, Jimmy would writhe around trying to figure out what had fallen from above him. When he looked up to see if the rock had fallen from the ceiling, we covered up the hole we made with the hideous Oriental rug. Needless to say, Jimmy didn't get a very good night's sleep, but the rest of us had a blast.

We even had a point system: 5 points for hitting the nose, 5 points for the forehead, and 10 points if we got an eye. Whoever got the most points got free drinks at the bar for an entire night. I always won the game of torture thanks to years of playing baseball.

I decided if the old coot downstairs didn't want to listen to me, I was going to make his fragile, bald head pay for it. Plus, I already owed my apartment complex about \$1,000 worth of carpet

damage anyway from so many spilled drinks, I figured it wouldn't really matter what other damage I caused.

I fumbled around the floor a bit with my hands, trying to figure out a good spot to start digging. When I was satisfied, I took out my power drill from my tool kit. I would start with the carpet and work my way through.

December 7, 2017 3:52 am

It wasn't singing that woke Riley up from his slumber. It was the distinct sound of my power drill that woke him.

"God damn it," Riley muttered as he stumbled over a can of Sprite, a clear sign that spring cleaning would have to come early for him that year.

My door was never locked. Riley never knocked when going into my room. I now know that he would wish he had knocked first. He wasn't prepared for the sight of me when he opened the door. I was sitting on the floor with my legs crossed pretzel style. I sat calmly on the blood-stained floor, paying no mind to him at first.

It took Riley a few moments to process the situation. I knew I looked a mess. Several of my nails were missing from my fingers. The tips of my fingers were chaffed almost completely flat because of my frantic digging.

I held a piece of carpet in one of my mangled hands. In the other hand, I held my power drill in a tight grip, as if I was an enthusiastic surgeon getting ready for the operation of my life. Riley looked mortified when I looked up to acknowledge him. I could not understand why. I was only doing what any rational person would do.

"What are you doing?" Riley gasped.

"I just want him to stop singing," I stated calmly, as if Riley should have already known the answer to such an idiotic question.

Riley didn't have to ask whom I was referring to. Although he'd never seen or heard of the old man downstairs, he'd heard many horror stories from me.

"Look, Dude, I'm going to call an ambulance before you pass out." Riley tossed me a t-shirt that was on the floor. "Put this over your fingers until I get help, okay?"

As Riley dialed 911, he tried to remain calm, but I could see the panic in his face.

December 7, 2017 4:06 pm

In the psychiatric ward of Holy Cross hospital, I could hear Riley and our apartment manager having a heated conversation outside my room. They tried to talk in urgent whispers, but I listened closely to their every word.

“So, how much do you think it will cost to fix it?” Riley asked the apartment complex manager as they both recalled the butchered floor in my room.

“I’ll have to take that up with maintenance before I give you my final estimate, but can I ask you one question?” There was a hint of apprehension in the manager’s voice.

“Of course.”

“What on earth possessed that boy to do such a thing?”

Riley sighed, “He says the guy that lives below us is being too loud and he can’t sleep.”

“You mean in apartment 108-C? I’m afraid that isn’t possible.”

“What do you mean?”

“Apartment 108-C is a staged, model home apartment. We show it to people when they’re interested in renting with us, but nobody actually lives in it.”

December 8, 2017 3:17 am

I slept soundly in the hospital the next night. The bandages the nurses had put on my hands felt snug and comfortable. I dreamed of wonderful things: my father and I teaching the family dog how to play fetch, my father and I at the shooting range for the first time, my father and I whistling tunes together. That’s when I heard it again for the first time since I’d left the apartment:

*Just remember the more life gives,
the more it must take away.
Even on the brightest of days,
nothing good will ever stay.*

The apartment manager had to have been wrong. There *was* a strange old man living in the apartment below and following me around. Perhaps he was a hobo squatting in the empty apartment below, but he was there somehow, I knew it.

The doctors told me it wasn’t true; they told me it was something called *schizophrenia*. They were wrong.

The old man *was* living below me, and somehow, he had found his way into the hospital room right below mine. I glared at the tile floor underneath my feet. It would be difficult to get through

the smooth, shiny floors, but I could manage it with the right tools. I set myself on the floor and started digging.

About Amanda Leigh

Amanda Leigh is a recent UNCC grad with a BA in English. She is currently a preschool teacher with 18 amazing students!

She has been published in journals such as *Askew*, *Cultured Vultures*, *Better Than Starbucks*, and *Tipton*. She is working on publishing her first novel.

AE FOND KISS
by Jim Mountfield

Paul kissed her. Behind him, as if urging him on, a crowd of people clapped and cheered.

She lay on a bed with a chipped mahogany headboard. An eiderdown of faded scarlet covered her to her shoulders. Her silky black hair fanned across the pillow and her eyes were closed.

As their mouths made contact, he marveled at her cold lips. No breath came from her mouth or nostrils. Nonetheless, he tried to give his *best* kiss.

People still clapped and cheered when he raised his head, but he scarcely heard them. The face on the pillow was stirring. The eyelids rose and the eyes underneath were a beautiful, lustrous gold.

He saw them only for a moment. Then the eyelids sank again and the face became still. At the same time, the cheering and applause died and seemed to give way to disappointed silence.

If only I'd kissed her for longer, he thought. I'd have woken her completely.

Earlier, while the sun set, Paul and Finlay stood at a junction. A sign there pointed in two directions, towards the town and towards a place called Lagg's Head that they'd heard was further along the coast. Finlay swigged from a half-bottle of whisky and passed it to Paul. "Well, which way?"

Paul managed a sip of whisky, which left his eyes watering. "Lagg's Head," he said hoarsely.

"No much oot there, man."

"Aye, there is. The circus."

All week the town had been decorated with circus posters. On the day of their arrival, Paul had walked along the esplanade and seen somebody sticking one up. A low wall overlooked the beach and sitting on it were a line of teenagers talking in Glasgow accents. Several had barbed green-or-yellow hair and wore studded jackets and T-shirts emblazoned with band-names like the Sex Pistols and the Damned. Feeling intimidated, wanting to avoid eye contact with them, Paul looked the other way to the town-side of the esplanade.

A man stood there dressed in dungarees that were red on one side and had red and white stripes on the other. He also wore a tapering white hat that ended in a red bauble and a cluster of red and white balloons were tied around his right shoulder. He was pasting a poster against a wooden fence that interrupted the row of seafront houses.

Behind Paul, one of the punks shouted, “Hey, mister!” Then he chanted, “Red ‘n’ white, your clothes are shite!”

They laughed—until the clown turned towards them. A crescent-shaped, red-lipped mouth had been painted over his white face, much bigger than his real mouth and giving him a massive grin. Even the punks found that disturbing.

The poster advertised the circus’s residency at Lagg’s Head. Tonight was its final night and the evening performance was already underway. But the poster had promised a ‘dazzling arcade’ in addition to the show in the big top. Paul persuaded Finlay to come with him to Lagg’s Head rather than to the town—whose attractions he’d grown bored of during the week—so that they could check out the arcade.

They followed the road onto the coast. A strip of spiky marram grass and prickly gorse bushes descended from the roadside to the waves, which seethed and growled in the dusk.

At Lagg’s Head a promontory containing a few flat acres of ground stuck out into the sea. Now one half of the promontory was dominated by the circus’ big top, lit up inside like a giant lantern. Covering the other half was a clutter of smaller tents, whose points and ridges were barely visible above a line of lorries, vans and trailers that’d been parked between the site and the road.

A meshed-wire fence was erected along that line of circus-vehicles. A single gap interrupted the fence and vehicles and was guarded by a hut with a hatchway and counter. Inside sat a clown with huge fake lips drawn across his white face, similar to the clown Paul had seen in town.

This clown grinned silently across the counter until Finlay demanded, “Hey, shouldn’t ye be in the big tent? Ye ken, *clowning*?”

“There are too many clowns just now,” replied the hut’s occupant. “We have to do other things to keep busy.” His accent was strange, his words constricted. ‘Keep’ was pronounced as ‘keek’, ‘busy’ as ‘dizzy’.

Deciding this clown was a foreigner, Paul asked, “Where’s your circus from?”

“From nowhere. We just tour.” The clown leaned out of the hatchway and gestured seawards. “Last week, we were over there.”

“In Ireland?”

“Yes. Before that, in England and France. Next, we go to Scandinavia. I hope you haven’t come for the circus. The show’s almost finished.”

“No. We want tae see the arcade.”

The clown shunted a huge jar full of copper discs across the countertop. “Sure. But we go from country to country and the arcade machines can’t take one currency. You put tokens in them. So you change your money here.”

Paul and Finn handed over some notes, received two piles of tokens and walked through the gap.

The first tent they came to contained old one-armed-bandit machines, lined up like hulking robots in a science fiction story. “They still working?” Finlay asked a clown who lurked by the tent’s tied-back flap.

Another white face, red-lipped grin and constricted voice: “*Everything* works.”

Loud cheers and applause came from the big top but only a few people wandered amid the arcade—mostly other teenagers who considered themselves too grown-up for the circus-show. Every tent contained machines. They saw more fruit machines with side-handles and newer ones with buttons to press. They saw shooting machines with guns fastened at the front and racing ones with seats and steering wheels. They saw pinball machines, fortune-telling machines and machines with glass cases containing puppets or models that came to life when a token was inserted – a barber shop quartet who’d sing, a bear that’d dance, a miniature Ferris Wheel that’d turn.

In one tent they found some video-game machines that’d recently arrived from Japan and they played on those for a time. Paul manoeuvred a laser-cannon below four barriers at the screen’s bottom while waves of squid-like aliens scuttled down from above. “What’s this game called?” he shouted over the zaps and explosions.

“Space invaders.”

Later, they passed a tent containing jukeboxes with curvaceous 1950s-style facades and rainbow-like colors. They saw a clown approach one and put in a token and then somebody with a mellifluous American voice began singing, “Kiss me quick...”

“Elvis,” said Finlay. “My ma hasnae got over him dying yet. Still cries about him.”

“Mine too.”

They arrived at a final tent, a marquee that housed the oldest arcade machines they’d seen. There were ones with crank-handles and binocular-style eyepieces, which invited you to see ‘what the butler saw’ or look ‘into the sheik’s harem’ or enjoy ‘Tom Mix’s latest cowboy adventure’. More puppets stood inside glass cases, ready to move—gypsy fiddle-players, Cossack dancers, an Egyptian mummy that emerged from a sarcophagus—but these were ravaged with age. Paint flaked off their faces, giving them the look of decayed corpses.

“This stuff’s *ancient*,” Paul marveled.

Finlay wandered between them. “Some ay these auld contraptions must pre-date electricity,” he said. “Wish I kent how they worked.” He was fascinated by machinery and wanted to become a mechanic, though as he was an only child and lived on a farm, he would more likely end up a farmer like his dad.

In a corner of the marquee’s they discovered a platform built from several timber palettes, supporting a bed with a battered headboard and scarlet eiderdown. Wires ran from under the bed, over the platform’s edge and into the base of a metal cylinder. Higher up the cylinder was a gauge that had a needle and was divided into different-colored segments.

“Now what happens,” asked Finlay, “wi this gizmo?”

A voice said, “You *kiss* it.” They looked round and saw a man rise from a chair on the platform’s far side. He shuffled forward on arthritic old legs, though his white make-up and painted grin hid his face’s wrinkles. “You kiss Sleeping Beauty and the kiss-o-meter...” He patted the top of the cylinder. “...measures the strength of your kiss.” Then he pointed to a slot below the gauge. “It needs a token, of course.”

Paul felt hands against his back, pushing him towards the bed. “Well,” laughed Finlay, “here’s the man for ye. Scotland’s kissing champion. A famous lady-killer. He’ll blow your machine off the scale!”

In truth, during his seventeen years, Paul had never kissed a girl.

That was how he ended up on the platform, placing his lips against the cold metal ones of the bed’s occupant.

When Paul stepped down from the platform, Finlay and the old clown were arguing.

“Ye’re saying,” said Finlay, “this thing’s priceless? This piece ay junk, which I could rig together one morning in my da’s work-shed, is *priceless*?”

“No.” The clown smacked his hand again on the cylinder with the gauge. “This, I admit, *is* junk. A showman made it fifty years ago when he found her and had the idea for the kiss-o-meter.” He swung his arm towards the bed. “*She’s* priceless.”

Finlay snorted. “Her? But she’s just a *doll*.”

Hearing her described as that, Paul felt indignant. When the clown spoke again, his voice was indignant too. “She is *not* a doll. Do *not* call her that. She belonged to a sultan in the 18th century. Rumors say he hired Henri Maillardet to construct her. You know who Henri Maillardet was?”

Finlay didn’t know, but pretended he did. “Oh aye. Henri. The French fellah.”

“The *Swiss* fellow. He was the greatest builder of automatons in his time. He made one that could draw pictures and write poems. Today it’s on show in the Philadelphia Science Museum.”

“But,” Paul interrupted, “if she’s priceless, if she was built for a sultan...how come she’s here?”

The clown sighed. “Hard times. People fall on them and objects do too. Even beautiful objects like her.”

The conversation ended then. The cheering and clapping Paul had heard while he was on the platform came from the big top, where the evening’s performance had reached its climax. Now, released from the top, children and parents flooded into the marquee and crowded the aisles between the machines. The spell of the metal woman, Sleeping Beauty, Henri Maillart’s automaton, was broken.

Paul said, “Maybe we should dander back?”

Finlay noticed something about the cylinder. He laughed and pointed to its gauge. Each of the gauge’s segments had a comment written on it. A few were disparaging – *Ice cold! You kiss like a fish! Ugh!* Others were more encouraging. Paul saw that the needle indicated a segment saying, *Hot stuff! Let’s go again!*

Finlay handed Paul the half-bottle for a celebratory swig. “Ye see that?” he chuckled. “Ye’re hot stuff!”

Paul took a bigger mouthful of whisky than he intended and nearly choked.

By the time they returned to the caravan park the bottle was empty. Finlay talked in a slurred voice about the incident in the marquee. “Hot stuff! It said ye were hot stuff!” Then he started singing a song by Robert Burns that they used to sing in primary school every January 25th, the date of Burns’ birthday:

“Ae fond kiss,
And then we sever,
Ae farewell,
Alas, forever!”

From a dark-windowed caravan a man bellowed, “Hey, bampot! Shut your gob!” Finlay tried to throw the bottle at the caravan, but Paul seized him and dragged him up the field to where their own caravan was.

Paul took a torch from his pocket before they clambered through the caravan-door. Inside, the torch-beam showed them the kitchen area—the sink, draining board and gas rings buried under mangled beer-cans, empty bottles, plates crusted with dried sauce and pans packed with white grease—and then the caravan’s central aisle, where the strip of floor was littered with more beer

cans, empty cigarette packets and squashed cigarette butts. Meanwhile, a smell like that of a very old, damp towel lurked everywhere.

Left and right of the aisle, beds had been folded down from the sidewalls. “Good night,” murmured Finlay and promptly toppled onto the empty half of one bed.

Paul and Finlay hadn’t had the resources to rent the caravan by themselves. It’d taken *six* of them to pool their money and pay for this seaside holiday. Sharing the caravan with them were Tommy, Dougie, Hector and Joe. The bed Finlay had fallen onto also contained a figure in a sleeping bag with a tangle of ginger hair protruding at one end – which identified the figure as Hector. Two more people in sleeping bags occupied the other bed, one broad and heavy, obviously Joe, the other either Tommy or Dougie. Loud, rasping snores filled the caravan.

A door at the end of the aisle led into a compartment with one more bed. Paul assumed half of that would be unoccupied and went to the door. He was about to turn its handle when nearby a voice hissed, “Hey! Dinnae go in there, man!”

His torch revealed Tommy’s face sticking out of another sleeping bag. “Dougie,” he explained, “came back wi a woman.”

“What? Dougie’s got a girl in there?” Paul leaned against the door. Sure enough, beyond it, he heard people grunting and a bed creaking.

“No,” said Tommy mysteriously. “A *woman*. He wis way too drunk tae notice the difference.”

“Where am I supposed tae sleep?”

Tommy’s head retreated inside his sleeping bag and his voice became muffled. “Guess ye’ll have tae kip on the floor.”

Cursing, Paul made a space on the floor by kicking aside some of the litter. Then he unrolled his own sleeping bag it and wriggled inside it without bothering to undress. The floor felt rock-hard and reeked of detergent, a smell as unpleasant as the old wet-towel one that permeated the caravan generally.

For a time he lay on his back and stared up into the darkness. The caravan park was on a hill overlooking the town and from their caravan’s seaward windows they could gaze down across the roofs to the esplanade, whose most prominent feature was a pier jutting out into the waves. At night, two red lights burned at the pier’s end as a warning to passing boats. Now the rays from those distant lights found their way through the windows and formed two red smears under the caravan’s roof. But were the lights really red? As Paul stared at them, they seemed to change color and become gold...

Her eyes had been gold. He felt they were suspended above him, watching him.

Finally, his own eyes shut and he fell asleep.

He was woken sometime later by the creak of a door. This was followed by several meandering footsteps and then a clatter and cry as someone stepped and slipped on an empty beer-can. A moment later a body landed on top of him.

In the darkness just above his head, a woman's voice asked, "Dougie? Are ye there, Dougie? I'm trying tae find the toilet." Breath acrid from booze and cigarettes wafted over him and a hand with sharp-trimmed fingernails touched his cheek. "Och, it *is* you, Dougie," blabbed the voice. "Where have ye been hiding? Here, laddie, gie us a snog."

A mouth clamped onto his and a sour-tasting tongue pushed between his lips. At the same instant, the caravan blazed with light – someone had turned on a big portable lamp Finlay had swiped from his dad's work-shed before coming on holiday. "What the fuck's the noise about?" complained a new voice – Hector's. "Folk are trying tae sleep here!"

Paul sat up and a woman recoiled from him until she banged against the edge of the bed behind her. "Here," she squawked, "ye're no Dougie! Where's Dougie?" Her face was slathered in make-up, though a few obstinate wrinkles stayed visible. Paul wondered how her bouffant hair could be so bright and blonde until he realised it was dyed. She wore only underpants and a tee-shirt with a picture of a cartoon mermaid and her eyes had a wild, swivelling look of someone who was extremely drunk.

Tommy was awake too. He said, "Dougie's in there, missus," and pointed through the doorway into the end compartment. Soft wheezing snores could be heard inside, the only snores in the caravan now. "Sounds like ye wore the poor guy out. Still. Ye've obviously found a replacement!"

Paul realised Tommy, Hector, Joe and Finlay were all leaning forward from their beds, enjoying the spectacle of him and the woman on the floor. "Aye," hooted Finlay, "ye cannae beat young Paul. He's hot stuff. I've seen him in action!"

The woman's lower face sagged and her mouth looked shapeless and sunken. She raised a hand to it and lamented, "Och, no! Help! Where's my teeth? They must ay come oot when I fell!"

The laughter in the caravan was deafening.

"Doon there, missus!" Tommy managed to say, between his guffaws, and pointed to a corner of the floor. The woman scooped up two things and stuffed them into her mouth. Her face was firmer when she looked at Paul again, but her newly-acquired teeth seemed as bright and unnatural as her bouffant. "Oh," she said in relief, "that's better! Now, which way's the bog?"

The four youths on the beds were in such convulsions of laughter that they hardly noticed when Paul scrambled out of his sleeping bag, snatched his shoes off the floor and vanished through the caravan door.

Outside, Paul leant against a fence and waited for the rage and embarrassment in him to subside. He grew aware of the night-time view before him—the criss-crossing lines of street-lights below the hill, the necklace of colored lights along the esplanade and the two warning lights at the distant corners of the pier. He stared at those two furthest-away lights until their color seemed to change from red to gold. He fancied they were eyes, returning his gaze...

He knew he had to see her again.

He walked back to Lagg's Head and found a scene different from the one earlier that evening. The fence had come down and the line of lorries, vans and trailers had dispersed. Many of the vehicles were now parked across the site, headlights piercing through the darkness, suspensions sinking low as things were loaded onto them. The big top's conical summit had disappeared and the canvas was being stripped from its sides. Some of the arcade tents were in the process of being dismantled and the rest had already gone.

Then he spotted a grove of poles that'd supported a marquee-tent and realized they marked the place where *she* had lain.

Paul entered the site. He wondered if he'd be accosted and accused of trespassing but the circus people were too busy to notice he wasn't one of them. Next to the frame of the marquee he found a parked lorry and he walked alongside it to the back-end of its trailer. A ramp slanted to the ground there, formed by a lowered tail-flap.

In the dark vault within the lorry, he made out the outline of something low and broad but not quite flat—a bed containing a body. He climbed the ramp, entered the lorry and went to the bed.

The rest of the interior was empty. Even the cylinder with the kiss-o-meter gauge had been removed. The lorry served as *her* transport alone.

Another vehicle's headlights flashed past and momentarily he saw her features: her fan of hair, her closed eyes, her slightly-parted lips that emitted no breath. Paul leaned over her and lowered his head. Again he was disconcerted when he felt her metallic coldness. But he was determined. This would be his *best* kiss.

While he kissed her, he sensed her stirring again—not just the eyelids rising, revealing the strange golden orbs underneath, but her body moving too under the decrepit eiderdown. He felt her arms emerge from the eiderdown's sides, searching for him, wanting to embrace him. He felt her mouth widen and reconfigure in an O-shape that matched the shape of his own. He felt her tongue probe between his lips.

The tongue had a similarly cold, metallic taste. Once it was inside his mouth, it *sprouted*. Half-a-dozen tiny hooks sprang from holes on the tongue's surface and embedded themselves in the tissue behind his lips. And immediately after that, almost before he felt pain, the metal tongue retreated. The hooks dragged his lips back into the woman's mouth, which had transformed again and become a wide gash across her face.

In agony now, Paul tried to wrench himself off her, not caring if the hooks tore bloody pieces from his lips. But her arms—robotic, solid, strong—had clamped themselves around his back and pinned him there.

He screamed. His lips had been dragged past the edges of her now-huge, now-terrifying mouth, so that the scream went down into her mechanical innards and nowhere else.

Then a blade behind her mouth guillotined down and Paul's lips were sundered from the front of his face. Her arms sprang open. Released, he sprawled across the bed, blood splattering from his ruined mouth and making fresh patches of colour on the faded scarlet eiderdown.

Later, he found himself lying on the trailer-floor beside the bed in a circle of light. The light came from a lantern, held by one of a half-dozen men who huddled around him.

Pain encased the lower part of his face. It was as if somebody had taken an iron bridle, heated it till it was red-hot and fastened it around him. He tried to speak but the sounds from his mutilated mouth were incoherent: "Eeeuuh! Eeeuuh! Eeeuuh!"

"Yes," said one of the men. "It's difficult. But you'll learn to speak again, *without* them." His voice had the now-familiar mispronunciations – 'difficult' as 'dithicult', 'speak' as 'steek', 'them' as 'then.'

Their white faces seemed luminous in the lantern-light. Another voice, which perhaps belonged to the old clown who'd been in the marquee, said, "You have to come with us. You can't stay here. Not looking the way you look now." A sympathetic note was just about audible in his contorted voice. "It isn't so bad. The circus people leave us alone. We travel with them, taking our arcade where they take their big top, but they aren't curious, they don't interfere. You see new places, new countries. And of course..." The note of sympathy gave way to a note of longing. "You're *always* with her."

Another clown mused, "The Sultan's daughter was said to be the most beautiful woman in the world..."

"That's why," said the old clown, "*she* was built. As a replica. As a *trap*. For the many foolish young men who wanted to creep into his daughter's bed-chamber, to kiss her, to defile her."

The lantern was placed on the floor and another clown – the one in the half-red, half-striped dungarees he'd seen at the esplanade – squatted down in the light. He held a tray. "Don't worry," the clown told him. "I'll soon fix you."

Paul stared at the clown and realized how thick the layer of white make-up was on his face. Its thickness helped conceal the fact that the face was missing a crucial feature. He also understood that the huge, red-edged crescent painted there, creating a fake smile, was meant to be a

distraction. It distracted attention from the real mouth inside the fake smile, which was itself unnaturally wide and smiling.

Then he studied the clown's tray. It bore a bottle of disinfectant, balls of cotton wool, a pin cushion with three long needles sticking from it and a spool of white thread.

The clown looked up at the surrounding figures and added with pride: "I've fixed *all* of them."

About Jim Mountfield

Jim Mountfield was born in Northern Ireland, was educated in Scotland and currently lives in Sri Lanka. His work has appeared, sometimes under pseudonyms, in *Aphelion*, *Blood Moon Rising*, *Death's Head Grin*, *The Dream Zone*, *Flashes in the Dark*, *Hellfire Crossroads*, *Hungur*, *Legend*, *Roadworks*, *Sorcerous Signals* and others.

He has written about Japan and Ethiopia for editions of the *Fodor's and Footprint* travel guidebooks. He has authored two non-fiction books about his local football teams in Scotland, and he blogs regularly at www.bloodandporridge.co.uk.



“Eternal” by Danilo Costa

POETRY

POETRY BY SARA TANTLINGER

HEART ROACHES

Keep the love ghost
nameless,
keep her haunting
tombs
like forgotten soldiers

Inside her palace body
I set tiny roaches free
infesting the pale
oval of her face
infesting my bloodstream

The roaches scatter inside
sick hearts, crunching
like pebbled death
beneath shadowed footsteps

Keep the love ghost
waiting,
keep her satiated,
lusting
for veins and lungs

The roaches steal my organs
carry blood away
stitch my ghost girl together
with the meat, tissue, muscle of me

I am the one who took
her silver moonlight life
in the first place,
I am the one who kept
her nameless in my cemetery

SOIL AND ASH

“I want to inhale you,”
he says,
then gives me back
to the earth

I am his compost, recycled
disintegrated
he plants soil over my ashes
grows a sapling
oak, I think

I grow,
upupup
and he breathes in
consumes me
forever his oxygen

I am not wasted
instead suspended
within the dust
of his dreams

eternally alive
renewed
saved from the world's filth
I am his nourishment

and forever I grow here
soil and ash

EPOCH OF ISLAND MIRAGES

the hourglass bursts
glass shreds skin
decorates sand with blood

somewhere there's a beach
white sand, clear water
not a muscle moves
away from that coast,
not a ghost haunts
those frozen beachgoers

because radiant sun sizzles
down, burns through
atmospheric time

shattered and jagged
hourglass pieces shove
shards down my throat
purge life away before

my expiration date,
decorate the sand with blood

not a muscle moves
away from that coast,
I disintegrate into the shore

About Sara Tantlinger

Sara Tantlinger resides outside of Pittsburgh on a hill in the woods. She is the author of *Love For Slaughter* and *The Devil's Dreamland: Poetry Inspired by H.H. Holmes*, both released with Strangehouse Books. She is a poetry editor for the Oddville Press, a graduate of Seton Hill's MFA program, a member of the SFPA, and an active member of the HWA. She embraces all things strange and can be found lurking in graveyards or on Twitter @SaraJane524 and at saratantlinger.com

POETRY BY DUSTY DAVIS

ALL THESE WORDS AND NOTHING TO SAY

All these words and nothing to say.
Why did you have to go away.
All these screams with no one to hear.
Why can't I just disappear.
All my secrets to be told.
I'll take them to my grave when I grow old.
All this pain growing inside.
Why did you have to run and hide.
All this love I have to give.
Why can't hearts mend, so I can live.
All this time with no one to share.
Why can't this damn world just be fair.
All these words and nothing to say.
Why can't these feelings for you just go away.

NEVER TO MEND

The pain I felt seeing you there.
Crushing the dreams that I thought we both had shared.
I remember praying for a joy that couldn't be.
A dream that you refused to see.
But hearts break and dreams come to an end.
In a world that breaks when it bends.
Never to mend.

LOOKING FOR A SIGN

Outside the thunder roars and the lightning races across the darkened sky.
So why do we still beg Him to show us a sign, when it's right in front of our eyes.
Life isn't that big of a mystery if we just open up our hearts and believe.
All of the answers are right there waiting to be conceived.
We spend our whole lives expecting a miracle to appear.
But we don't see it in the rain, the stars, and every single tear.
So why do we still look for a sign to show us that He is real.
When it's in our heart, our soul, and everything we feel.

THE MAN I COULDN'T SAVE

I pray for a man I couldn't save.
And weep above his nameless grave.
I can still see his face through my eyes.

And hear his haunted cries.
No one cared about this man because of the road he took.
So God finally closed his book.
He didn't want their pity or their force.
But still they showed no remorse.
I hated him don't you see.
The man I couldn't save....Was me.

About Dusty Davis

Dusty Davis is an author of poetry and fiction from East Liverpool, Ohio. When he is not working on a story, he can be found hanging out with his wife and two children. Dusty's work can be found at:

www.amazon.com/author/dustydavis

POETRY BY SALONI KAUL

BLUEPRINT & THE STARS ALL

He was deft, dramatic and determined.
His aim was the perfect drive
Molding physique and stamina,
Sheer genius and ability.
Blend of body and technique with style.

(On the one hand): Proper club size,
measured flight curve and tee angle.
Envision trajectory all the way
and take into account air resistance.
Study the surface structure diligently
and go about ball rotation pin-pointedly.

(On the other hand): Posture is crucial,
power is premeditated, astutely planned.
Yet that intuitive great gut haul
and drive technique is all his very own.

To each his swing, unique as fingerprint blueprint...

And the ball is lofted to where it has to go.
This one easily matching the speed of his car,
almost 300 km. / hour.
And it is all in the game!

COLD IN THEIR ENCLAVE

This time I hark after a distant sound
Dusting tall statuettes of gold.
I trace the song line to the edge of the mound
And sheer liquid gold gets sold.

I slowly chase the glinting staves
As their echoes recede.
I touch the statues one by one, meek slaves,
And in silence the acquiescing shadows all concede.

ALL IN GOOD USE

Lazy for long to hints obtuse,
Steeped in slush slippery lubricities ,

Idling away long days equally lax lethargic,
Clear of strict edgy disciplinary precision,

That self-indulgent languorous dreaminess,
Lacking both energy and enthusiasm to combat
The overwhelmingly oppressive stillness
Engulfing the world, clouds the horizons.

Then sudden like those unveiling of statues,
With eagle-eyed firmness, called for rigidity,
All that well-stored produce,
Still camphor-laden, unaired all, lack-lucidity,
Is put at once to use.

About Saloni Kaul

Saloni Kaul, author and poet, was first published at the age of ten and has been in print since on four continents. As critic and columnist, she has enjoyed forty-one years of being published. Her first volume, a fifty poem collection, was published in the USA in 2009. Subsequent volumes include *Universal One* and *Essentials All*.

Recent poetic productions have been published in *Misty Mountain Review*, *Mad Swirl* (her own poetry page), *The Penwood Review*, *Mantid Magazine*, *Haikuniverse*, *Blue Pepper*, *Sentinel Literary Quarterly*, *Cabildo Quarterly*, *AJI Magazine*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *River Poets Journal*, *Belle Rêve Literary Journal*, *Taj Mahal Review*, *Verbal Art*, *Poetry Pacific*, *Ink Sweat and Tears*, *Military Experience And The Arts* (As You Were: The Military Review), *Blueline*, *Indiana Voice Journal*, *OVI Magazine*, *FIVE:2:*, *One Journal* and *The City Poetry*. Upcoming publication acceptances include *The Penwood Review*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *OVI Magazine*, *Mad Swirl* and *The Imaginate Zine*.

POETRY BY MATHIAS JANSSON

NATTRAMN

It was a magic summer night
the sunlight would never disappear
I walked with easy steps
in the deep forest of Sweden

I was only an innocent child
a playful boy
with rosy cheeks
when suddenly I heard
a terrible scream
a scream that
shook marrow and bone

From the forest a shadow
a big black raven
on its way from west to east
flew low against me
his wing touched my cheek
I could feel the cold stroke
like a bony finger of ice
before I fainted away

When I woke
I felt stiff and tired
I could hear
my parents whispering
with fear
—Nattramn, Nattramn
the dark raven of the night
the ghost of a unborn child
has stolen his life
And my mom was crying
—His youth has been taken away
now he is old and dying.

THE CHURCH GRIM

Under the cornerstone sleeping
buried is the guard of the sacred
the church grim waiting
listening when the shadows falls

over the silent cemetery

A sound of broken glass
a glimpse of a flashlight searching
the secret guardian rises
shakes his fur full of dirt
stretches his old rigid bones
yawn with a terrible grin
seeks with eyes of burning hell
the one who disturbed his sleep

Bent over the church silver
a simple burglar at the altar
a terrible scream echoes
in the night
and walls are stained with blood
Christ looks down from his cross
at the black creature
chewing and eating
on a bloody flesh bag
once resembled a man.

HULDER

He saw a sneaking shadow in the forest
a shy creature only dressed
in moonlight and mist
with long blond hair
and tempting blue eyes

He foolish followed her
finally caught her
leaning her back
against an old oak

With desire he embraced
her nude firm body
and found a rotten tree
filled with crawling bugs
spiders and millipedes

Root and branches entangled him
ivory stretched its green fingers
deep down his throat
into his eyes and ears
paving the way

for thousands of insects
to invade his defenseless body

Years later they found his skeleton
pierced by a tree
in a great circle of oaks
entrapping her other victims.

About Mathias Jansson

Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and horror poet. He has been published in magazines as *The Horror Zine*, *Dark Eclipse*, *Schlock* and *The Sirens Call*. He has also contributed to over 100 different horror anthologies from publishers as *Horrificated Press*, *James Ward Kirk Fiction*, *Source Point Press*, *Thirteen Press*, and others.

You can find Mathias at
<http://mathiasjansson72.blogspot.se/>

POETRY BY JOHN SINEY

TIME MY ENEMY

Blue o'clock in the morning,
the sun had just passed seven,
demons fled from the dawning,
all was quiet in heaven.

Indigo, lapis lazuli,
the colors crept across the sky.

A clock chimed green,
suffused the scene,
the minutes marched in line.
The hour passed,
the time amassed,
the world was olivine.

Soft sages, jades, aquamarine,
Time's varied colors reconvene.

At twelve the sun did redden,
its hands crept on to thirteen,
clouds approaching were leaden,
my fate already foreseen.

Once crimson, rouge and cinnabar,
the hours now have gone too far.

Night grows so dark,
the world is stark,
minutes now are dying.
The demons come,
not all, but some,
and for my blood they're crying.

Tar-black and jet and ebony,
time has become my enemy.

SEATS IN HEAVEN

They're selling seats in heaven,
buy one get one free,
we thought we'd take advantage,

Aleister and me.

He said it was a bargain,
and I could but concur,
the offer seemed quite genuine,
they sold them at the fair.

We spilt the cost, we paid our fee,
then set off on our way,
an energy in every stride,
our spirits bright and gay.

Yet as we neared Paradise,
the way ahead descended.
But surely, no, this could not be,
the place we had intended.

A burning gate, a flaming sword,
a noxious baking heat,
a sulfurous stench assailing us,
the smell of roasting meat.

It only then occurred to me,
as I approached more slowly,
only then I thought to ask,
what heaven meant for Crowley.

WORMS

She had the general philosophy that young men who professed their love for her,
like poisonous creatures and wild beasts,
should be beaten over the head with a blunt instrument.

You say that you love me?
That your love is true?
How deep can that love be?
From someone like you?

Your love is so shallow,
and dull is your mind.
I hate to sound callow,
but death would be kind.

She beat him over the head with his own baseball bat,
buried him in the garden, where the worms fed on him.
She visited the worms every evening,

enjoying their industry.

You say that you love me,
but worms often do.
So how would that love be,
for me and for you?

You squirm in my fingers,
you writhe in my grip.
His memory lingers,
then slowly lets slip.

The worms welcomed her caress, enjoyed her titillation.
Like lovers they wrapped themselves around her fingers.

You say that you love me?
I think that you could,
but doubt that it would be,
a love that is good.

For if I was to love you,
how long would you stay,
before you return to,
your world of wet clay?

Until death, the worms promised.

About John Siney

John Siney is a fine art graduate from Liverpool UK. He now lives in Zamora, Spain. Previously, under the pseudonym Severin Rossetti, he published numerous works of an erotic nature, in the UK and the USA, with stories featured in anthologies edited by Maxim Jakubowski and Adam Nevill, among others. Now concentrating on the Horror/Weird Fiction genre, and writing under his own name, he is finding some success with stories published by *The Horror Zine*, *Schlock! Magazine* and *Infernal Ink*. Generally a fiction writer, the poems included in this edition of *The Horror Zine* are his first attempts at the medium.

You can find him at jsiney.com

POETRY BY FRED R. KANE

A PRODUCT OF COLLECTIVE SUBCONSCIOUS MANIFESTATION

Maybe it's the drugs.

A whole generation, for the most part, trippin' balls or sedated to near comatose.

Old aged drop outs: trailer and ghetto dwellers featured on real time cop shows,

void of drivers licences and auto registrations

(but well stocked with junk, meth, weed and prescription pain killers;)

riding wino scooters or lawn mowers to and from the local red dot.

Let's not forget the college kids who experimented with altered states,

and grew up to take their places on top the food chain:

the successful and damaged "superior" humanity.

Could be the drugs.

Probably aided by comic books, drive in flicks, and the rock n roll

of which our conservative parents warned us:

all that wonderful mind rot from those laid-to-waste days so revered

by us old ass delinquent and nerd kids alike.

You may take that as an ex-stoner's explanation

as to why UFO encounters are ever increasing,

not to mention Big Foot and Nessie sightings.

Vampires, ghosts and shape shifters are also getting a lot of attention as of late.

Drugs and severely fucked, but somewhat focused mass subconsciousness

could be responsible for giving form to, and making real

all the things that were once merely mist and smoke shows,

bedtime fairy tales, and ghost stories around the ol' campfire.

Bad drugs and not so good ideas

transforming matter by power of collective mind...

Now it seems there really are monsters under the beds of our kids.

I'll have to do some serious research to see if this hypophysis has any merit.

Something to keep in mind after I pry my kid's ankle loose

from this ugly red eyed bastard's green scaly fingers!

OF AND ABOVE HIGH LEVEL FAIRY TALES

"The giant stepped from the shade of the total eclipse.

He cast a long nuclear shadow.

The demons, goblins and pestilent witches fell by his hand..." Begins

the bedtime stories recited by the emperor.

His children, lulled to sleep, and dreaming of

the wealth gained from easy-come victories.

Remember that fairytale of the feral children?

The two dog sucking founders of Rome?
Maybe there's some truth in *that* image:
The human condition rendered,
emphasized by the graffiti carved in Hadrian's Wall.

Today, we see in the the rattle can runes on some steel/brick ruins that
children of the new underclass are writing their own grand narrative
in rebuttal to one created for their conditioning.

And they lived happily ever after?
Our inner children ask;
tucked in beds, blanket-safe, with a dim light on.
Nervous of the thing that lies beneath.

REACHING LENORE

She believed in the Christian afterlife. Still,
Lenore shrugged off eternal damnation
and took herself out. Oh, deed.
Pretty much the ending I would've envisioned:
dirt and flowers. Flowers. Dirt.
As the pen is to sword: inspiration for war,
so the needle to pen: the addict's statement.
Tracts and tracks.

She loved poetry.
From our time together, I guess it rubbed off:
an appreciation for old verse, and a belief in some kind of hereafter.
There was a time when I was indifferent to both.
It all changed one mourning.

From the radio,
distinct to my unfocused ear, came
an obsolete phrase intended only for me.
Cloaked in guitars, but present nonetheless:
"Felo-de-se!"
Her confession.
"Felo-de-se!"
An invitation from a ghost, reaching.
We should've left together.

Songs with secret lyrics, and hidden voices
recounting not the how, nor the where,
only the why;
suggest we be joined in perdition.
Ours, the same disease.

The same demons.
Always hidden, but not from the unfocused eye:
floral patterns on wallpaper—on sheets, reveal
the deformed scowling faces of infernal creatures.
Most disturbing:
the reappearing image of a twisted dragon.

Sedate,
at her funeral, my head was captured by flowers.

Now, I'm weary of living
with ghosts and demons.
In the winter dusk, with the main road looking white as fine china,
I'll reach her.
Gunning it, sticking throttle to damnation,
not every song carries her voice: this highway sings in a different pitch.
Not all found shapes
frown with evil intent.
The oncoming vehicle, why
it's got one hell of a grin!

About Fred R. Kane

Fred R Kane has lived in every east coast state from Maryland to Alabama. Finally settling in South Carolina where he now resides with his wife, and all the wildlife his back yard can attract. Fred prefers to write verse when he's not working or playing the blues on one of his many guitars. He especially loves to write dark satire and speculative poetry.

POETRY BY JON BENHAM

FADE

I patiently catastrophize
the boisterous morning that will follow.
A day, like today, mourning, in a tentative morning.
I knew they were there, but,
how much can they deny me sensation before they
clamor and destroy what is left inside?
An ego idealized by the being of passion.
Driven, to a harrowing morning.
Mourning.
Polish the idea that this is safe,
that this is meant to be.
Crumble into insanity at night.
Mourn the morning afterwards.
This is existence?
A mind incapable of compartmentalization.

INSUFFERABLE

Tarnished by energy getting mauled by time,
I conceptualize the sound of my breath.
Invincible, as it seems to the naked eye,
it subsides to the agony of what I hear.
Speeds quivering.
Silence.
Speeds quivering.
Silence.
Injustice, is when breath struggles
to find its innocuous provider.
Who are you running from?
My breath cuts short.
What is it that you fear?
We are all afraid, we are all afraid.
I find, justice is solidarity.
The punishment of trial and error.
The illusion,
being, which one are you?
Hide alone, feel disconnected.
Hide from yourself, be disconnected.
Return to the breath, as it begs,
for your admiration.
Your attention.

You tell yourself time after time,
run.
The people will just laugh,
but,
run.
They want to see ya dance, boy.
They want to see ya play, boy.
Your breath lies dormant.
You hope that it will remain that way
until eyes close and you can finally,
grasp,
an escape.
But, you always run.
Hide from them.
Hide from them.
What will they think when they
find you, though?
They will find you odd.
Odd.
You run.
They find you weak.
Weak.
You beg for mercy.
And they give it to you.
But, we must never forget,
who was the one who asked for it?
My breathing echoes in me.
I want to rip my skin off
and find
Its source.
All I find is endless.
So,
I run.
I am stuck in between the ceiling,
and the ground.

DRAMATIC

Not all thoughts are articulated
by endless deception.
But through these ideations
of sincerity, comes a depression.
A wizened mind gives way to
a lack of rapport with the one who hears,
the listener.
A perfect mirror, the speaker is always near,

asking,

“What side are you on?
What side are you on?”

Vexed by confusion,
the poor culprit of deception
is nothing but a bellicose invention.
What can it do but release dreary,
thoughts and ideas? The fear of seeing clearly.
The one who listens, must witness obsession
if they want to conquer their impaired
personality that lacks confession,
as it tries to ask,

“Whose side are you on?
Whose side are you on?”

About Jon Benham

Jon Benham is twenty-two and a writer, poet, musician and occasionally a painter. His work in all of these mediums are his attempt to provide a therapy for himself and hopefully a way to make people feel less alone.

POETRY BY SAMAEL APOLLOS

GHOST HUNTING

The air crackles with residuals
Damp, moonlit, permanent and cold
A nearby stream echoes yesterday's voices
The patient, the tragedy, the victim, the old
Shadows move, orbs of light dance and follow
Chills, scratches, hair-raising noises,
Only between two and four AM the electro magnetism peaks
The graveyard comes alive with the living trying to capture the essence of the dead.

MANIC MANIA

Over the moon yet full of rage
Flip between the two over a couple of days
It will be all right even though it's not
Splitting into two with one hemisphere always fighting to talk
Expressing love to her with adulations of hate
Adulations of love always arrive too late

DEATH

Fight, flight, or freeze
Either way you lose
Huff, puff, or wheeze
Either way you'll drop
Hate, love, or abstain
Either way you choose
Clarity, darkness, or haze
No matter how clear your sight
Vigorous, indolent, or malaise
No matter how you live
Joyful, vehemence, or apathetic
No matter how you express it
There will be a permanent goodnight

CORPSES

If there is only one
It won't be yours
If there are only two
What happened to your friends?
If there are only three

I'll be considering you next
If there are only four
You won't be special
If there are any more
I'll get bored

About Samael Apollos

Samael Apollos currently resides in Phoenix, Arizona in a zone separating the haves from the have nots. Samael was born at 4:25 am on 9/14/77 in Delafield, Wisconsin. Samael has a penchant for writing short stories and poetry about dark topics including crime, death, the afterlife, the occult, and pure evil.

Samael is a 6th Grade history and English teacher by day and an advisor for the unidentified.org (@deathclues on Instagram) by night where he advocates for missing persons families and investigates cases involving the unidentified dead. A book is in the works regarding one of Samael's pet cases.

When not writing or investigating you can find Samael enjoying whiskey, rock/metal, discussing the human experience, or hiking.

Reach out to him at samaelapollos@gmail.com

POETRY BY MARC CARVER

AVIARY

I walked to the big aviary in the park
you could hear the noise of all those beautiful birds from miles away.
I walked right up to them
then as if they all hold just one voice
they stopped singing and were perfectly quiet.
I don't know what they saw that so scared them
there was nobody else there but me
but they didn't make a sound.

SITTING ON THE DOCK OF THE BAY

I listened to Otis on the radio
yelled out the song as people came past
must have thought I was some kind of lunatic
but I did not care
the way I have always not cared
even when I was at rock bottom
some people do not get up
but day after day
up I get like the man off the cross
nothing can stop me

A SECRET

We are all fools
wandering around
doing things for no real reason
crashing off each other like snooker balls
hoping one day we may do something of brilliance
so everybody can say how great we are
only to realize
how unimportant it is to be recognized by others
even of greatness.
But on we go
trying to grasp onto that passing cloud
looking for something
trying to find something
but the secret is
it is never quite what we thought it to be.

ANGEL DANCING

The woman came up to me at the party
at which I did not have a ticket
She asked me who I was
asked if I was in insurance
no I could never do that I tell her
as I held her hand she said
you walk up and down here not talking to anybody
as if you were an angel.
And for a second I really thought it could be possible
she asked for her hand back shortly after that
then I started to dance and the night really took off

About Marc Carver

Marc Carver has published some ten collections of poems and performed around the world but his biggest fear is to sit in a room with poets and listen to them reading their poems.

POETRY BY RICHARD STEVENSON

EIGI EINHAMER

Certain men in Norway and Iceland
are said to be *Eigi Einhamer*
(not of one flesh).

i.e They can shape shift
or “ride” the totem animal
of their choice. Oh yeah!

Literally occupy the mind or will
of an animal, and assume
its strength, its point of view.

We’re way beyond lycanthropy
and werewolves here! Wolves, sure,
bats and rats, and sure as yer born,

owls, ravens, eagles—even yer pet beagle.
Assume that animal’s habits and quest.
They shed the white shirt and tie, Holmes.

Don’t necessarily get all furry—
One might just jump into another man’s
or woman’s soul and take control.

The only thing one can’t hide
in occupying some poor guy’s pia mater
is the person’s eyes, looking out.

See that person in the driver’s seat
and you’re half way to getting
the guy to assume ownership of his hide.

Is this tale to be taken literally?
Do these people literally change
into some other critter—all furry or not?

Or are they hallucinating from
Some fungal unguent—wolfbane
and mushroom body rub and rug fantasy?

Tonsured elders of some no-fun-

don't-drink-or-dance-prance-about-
in-boring-black-and-white-robos order or other

who just wanna have a night of fun. That's all.
When they get to hypnotising the rest of us
so we see fur where there ain't none,

then call the Ghostbusters
or start packing a pistil
with silver bullets, dude.

For now, let 'em think they're
in control. Riding whatever head houngan
says they're riding in herky-jerky moves.

They probably need to hop around
to get warm. Not like their Haitian
Voodoo bretheren greased down in Funkytown.

Think of the animal hides and feathers
as an extended toupeé. Hey, they're bald.
Like to dress up and be what they're not.

You don't need to have a problem with that.
Wear a hat or alligator shirt if you
aren't partial to paisley of fur. Be cool.

Hey, if they're for real real monsters,
give 'em a wide berth. Don't be up in their
muzzles like porcupine quills, Holmes.

It ain't healthy to be battin' anyone
across the snout with a copy of any book.
Get your jollies some other way.

PHATOM KANGAROO

Phantom kangaroo, phantom kangaroo—
Got roofied by some gray guys.
Now what am I gonna do?

Got beamed up off the outback;
got beamed down in a swamp.
Now what am I gonna do?

Now you see me; now you don't.

Dukes up, ready to box,
but who wants to fight a phantom?

I could box my way from here to Timbuctoo,
get a ride on a tramp steamer
heading for the south seas.

I'm on my knees—
when I can find 'em,
but these grays'll make a ghost of me.

Ghost of me, ghost of me...
These grays'll make
a ghost of me...

About Richard Stevenson

Richard Stevenson recently retired from a thirty-year gig teaching English and Creative Writing for Lethbridge College. He has published 31 books, the most recent of which are a long poem sequence, *Rock, Scissors, Paper: The Clifford Olson Murders* (Dreaming Big Publications, USA, 2016) and a collection of haikai poems and sequences, *A Gaggle of Geese* (Alba Publishing, UK, 2017). Other poems have appeared in or been accepted for future issues of *Aphelion*, *New Myths*, *Polar Borealis*, *Star*Line* and other magazines and anthologies, and were featured in a previous issue of *The Horror Zine*.

POETRY BY CLAIRE FEILD

MAHOGANY

My dining room table is not that dark as a
damsel can see her attractive face in its
entrails.

As the wind becomes brusque, it sends its
flow to the girl who catches herself
on one of the knobs the table has
so she will not fall downstairs.

Because of the magnitude of the wind the
conjurer sends, other maids recede
to the basement of the house where
they are forced to drink an elixir to
relieve their pain.

Most spit up the therapy and suffer through
this pith as they walk through the
basement's garage that leads to the
outside.

They run as if they are in the Boston
Marathon and descend onto their beds,
fearing that the witch will find them
and modify their appearance.

But she is long gone to another village to
cause havoc to as much of its
cryptic population as she can.

Confused by the witch's return, they
plant her in their rich soil to see
what will happen.

Because she grows so tall, she turns over
and dies a peculiar death.

HOST

Although Lemanda had an independent
streak as peculiar as a diagonal, some thought
she was moving toward the norm to fit the

personality she had worn with the carefree nature of a baby's bootie.

Since Lemanda was too agreeable, a foreign entity as sneaky as a bacterial thread had to be crawling through her system.

When her once lovely brown face resembled a hairy coconut shell, the ciphony she transmitted made her closest enemies think they had won, and they had beat her down, for the immaculate society they had formulated fit over her like a purple hood, their disease as wicked as crown gall, Lemanda haven been taken hostage by the plants she had worshiped since childhood, the ones turned cancerous in the pliable hands of the contingent in power.

DELPHIAN

He lives in the cryptic weeds where no one can see him plan his evil deeds.

His shape varies so that he can slither into small crevices and on top of large mountains where the houses are.

Enigmatic, he cannot be seen by those going about their regular duties and habits.

He slips into homes and moves objects from place-to-place to mystify the owners.

On a darker side, he sets the homes on fire the way he set paper on fire when he was younger.

When some die in these fires, he cackles like the eldest man in town.

Since no one can see him, he will be
prophetic to the creatures
he teaches and then will rip
them to pieces.

Manic, he lives to destroy.

About Claire Feild

Claire T. Feild has had 428 poems and seven creative nonfiction stories accepted for publication in 134 different print journals and anthologies such as *The Tulane Review*; *Freshwater*; *Ghostlight*; *Alabama Views and Words*; *The Muse*; *Spillway*; *Poeming Pigeons*; *Jelly Bucket*; *The Carolina Quarterly*; *Slipstream Press*; *The Horror Zine Magazine*; *The Path: A Literary Magazine*; *Cake*; and *Literature Today* (Volume 5). Her first poetry book is *Mississippi Delta Women in Prism*. Her next poetry collection is *Southern Women: The 1950s*. Her third poetry collection is *Indigo Blues* (Origami Poetry Project). Her first nonfiction book is *A Delta Vigil: Yazoo City, Mississippi, the 1950s*. Her second nonfiction book is *Mississippi Delta Memories*.

POETRY BY DANIEL DE CULLA

FROM BEGINNING TO END

From beginning to end
is explained absolutely everything worth knowing
about absolutely nothing.

Why not?

We felt that the Beginning is a true leaf
Of the immortal literature
as a side of bacon changing the pig
discovering the best way to keep its legend alive
encouraging mythology
and the controversy about it.

Sun will have its tide spreading over our maps

Moon remembering us when we are gone

And West will sing everything waiting

For birth, death

Inside this den of us.

Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter

Coming with feelings of love, radiance

quiet and delight

As ever.

WE ARE ALL ALIKE

Crossing the street

I'm just celebrating

The feline sense of "Like."

How do you like me?

I like bananas more than slices of watermelon.

And I really feel like...

And yet I induced it like...

That is like.

What is she like?

The like as me.

With my own words to receive

To touch, to perceive:

Baby is likely to live; Old is likely to die.

**You have eyes like stars
And the face like an ass.
I'm going to divorce you
For that;
Like father, like son.**

NIGHT MUSIC THAT DOES NOT SHUT UP

**With good or bad music comes Night
When the Sun is below the horizon.
Black cloak as clerical cassock
Is covering the city**

**On their roofs of houses and blocks
Referring to Mozart's music
To Straus waltzes
To rock or rap.**

**The Moon flies over the clouds
With its head peeled and a scarf around its neck.
Little by little, Night is singing its music
That does not shut up**

**In harmony or melody of sounds
Or both combined
And, when it's quiet, butterflies leave the clouds
And come towards the light to burn their wings**

**Introducing more or less deeply
In the lovers' bedroom
With vain talk, stories, gossip
Where one organ enters the parts of another**

**Adhering to its surface
Like the cat at the snout—very thin
The long tail
And the gray hairs of the mouse.**

Mischief, traps, perfidies

**Coronate musical notes
From a nocturnal dream that soon begins.
Stigmas, infamous notes, like Bingo's cards
Are coming out of a sack, from a stanza
Or of any other similar deposit.**

**Tokens, balls or any other similar objects
With the names of the people
That they have to leave with luck.**

**Later, to the point, Dream
With its adoring, gentle serenade
Between handfuls of cotton
Jumps without rhyme or reason
In corners and between sheets**

**When networks are building
For unsuspecting flies to produce sounds
On string instruments, wind instruments
Percussion, keys, and so on
That makes them boast of themselves
Making march to the melodious Night
At its dawn
With music elsewhere.**

About Daniel de Culla

Daniel de Culla is a writer, poet, and photographer. He's a member of the Spanish Writers Association, Earthly Writers International Caucus, Poets of the World, (IA) International Authors, Surrealism Art, and others. He is the Director of Gallo Tricolor Review and Robespierre Review. He participated in many Festivals of Poetry, and Theater in Madrid, Burgos, Berlin, Minden, Hannover and Genève. He has been exhibited in many galleries from Madrid, Burgos, London, and Amsterdam. He is moving between North Hollywood, Madrid and Burgos.

**You can email Daniel at:
gallotricolor@yahoo.com**

POETRY BY JOHN GREY

THE OLD BOOKSTORE

Nothing like an old bookstore
with its narrow, dark aisles,
cobwebs dripping from the ceiling.
Every book cover
is one touch away
from puffing up a cloud of dust.
Each yellowing page
festers with insect larvae.
A volume of Thackeray
is so stained, so crinkled,
so wretched-looking,
it's more suited to grimoire
than great literature.
And next to it is a book,
so ancient, so rooted to its shelf,
I swear it cries out as I take it down,
squeals when I open it.
It's a book of spells.
And, on the very first page,
the heading is,
"How to turn a man into a book."
The price is only a dollar,
person included.

OCCUPANCY

I am lived in
no matter where I live.
My tenant is
the old man who passed away
from hunger
or the woman who was
battered to death
by a drunken boyfriend.

I sometimes feel so weak
I could collapse any moment now.
Or I'm taking blows
to every part of my body.
and I'm bleeding everything
but real blood.

I fasten the windows.
lock the doors at night,
but I keep more in
than I ever keep out.
There's the junkie
who shot himself up
into oblivion.
I can sense a syringe
being jabbed into my arm.
And the boy who hung himself.
My neck burns
from an invisible rope.

It's not as if
I give these people a good home.
I'm just the bad one
where they've always lived.

WE MUST NOT LET THIS BE

The villagers are pounding on the door.
They're carrying torches,
brandishing axes, swords, spikes
and various other weapons.
This is not a social call.

Time to seal the coffins,
padlock the lab,
tie down the woman in the attic,
drug the lug in the bedroom
getting itchy from the full moon.

If the townsfolk have their way,
They'll decapitate the vampires,
set the monster ablaze,
send the crazy lady off to an asylum
plug the werewolf with silver bullets.

Sure it will make the village safe.
But think of the effect on our readers.

About John Grey

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently he has been published in the *Homestead Review*, *Poetry East* and *Columbia Review* with work upcoming in *The Roanoke Review*, *The Hawaii Review* and *North Dakota Quarterly*.



“Moonman” by Mark Noy

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Front cover: Not chosen yet

Bio needed.

Hubert Spala

Hubert Spala lives in Poland. He is an illustrator with a deep love of the eldritch, creating monsters and dark fantasy worlds with every bit of his free time. He is currently working at NetEnt, a European leader in online casino slot games.

He is developing two projects: Dr. Finkelstein Killer Bots Catalogue, in which he draws and collects various designs of robotic minions for self-respecting villains, and Mythos Monstronomicon, an encyclopedic tome with black and white illustrations of various Lovecraftian Mythos gods, monsters and beings, all with proper text to go with them.

You can see more of Hubert's artwork at:
<https://www.deviantart.com/hubertspala/>

Francis Hicks

Francis Hicks was born in Dublin Ireland in 1985, raised in Galway until 1997 and Belfast until 1999, moved to Dublin in 2004 where he studied Animation and got his Bachelors Degree, currently residing in Letterkenny since 2008.

He took to art at a young age and was inspired by both horror and fantasy sources. He always held a fascination for mythology and folklore, especially Irish tales of the strange monsters said to be lurking in every corner of the Island and in the matte paintings of the films of the 70s and 80s.

You can find Francis Hicks here:
<https://www.deviantart.com/misterhix/gallery/>

Blake Lavergne

Blake Lavergne is a self-taught artist originally from Louisiana and currently residing in California. He creates mixed media for Dark Surrealism using any tool or supply that he can get his hands on. He painstakingly uses innovative and cross hatching techniques to transmute the idea in his head onto canvas through the alchemy that is hard work.

Blake's subject matter is focusing on contemplation of the human condition and death while expressing the struggle of grasping the vastness of the outward universe. He tries to simultaneously cope with the inner universe that is our imagination and his art is overall used as an overall catharsis for mental illness. He truly believes he would not be alive if it were not for his

creations.

Blake is also a published writer with several of his poems being published in a collection of poems for Sarah Lawrence College in New York.

He is publishing his first book of art and poetry entitled “Exorcism of a Poet” with Janet Fitch, author of *White Oleander*. In writing the foreword for his book, Ms. Fitch said, “Enjoyed these drawings, the graphic quality, the mood, and the sense of your hand.”

Blake’s art was recently displayed in the Haven Gallery “Enchanted Forrest” exhibit in San Diego and in many other established art galleries.

Red Tweny

Red Tweny was born in Rome in 1964. He graduated in 1984 at the Mary Mount College in Rome. His pedagogic method, characterized by a humanistic philosophy of religion, gave a prominent role to the “spiritual nourishment” of creativity. His artistic talent was revealed early, encouraged by his mother who sent him to drawing lessons from an illustrator, within the same college.

He began to attend many collective exhibitions in Rome in search of new subjects in the Italian figuration. In 1985, helped by his artistic talents, Red began to work in advertising department of Eni, the Italian energy company, where during all the 90s he had the chance to know and work closely with the main advertising international agencies that influenced him, producing a style that mixed the direct advertising graphics style and the elements of classical and the surreal painting. In the 90s he uses also the technique of watercolor, then in 2000 he choose the black ink which helps to make his style and his subjects instantly recognizable.

His drawings are characterized by an exaggerated and mesmerizing use of black ink. His subjects produce a strong impressionist impact and are immediately recognizable among others. The meanings are not hidden but are brought out with simplicity and immediacy, without useless elements. His images are centered on lonely characters that writhe, tangled and dissolve in a vain attempt to give meaning to their existence.

Exclusive use of black and white gives a more edgy character to his subjects that are often suspended in the white space which seems to have been taken off the air. The feeling of lack of air increases the tension of the bodies gasping and convulsing in the empty space that supports them. The works of Red Tweny makes us realize the good with the bad, as it happens every day. It reminds us the continuous conflict and compromise that humans must manage throughout its existence.

You can see more of his work at:

<http://redtweny.deviantart.com/>

Mark Noy

Mark Noy is a Dutch artist living near the historical city of Nijmegen. He draws fantastical landscapes and scenery, usually with themes of medieval fantasy and nature. He uses a dip pen and ink, or a tablet and Photoshop to make interesting fantasy worlds.

He is mostly inspired by the world around him, but a lot of inspiration also comes from games that focus a lot on worldbuilding and atmosphere. From bright and colorful games like Rayman, to dark and moody games like Dark Souls. Games can make you travel to imaginary worlds and interact with them in a unique way. A theme that is persistent in most of his drawings is the combination of realism and fantasy. It can be hard to imagine a world that is purely fantastical, and drawing purely realistic scenes can be a bit dull. So taking a realistic world and making it a bit strange and twisted is very interesting.

What he likes most about drawing is that you can communicate things that are difficult to put into words. A picture can give you complex feelings just by looking at it. That is why he loves it when he can inspire others to do something creative, or at least make them travel to another world for a while.

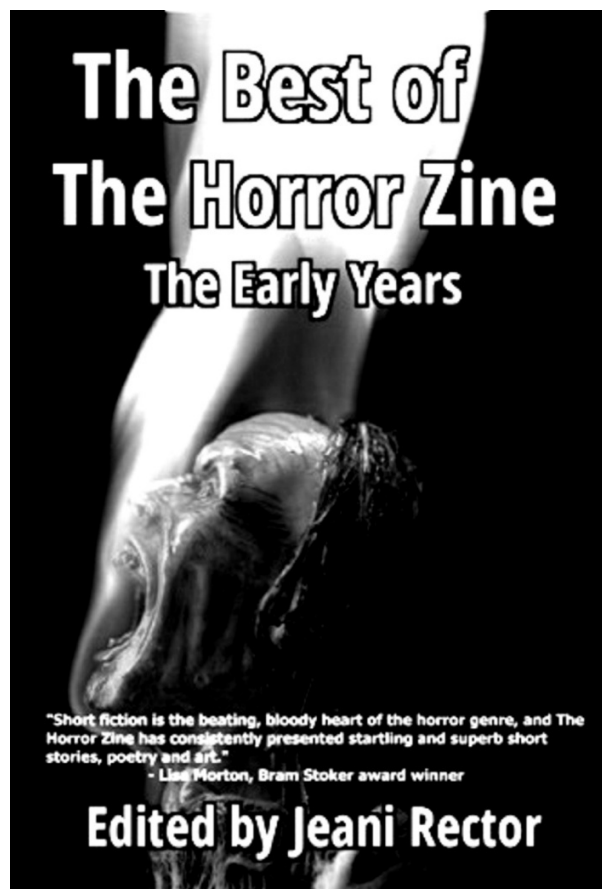
You can see more from him here:
<https://m88dragonfire.deviantart.com/>

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