

Typetthouse

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Harder Than We'll Ever Know

W. Jack Savage



Call for Submissions

Typehouse is a writer-run, literary magazine based out of Portland, Oregon. We publish non-fiction, genre fiction, literary fiction, poetry and visual art. We are always looking for well-crafted, previously unpublished, writing that seeks to capture an awareness of the human predicament. If you are interested in submitting fiction, poetry, or visual art, email your submission as an attachment or within the body of the email along with a short bio to: typehouse@peoples-ink.com

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Life in the Fast Lane, by Shannon Cavanaugh

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Dani Nicole has been writing since she could read, creating stories about everything from bunny rabbits to boyfriends. After graduating from UT Austin, Dani realized her dreams of becoming a writer hadn't faded away with the imaginary friends from her childhood. She is currently working on a young adult fantasy novel titled Moonstruck and actively participates in several writing groups, often sharing (or not sharing) a stack of pancakes with people who love words as much as she does. To see more of her work visit <http://www.daninicoleauthor.com>.

Blood On The Bayou

Dani Nicole


Gigi hangs a mirror on her front door to keep away the Devil. She says he'd be too transfixed with his own reflection to come barging in stealing souls. That translates to her complete disregard for locking the doors and keeping a shotgun nearby.

"The Devil is your enemy, Lela, not men."

At twenty-nine, I can tell my grandmother that I've seen plenty of foes come around the bayou in the form of sweet-talkin' men, but never any damn Devil. Regardless, she still polishes her mirror every night and whispers old Cajun poems.

*The Devil will die with swamplands in sight,
When he catches his reflection,
He will stare and won't move nowhere,
When the angels come teach him a lesson.*

I'd like to say I'm not living with my grandmother, that I'm off in some big city instead of Boudreaux, Louisiana, population three old women and 75 gators, but truth is the job market's tough as hell and Grandma's got dementia. One time I caught her putting butter on her alarm clock to make it stop buzzing. I smiled at her and gently told her the clock was on a low-fat diet and if she'd please be more considerate.



But consequently, since I can't seem to find a man to put a rock on my finger and populate the earth with little brunette babies, she's the only family I've got.

So I moved into her dinky little cabin on the bayou. I suppose it ain't *all* bad. The moonlight reflects off the swamp, and it's kinda pretty in a Suckville, Louisiana, kind of way. We rock in our rocking chairs on the patio and sip on sweet tea. She tells me about her French ancestors and recites French poetry. She forgets the words and accidentally says glass instead of green, but I don't hold it against her.

"Hey, Gigi, what's that?"

She pauses after "pamplemousse." "Hm?"

"Out there in the trees."

She turns to look at the trees draping the swamp. Just barely in sight, there's a little animal, maybe a dog, staring across the water.

"C'est Ragarou, ma cheri."

"Who or what is Ragarou?"

"A werewolf."

I roll my eyes. "Oh great, just a werewolf. Here I was thinking it was some ferocious dog or coyote or something. But just a werewolf. Whew." I wipe my brow emphatically.

"Not to worry, Lela, I set traps for Ragarou."

"What kind of traps?"

"I put blood out."

"I'm sorry, when were you going to tell me you turned into an axe murderer?"

"Human blood lures Ragarou out—turns him human again. I told you, Lela, man is not the enemy."

"Right, the Devil."



"It's chicken blood."

I lean back in my rocking chair and shake the ice in my jar. "You want some more tea?"

She smiles at me, a yes.

I take the mason jars inside and open the fridge, illuminating a narrow sliver of the kitchen. I grab the sweet tea as my eyes scan the weird stuff Gigi has stocked up. Pickled beets. Kombucha.
Disgusting.

I turn to pour the sweet tea into the mason jars and freeze. There, standing in the electric glow of Gigi's kitchen appliance, is the dog I just saw across the swamp.

Ragarou.

"What the blazing hell?"

The dog stares. His eyes are yellow and his fur is so dark I don't know how I saw it across the swamp.

"Get out of here," I scream. The dog doesn't flinch. His fur is long and prickly; he's different than any dog I've seen. He just sits. Stares.

"Scram!"

"What's going on in there, Lela?" Gigi calls from outside.


"Nothing. Just filling up the ice trays."

The answer seems to satisfy her. I stare at the dog. "I don't know what you're looking at me like that for. You hungry or something? I've got pickled beets."

The dog's lips move like he's trying to smile.

"I'm sure there's something for you. I still like my first idea better, though. How 'bout you scram?" I shoo him with my hands.

The dog picks up his rear, turns, and walks out the wide-open front door.



"I'm buying you a deadbolt and a shotgun." I say to Gigi, handing her a jar.

"Mhm, with what money?"

"I'll strike it rich somehow, just you see."

"I once knew a rich man."

"I'm sure, Gigi," I say, dismissing the beginning of a surely confused and somewhat fictional story.
Butter on the alarm clock.

"I met him on the bayou. He was very good-looking. Perhaps you will meet a man on the bayou."

"So far, just werewolves and gators."

She gives me that look she always gave me when I talked in church. "He was a strange man."

"The rich ones are."

"He was a salesman of sorts. Knocked on my mom's cabin when she was ill. Asked if I was the only one home."

"Sounds like a bona fide creeper, Gigi."

"I told him so. Told him I didn't like the looks of no stranger coming 'round at dusk asking a pretty lady if she was home alone."

I smile at Gigi's spunk.


"He assured me it was nothing of the wrong sort. Said he specialized in a specific kind of sales."

"Cocaine?"

Gigi chuckles. "He said he could smell the illness in my home."

"Smell?"

Gigi nods. "He said he could sense that whoever was there needed help."



"Let me guess, he had just what you needed?"

"He opened up a traveling bag full of vials and herbs. Medicine unlike any I had seen. He asked if he could see the person who was ill."

"You didn't."

"I did, Lela, I was desperate. He stood over my mother's bed and rested a hand on her arm. He pulled out a vial of something pink and told me the power was not in the medicine—it was in the person who administered it. He said I had to have faith that it would work, or it wouldn't."

"Like a self-fulfilling prophecy?" I ask.

"Of sorts. I turned to him and said, 'How do I know it will work, huh?' He said it would if I believed it would, and it wouldn't if I didn't."

"Well, that sounds cryptic as hell."

"Stop saying 'hell,'" Gigi scolds. "Anyway, he had me at a stalemate. I guess I couldn't do anything but try, right? But when I asked him how much he wanted for the medicine, he told me he didn't accept money."

"This story is on a one-way path to BAD IDEA," I say.


Gigi goes on, "He told me he would show me what he meant if I followed him to the woods."

"Seriously, Gigi?"

"Remember, I was desperate. He took me to the edge of the swamp, just beneath the moonlight, and said he'd show me something I'd never seen. Perhaps I'd only dreamed about.

"And there beneath the moonlight, he held still—perfectly rigid—like he wasn't even breathing anymore. In fact, I thought about seeing if he was. Thought about calling the doctor who just left my mom to get some sleep.

"But then the medicine man started moving. More like shuddering. Things started happening I couldn't explain. Coarse, black hair prickled up on his arms. His nose turned into a snout, and his teeth turned canine. He shrank until he landed on all fours and shivered. His fingers curled under into paws—and a tail, long and wagging to and fro, shot out behind him. I stood staring at him,



bewildered.”

I roll my eyes at Gigi’s imagination.

“He told me his name was Ragarou, through canine teeth. Said he wanted a wife to break his curse, to keep him in control of his changes.”

“Wait, he proposed to you?”

“He offered me all the money in the world and a lifetime of happiness.”

“Well damn, Gigi, why didn’t you marry him?”

“He just stood there on all fours. Tail. Paws. Fur. I told him I thought he’d lost his damn mind.”

“So you just told him no?”

“Oh, I told him no,” Gigi says. “And he went running. Didn’t want me to have the medicine or nothing. Momma died five days later with a fever.”

“Why didn’t you just marry him? You could have saved your momma.”

“I’m telling you, I would have done anything but marry that man. You should have seen him. As much as I wanted momma to live, death comes for us all, and it was her turn to leave the bayou. I wasn’t about to waste my life on a mad medicine man beast to disrupt the order of things.”

I lean back in my chair and look up at Orion’s Belt in the sky. “That’s a good story, Gigi.”

“It’s not just a story, Lela.”

“Mhm.”

“They say there’s nothing like a woman scorned, but I’m telling you there ain’t nothing like a Ragarou rejected.”

That makes me chuckle. “Well, serves him right, creeping on a pretty woman at night and turning into a mutt. Did he expect you to swoon?”

“The Devil bargains, Lela, he doesn’t seduce.”



I sit up in my rocking chair. "You think he's the Devil? Ragarou?"

"I know he was evil." She stands up and straightens her dress. "That's enough for tonight. I'm going inside, Lela."

"Goodnight."

She kisses my cheek and hobbles toward the bayou.

"Gigi, the house is that way," I say, pointing behind me.

"I know, I know," she says, turning to walk through the doorway.

I rest silently under the stars and close my eyes, letting the still, stagnant air clear my head. My mind is racing with images of Ragarou and medicine vials. Of what it would have been like if Gigi had married the medicine man. Not that I believe any of her story is true.

Someone clears his throat.

My eyes shoot open as my heart accelerates. "Who's there?" I say, looking around, panic-stricken.

I hear the scraping noise again, and a dark figure emerges from the edge of the swamp. It hops onto the deck and stops in front of me—a dark, canine figure.

"Did you just clear your throat?" I ask the dog. Then I berate myself for asking a dog anything.

He stares at me with his yellow eyes. "Lela, is it?"


The dog's snout doesn't move, but his voice is clear. I look around again, searching for the speaker. But we're alone.

"Ragarou?" I ask, barely audible.

The animal smiles. "Nice to meet you, dear one."

"What the—"

"Blazing hell? I know. You've already said that."



Ragarou circles the deck. "I have a proposition for you, Lela."

I feign confidence, but inside everything that ever made sense in my life is crumbling, exposing the reality that I'm talking to a dog. "What makes you think I wanna listen?"

"I am not a tame wolf." He snarls. "And I wouldn't hesitate to shred any trespasser on my bayou."

"What kind of wolf are you, then?"

He stops circling and sits on his rear. "I am not here to talk about me. I am here to talk about your grandma, Gigi is it?"

I sit up straight. "Now you leave Gigi alone."

"I certainly wish I could. But you don't know the end of that story, the one, I believe, she just told you."

"You were listening?"

"Of course." He smiles. "Who do you think she was telling the story to?"

A shiver rolls up my spine, despite the sticky, humid air.

He hops down a step closer to the bayou. "If I were you, I'd come with me."

"There ain't a damn chance in hell I'd go anywhere with you, wolf man."

"You are just like your grandmother, and just as ignorant."


I tighten my fists.

"You have no power over me, Lela. I could kill you in seconds."

"You wouldn't get away with it."

Ragarou smiles, "Oh, wouldn't I?"

I hesitate as Ragarou hops into the Bayou. He wades through the shallow bank and walks along



the edge, toward the draping trees. He moves swifter than any animal I've seen, and though his threat could be empty, I do not miss the way the moonlight shines off his deadly-sharp teeth.

"Wait," I call out. "I'm comin'."

Ragarou takes me farther into the woods than I've ever been. The insects chirp up a symphony, and I bat at the mosquitos circling my head. He stops at a pile of rocks rooted in the ground forming a circle.

"This is where I transform every night, under the moonlight."

"Looks cozy," I say, trying to hide the tremor in my voice.

"The rocks are immobile. They are glued to the earth by a powerful spell."

He gestures for me to try one of the rocks. I kick it with my foot, but my shoe just skids off the flat, smooth surface.

"Alright, so you have a lifelong crop circle. What's this got to do with me?"

"You're the only one who can move that rock and break my spell."

"You're not smart, are you? You just saw me try to kick it."

He growls. "You used your flesh, not your blood."

"There you go, talking about blood. You sure you and Gigi aren't on the same team of insane?"

"Gigi and I are not together."

"That's right, she shot you down."

Ragarou growls, revealing sharp teeth. "You have the blood of the one who cast this spell."

My skin prickles at the way he says *blood* again, with hungry, feral eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Your great grandmother, the one who was dying, she's the one who turned me. Now one of the daughters in her bloodline has to turn me back by marrying me. The marital bond breaks the curse."



“What makes you think I’m going to help you?”

He smiles. “You want out as much as I do. I may be the one trapped in a wolf’s body, but you’re the one trapped in a cabin on the bayou. Break my curse, and I’ll take you anywhere you want to go. I’ll build you a house, or we can be nomads. You can buy anything you’ll need with my money.”

I can’t help but laugh at the ridiculousness of his words.

Ragarou growls and pounces on me, knocking me back. He stands on my chest with his teeth inches from my face. “Marry me, or I will kill you, Lela.”

“Not . . . such . . . a gentleman, are you?” I say, trying to push him off me.

“You’re not the only daughter of the bloodline. I still have Gigi.”

“Gigi won’t marry you.”

“She will if I show up with her dying granddaughter. She won’t have a choice but to buy my medicine to save you.”

I know he’s right. Gigi would do anything to save me, even if it meant tying herself to a man she thought was the Devil.


I try to fight Ragarou, pushing against his body weight. We struggle with each other until I roll him over. He quickly stands and launches himself at me again. We fall into the center of the rocks as his teeth bite into my arm. Blood streams down my skin, onto the dirt.

Ragarou stops moving. He is rigid on my chest, his claws sinking into my stomach. I try to push him, but I am frozen too. I feel a jolt and I am launched out of the circle, where I fall on the ground and hit my head against a tree root.

Ragarou shudders in the center of the circle. I hear footsteps and the crunch of leaves as I try to fight the blurry veil closing over my eyes.

Then someone is shaking me. I look up at gray hair wound into a bun.

“Gigi?”



"Lela, get up."

She helps me stand and presses a cloth into my arm. I look at the circle of rocks and find a very attractive man standing there, frozen.

"Ragarou has transformed. Your blood has brought him from his wolf form," Gigi says.

"Why can't he move?"

She smiles. "Because I tricked him."

"I'm not following."

She walks over to Ragarou and looks into the man's eyes. He doesn't move. "When he threatened to kill me many years ago, I told him tasting my blood would freeze him, making him easy to kill. But I didn't tell him my mother cast this protection on you as well, Lela. Our whole bloodline is safe from Ragarou.

"The chicken blood I set out was a trick. It turns him human but it won't freeze him. When he tested it, I'm sure he thought you were safe to bite."

There is venom in Gigi's words and fire in her eyes. "No one gets away with munching on my granddaughter."

My sweet-tea-drinking grandmother is standing a foot from a man she is desperate to kill.

"You can't kill him, Gigi," I plead.

"Why not, Lela?"


"You just can't. He's human."

She spits on the ground. "He's the Devil in human skin."

"There has to be another way."

Gigi looks from Ragarou to me, back to Ragarou. "Okay, Lela. I won't kill the beast."

She steps into the rock circle with Ragarou and starts chanting in old French. Her words are hard



to translate, but it sounds like:

*The Devil will chase but will not find,
A Cajun woman to be his bride,
Cursed to ask but not receive,
Forever hunting his reprieve.*

Ragarou shifts into a wolf again and is released from his hold. He skitters off into the woods without so much as a goodbye.

“What did you do, Gigi?”

She smiles and rests a hand on my shoulder.

“I turned down the Devil.”

Carol Shillibeer is a writer, but she also takes pictures, makes sound files, reads tarot, edits poetry manuscripts and teaches workshops. Her publication list is at <http://carolshillibeer.com>.

a little light magic


Carol Shillibeer

Cluster like figs along a trunk
leave room for the gall wasps to edge by with their wings fully spread
—we need them to light the fruit
—they need the fruit to go from lone stinger
to the marrying kind, and if truth were told,
we too need the sweet orange light
(out of ficus flesh we climb)
in fact, we need them all. Who else would agree to hold our stories?

There's light everywhere; we realize that don't we?
Too low for our eyes in many places, so we call it darkness
—wasp eyes see sideways of ours,
—this is perhaps why they colonize
the inside of translucence. Imagine the world an orange
glimmer. The transcendence that would describe.

In the cafe, hot in the stone square, in the centre of the village,
there is a paper lantern hanging from a twisted iron hook.
The paper is yellowing with food and tobacco lifting up
as it does into the evening.

A dark paper wing, the bird body a long-necked winger
—an ibis perhaps, certainly without a stinger.
Bird body a deeper yellow than the paper buckling it to the pendant
iron, the light inside, falling forever onto the tables and stone



flagging, human hands lifting dried figs and cups of sweet Turkish coffee
—hands that transport winged shadows, stir with meaning.

To bring wasps to table, to honour the stories they harbour,
all it would take is to—in fingers—twist paper (or the strands
of swooping light). If we did that
—in that illuminated space—tabled figs would come alive
with light, and we could finally understand it
—what wasps have magic wrought in worlds
too dim for beings with our poor eyes.

origins

Carol Shillibeer

*Brutal as a tombstone*¹, this daughter's origins,
their lithic character,
in the stone faces of various regions' petroglyphs;
her nature crystallizes in the shifting storms of 1792².

The English and mobile Jews, Romany women
casting river stones,
the Interior Salish in the final years of their salmon-river summer-homes,
the explorers³, and the as-yet-undiscovered,
all of them with their blades
—from these *I rise stubbornly*, still undefined.

That year⁴ was wet, but the stones remained hard,
their carved faces,
wings, memorial dates and 18th century graffiti marking
in meadows, on river banks, crossroads and tradeways,
impressing on time and matter, from England to Sp'q'n'i
dreams & desires, the dead⁵ and yet-to-be-living.


¹ The quotes in italics are from Rosario Castellanos.

² In May of 1792 George Vancouver's ship "Discovery" gets laid on its side by low tide, and in his spinning ire, he names the place Useless Bay.

³ John Shillibeer, born this year, would later sail on the HMS Briton, and as an artist would draw Patuki with his war club. They would, together, undergo a ritual name exchange.

⁴ By the end of berry season, Vancouver visited the Tsa Kwa Luten, a Salish group living on a cliff above Cape Mudge. V and the TKL got along famously. However, the TKL's northern neighbors, the Lekwiltok, had been readying their new guns and their old war canoes. The TKL were shortly to receive a visit, and as a result, move south.

⁵ The French introduced the guillotine to its first use. It was so successful that its last use wasn't until 1977.




But this is all nothing, the underbelly of history.
What matters: the sea otter skins
were still heaving upon ships running fast to China,
horses had finally reached the last of the tribes,
with iron kettles, knives;
the salmonberry bloomed
a little later than it does today.
This is what matters.
This daughter, her origins 222⁶ years into their beginning,
cradling the small stone⁷, the sharp knife⁸
sun-napping amongst the Asteraceae⁹ of Useless Bay.

⁶ 2014-1792=222. (poem written, by accident, in 2014) The aunties would not have said that the number sequence 2-2-2 meant I was *on the right* track (online numerological analysis). If they'd talked about it all, and not just given the twitch-lip stare, they'd have talked about that much history being lots of responsibility.

⁷ Origins: latest incarnation, ~60 million years ago

⁸ Origins: blade, ore smelted before the year of my birth (how long is still unknown); the antler (discarded) which became the handle, mule deer, birth and death dates unknown.

⁹ Specifically, *Symphyotrichum chilense* (Nees) G.L. Nesom var. *chilense* aka *aster chilensis* aka Pacific aster. Origins: evolution of Asteraceae family 42-36 million years ago. Growth form: rhizomatous. Lifespan: moderate.



bee concerto, 2nd movement

Carol Shillibeer

inside the drop of water
a warm winter evening swims
—warm enough that the future can be smelled
in the yellow breeze trembling liquid skins


just tender enough that the bees wing out of the preceding year;
on its promise, the bee balm springs,
floral doors jitter open on the dot of 4 minutes to gone,
orange tongued & welcome, pheromones take on sonata's form.

but the women who dressed
last year's vegetable beds
couldn't be turned from their slumbers
& so the soprano's recapitulation could not be umber hung.

nevertheless, the winged tenors, the blue blow
of the still tender-petaled baritones,
& the coloured pistils of the contraltos—
between them, tissue-thin sheets of time ripened harmony's exposition.

& we, audience to the low-toned concerto
here at the coffee shop, espresso outside in limpid winter,
at tables clustered with spoons,
elbows and knees poke holes in thin-skinned air;

we carry on mumbling.
unbeknownst to our nimbling intentions,
hands signalling building exposition,
muffin crumbs wing lively in the air



then fall. Wet-winged sparrows
from the wings, these hurried sopranos
in an under-table shuffle bend their feet
with ours to bee-buzz singing.

Kristen Abate, originally from small-town Idaho, currently resides in Singapore where she teaches a children's reading program, writes for a local review magazine, and feeds her wanderlust by traveling South East Asia. Her writing has recently been published by Sand Hill Review and [wherever] magazine.


The Orphan Cleopatra

Kristen Abate

Millie missed the last month of second grade because her mother had convinced herself she could get rich by selling t-shirts. She told Millie she had no time to drive her to the elementary school in town, help her with arithmetic, or make her dinner. Instead, her mother spent her time buying a thousand packs of Hanes 100% cotton shirts, three to a pack, and screen-printing old airplane paintings and Bible verses on them. When the school called, Millie heard her mother tell them she had tuberculosis.

On the last day of June, her mother packed all the t-shirts into the trunk of the 1997 Toyota Corolla with chipped maroon paint and no taillights. Millie crawled into the back seat without instruction. When they got to Maryland's annual Ocean City Airshow two hours later, her mother cursed as she maneuvered the heavy t-shirt boxes through grass pathways. Her graying blond bangs became laced with sweat and her cheap mascara began to bleed. Their booth stood out in the maze of white cabanas for the simple fact that nothing about it was eye-catching—no shiny sign, no fancy shelves, no name brands, no music, no staff, no cash register—just a long wooden collapsible table covered by two white table cloths from the dollar store, folded t-shirts, Millie, and her mother, whose eyes were wide with mania.

Millie sat on the dusty grass inside the confines of the tent, wondering when she would get to go home, where her mother's craziness wasn't so obvious. She ached for the time when her mother would once again comb her hair after her bath, read her *Little House on the Prairie* and make her chicken casserole for dinner—those few days of happiness before she would crawl into the dark cave of her room and cry for weeks.



Millie felt sick. She was thirsty and needed to eat. Her mother said she had to sell three t-shirts before she could spend money on lunch. Airshow goers funneled through the market pathways, wasting time before the aerial show. The wrinkles in her mother's face burrowed themselves deeper as every passerby rejected her invitation to look at the t-shirts with tight smiles and slight nods. Her mother's smile faded as she looked around to see men with their wives and girlfriends stopping to look at airplane video games, pilots and owners congratulating each other on their awards, and the line thirty people deep to look at Ray Ban sunglasses.

"Millie!" Her mother grabbed her arm and pulled up her to stand. "Honey, we're not making any money and we have to sell something. Here—put this on and go tell people in the crowd to come look at Mommy's stuff," she said pushing a large t-shirt into Millie's hands.

"But Mom, I can't—"


"Millie, please. Just do what I say, and I'll buy you a Dairy Queen later."

Millie's hands trembled when she stepped outside her mother's rented tent space and began to wander amongst the packed crowd. She wiped her tears with the back of her hand and tried to walk straight as people shuffled around, pushing to get through the mass. The grownups towered above her and whenever she tried to draw attention to her shirt, no one took notice of her soft voice. She kept her head down and wandered until she was out of the crowd. When she finally looked up she was at the gates of the park. She stared at the chain link fence and the openings where people flowed in and out of the airport. After a moment, she slipped through the opening and out onto the main road.

A glowing red sign in the parking lot of a grocery store read ninety-nine degrees. The stiff t-shirt clung to the sweat of Millie's back and the rough cotton scratched across her shoulder blades. She thought she might die of heat under its heaviness. Millie tore it off and left it in a bush beside the gates to continue on in her faded daisy-print tank top.

The straight road steamed in the sun for a mile before it seemed to simply disappear into the sea. Millie watched the intoxicating blue expanse of ocean sparkle before her. Sunlight prickled on her arms and streamed through her eyelashes and left a prism on the window of a nearby Starbucks. The trees blustered in the wind, stirring up stagnant, thick summer air. Millie felt specs of dirt catch on her sweaty skin. She trudged on towards the oasis. The street was busy, but most of the cars were on the other side, heading toward the airshow.

Millie inhaled and the air tasted of sweat and sea. A tan convertible pulled to the curb near her. Millie looked over to see a woman with shiny lip-gloss and a wicker sun hat over her brown waves.



“Where are you going all by yourself, sweetie?” she called from her car. The boy in the back seat who looked about Millie’s age had a gleaming blue sand bucket and green plastic shovel on his lap. His eyes were wide with embarrassment.

“Home. It’s not very far from here.”

“Well, this is a pretty busy street. How about I give you a ride to your house?” The woman smiled and waved her hand to motion Millie into her car.

“No, I’m almost there. My dad says to never ride with strangers,” Millie said.

Then the light turned green, and the convertible sped off.

When Millie finally reached the glittering beach, her mouth tasted like dirt. She searched out the couple of dollar bills that had slipped from her mother’s back pocket this morning when she was unloading boxes.

Millie walked into Roy’s Beachside Store, and turned left down the first aisle. If anyone asked her why she was there alone she would say her mother was tanning on the beach and sent her to buy them some drinks. She picked a root beer from the case and turned to walk to the front of the store.

“Hey,” a voice whispered from behind a revolving rack of “Greetings from Maryland” post cards. Millie peered around the rack and found the boy from the back of the lady’s car staring at her.

“Um, hi,” she said.

“You told my mom you were going home.”

“I lied.”

“Do your parents let you come to the beach alone?” he asked, still whispering.

“Yes. Well, kind of. I don’t have parents. And I live at the beach,” Millie said, crossing her arms over her chest and raising her chin.

“Don’t have parents? Like you’re an orphan?”



Millie rolled her eyes and muttered, "No, not like I'm an orphan."

"I'm Brian," he said seriously.

"I'm Cleopatra."

"Your name is Cleopatra?"

"Yes," Millie said, her face grave.

"That's a weird name."

"It's Egyptian."

"Oh."

Millie's eyes jumped to the door as a singsong chime announced the entrance of six teenage girls in bikinis. The storeowner told them to put their shirts on or they wouldn't be served.

Millie looked back to the boy, whose eyes had not strayed from her face. Millie hadn't had anyone to play with since the last time she went to school. "Well," Millie said, "do you want to see where I live?"

"Um. My mom was going to buy me ice cream. And I was going to make a sand castle."


"Oh, come on, don't you go to the beach every day?" Millie grabbed Brian's hand and pulled him toward the front door of the shop.

Brian resisted, saying he needed to tell his mom, but Millie was strong and she pulled him outside without Brian's mother or the storekeeper noticing, thanks to the playful whining of the six teenage girls who were putting on their clothes.

"Stealing is bad," Brian said, pointing to the bottle of Root beer in Millie's hand.

"I own that shop, it's not stealing."

Brian stared at Millie, his eyebrows tucked together like he was equating a particularly difficult subtraction problem. "I have to tell my mom."



"No!" Millie whispered. She turned and ran into the line of trees that separated concrete from sand, her flip-flops spraying earth behind her. Brian didn't follow her immediately, but soon he was next to her, breathing hard from his desperate scramble to catch up to her.

They ran for a long time, always staying under the cover of the stubby trees and bushes. The beach and the glittery ocean were to the right of them, and mansions to the left of them. Millie convinced herself she lived in one of those fancy houses. She stopped suddenly and put her hands on her knees to catch her breath. Brian almost fell trying not to run into her. He looked back in surprise and she started giggling, laughing harder and harder until Brian was laughing with her and they had to gasp to catch their breath.

She pulled her bottle of root beer out from where it had been tucked into her shorts. After taking a big swig, she handed the bottle to Brian. She thought of her mother, at the airshow by herself. She knew her mother wasn't thinking of her, wondering in the crowd all alone.


Millie reached for the bottle in Brian's hands. "I'm hot. Let's get in the water."

"My mom said to never get in the ocean without her watching."

"Do you always do what your mother tells you?" Millie asked, as she led the way out of the shade, onto the beach, and then up onto a mountain of rocks where the beach ended. Brian fell twice and scratched his palms before they reached a pool of water nestled into the rocks. Mussels clung to the sides of the tube, the sunlight lighting up their shells. Millie dropped herself down to the side of it, took her flip-flops off, and dipped her feet into the cool water. It tingled at first, but the freeze felt delicious on her skin. She knew not to go in the ocean without anyone watching. Brian followed, and let his legs hang down into the pool. They watched the waves batter the rock wall in front of them, ocean mist chilling their skin, the crashing sound so loud they could barely hear each other talk. Millie felt much better being in the open air, with the mist spraying on her face and the sea laid out for miles before her.

Millie felt Brian looking at her. She knew her pink tank top with the big daisy on it was dirty and her wavy hair was stringy and her sparkly nail polish was chipped. He told her she didn't look Egyptian. She told him she looked like her mother, and her father was the Egyptian one. She told him her ancestors lived in palaces and that her great-great-great-great-times-a-thousand-grandmother was probably the real Cleopatra. Brian nodded slowly.

He asked what happened to her parents. Millie opened her mouth, but she couldn't think of a single lie, so she was honest. "I don't like to talk about it," she said.



"There's things I don't like to talk about too."

"Like what?"

Brian's eyes dropped to the water. Millie waited while he toyed with a rock and dropped it down into the pool. "Like that when my dad goes away to the Army, my mom leaves after she puts me to bed at night. And when she comes home she brings someone with her. I never see them, but I can hear." Millie didn't exactly know what Brian meant, but the pain in his face made her sad. "Nobody knows," he said after a moment.

Again she thought of her own mother—the way she cried after she had been up for days, writing furiously with big black magic markers on newspapers when she should have been cooking dinner. Millie always stroked her hair until the tears stopped and she finally slept.

"Come, I'll show you where I live," she said.

She pulled her legs out of the water, and slid her wrinkly toes into her flip-flops and grasped his hand to lead him.

"It's this way," she said, motioning toward the rising boulders behind the pool. They trekked across the stone pathway and into a chamber in the rock wall. They stumbled over wet pebbles for twenty feet, and then she pointed to a pool nestled in the bottom of the cave.

"When the tide goes out, that passage way is empty and it leads to my house," Millie said. Brian's mouth dropped open and he peered down at the pool.

"Wow. What does it look like in there?"


"It looks like a normal house. It has walls and rooms and great big, pretty lights."

"Cool," Brian said. "When can we go in?"

Millie shrugged. "I dunno, when the tide goes out. Do you wanna play a game?"

"Sure, what game?"

"Let's pretend we're in love, and let's get married, and we can have a sail boat and go on adventures." Millie waved her arms around, imagining the world come to life. Brian laughed and agreed. She thought that he must have forgotten girls have cooties.



So they got married on the beach, but they didn't kiss, or even pretend to kiss. They said I love you, but only one of them meant it. They built a sail boat to go on adventures—two humps of sand formed like benches for them to sit on, with an oval shaped trough providing the sides of the boat. They drew a map, and plotted routes. On their maiden voyage they sailed to an island with a castle. It was called Root Island, and the king there was very mean, so they had to sneak around.

Millie and Brian went to the house nearest them on the beach, one that had no people playing or lounging in front of it. Brian and Millie sat in the cool shade on the side of the castle, drinking wine, because that's what explorers drank, and squirted each other with the hose and muffled their laughter with their muddy hands, in case the king was at home in his castle. They didn't want to be caught.

When they wandered back to the beach to set sail to another island, the aerobatics show started at the airshow. Fighter jets screamed from above, and Millie could feel her bones vibrating. She squinted against the sun, as the planes circled above the airstrip, turning, weaving, and flipping. They left trails of white behind them, and Millie wondered if her mother was even watching.

Millie looked at Brian, with his head thrown back to the sky and his mouth gaping open with a huge smile. She wanted to look like that all the time. She grinned and looked up again, letting the big expanse of the heavens and the men in planes soaring through it take hold of her thoughts.


When it was over, they returned to the rocks, now a deserted pirate ship they had found on their second voyage. They tiptoed near the perimeter of the rocks, but when Brian got too close to the edge, Millie grabbed his hand and pulled him back. "Watch out! There's a shark in the water!" she shrieked. Brian stepped back and pretended to shoot it, and then they ran to the cave. They picked up funny shaped rocks and declared they had found cups and plates, left by the pirates. Brian found a blue rock that didn't look like the others and gave it to Millie.

"I found you a jewel!" he told her. She gazed at it, thanked him, and slid it in her pocket. "Hey, Cleopatra! The tunnel is open—let's go!" Brian said from the back of the cave. He started to lower himself down into the thin chamber.

Millie tried to protest. "No, Brian. We—we have to get back to the boat."

"No, I want to see it," Brian said, dropping down further.

"Brian!" a shrill, new voice echoed in the cave. Brian and Millie turned to see his mother stumbling towards them. Their mouths dropped open, and Millie's heart pounded. Brian's mother dropped to



her knees in front of Brian and pulled him to her. She started mumbling some incoherent demands and pleads and laments, as her tears poured in a heavy steam to her chin. Brian looked at Millie over his mom's shoulder. Millie hid her face in her hands, pressing her palms against the hot tears pooling around her eyes.

A police officer with breath that smelled of sour milk and coffee asked her what her name was, but Millie refused to take her face from her hands to answer. She didn't want Brian to know she wasn't Cleopatra. She heard him tell his mom that he wanted to play with her again. They were supposed to go to Africa and then find Atlantis. He didn't understand this would be the last time he saw her, but Millie knew—she had not yet learned to lie to herself.

She kept her head down, her eyes shut, tears squeezing out of the lids. Her mother would do the same when Millie finally returned to the booth where not one t-shirt had been sold, while the police looked on and wrongly assumed Joan Cane's tears had something to do with her daughter's seven-hour disappearance.

Neal DeRidder is an architect and writer in New York City. He gets his kicks writing Flash Fiction and also has a science fiction novel in the works. He serves as part-time sherpa for his photographer wife and on weekends can often be found on Manhattan street corners staring into the distance clutching a lens cap.

The Apprentice

Neal DeRidder


Raffi spun the valve open and a stream of Theedle bugs raced toward the Master's neck. So many times Raffi thought the old man would die, his frail body unable to finish one more story. But he never did, maybe he never would. He was the most respected elder in the Ecrivain Guild and his stories grew more popular every cycle. Raffi hated him.

The thick red liquid reached the fitting in Master Evantre's flesh, trapped air screeched out of the relief valve and the bugs slammed home. Master screamed in pain, his head snapped back violently and his back crackled into a rigid arc of ancient bones. He trembled and shivered, his nails dug into the palm of his hand and blood dripped down the stylus and onto the parchment scroll.

Master Evantre was the first Ecrivain Raffi had ever seen. Mother had allowed Raffi to attend the guild fete for the first time that year. She had stopped begging him to choose Farseeing or Smithing - anything but Writing, and had even sewed his apprentice cap herself. The man had seemed ancient and powerful. Crowds of citizens and desperate, masterless apprentices followed him through the fete, touching his colorful robes and slipping their hands beneath his leather armor to thrill his flesh and find his favor. Master had brushed them off and strode regally onto the center stage.

Dragons had been popular that year and Master's tales of devious dragons with hypnotic eyes and women's breasts were read more than any other story in the history of the guild. The story he was writing now would be even better.

Raffi swiped at the blood on Master's jerking hand. He had to keep the blood from mixing with the



ink and ruining the text. He knew that he was pushing the old man, but he kept the valve wide open. The Theedle bugs raced through Master's imagination, illuminating and obscuring, opening doors from eons ago and releasing ancient secrets. The stylus in Master's hand raced across the page, Raffi turned the crank at the side of the altar and iron gears pulled fresh paper into the path of the Ecrитай Master's crazed pen.

The Master's hand froze and Raffi heard him wheeze, "Stop... Stop... No more..." Raffi dropped the crank, the scroll stopped and Master slumped forward. Theedle bugs dripped from the leaking valve onto the scroll and disappeared in a wriggling puff of smoke. Raffi closed the valve and walked behind the Master and began to read. He wept at the strength of the words, the power of the story. Words like these could make Raffi a god. The guild would beg him to sit at the head of the Elder's Congress. He would be the youngest writer ever to find such success at his debut fete.

Raffi pulled the tubing from the injection port of the ordinator, switched it to the extraction port and turned it on. At the writing desk the Master rocked gently back and forth as the pump clanged and spun, removing blood laden with Theedle bugs. Raffi reached above the altar and unclipped the tube from the keg suspended there. He wiped the dried blood from the mouth of the tube and connected it to a second fitting on Master's neck. Opening another valve, he watched his own blood begin to flow into the old man. Apprentices were chosen for blood type as much as they were for their aptitude. Raffi couldn't remember how many kegs of blood he had donated to the old man over the years, it must have been enough to fill the bastard twelvefold.

Turn the scroll, spill his blood, feed the Theedles, tend the Master's flesh. Raffi couldn't do it anymore. Every cycle the old man promised to give him his chance at the writing altar and every year he said it wasn't the right time.

Raffi reached up to the keg and closed the valve. He pressed his lips hard against the Master's ear and whispered, "You have written a masterpiece. Generations to come will cherish this tale, boys will read it and become men, women will read it and fall in love."

The Master finally understood, but he was too weak to fight. "Raffi, no. I love you. Don't do this." The extraction pumps slowed but continued their work. Raffi grabbed the man's neck and pushed his head back to look into his eyes. "You love the story, that's all you ever loved." Raffi held him there until the life slipped from his eyes. He carried the Master's lifeless body to the sleeping cot in the corner, laid him on his back, folded his hands upon his chest and kissed him gently on the forehead. The apprenticeship had ended.

Two-time Pushcart Prize and Kentucky Poet Laureate nominee, **Sheri L. Wright** is the author of six books of poetry, including the most recent, *The Feast of Erasure*. Wright's visual work has appeared in numerous journals, including *Blood Orange Review*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Blood Lotus Journal* and *Subliminal Interiors*. In 2012, Ms. Wright was a contributor to the Sister Cities Project *Lvlds: Creatively Linking Leeds and Louisville*. Her photography has been shown across the Ohio Valley region and abroad. Currently, she is working on her first documentary film, *Tracking Fire*.



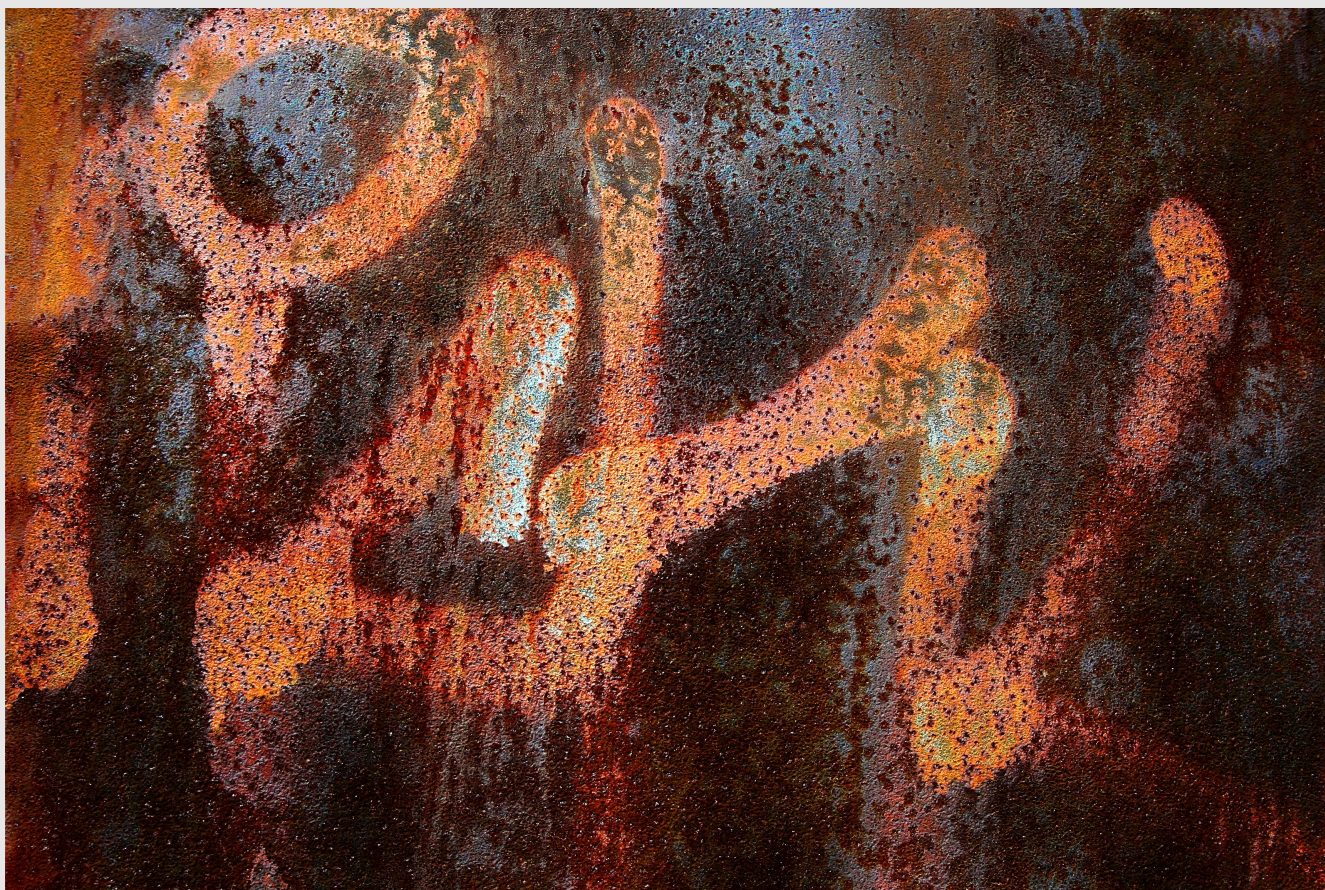
Riveting Down Colors

Sheri L. Wright



Three Eyes
Sheri L. Wright

What is aged or overlooked can often be a source of beauty, if approached from a different perspective, one from a desire to find stories. Ms. Wright seeks out visual tales that lay hidden among rust, abandoned places and the unique. She feels that characters develop only through weathering, that the patina of rust emotes stories and that textures are like words on the page we can feel through our eyes.



Fire Talk
Sheri L. Wright



Light Reading

Sheri L. Wright

Jeff Burt has published short stories in Thrice Fiction, Mobius: A Journal for Social Change, Star 82 Review, and The Write Room, and won the 2011 SuRaa short fiction award. He enjoys the aroma of a freshly sharpened #2 pencil and the sound a ripe plum makes when it plops on soft soil.

Mama Hari Dass


Jeff Burt

What I remember most is the scratching of the pencil on the paper, like a rat's claws searching in the wall, the blue jays jeering overhead like I was some kind of criminal, the cushioned sound of every step on the ground of the redwood forest, her pale tap on the patio glass door as if a timid child.

I lived in Bonny Doon in the Santa Cruz Mountains, renting out the master bedroom of a house occupied by a Lockheed engineer who worked on Star Wars missile guidance systems and his two young children. I had privileges to the kitchen and to the garage for storage. However, the greatest privilege was listening to my landlord groan, moan, and thump on Friday nights with his lover when his kids had gone away for the weekend with his former wife.

Behind me across the grassless dirt, peeking around the gigantic girth of redwoods, lived Maureen, a frail young woman in her twenties who wore flowing solid-color thin cotton dresses and never spoke a word. She often appeared like a pane of glass reverberating and about to break. When we would pass, I would say hello and ask about her, and she would quickly produce a small, white pad of paper and a knife-shaven red pencil and scrawl an answer. She smiled constantly, so much so that it irritated me, led me to think she was mentally deficient in some way. I have never liked the baring of teeth, and she displayed her choppers continuously. My landlord told me that she had taken a vow of silence, like a nun, only she followed Baba Hari Dass.

Conversations with Maureen traveled slowly, from my voice to her ear, from her ear to her fingers to the pencil grating against the paper and occasionally stopping to graze at the corners waiting for the right word to migrate down her neck and arm into her fingertips. She had a great knack for the



elliptical. I would ask what she had been doing, and she would write, “thoughts on paper.” I would say the jays squawk loudly, and she would write, “glad you are hearing better,” pause, then write, “why did you disturb them so?”

We even took to writing to each other on her scratch paper rather than speaking, Maureen’s way of elongating the two minutes of conversation to ten, each response hesitated as if it were a small winged craft at an airshow intentionally stalling and diving before pulling up at the last second to the roar of the crowd.

She sold flowers on the Pacific Garden Mall, though she wrote on that little pad that people gave her donations and she gave them flowers. No matter the size of the donation, people received a half-dozen flowers. Once, I had watched her and her group work through passersby on the pavement, and it was a mild deceit. The group did not hustle, did not impede foot traffic, but they did persist. Both of us knew the truth.


Living in a tiny room in a retired woman’s enormous house, she looked like a silent mouse in a mansion. Six days a week a white Econoline van pulled in and she would appear from out the side door of what had been a gardening room, and disappear inside the van with another five or six frail but smiling women to sell flowers. All through the end of summer and fall and into early winter, every morning before I left for work the tires of the van almost silently rolled on the redwood carpet and Maureen hopped out of her doorway and hopped in another.

Between Christmas and New Year’s Day, I did not see Maureen. The van would come, keep running, a young woman would come out of the back door of the van, leave it open, leave a hot bowl of something on a windowsill, rap a few times on the window, come back smiling, close the van door, and then, nothing. Nothing. Maureen did not come out. The bowl stayed put. Occasionally a jay would investigate. Overnight, the bowl would disappear.

For the first time, I worried about a neighbor. I did not plan the next step, simply found myself loudly knocking on the door to her small space.

“Maureen? Maureen? This is your neighbor. Maureen? Maureen?” I grew louder, like movie music intended to induce an emotion. Finally, the knocking and the pleading produced her.

She had thinned, going from bony and gaunt to emaciated, yellow, cheeks sallow, and it seemed as she tried to smile that her teeth no longer fit her mouth. She slouched and appeared to be hanging from the doorpost. She could not stand to write, though she had her pad and pencil out, the pad held just under her chin and the pencil poised by her nose. I reached to steady her, and was startled by her boniness. What we call flesh—muscle, sinew, skin, and fat—was missing. Her



bones felt hot, like wood rescued from an open fire. I brought her to a thin, rickety wood chair.

I do not remember the conversation, mostly because I talked and she pantomimed, with her fingers repeatedly forming O and K, until I finally put her hands down and said no.

“You are not okay,” I repeated every time she formed the O and K.

We went through several repetitions and finally I simply turned my back to her and hunted through the armoire in the single room for food. There was none. Many, many herbal teas and mason jars had a label with a child’s writing with a malady in bold Sharpie pen on the masking tape—fever, anxiety, sniffles, constipation. I laughed at the last one, not believing that she could ever be constipated on a diet of air.

She turned submissive. I found the faded number of her mother on her calendar, went back to my room, and called.

I returned with my car, lifted her like a pillow, and took her to urgent care. Maureen did not sign anything, kept her hands folded on her lap, hardly made an audible breath. It was as near as I had come to someone near death.


When he came from the ICU, the doctor said she was fevered, dehydrated and malnourished. They had her on a sugar IV, a painkiller, and a new pencil, which she wrote with instantly, and apparently, judging by the notes in the doctor’s hand, constantly.

When her mother came, all order, all recovery, broke loose. Maureen, it turned out, disliked her mother, and vice versa. Maureen’s new finger formations included an extended middle finger and a five-fingered wall of interference stretched to her mother’s face. I had never witnessed anything but the mildest animation from Maureen, and was left with the idea that she had become demented from the flu.

A few days later, Maureen’s mother came back and placed Maureen’s belongings in the trunk of her car. They did not take up half of the space. Since I lived with few possessions myself, when her mother called it the look of poverty, she could have been talking about me as well. Maureen’s mother said she was driving to the hospital to pick up her daughter and they were going home.

Maureen was gone, and for twenty-three years I would not think of her again.

#



My wife and I were in San Francisco for a night of theater and an urban walkabout, when I noticed three cheery women laughing and pushing each other back and forth at a bus stop. Perhaps I looked because the voices were so different, one almost a manly baritone, one a normal though singsong alto, but the last, the last voice--the third woman had tremolo in her speech, a wavering vibrato in the long vowels, the extended words, a tremolo cast in a high soprano. The words beckoned an echo from me, as when a chickadee sings and you find yourself saying "chickadee" two or three times after the bird tweets.

She saw me, and smiled. I knew that smile, but could not place the face.

"Howdy, neighbor," she spoke, and smiled revealing the entirety of her teeth.

Then I knew. "Maureen," I said, in a half-confident voice.

"Yes," she answered loudly.

"You speak."

"I always could."

I corrected myself. "This is the first time I have heard you speak."

We shared introductions, that awkward crisscrossing of names and hands that eliminates distance but enforces the lack of memory of names.

"What made you break your silence?"


"I was never silent. I was never not silent. I couldn't hear things back then, or didn't want to hear things. Now I do. Now I want to hear even the sound of my own voice. I couldn't say that when you knew me."

"It's good to see you smile."

"And I've got pudgy cheeks to smile with."

I smiled. "It is good to see you with some weight, I must admit. The last time I saw you, you did not weigh more than a few feathers. And your mother? Difficult. Did it work out?"

"We got along," she said slowly, delightedly. "Not best friends, but friends. She died about ten



years ago, but happily.”

“That’s good. Glad you two found each other.”

“We didn’t want to. But we can’t know ourselves without knowing others, and who better to know than your own mother.”

The bus came and the three stood up to go.

“I like to hear your voice,” I said.

She lingered on the first step and removed her scarf. Her smooth shaved head shone brilliantly in the street light. “Me, too.”

Alyssa D. Ross was born in Guntersville, Alabama, but spent over a decade in Metropolitan Virginia. After abandoning art school in Richmond, she went on to pursue writing. She now holds an MFA from George Mason University and is currently working on her PhD. at Auburn University while teaching American Literature.

Already-Brewed Coffee

Alyssa D. Ross

I remember mom brewing coffee as sun leaked through the seams. Waking to the sound of her heels, the scent of acrid morning air. Rubbing the crumbling sleep from my eyes. I went. To watch her. One deft hand scooped black grinds into a pleated, white filter. Water in the machine, sloshed over the side of the pot, dripping onto the counter.

Some mornings I woke late to the bitter, sticky-sweet aroma. The already-brewed coffee. Bubbling, boiling, hot on the pot. That historic smell put me out of bed, and I ran to see her before she left. I wrapped my arms around her and sucked in the smell. Too-sweet knock-off Chanel. She kissed me on the cheek, leaving behind a sticky, maroon stain.

I learned my love of coffee
from my mother.
It would give me ulcers,
later in life,
gnawing my stomach raw.

But I can still hear
trickling water,
tapping heels towards the kitchen,
towards the door.
Drip, drip. Snap, click.

Her hard, alluringly large feet –
they almost seem to bite the air.



Oreos, on Leave

Alyssa D. Ross

When mom had work, I was not allowed coffee. Robbed of the feeling, the warm tickling steam.
The mysterious unfurling taste. But no. For work trips she bribed me with packaged cookies.
So sweet, they made your jaw ache. Made you forget. I angrily tugged her pants' seam, picking
away the loose, frayed string. Not looking her in the eye.
Pretending she wasn't there, but wishing she'd never leave.

~

Cross-legged on the carpet,
beside mother's large feet.
Raking her acrylic nails
across my back.

Soggy Oreos soaked in milk,
a sweet induced coma.
The sugar already crusting
the corners of my mouth.

A small saccharine promise –
she would come home.



Sin

Alyssa D. Ross

The workweek past, she was *transformed* from Work-Witch to Mother-Goddess. Bright, sleep-swollen eyes, and didn't bother to brush her hair. Just let it curl around her in big, soft tufts. She made strong Arabica, swirling the amber liquid into a frothy cup of warm cream. "Just a little sugar," we both agreed. Specks of steam collecting on our skin. Presenting a promise that stunted all other days. Día sin café. When I could smell the pungent aroma, but never feel the warmth.

~

Stained teeth
tell a history
of the sweet, sharp coffee
we once lovingly shared.

Zumba

Kalpana Negi

Three months after her divorce, Mrs. Bhonsle started losing her hair. They were everywhere: against the cotton white of her Jaipuri bed sheet, on the pale floor of her bathroom, in the marble sink of her kitchen, on the brand new porcelain cutlery and the teeth of her plastic comb. They were not the jet black colour of her youth but henna-dyed red strands of her fiftieth year. The domestic help had grumbled while sweeping the floor: "How do you live like this?" But Mrs. Bhonsle gave her a raise that very month just so the secret of her embarrassing condition didn't make its way out of the apple green walls of her house. But the maid stopped complaining and started advising. "Mr. So-and-so, your neighbour you know. I work for him. He is a very good doctor, why don't you see him?" He had given her a raise too because his wife's lover dropped in right after Mr. So-and-so left for the office and the maid had a habit of peeking through wrong keyholes and not keeping her mouth shut.

But Mrs. Bhonsle was determined to find her own answers when one day, post-shower, she defogged her mirror and saw a bald spot. The bald spot was unusual. It wasn't the amoeba-shaped patch in the pop-up ads for hair transplants. What she had were three coin-sized patches-- like craters on the moon. The biggest was smooth as her bathroom floor, right in the middle of her scalp, which she carefully hid with a comb over. This was so much better than what her maid's Mr. So-and-so could ever prescribe!

And that day she went to bed peacefully thinking about the Greek god porn film titled "Holy Fucks". Instead, she dreamt not of the man in the film but Mr. So-and-so in a talk show prescribing Zumba classes for stressed out middle-aged women losing their hair. It was Mr. So-and-so, there was no doubt about that. He had the same white shock of hair on an otherwise jet black head.

Was she really stressed out? She didn't know. She Googled: "Symptoms of stress in middle-aged women". Yes. The internet said middle-aged women could get hair fall due to stress. But there was still one question that she did not have a clear answer to: Was she middle aged? Yes. Google said she was. She decided she was going to dream of Mr. So-and-so again so she could clear her



doubts about last night's dream. His prescription had seemed a bit unclear to her.

That night she decided not to think about Mr. So-and-so before sleeping for the fear of not being able to dream about him. "Never think about what you want to dream about," had been her learning from last night. It worked. Mr. So-and-so was on the same talk show as in the last night's dream when Mrs. Bhonsle, who sat in the audience stood up and asked: Doctor, do you think hair loss is a symptom of stress and loneliness? Should I join Zumba classes?

"Yes, it definitely is. Yes, come let's dance."

"I don't have white hair, I have red hair. Am I still stressed?"

"No. I don't have Nunsploration videos."


And then the audience applauded and the dream ended. Weird as the conversation was, Mrs. Bhonsle knew she had intelligently picked up her answer from the cryptic dream. She was bright and she knew that.

Just because Mrs. Bhonsle was stressed out did not mean she was going to attend Zumba classes with visible craters on her head. She took several prints of Donald Trump pictures from the internet and stuck them around her dressing table. She particularly liked the one in which his immaculate hairdo was devastated by the blowing wind. That picture revealed a lot of his secrets. The biggest being: layering is the key to the perfect comb over. And she threw in her own favourite tip: pin them down so the nasty hair stick to the scalp. Once she was done with her tidy hairdo, she felt like she could take Zumba classes even in outer space!

The classes started and within ten days she was asked to leave. Her money was returned and her "Zumba Vikings" badge was strapped of her as if because of some betrayal. She lost her membership too and it was not because she was the only one who did not wear shorts to the classes or that other members of the troupe were blown away by the twister of her falling hair but merely because the dance teacher Riya was convinced Mrs. Bhonsle was the one her husband danced with in Riya's dreams.

Mrs. Bhonsle and Riya's husband met during the talk-show dream. Mrs. Bhonsle had asked him a question and he invited Mrs. Bhonsle on the stage with a "come let's dance" line. Riya saw it, she was in the audience too and yet her husband chose to dance with not her but Mrs. Bhonsle. He'd held her very close, she could not forget that.

When Mrs. Bhonsle had joined Zumba classes, Riya struggled to decide if it was okay to let the



woman who was trying to steal her husband in. By day five, Riya's rationality prevailed and she was sure it was all right to let her be. After all, it was just a dream. But on day six, when Riya decided to end her own extra-marital affair because she was overwhelmed by the jealousy the dream brought, Mrs. Bhonsle kissed her husband again on the stage in that very dream talk-show. Damn! How she hoped should have chucked her out on day one! Riya thought of herself as patient and mature, unlike her husband Mr. So-and-so, who she had unfortunately fallen in love with once again. Yes, her affair was going to be over and she would never again cheat on him but then she couldn't stand him cheating on her either.

In ten days the stress wasn't gone, nor had the hair fall stopped. Mrs. Bhonsle decided to meet Dr So-and-so again in the dream again. So, she made sure she thought about Greek gods that night again. "Never think about what you want to dream about," she held the mantra close to her. This time in the dream, Mr. So-and-so was dancing away in the arms of his wife Riya and the studio was full of people applauding the performance. Mrs. Bhonsle was in the chair of the show host this time. When the music stopped, Mr. So-and-so took his place on the sofa in front of the host and Riya his wife sat on his lap, his arms tightly holding her. Audience applauded again, like they were supposed to. When the silence fell, Mrs. Bhonsle asked him: So, what do you think is the best way to cure stress in middle-aged women?


"Here, take these pills and you will be fine."

"Do the pills have any side effects? Will I get nausea or hair fall?"

"No, take one and swallow it."

She did. She gulped it down with her saliva and drank some water from the bottle on the table. The audience didn't matter any more and the clapping had stopped. The couple disappeared too but her pill was still stuck in her throat. She gulped some more water and walked down from the stage to the audience area. She waited and waited for the dream to end. The studio clock ticked away and she fell asleep on the chair while she waited.

The next thing she knew, she was on the bathroom floor. She quickly stood up and checked her hair in the mirror. Her comb-over was intact but her head hurt because of her tightly pinned down hair. She started to remove the pins and braced herself for a hair wash, which had become a nightmare these days because her hair was falling fast. Instead, to her surprise, her hair beautifully fell on her face when she removed the hair pins. She searched for the bald patches underneath layers of hair but she could not find them. Not even a single crater! She was happy to have her hair back, but she did not know if she still suffered from stress and if the pill that Mr. So-and-so gave her had cured her stress or her hair fall or both. If there was no hair fall, then did that mean she was not



stressed and lonely any more? She decided to find out in the dream. “Never think about what you want to dream about,” she chanted and fell asleep.

That night in her dream, Mr. So-and-so was sitting in the sofa opposite the show host. Mrs. Bhonsle was in the audience and asked him again: “Is my stress gone because my craters are gone?”

“No, you left your craters from your head in the studio last night. Look up. Do you see?” The ceiling of the studio was embedded with three circular lights that blinked every once in a while. “But, Mrs. Bhonsle, why did you come here to take your craters back?”

“Because I...”

She woke up in her room again and walked up to the mirror in her bathroom. The craters were back but this time when she smiled, she smiled not to see if it caused her wrinkles, but because she knew that this time she'd left her stress in the dream. And if stress was the cause of her baldness then she should be cured very soon. All she had to do was to make sure she was never went back to that dream again. She Googled: How to have lucid dreams. There were plenty of results the search returned. There was one that she found useful: Place red roses in your bedroom. And then she never dreamed about Mr. So-and-so again.

A month passed and her hair was back on her stress-free head, she heard her door bell ring early in the morning. She was surprised to see Mr. So-and-so at her door.

“Hello, Mrs. Bhonsle, nice to meet you.”


“Please come and sit. Have some tea,” she offered the cup she was holding in her hand. He smiled and declined but he made himself comfortable on the sofa in the drawing room. He looked around, as if searching for something he'd lost.

“First of all, I would like to thank you for what you did for me. I cannot thank you enough actually. So, what brought you here?,” she broke the ice.

“I'm glad I could be of some help. But, by helping you, I may have put my life in danger,” he said, bowing his head in despair.

“Why, what happened?”

“My wife caught the stress that you left that day in the dream and now, she is losing her hair. She has gone crazy! You know how conscious she is about her looks. She thinks it's all because of



me. I don't know what to do. The other day, when I was sleeping, she tried to stick a knife into my hand. I'm really scared. Everyday I hope we are in the dream together and you take back what you left that night. Don't take me wrong, I'm a well-wisher but I can't see my wife like this. I figured I could not share this with anyone except you. What do you suggest I do?"

Was that all, she thought. Was that all he had to say. Did he not know what he had just done! She knew it was all too good to be true. It wasn't possible that she could be happy and have a head full of hair at the same time. As she sat there, looking blankly at the carpet in despair, her hair began to fall from her head again. It was time for her to Google again.

Nathaniel Sverlow is a freelance writer of poetry and prose. He was born in 1983 in San Diego, California to a biotechnologist father and a microbiologist mother, and moved to Northern California at the age of three. Since then, he has graduated from Sacramento State University and spends most of his time hunched over his computer hunting the Word. He currently resides in the Sacramento area with four roommates, three cats, and one incredibly supportive girlfriend.


In the Mirror

Nathaniel Sverlow

I ask her about purpose,
and she says
it comes
from me,
that it always came
from me.
Not from a god,
or a father,
or a friend,
but from me.

I have nothing
to say.

"So when you get
all depressed
because you think
life is meaningless,
look in the mirror,"
she says.



We are in bed,
naked,
sweaty from love-
making, and I ask
if she's looked
herself.

She sits up,
thinks,
doesn't say
anything.
I lean against her.
I say she doesn't have to
answer.
I say it'd be something
to think about.

She pulls the covers
over her body,
the cold coming through
the open window.
She looks around
at nothing
then me.

She says she's going
to take a shower.

I'll be taking one
after her.



Stronger

Nathaniel Sverlow


Dad
was much
stronger
than I.
He could go
weeks
without
talking.

He'd pass
in the hall,
sit
in his chair,
drink
his wine
as the house
burned

down
around
us.

He calls
sometimes

now
the hall's
too long,



the chair's
sunk in,
and the wine's
soured.
He burns
down
around
us,
and I
wish
I were
stronger.



Too Tough

Nathaniel Sverlow


sitting there
at the kitchen table
big bowl of ice cream
between them
and two spoons
digging for
strawberries
too tough to break
apart
in the mixer

"That fucking cat
of yours. I fed him
four years and
he acts like he don't know
me. The little shit."

"That's 'cause you're
a fucking asshole, Dad."

"I oughta toss him
in the pool. He'd
remember me then."

"That's what you did
to Mom, and look how
that worked out."



"I oughta toss you in
the pool too."

"You're such
a fucking asshole."

"I found one."

he lifts his spoon

"I found one too."

she lifts hers

and they bite down
together

they are
sour
sweet
too tough to break
apart

Michael B. Tager's work has appeared in a variety of online and print media, most recently in Schlock!, The Light Ekphrastic, Welter, Industry Night, The Realm Beyond and more. He likes Buffy, the Baltimore Orioles, and theater.


Cold Fort

Michael B. Tager

I thought I was close sitting to sleep sitting there in the Pit next to Blair on an ancient green vinyl couch. My eyes had been closed, anyway. With my head on her skinny shoulder, our blond hair mingling, I was relaxed, anyway. I was planning to ask her out again, but then Jason leaned in, yelled, "It's the mother lode," and pointed at the window, his face inches from mine. Jason's mouth opened wide when he spoke and I stared at his yellow molars; his breath stank of onions. I cringed and he must have mistaken my expression for fear. "It's ok, there's no one out there. **They** like to hang out down there, watching me ... but it's like God's pissing dandruff out there."

Surrounding us, the Pit was a mountain of insulation: blankets and pillows; mattresses stood on their side in the middle of the otherwise mostly-empty flat. There were rugs and sweaters and torn-out car seats, baby clothes and jogging shorts and mounds of socks. Crumbled newspapers dating back nine months mixed with the towers and minarets of Styrofoam. There must have been hundreds of pieces, some of it the popcorn kind that he glued together. It was our fort, lined with blankets and comforters that Jason relocated while Blair and I slept.

Most of the apartment was bare; it wasn't even an apartment, really, just a room in an old factory on the scary side of town. Someone paid rent, but none of the utilities were on. We stole electricity from somewhere, but I didn't know how it worked. I was just happy when the lights flickered on and the one TV we had played old movies. The brick walls were painted grey and the ceiling was fifteen feet high. It seemed a mile high those days when I'd lay on my mattress, unable to get up, not sleeping and not really awake. Since I stopped taking my medication, everything kept me awake at night.



It was normally just me, Blair and Jason in the place by ourselves – Blair and Jason usually high and me too frightened to move – but occasionally some others came by. I treated them like I treated the sketchings and random magazine pages taped to the walls; background scenery to be ignored.


“There is no **“they”**, Jason. We’ve gone over this. Like your therapist said.” Jason ignored me, grabbed my shoulder, hauled me to my feet, and dragged me across the apartment. As soon as we left the Pit, the January chill struck my bones. There were only a few old heaters arranged in a circle, hooked up to pirated electricity that made the difference in these harsh mountain winters. The temperature outside often dropped below zero and the uncarpeted, scuffed concrete floors sucked all the warmth from my bare feet. “Le’go of me,” I mumbled and I tried to loosen myself, but Jason’s grip was tighter than necessary. His mouth was clenched and he was grinding his teeth. “Get off,” I repeated while pushing him.. “Hold on. I’ll be right back.” He let go, but stayed close

I walked back to the Pit to grab my shoes. Blair looked at me when I crossed the Wall and entered the Pit. Blair was messing with a spoon and a needle. She smiled and asked a question with her green eyes. *You in?* When I shook my head - still not my scene – she ignored me. Last time I asked her out, she was nodding from the drugs. It was poor timing. She didn’t respond in words, her eyes just looked sad and she ducked her head.

By the time I returned to Jason with mis-matched shoes, he was bouncing on the balls of his feet. I saw white flakes rain to the floor from his shoulder-length brown hair. It matched the snow outside. I missed running water. We didn’t bathe enough. “What do you want?” I yawned.

Jason grabbed me and pulled. He thrust my face against the window and I groaned. “Look, man. Look!” He stabbed at the window with his half-gloved hand. Most of his nails were cracked and yellow. I followed his finger and saw, on the curb, a pile of trash. A futon, some stereo equipment, and the object of Jason’s current craze. A pile of Styrofoam. “See it? It’ll help the Wall, man. That stuff’s worth its weight, man. It’s awesome.” Jason whirled and, still attached, I went with him. I batted at his hand but I doubt he even felt it.

I stared at Jason’s pinky while he salivated. There was a thin layer of cocaine sticking to the edges and I wondered where he got his shit. “You want to add to your fort, Jason?” I asked. When he got like this, he didn’t hear much besides the voices already in his head. He nodded and turned.



"It's going to be incredible." Jason's eyes were shining and his smile made my face hurt. It was beautiful in a way, how intense he got. I wanted to cry. "It's going to be my home."


"You are home, Jason," I said, thinking of Blair. When I turned to find her, I saw her eyes closed, swaying in her seat. Something went slam-slam in my gut and tears welled. Sometimes I wished I had my own way out, like Blair did with her drugs or Jason did with his psychosis. I just feared. "You're home," I repeated, trying to convince myself.

"Come on, before **they** grab it," he said, dragging me. I craned my neck to see Blair, but the Wall was in the way. Soon we came to the metal door that led outside to the fire escape. The snow on the landing was up to my ankles and I cursed when my bare arm touched the frozen railing. Everything hurt and tears leaked out. I let it wander down my cheek, into my thin beard. I wanted to know if it'd freeze. I wondered if when we got back into the apartment, the tear would melt and my blond hairs weep. I thought about telling Jason, but we were already on the street.

Jason looked in both directions. "Come on, man," he said and hustled me close. "**They're** around here, you know." He eye-balled the snow-blanketed street and everything in it - I didn't have the energy to speak to his paranoia. He acted like my mother always did; I knew how to fill the caretaker role, didn't I? I imagined what it was like better than most, being afraid of the people in your head. My mother didn't even know she was sick, she just knew what made her feel better. For her it was Miller and Pabst, for Jason it was white powders. Surging with emotion, I hugged him. He patted my back, awkward. "Man, come on. **They'll** get you for that homo shit. **They're** always trying to get me, **they'll** get you too." He squatted in the trash and the Styrofoam blocked him from my sight.

I saw that there was enough Styrofoam to pad out the Wall; I understood Jason's enthusiasm. All the Styrofoam was packing stuff, like someone ordered a bunch of new furniture. I looked around to see where the person was while Jason got busy stuffing all his loot into trash bags, careful to damage nothing.

I was confused where the bags came from. Did he grab them before? I wondered. A sudden headache bloomed and I moaned. I closed my eyes and lifted my fingers to my temple and wished I was somewhere else. I thought about being a bird and flying away and going somewhere warm. Somewhere where Blair and I could go and I could take care of her and she could take care of me and maybe Jason could live in the extra bedroom that we'd have. I smiled and laughed and then Jason's hand grabbed me. I opened my eyes and looked in his brown



ones and there was concern there, somehow, incredibly.

"You gotta get inside, man. It's cold," he said. I looked around and all the Styrofoam was gone. There had been piles of it, pounds. It was all gone and I was covered in a thin layer of snow. I was so tired.

"How long have I been out here?"


"I've made three trips, man," Jason said. "I've been yelling at you and you've been mumbling at me, saying you were gonna help." He grabbed his head in both hands and shook it. For a second I thought it was going to come off and I was scared before he looked like Jason again. "Come on. Help me get this futon." Together, both of us lifted it. The frame was cracked and there was a tear-drop stain on the mattress the size of a foot, but it looked ok to me. I wondered if I put it next to Blair, if she'd sleep next to me. She did, once, letting me hold her for a little while. When she started snoring, I whispered that I loved her and that we'd make beautiful blonde babies. She smiled in her sleep, but the next day she wouldn't look at me and she spent hours and hours nodding out.

It was hard getting the futon up the fire escape, it was so narrow and the edges of everything hurt so much. It wasn't until the skin on my arm stuck to the railing that I realized I hadn't brought a jacket. Even Jason brought one. "No wonder I'm cold," I said and my teeth were chattering.

He laughed like a hyena through a frown. "You scare me when I don't take care of you." We hauled the futon to the landing and through the door. I wondered if he was right.

All the Styrofoam was piled waist high at the door and it was like I was wading through an ocean of white foam. "You think someone got all new stuff and threw their old shit away?" I asked. "That'd explain all this packing stuff." Jason nodded though he wasn't paying attention. "I sometimes wish I could do that." I sneezed and took a big breath; my lungs hurt. "Just order a new life, unwrap it from boxes and set it up. Boom! New person, new life. New me." Jason looked at me, arched an eyebrow and didn't respond. He went to the bathroom and I knew he would come back sniffing. Instead of waiting, I thought I'd drag the futon over to show Blair.

It took me a couple minutes to get it through the Wall and over to the Pit, though it didn't seem like that far. I had to rest a few times. I wondered if I was going to get sick, I was so cold. I was sick a lot as a kid and my mom tried to take care of me, but she was so sick herself that it was



hard. Sometimes she couldn't do it and she yelled at me to stop being such a baby. And then she cry herself and yell at the voices and I'd hug her. She left when I was twelve and I lived with my uncle for a while. But then I got sick myself, not like my mom but bad, and my uncle said he was going to put me in a foster home before I left.

I didn't like to think about it so I didn't. Instead, I concentrated on dragging the futon across the concrete floor. It was hard maneuvering between the Wall without disrupting anything and by the time I got it to the Pit, I was covered in sweat. I looked for Blair but didn't see her. I let it slam to the ground and sat on it, panting, deciding to wait. I heard Jason moving around, arranging his Wall. He muttered and readjusted things. He made trip after trip, returning with another armload of foam each time. I turned to face him and saw him over the top. He was stacking it all on top of each other, like squeaky clouds; each time, there was squeaking and my hair stood on end. I couldn't stop shivering. I thought about lying down and trying to go to sleep, but no, I'd wait until she opened her eyes and looked at me.


I must have been there for quite some time. I opened my eyes (I didn't remember closing them); the cold had left my body, though my heart beat hummingbird-quick. I put my hand to my forehead and frowned. "Hot," I said. Blair smiled at me but went back to watching the T.V. All I heard was a high-pitched ringing or shrieking in my ears.

"I was thinking," I said. Blair looked up. "I was thinking we could go out. Do something." She smiled, a little sadly, but I focused on the smile itself, the curve of her lips. The sadness must be within me. "You and me."

Blair reached over and turned the volume down and then looked at me squarely. She was so thin, so pretty. "Do you think that's such a great idea?" she asked. "You're-," she paused and looked up, scratching at her neck and her wrist. The marks on her arm made her no less beautiful. "You're kind of a mess, aren't you? Even worse than Jason. Shouldn't you focus on you?" She turned the volume on the t.v. back and I heard Ricky Ricardo. *Luuuuuucy.*

I must have been staring because she looked over again and said, "I'm sorry, you know? No offense." She got up to leave. Something fell from her pocket onto the ground.

Picking it up, I tested the weight of the white powder. It seemed so light, so effortless, I had to open the bag, smell it, see what the big deal was. Suddenly, a sneeze came on and though I managed to close the bag in time, my neck whiplashed back against the vinyl couch. Snot piled in my nose and I knew I only had a minute.



I'd watched Blair enough times to know how to inject something. *Maybe this will get me together*, I thought. *She seems so much more even-headed*. Her works were right where she'd left them and I used the dirty spoon and the lighter and the needle, even as I heard Jason continuing to stack the wall, make the Pit more secure. I hurried, before the sneeze came back or before Blair did. I'd show her, right? The needle slipped in like nothing and the plunger, when I pulled back, mixed my blood with Blair's life. When I slammed it home, I fell backward.

I don't know how long I was out. When I opened my eyes, the ceiling swam before me and I lifted my head in slow motion, looking around. While I had been sleeping, Jason had reconstructed his Wall. Almost the entire Pit was encircled and it was a couple degrees warmer. A grin spread across my face and I shuddered to my feet. The Wall extended to the ceiling in some places. Halfway round, I saw Jason's face poking through one jigsaw-shaped segment, his eyes twitching and his teeth grinding. He flipped me a thumbs-up before sticking a piece of Styrofoam into the hole. I heard his voice through the Wall.


"Why don't you come through?" he asked. I searched the Wall. "Come on through, man. Help me over here."

"How?" I asked, looking for a way. I searched for Blair and shuddered. "Should I come around?" I wasn't sure where she was, my vision seemed to be going in and out.

"No," he said. Sweat poured down my forehead and I shook my head as his voice went in and out. He sounded how I imagined God sounded. "Just come through. Look down."

I followed the base of the Wall and saw a little opening, about knee high, big enough to crawl into. I got down on all fours and stuck in my head. I crawled into the gap, into a dim tunnel. After a body's length, the space opened and I was able to sit upright. There was a small room, lined in blankets with a small floor lamp. Two tunnels went off in different directions. I heard Jason's voice call again. I wasn't sure which way to go but when he called again, "Come on, man. Time's wasting," I turned and set off on all fours. I thought I heard Blair's laugh.

It seemed like I crawled for hours. The tunnel rarely stayed straight for long and twisted and turned in new directions, sometimes uphill or downhill. I wondered at that. Sometimes I could almost stand up, other times I had to move on my belly. I thought that the thin blankets wouldn't be proof against the cold floor, but I felt comfort for the first time in ages. Soon, I reached an area that emptied to a circle. The floor was lined almost a foot high with blankets. I tumbled into the center, lay down, looked up and couldn't see the ceiling. Blair and Jason were there and then they



weren't. Closing my eyes, I thought a cold hand touched my forehead.

"He's burning up," Blair might've said. Instead of her green eyes all I saw was a field of flowers poking from the blanket-lined ground. I turned my head and laughed at the grass I lay in. Blue skies were above me and white clouds. "He's barely breathing."

"**They** got him," Jason said, though I couldn't see him. There was just me and flowers and the sky above happiness. I missed my mother and the sun but it was warm enough to fall asleep.

Joe Berry is a sometimes writer living in Arkansas, where backgammon opponents are hard to find.

Poor Harvest

Joe Berry

Before Big Boy Roberts limped into the barbershop Sammy had been trimming the ring of hair that still clung to Abe's head as they discussed soybeans. Now Big Boy stood with the closing door behind him, its sleigh bells clanging. He slumped, shoulders crooked, tears dribbling from his nearly closed eyes.

"What in the world's wrong with you, Big Boy?" Sammy asked. Big Boy limped the several steps toward the two men in the barbershop and collapsed onto a battered chair. Abe, flailing the apron he was covered with, produced his walking stick and poked Big Boy in the chest. "What's ailing you?" He asked.

Big Boy, pointing to his right boot, grunted "Engine block."


"You dropped a motor on your foot. That what you're saying?" Sammy asked.

"Uh-huh. A block. Had it on the—"

"How in the world," Abe banged his cane on the arm of Big Boy's chair, "does somebody pull a fool thing like that?"

"Want me to call the ambulance from Wyville?" Sammy asked. "Probably be here in twenty or thirty minutes."

Big Boy shook his head. "Don't need no ambulance. Need this boot off," he said, twisting in the chair and producing a pair of sheet metal shears from his back pocket.



"Put them up before somebody accuses me of scalping Abe. I got something that'll do the trick," Sammy said, turning to the counter behind him and pulling the tray from one of the several antiseptic cylinders. He produced a sturdy pair of scissors. Abe, still wearing his apron, slid from the barber's chair, balanced himself on his cane and stood at the ready just in case his assistance was needed during the excision.

Sammy knelt, pulled Big Boy's pant leg up and set the scissors to work on the leather. It went fast as he ripped the upright seam and then slowed a bit as he crossed a double-stitched welt transitioning from boot top to boot foot. Then he kept the pair of small blades close to the boot's sole and glided to the curve of the toe before backing up and cutting a perpendicular across the top. "Ease your foot out," Sammy said, holding the filleted boot against the floor. Big boy pulled his foot from the boot yelping like a little terrier just stepped on.

"Dogburn," Big Boy said, "that feels a lot—"

"I still want to know how you do something so stupid," Abe said.

"It was an accid—"

"Take off your sock," Sammy said.

Big Boy did with another yelp. Sammy told him to flex his toes and he did this too, yelping again.


Sammy watched the foot closely. "Well, it ain't broke. But would you look at it. Look at that toe, Abe. Ain't it a whopper?"

"Yeah-boy. Looks like a big old rotten plum. Ugly purple—even under the nail."

"That's it. That'll fix it," Sammy said, fishing out his pocket knife and flipping open the smallest blade. He nodded toward Abe who produced his cigarette lighter from under the apron, clicked its lid back and struck a flame with his thumb. Sammy held the blade in the flame. None of the men said anything. There was no noise in the street outside. At the point when the barber decided the instrument was in operating condition, he set the heated blade against the purple toenail and began rapidly twisting it in half-circles.

"Sammy, what're you—"

"Don't you worry none, Big Boy," Abe said. "Ole Sam'll have you fixed up in a minute. You'll feel a bunch better. Not right away you won't. But directly."



As the knife pierced the nail darkness oozed from the toe and onto the sock beneath it. Sammy nodded toward Abe again and Abe retrieved an oversized moist Q-tip from another of the antiseptic containers. Sammy pushed down on the nail with a thumb on either side, forcing the last bit of poison from it. He applied the Q-tip to the incision and Big Boy howled like a pack of lapdogs all stepped on at once. The barber pulled the sock up around the wound and knotted it with one final yelp from Big Boy whose tears had been replaced by a forehead washed with sweat.

"You'll be better in no time," Sammy said. Big Boy nodded, offered to pay Sammy, and limped from the shop carrying his flayed boot and careful to keep his sock-bandage from contacting the floor.

Abe remounted the barber chair making sure his apron covered the armrests. Sammy washed his hands, pulled his regular scissors from his pocket and snipped at the ring around Abe's head.

"They say it's a fungus of some type," Abe said. "Cut yields by ten or twelve bushel an acre."

"That's what I hear too. Some new disease of some kind they didn't have any idea about. Blows in with the wind or something. Bad year for beans."

Shannon Cavanaugh grew up in the Ozarks on the family farm. She held her first "hand-me-down" camera at age six. It was a 1957 Kodak Bullet Box, all manual and shot black and white film. Years later working as a television journalist, she often edited video putting pictures to her words and used the same tug of the eye for that shot that told the story and so much more. As a photographer and writer, Cavanaugh has published in poetry, creative nonfiction, fiction and photography. She currently lives on the East Coast, but still calls Arkansas home and travels the backroads any chance she gets to find the forgotten and to find herself.



Letting Go

Shannon Cavanaugh

It takes only a look at the lean of this old frontier home in southern Missouri to know its tired from the living that's taken place within its walls and all the storms it's weathered. Yet, it is determined to hang on to its nailed in dignity of boards and what's left of a tin roof. There is a grace in letting go, of growing old, even for a house. The blue of the skies hold it up while the fields of fodder assure it of a soft fall when the times comes. Shot was taken on rural Highway 223 between Viola, Arkansas and Moody, Missouri.

This 1940s wringer washing machine sits on the front porch of an abandoned house. A "no trespassing" sign hangs on a barbed-wired fence that wraps its arms around this capsule of time. Despite being forgotten, the washing machine still proudly displays its name. The child in me wants to climb over the gate and throw in a load of laundry. It's the same kind of washing machine my grandmother used to wash her feedsack dresses on the farm. Photo taken near Optimus, Arkansas, just off Highway 5 on a winding dirt road.



Awash in Time
Shannon Cavanaugh



Turn of Time

Shannon Cavanaugh

The rusted spokes of this fence along Highway 14 cast a shadow of the turn of time when folks settled northern Arkansas with nothing more than a wagon and a mule. This rural area is still known for its wilderness and outlaws. Brothers Frank and Jesse James hid out here after the Civil War in the community that is now named St. James. Though notorious murderers and thieves, local folks believed they did enough good for the poor that they changed the town's name from Buckhorn to St. James in the 1870s to honor their own Robin Hood. St. James, Arkansas, Stone County.

Allen Kopp lives in St. Louis, Missouri, USA. He has had over a hundred short stories appearing in such diverse publications as *Grey Wolfe Publishing*, *A Twist of Noir*, *Bartleby-Snopce*, *Penmen Review*, *Short Story America*, *Danse Macabre*, *Skive Magazine*, *Churn Thy Butter*, *KY Story Offbeat*, *Christmas Story Anthology*, *Quail Bell Magazine*, *State of Imagination*, *Gaia's Misfits Fantasy Anthology*, *Back Hair Advocate*, *Wilde Oats Magazine*, and many others. His Internet home is at: <http://www.literaryfictions.com>

The Good Death


Allen Kopp

The bus let me out at the bottom of a hill and I knew where to go from a sign with an arrow pointing up. I began the climb, going slow because I was tired and, to be truthful, I was enjoying the country setting—the wildflowers, some of which were probably weeds, the tree-covered hills and the singing birds that would come so close to me I could almost touch them. It all reminded me somehow of when I was a small boy in grade school and used to go home for lunch on the one day in the week my mother wasn't working.

When I got to the clinic I was out of breath and sweating. The girl in reception asked me if I needed to sit down and when I told her I didn't she asked me my name. She checked it against a list and then smiled at me and told me I could go right to admissions, down the hall on the left.

Another woman greeted me in admissions. After I gave her my name, she asked me if I had any jewelry, other valuables, or money. I gave her my watch and my empty wallet. In return she gave me a pair of loose-fitting pajamas with a matching robe and told me to go into a little room and put them on, putting all the clothes I was wearing into a basket on the table. When I came out, she led me down the hall and up a couple of flights of stairs, apologizing for the elevator being out of order. She took me into a room with the word RECEIVING on the door, told me somebody would be with me shortly, and left.

The room had a cold clinical feel to it; one window, a desk and some chairs, no adornment of any kind, not even any ugly pictures on the walls. On a low table was a TV, turned to a news program



that I wasn't interested in hearing. I went to the window and looked out, again admiring the pastoral view until a woman came in wearing a white coat. She was thin and fragile-looking and slightly bent forward as if she might break in two. I saw from the tag on her chest that her name was Letha.

"Do you mind?" she said, and, before I knew what she was talking about, she went to the TV and turned up the volume. She stood for a moment looking at it, listening, and then she turned to me. "Sorry," she said. "I wanted to hear what they were saying about the food riots in the city."

"I'm done with all that now," I said.

She smiled and gestured for me to sit in the chair in front of the desk and then she sat down facing me.

"I was a little worried about my son," she said. "He lives near where the riots are happening and I was afraid he might somehow be involved."

When I looked closely at her, I saw how her face was drawn, as if she was recovering from a serious illness, and her eyes were puffy, either from hay fever or from crying. I started to say something about how we were approaching the time when none of us would have anything more to worry about, but I thought it sounded too cynical for the moment, so I didn't say it.

"How old is your son?" I asked.

She handed a picture in a frame across the desk for me to look at. "He's twenty-one. Ordinarily that would be old enough to take care of oneself but he isn't like other people. He has an artificial leg. He can walk—with a limp—but he can't run. He isn't very strong. Anybody could overpower him or take advantage of him."

"He's a good-looking boy," I said, handing the picture back to her. "What's his name?"

"Johnny Percy. The picture was taken a few years ago when he was still in school but he still looks the same."

"Surely he would know to get out of the way of a riot," I said.

"If only I could know for sure. He's all I have in the world and I wanted him here with me at the end."

"Can't you get a message to him?"



"I've tried calling but now the phones aren't working at all."

"Maybe he'll come here if things get too bad for him in the city. As of this morning, the buses are still running."

"Bus service ends today." She took a handkerchief out of her pocket and blew her nose loudly.

"Well, you know," I said, "things have a way of working themselves out."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't be bothering you with my personal problems. You're a patient. This is very unprofessional of me."

"If there was ever a time to relax the rules a bit, the time is now."

She laughed as if I had made a joke and had me sign my name to a couple of forms, altogether useless in my opinion but still part of the procedure.

"How about you?" she asked as I handed over the forms. "Did you come from the city?"

"Yes."

"How did you find it?"

"Chaos and anarchy. No food or water. People taking what they can get their hands on, killing each other for the fun of it."

"So you had the good sense to get out while you still could."

"Oh, I could have died there easily enough, but I thought I deserved the good death. It's the one thing I wanted for myself. My last wish."

"Yes," she said, "since we got the news that the end was near, we've helped thousands of people. We won't be able to go on much longer, though. We're about to run out of supplies."

"I heard there was a do-it-yourself pill," I said, "but I never knew if it was true or not."

"We have some but they're very rare and hard to get." She opened a drawer and held up a large bottle and shook it. I could see it was about one-quarter full.



"How do they work?" I asked.

"Much like the injection, only not as fast. The problem is there can be side effects."

"Like what?"

"You don't die."

"That doesn't sound very efficient, does it? You take a pill to make you die and it doesn't work."

"The only thing that keeps us from being overrun by the rabble is our out-of-the-way location."

"Ah, yes," I said. "The rabble."

"How did you find out about us?"

"A friend who works—or worked—in the medical profession. He left the city. I don't know where he is now."

"I believe that things happen for a reason, don't you?" she asked.

"I suppose so."

"All these terrible things that are happening right now serve a purpose."

"After we're gone," I said.

"Yes, after we're all gone."

She stood up and gestured for me to follow her. She led me down a darkened hallway to a little room with a bed and a chair. The one window in the room was covered with a heavy curtain so that very little light was admitted.

"Just lie down," she said, "and make yourself comfortable."

I lay on my back on the bed, adjusting the pillow under my head and feeling slightly foolish in the clown-like pajamas.



"Would you like to hear some chamber music?" she asked.

"As long as it's not too morose."

She put on something sprightly, by Mozart, I think, and sat on the chair beside the bed.

"Now I'm going to give you a sedative," she said, "to relax you and make you feel as good as you've ever felt in your life. I won't administer the final injection myself—somebody else will do that—but when it comes you won't even know it."

"How would it be if I went and got your son and brought him here to you?" I asked, as she prepared the hypodermic.

"I couldn't ask you to do that," she said.

"You're not asking. I'm volunteering."

"It's kind of you, but..."

"But what? Are you afraid of getting into trouble? What are they going to do, fire you?"

"No, it's not that," she said. "I don't think it's ethical."

"Everybody is dying and you're talking about ethics?"

"I'm not sure you would even be able to find him and I don't want to put you out in that way. You're a patient, for God's sake! I'm supposed to be helping *you*."

"Look," I said, "I'm at the end of my life. One more mission isn't going to matter, especially if it might help somebody else."

She put a tourniquet on my upper arm to make the vein stand out and picked up the needle.

"I think you should wait before you give me that sedative," I said.

She laid the needle down, went and closed the door and said quietly, "If you get to the city, you might not be able to get back here."

"That's a chance I'll have to take," I said.



"Are you sure you want to do it?"

"Can you get me my clothes?"

She went out of the room and in a few minutes she returned with my clothes, yes, but also with a small canvas bag.

"I put a few things in here you might need," she said.

She handed me the bag and when I looked inside I saw a small flashlight, two bottles of water and some energy wafers. She had also brought her son's picture from the other room. She took the picture out of the frame and wrote something on the back—which I soon realized was his address in the city—and put the picture in the bag along with the other stuff.

While I got dressed, she wrote a note for me to give to him, in the event, she said, that I should find him.

"There's something else," she said. She handed me a lumpy little white envelope.

"What's this?" I asked.


"Two of our special pills, if you need them. One for you and one for him."

"Thank you," I said. I put the note and the envelope with the pills in them in my pocket.

When I was ready, she asked me if I needed anything else and when I said I didn't, she took me down a back stairway to a door marked EMERGENCY FIRE EXIT. She opened the door for me, touched me lightly on the shoulder without looking at me and said, "Good luck."

I didn't know how far it was to the city but I knew the bus ride out had taken a good half-hour, so I knew I was in for a long walk. Instead of feeling oppressed, though, or afraid, I felt unburdened and as free of worry as I had ever felt in my life. I truly had not a care in the world. If I died alongside the road and was eaten by animals and had my eyes pecked out by buzzards, would I be worse off than anybody else in the world?

I walked for the remainder of the daylight hours without incident and came upon the outskirts of the city just as the sun was going down. I was so tired I couldn't go on without resting, so I found a spot in a clump of bushes out of sight of the road to take a rest, just the way a hobo would do. I



slept for about an hour and then pressed on.

The city, to my surprise, was mostly deserted. The riots were over. A deathly calm lay over everything, along with a lot of smoke from small fires that burned here and there. The people I saw ignored me as if I was invisible. At that point I wasn't sure that I *wasn't* invisible and was glad of it.

I studied the picture of Johnny Percy, the boy/man I had come to find, memorizing his features so I would know him when I saw him. Then I turned the picture over and puzzled out the address Letha had written on the back. I wasn't familiar with that part of the city but I seemed to remember somehow the general location of the address, which wasn't far from where I was.

After a half-hour or so of walking around in a semi-daze, I found the street easily enough and then the number. It was a four-story brick apartment building that still seemed habitable and had all the windows intact, so I figured it had escaped the rioting. I walked through the front door as if I belonged there and up three flights of stairs. My footsteps sounded deafening in the eerie silence.

Apartment 308 was at the end of the hall. I leaned in to the door to listen for any sounds that might be coming from inside. I heard nothing and then I knocked. I didn't expect Johnny Percy or anybody else to be there.

When I was sure I had heard a faint rustling, I said, loudly, "I'm looking for Johnny Percy!"

"Go away!" a voice said. "Leave me alone!"

"Johnny, is that you?"

The door was opened about an inch and I saw an eye looking out at me. "I don't have any food and I've got a gun," a disembodied voice said that seemed to have nothing to do with the eye.

"Johnny," I said, "I have a message for you from your mother."

The door opened a little farther, apparently so the eye could get a better look at me.

"I have a message for you from your mother," I said again.

I could see the face now and knew it was a haggard approximation of the face in the picture. To show him I wasn't playing a trick on him, I pulled the picture out of the bag and waved it in his face.

"You've seen my mother?" he asked.



"Earlier today. Are you Johnny Percy?"

"Yes."

"Can I come in?"

He let the door swing open on its hinges. I stepped in and closed the door behind me.

"If this is a trick," he said, "I swear I'll kill you!"

"It's not."

"Just so you know, I have a gun and I know how to use it!"

"You won't have to."

As he turned around and walked across the room to a couch and sat down heavily, I saw the terrible clomping limp that he walked with.

"How have you been, Johnny?" I asked, as though we were old friends.

"Just peachy," he said.

"Your mother is very worried about you. I just spoke with her a few hours ago."

"Where is she?"

"At the euthanasia clinic outside town."

"Oh."

"She wants you to come to her for the end."

"Do you have a car that you can drive me in?"

"No."

"How about a donkey cart?"



"The only mode of transportation I have at the moment is my own two feet."

"Can you carry me there on your back?"

"We'd never make it to the corner."

He gestured for me to sit down on the other end of the couch. "Do you have any food?" he asked.

"Only these," I said, pulling the energy bars out of my bag and setting them on the couch between us.

"Water?"

I produced the two bottles his mother had given me.

"I have some canned fruit," he said. "Some crackers, not too stale, potted ham, a bottle of wine, and some candy. A veritable feast. Would you care to dine with me?"

"I have no other engagements."

He set two places at the table in front of the window and put the food out, along with the bottle of wine. I put the energy bars and the water bottles alongside the other stuff and sat down. He sat across from me and poured the wine into two small glasses.

After I tasted the wine, I said, "Oh, I almost forgot. I have a note for you from your mother."


He held the note in his trembling hands and read it. When he was finished, he folded it up again.

"Here's to mothers," he said.

We clinked glasses and I tried to smile, remembering his mother, from what seemed like days ago but was just a few hours, and my own mother, who had been dead for fifteen years.

"I have something else that your mother sent," I said. I took the little white envelope out of my pocket, opened it and took out the two pills, placing them side by side on the table.

"I'm so glad you came," he said. "I thought I was going to have to do this alone."



He took one of the pills in his fingers and swallowed it with the wine. We sat there, two strangers, smiling at each other, and then I picked up the other pill and put it on the end of my tongue, washing away the bitter taste of it with the last of the wine.

Kole is another MFA teaching writing in Brooklyn. He's also trans, but even that is starting to be a Brooklyn cliché.

The Man behind Me

Kole

His steps are masked by the scuffle of my shoes against pebbles that have chipped off the concrete, but I know he's following me. His presence lurks like hot breath on my ear and makes the skin covering my left kidney quiver. I squeeze my key fob, locking and unlocking the doors to my car. Its lights blink like a beacon of safety, but I don't stop to get in.

#

As a child, I stood in the darkness of my grandmother's bathroom with my cousin, James. We called at the mirror for Bloody Mary and waited to see what would happen. James insisted she set matchbox cars rolling and threw underwear across the rooms of his classmates. This didn't seem violent enough to warrant a name like Bloody, but my cousin rushed out of the bathroom into the bedroom we were sharing anyway. He thought the pillows on our beds had moved.

"They didn't move," I told him. "Bloody Mary isn't real, just like Santa and the Tooth Fairy aren't real. And if she were real, we'd have seen blood leaking out of the mirror or something when we called on her anyway."

His face skewered, like he might cry, but instead he ran at me. I let him shove me out of the room. It's not his fault no one in our family cries.

"If you're so sure why don't you call the sailor?"

"Who's the sailor?" I asked.

"Does it matter? Are you scared?"



“What am I supposed to do?”

“Knock on the mirror and say his name just like with Bloody Mary. That’s how you call on all dead people.”

He was on his toes, bobbing up and down like he did when he knew a secret, but I closed the door to the bathroom anyway and shut my eyes.

“Sailor man.”

My knuckles wrapped the glass three times.

“Sailor man.”

Three more knocks.

“Sailor man.”

I opened my eyes before knocking. It took a moment before they adjusted to the miniscule amount of light coming through the gap under the door. I could see the grey outline of the toilet and the sink. My knuckles wrapped on the glass once, twice. I paused. I wanted to see hairy knuckles break through the mirror and part my shaded reflection. I wanted the sailor to sit up in the tub with bloated flesh from spending too much time at the bottom of Lake Michigan. I wanted something to happen. The final knock.

#


When I came out of the bathroom, my cousin was beaming. I turned back to look again.

“Nothing happened.”

“Not yet. The sailor follows you around and when you least expect it,”

He didn’t finish the sentence. In the mirror, I could see him raise both his hands over his head and bring them down in a swift motion toward my back. My spine twitched when his imaginary knife didn’t land.

#



The sailor isn't following me. He isn't waiting to stab me in the back. The man behind me is losing ground. We're halfway to my apartment, walking. A man passes beneath a street light in front of me. For a moment, he looks me in the eye. I look at him and we're both walking toward each other like we intend to make something happen. But he's still five feet away when he breaks my gaze. His baseball cap is pulled low, the bill curved, blocking his peripheral vision, like if he doesn't acknowledge me then I don't exist. His hands push the material of his jacket downwards from within his pockets. I turn to watch him as he walks away.

"Hey," I call out. "Hey."

He ignores the sound. When I turn back, the road is empty again. The man is still back there, stalled in the darkness between lights. I want to feel his fingers grip my shoulder. I want to grab his wrist and tug him off balance into an arm bar. I want to hear the snapping sound as I drive my palm through his elbow and fragments of bone splinter off and bury themselves in his tissue. I keep walking.

#

One time, my girlfriend and I were having sex and I looked down at her. She was close, but I slowed my rhythm. Her back lost its arc and she looked at me, mouth open, searching for breath.

"Dig your nails into my back," I told her.


She let go of the bed sheets and brought her artificially strong nails to the flesh of my spine.

"Harder."

I bit her lip. The muscles in her wrists and forearms shook from the demanded pressure, but the pain never penetrated deeper than the skin.

"Keep digging them in, on my spine."

And she did, digging the white tips of her manicured nails into my shoulders and dragging them down my back towards my love handles and then back up again with all eight tips grinding against my bone, but it wasn't enough and I pushed my spine out to embed her nails even deeper in my flesh. Her legs wrapped tightly around me. My mouth caught her earlobe and bit down. The building adrenaline shot into her hands and she brought them down on me harder and harder until it was



just enough and my back was finally still.

Her face softened first, her breathing slowed, the movement of her body gave way to random short spasms as the small of her back landed on the bed, and then her fingers relinquished their hold.

The air stung. A bead of sweat found its way into one of her marks and burned. I closed my eyes and embraced it, like drops of acid eating away at my skin. It lulled me into sleep.

When I opened my eyes again, she was staring at her hands.

"There's blood on my nails."

It was something.

#

I think I lost him. I've turned the corner and discovered an alley that wraps behind an old brick building and heads back to the street I was just on. The lights from countless windows illuminate the route, but I've hidden away in the darkness between two dumpsters. A rat scurries by and trips over the rotten banana peel it carries in its mouth. It darts under a stack of cardboard across from me, but quickly reemerges and makes slow progress back towards its lost score. It's missing half of its left ear. The danger isn't imagined.

When the peel is safely dragging against the ground under its feet once again, it bolts to the shadows. I lose it under a heavy stack of cardboard and double back out of the alley, speed walk to my apartment without incident, and bound up the stairs to the third floor. The man is still out there no doubt, scratching dandruff out of his hair and wondering where I've gone.

"Where have you been?"

My girlfriend sits on the couch, staring at the TV. Her arms are folded across her chest, her fingers buried loosely into her armpits. Her right leg is crossed over her left, bouncing.

I realize there's no reasonable way to answer this question. Studying rats? I probably won't be feeling any nails in me tonight.

"I'm going to bed," she announces as I sit down on the couch.

I turn off the TV and stare at a blank screen.

#

Sometimes I think the man has a knife. Without a sound he'll lunge forward, launch his weight off his left foot and land on his right in some kind of Kung Fu pose that will drive the knife into the middle of spine. Sometimes I wish he'd hurry up and get on with it.

#

At the moment, the man rides curled up in the backseat of my car. This is a bold move forward for him. He stays crouched down, behind the driver's seat, not moving. The radio is off but his breathing is so soft I can't hear it. I wonder why he never attacks me. He could put a knife to my throat and demand I drive him to a secluded gravel road where he could cut off each non-vital part of my body for his pleasure before leaving me in a pool of blood to be eaten by vultures. I wonder if he'd slowly twist my intestines out of a hole in my stomach and begin to feel sick. But I'm home and he hasn't made a move.

His presence lingers with me as I walk up the stairs to my apartment. I try to forget about his hot breath on my neck as I reach into my pocket for my keys. My pocket knife comes out with the tangled mass of metal and I wonder why I didn't make something happen. I pause before putting my key into the lock. My girlfriend has been silent, staring at me with raised eyebrows for days. The other day I asked her from a safe distance at the other end of the couch:

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

And then there was more silence and more raised eyebrows and one of her feet ticking like a metronome.

I'd rather go on that drive with my shadow man than deal with those eyebrows another night. I turn the key. Tonight, she stops in the middle of carrying folded laundry to the bedroom and smiles, deliberately. I follow her and when she turns I wrap my arms around her from behind, kissing her lightly just below and behind her left ear. When I give her a small bite, her body falls weak against the bed and I fall on top of her. She turns over; I kiss her collar bones; my neck falls close to her mouth; I'm waiting for her teeth to find it, but they don't and the skin on my back begins to crawl.

"Your nails," I tell her.



She doesn't move. My back spasms against the lack of contact.

"Your nails. Dig your nails into my back."

Her palms only clinch onto more of the bed. My shoulders twist and flakes of dandruff dust her breasts from the commotion.

"Please."

Her eyes close.

I draw my face to the other end of her body until finally she quivers and drifts off to sleep without a word. I try to dig my thumbnail into the flesh between two pieces of spinal cord. For hours I contort my back and I get no closer to falling asleep. I roll over and think I see my girlfriend's eyes open. Her body stiffens. She seems to see me, but I can hear the slight snore in her nose as I close the door to the bedroom behind me.

In the darkness of the kitchen I see a black patch out of place and realize the man has become a shadow in my home. My pocket knife sits on the end table with my keys. Keeping my eyes on the man, my fingers find the blade. My stomach drops. I keep hold of the knife behind my back, the blade open, and my eyes trapped on the man in the corner. My back stops twitching and I grip the knife tightly, still holding it behind me. This is it. I move closer and still the shadow does not move, but I'm done anticipating. I'm done waiting for him to attack me. With a quick thrust from my hip I drive the knife forward. I can feel the resistance of his flesh again and again. It's real. It's happening. Until the lights come on and illuminate the dozen holes I've just put in the wall. The man is gone.

My girlfriend stares at me from the doorway to our bedroom, one finger still rests on the light switch. She blinks.

"I'm sorry," I tell her. "I have to go."

The light shines brightly overhead in the hallway on the third floor of our apartment building. The humidity sticks to the hairs on my arms, making them dense and heavy. It's hard to breathe. Downstairs, on the sidewalk, a man in a curved baseball cap looks over his shoulders, one after the other. I watch him stroll down the deserted street, his hands still buried within his jacket. I can feel his anticipation. I pocket my knife and follow him.

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The Space in Burned Houses


Sally Yazwinski

Detroit moves me.
I'm going to set a house on fire.
Set it alight.
A home that's nested close to others.
So close I could touch two if I stood between them with raised arms.
In a neighborhood with people who keep their lawns close.
With shutters carefully painted a color that will pop against brick.
It would have three floors and a basement.

I don't have a good reason for why I'd like to set a house on fire.

I'd wait until the evening,
the sun would melt into the neighbors' roofs.
Navy light would bleed into my horizon,
like water colors on rough paper.

I wouldn't want it to be beautiful, but it might shake out that way.
There's something about flames licking sky as it's beginning to get dark.
I wouldn't want anyone to get hurt.
The house would be empty.
I'd make sure the dogs were outside.



I'd set it on fire and watch it burn colors.
The fucking colors.
And the noises.
Popping like knuckles,
cracking like ice cubes,
hissing like my tire when I drove over a broken screw.

I don't want to give you a good reason for why I'd set a house on fire.

I wouldn't remember my life before it happened.
But that's not the reason.

*Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, **Tony Conaway** has co-written business books published by McGraw-Hill, Macmillan and Prentice Hall, among others. He has written hundreds of articles for magazines as varied as airline flight magazines, architectural reviews, and literary magazines. In addition to four anthologies, his fiction has appeared in Blue Lake Review, Clever, Danse Macabre, qartsiluni, and the Rind Literary Magazine (among others).*

We Have a History

Tony Conaway

"I don't go to a lot of lectures," the gunman said. "Turn left here."

The driver did as he was told. Occasionally he glanced at the .45 in the gunman's right hand, which rested lightly on his left thigh. Despite hitting a few potholes, he kept it pointed at the driver.

"Got to tell you, I was pretty bored. You saved the best part for last."

The driver's mind raced. "Well, that's the way it's supposed to go, isn't it? End big?"


"End big – that's good." The car windows were wide open, but under the roar of incoming air, the driver thought he heard laughter from the gunman.

"What do you want? Money? I don't carry cash."

"Yeah, why is that, Doc? You got this beautiful Cadillac, expensive suit, and you have less than – " With one gloved hand, he turned the driver's wallet upside down and shook the money out onto the car seat. The gun remained pointed at the driver. "- twenty bucks. Why?"

"The nature of my work, I sometimes go to dangerous neighborhoods. I've been robbed, more than once. So I stopped carrying cash."

The gunman stuffed the bills into the pocket of his coat, but left the wallet on the car seat. "This



historic restoration stuff must pay well.”

“It can. It took me years to get a reputation among the right people.”

“You mean rich people.”

“Only people of means can afford my services.”

“Your services? Aside from the Ph.D., what makes you different from an ordinary contractor? And turn left at the light.”

After turning, the driver said, “There are many steps involved. First, a trained researcher goes through all the available records. Then we usually hire archaeologists to dig around the site, and chemical tests are done to see what is original and what has been replaced. Once I compile a full history of how the structure has changed over its lifetime, I let the owner decide which version they want restored.”

“Stay in the left lane. So, doesn’t everyone want their historic house restored to when George Washington slept there?”

“Generally, no. People aren’t willing to give up modern comforts. A colonial-era house would have had huge fireplaces and very small rooms. If you want to watch your big-screen tv, you need to be able to sit back a ways. I suggest compromises.”

“What, they keep the George Washington room like a museum and build a big TV room in back?”


“Something like that, yes.”

The gunman was quiet for a while. He was a big, muscular man with short gray hair. He looked to be in his sixties, but the driver had no illusions that he could overpower the man. Worse, the driver still didn’t know what the gunman wanted.

“It’s cold. Can I close the windows?”

“No. If you make me shoot you, inside a car with the windows shut, it’s liable to blow out my eardrums.”

That wasn’t good. The driver shivered, and not just from the cold.



"Sorry that you didn't find my lecture more...engaging."

"Oh, some of it was interesting. For instance, I always wondered why every Victorian house seemed to have a brick sidewalk in back that stopped in the middle of nowhere."

"Yes, those sidewalks led to the privy. Most Victorians were built before indoor plumbing was available."

"And that thing you said about 'privy archaeology.' That's really big now?"

"Yes. Think of what you could get rid of in the pit underneath a privy. It served as a trash dump as well as a sewage pit."

"Must stink bad, digging that up."

"No, not so much. Most have been filled in for over a hundred years."

It suddenly occurred to the driver that, if this man intended to kill him, he might be thinking about dumping his corpse in a sewage pit somewhere. Or worse, dumping him in one while he was still alive.

"S-so, you said you liked the ending of my lecture. The part about the burned-down building?"


"Yeah, that part was fan-frigging-tastic. You're a regular Sherlock Holmes, figuring out all those facts about a burned building just from the smoke on the building next door. Turn right at this corner."

Is THAT what this was about, the driver wondered? Did this man carjack me after my lecture, because of my analysis of a burned brownstone?

The traffic was sparse. It was too cold for anyone to be on the street. Besides, this was a bad neighborhood. He knew it well: there were several decrepit Victorians in the area, mansions that he cannibalized to rebuild his clients' homes. He even owned one a few blocks away. His contractor had already removed most of the beautiful flooring from the upper stories.

"Yes, well. That only worked because the building that burned down shared a wall with its neighbor. If it was further away, the soot stains wouldn't have been so...revealing."

"It was really amazing, what you could tell from those soot stains. There was a stairway, here, and a



room with a supporting wall, there. That's why I came to see your lecture. I overheard someone talking about it, and I just had to see for myself. Park here."

Yes, they were at the decrepit Victorian mansion he owned. Had the gunman lived here, years ago, and objected to it being taken apart and used to renovate the homes of the wealthy?

"Turn off the engine. And the headlights."

As the driver reached to turn off the ignition, the gunman quickly handcuffed the driver's hand to the steering wheel. He did it fluidly, as if he'd done it many times before.

"Keep quiet, Doc. I left my car here. I need to check that it's still OK." The gunman took the keys and slid quietly out of the car.

With the car stopped, the unreality of his situation struck the driver. He looked carefully at the house for signs that this was all a joke, that his kidnapper was just a man hired to deliver him to a surprise party, and that all his friends were hiding inside.

But no, the house was completely dark. His friends wouldn't stay in the dark in a rat-infested building.

He snorted. Did he really have any friends? Neighbors, colleagues and golfing buddies, but real friends? Certainly, there was no one at home waiting for him.

He could yell for help, but this side street was deserted at night. The entire block had once been the gardens of the old Victorian mansion. Now it was dotted with warehouses and small businesses, unoccupied at night.

He checked his pockets and found nothing useful. The gunman had taken his cell phone. And this was a classic Cadillac, built before they installed OnStar or whatever modern Caddys used. A restored classic car – it went with his restoration work. If only he'd driven his Mercedes today!

The gunman returned and slipped back into the car. "Miss me?"

"Now what?"

"Now we wait." He looked at his watch. Young people rarely wore watches any more, but this kidnapper was older than his victim. "Not long."



"Are you going to tell me what this is all about?"

"You're a smart guy. Guess."

"Was this your house? Did you grow up here?"

The idea stuck the gunman as funny. "My house? We're here because you own this building. The first time I was here was yesterday, when I scoped the place out."

"OK. Let me think. In criminal cases – and you know that the FBI investigates kidnapping – the first rule is to follow the money. But I AM my business. I contract out the archaeology, the architectural drawing, and all the construction. All I handle is the contract and the historical research on the restoration. My entire staff consists of a receptionist and an assistant. Oh, I have an unpaid intern at the moment, too."

The gunman said nothing.

"The point is, if you kill me, my business is worthless."

"No family to ransom you?"

The driver shook his head. "My ex-wife hates my guts. We never had kids. When I die, my money goes to my alma mater. My ex can expect far more by keeping me alive and working for another twenty years."

"Well, you're right. It's not about money."


"I never saw you before. Did someone who hates me hire you to kill me?"

"No. I'm a lone gunman in this case. No one hired me."

"This isn't fair! I don't understand!" He started to struggle.

The gunman's left fist, encased in a driving glove, shot out and hit the driver in the side of the head. The driver immediately stopped struggling.

"Quiet down. I told you that I heard that you did this amazing Sherlock Holmes bit about the burned building. That's why I came to your lecture. See, I'm the guy who was paid to burn that building down. And I wanted to know if you could somehow tell who did the job."



“No, NO! I can’t deduce anything like that! I was trained as an architectural historian, not in criminal forensics. I wasn’t interested in what caused the fire. And even the fire inspector couldn’t prove it was arson.”

“Yeah, I’m good at my job. I’ve been a successful arsonist-for-hire a long time. Emphasis on “for hire” – I’m not some perv who starts fires for fun. But the cops keep coming up with new forensics techniques. I lucked out when they started using DNA. Dumb luck: fire destroys DNA. But who knows what else they’ll come up with next?”

“Please, I’m not with the police.”

“I read this amazing thing. Did you know that each of us has colonies of bacteria living on us and inside us? And that each person’s arrangement of bacteria is unique? Someday, they may be able to take a sample of the bacteria you leave behind, and I.D. you just like you left a fingerprint!”

“You KNOW that I couldn’t deduce anything about the person who started the fire! So why am I here?”

“Calm down. I’ll uncuff you, but not if you’re going to panic again.”

The driver made an open-handed gesture of surrender. The gunman exited the car again, went around to the driver’s side, opened the door, and carefully uncuffed the driver.


Then the gunman produced a large baggie. “Slowly, take out your valuables and put them in this bag. That fancy watch, that ring, money clip if you have one. Put your wallet in, too – it’s on the car seat.”

After the driver put the items in the baggie, the gunman dropped keys to the Caddy in, then sealed the bag and put in his pocket. Desperately, the driver hoped this was just some sort of bizarre robbery. Maybe the gunman hated people who cannibalized old houses, and was going to leave him broke and afoot in a bad neighborhood.

The gunman looked at his watch again. “It’s time. Out of the car.”

The driver exited the car.

“That front porch doesn’t look safe. We’ll go around to the side door.”



They did so. There was a cracked concrete driveway; the driver noticed that the gunman was careful to stay on the concrete. To avoid leaving footprints in the soil?

“Stop here.” They were under the port-cochere. The driver was sure the gunman didn’t know the technical name. Like most people, he probably just called it an overhang or a giant carport.

“So congratulate me, Doc. This is my last job. I’ve decided to retire. I’ve got enough money, and the cops and the firemen and the insurance investigators keep getting cleverer. Time to get out. There’s just a few loose ends to take care of.”

“Uh, congratulations?”

“You’re right that I didn’t have to do this. But you’re wrong about one thing: we do know each other.”

“I-I don’t – “

“Twenty-nine years ago. We never actually met. But you hired me over the phone to torch a building. It was one of my first jobs, in fact.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. You had me burn down your house. With your parents in it. You didn’t get along with them, and they cut you off. I understand you used your student loan money to pay me.”

“My Dad was –“

“Save it. You know, except for a few firemen, your parents were the only ones I killed in my entire career. The firemen – well, that comes with the territory. They knew the risks, and I didn’t mean to kill them. But your parents - when I took that job I didn’t realize that killing your parents would bother me. But it has, for all these years. And I want some closure.”

“So this isn’t about my lecture?”

“I was curious if you could figure out who set the fire. But mostly, it just gave me the idea for this.”

“We never met...back then. How did you –“

“You think I didn’t check you out when you hired me? That’s how guys who work for hire usually



get caught – they take a job from an undercover cop. I knew your name, your face, everything about you.”

There were railroad tracks nearby. A train was coming. It was very loud in the cold night.

The architect sighed. He knew what was coming. He looked up at the house, and thought: *three-story Second Empire house, mansard roof, fish-scale shingles, port-cochere*. All this knowledge, about to be lost forever.

Without looking at the gunman, he asked, “Don’t you own a silencer?”

But it was time. When the train blew its whistle, it drowned out the sound of the gunshot.

The gunman glanced around. The street was still empty. Then he looked down at the dying man.

“Sure I do, Doc. But I need people to think you voluntarily stopped by this old house you use in your renovations. And some mook held you up and shot you. Muggers don’t carry silencers.”

In the cold air, he could see the steam from his victim’s breath, as well as from the gunshot wound. It took less than a minute for his breathing to stop.

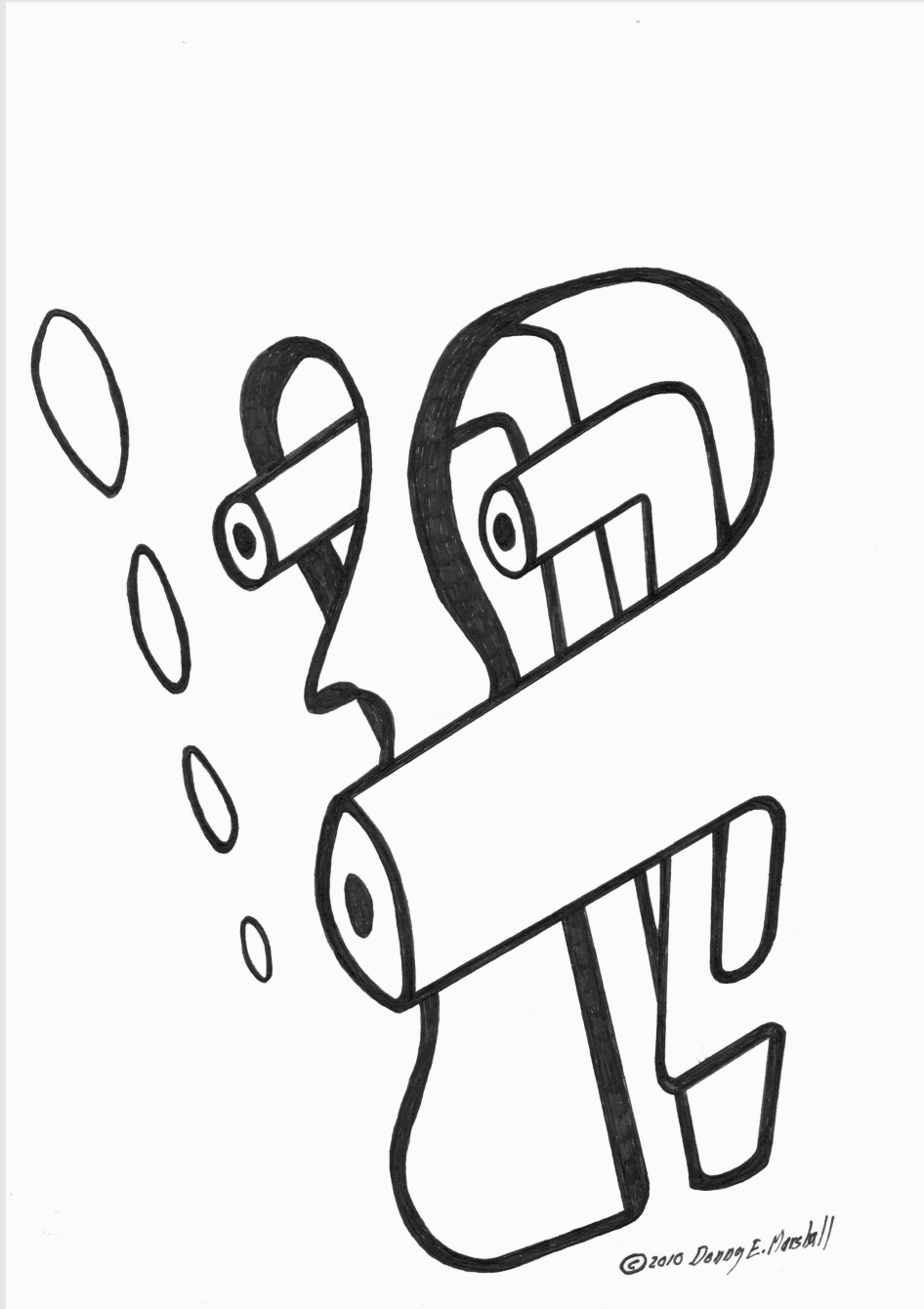
He walked back to the Caddy. With his gloved hand, he took the car keys out of the baggie and put them in the lock of the driver’s side door. There was a Methadone Clinic two blocks away. Once it was light, junkies would be walking by to get their fix. One of them might spot the keys and steal the car. Confusing things suited him. He hoped that he hadn’t left any hair or fiber in the car, but some risks had to be taken. Vacuuming the car would leave its own evidence.

And if he left his bacteria, well, he hoped he would be dead before the cops learned how to I.D. a person from that.

He gave a last look to be sure that the corpse couldn’t be seen from the street. He didn’t live in this city; he preferred to be out of town before the corpse was discovered.

He walked swiftly down the block towards the car he was driving, and disappeared into the night.

Denny E. Marshall has had art and poetry published. Some recent credits include cover art or *Petrichor Machine* issue #4, interior art and poetry in *Stinkwaves* Spring 2014. He does have a website with previously published works. The web address is <http://www.dennymarshall.com>



Sounds of Pipes
Denny E. Marshall

