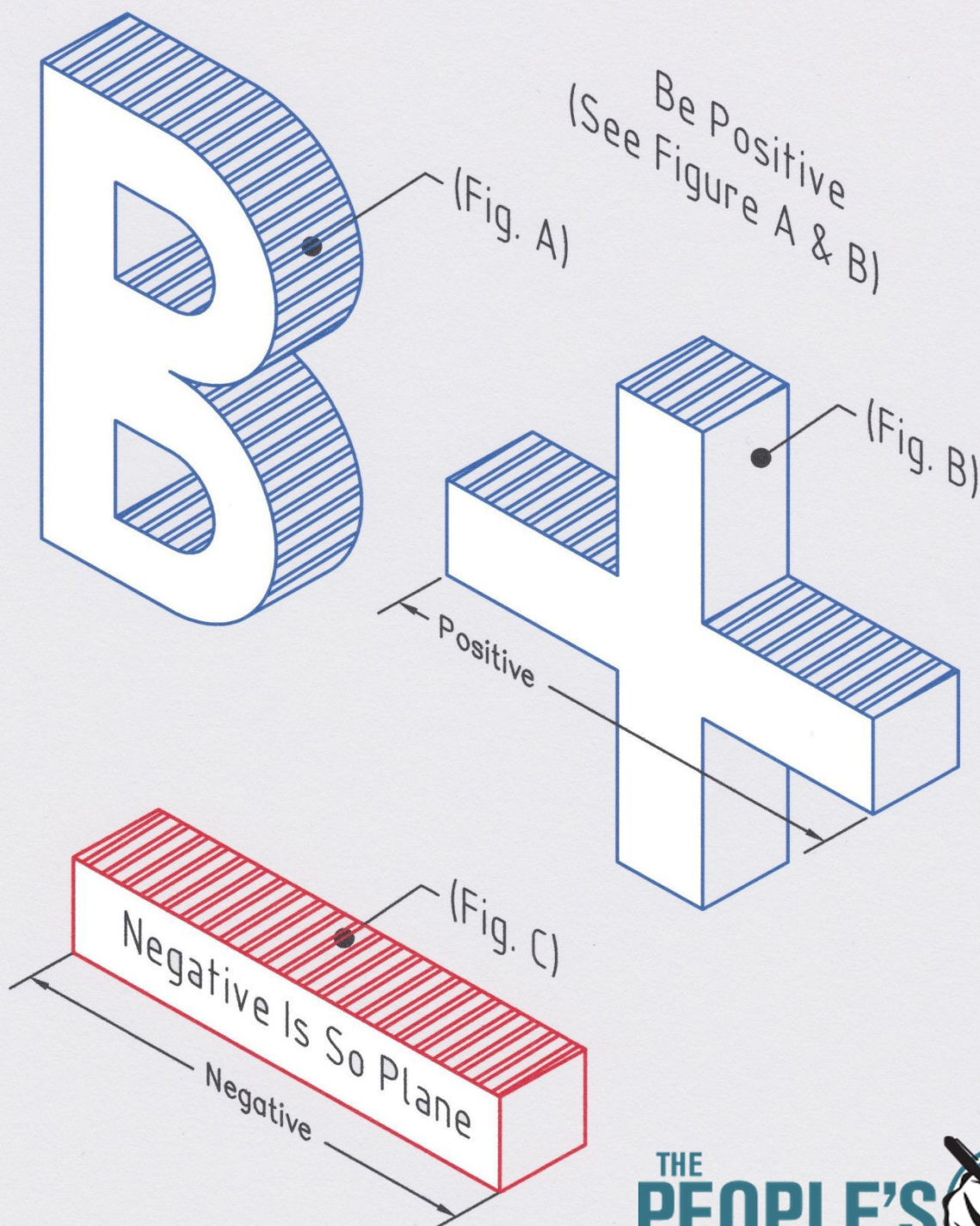


Typehouse

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LITERARY MAGAZINE





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 We are always looking for well-crafted, previously unpublished, writing that seeks to capture an awareness of the human predicament.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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My Grandmother Was Buried In Ink Blotches

Amy Friedman

My grandmother was buried in ink blotches
on my grandfather's forearm, her final resting place.
He'd paid tribute to her with his buddies during the war
one drunken night aboard an aircraft carrier,
whiskey shots circumscribed by young love.
The orchids encircling her autograph
ultimately devoured it, blue/black clots
feasting on her remains.
Grandpa's arm blossomed into a narrative
from which she'd been redacted.
Like a bridge collapsing,
the embellished script
went under with the weight of years
leaving only a mud puddle, bigger than her name.
His skin could not contain her.
Instead, it orchestrated her erasure,
his limb a cemetery carrying the dead weight
of what they'd once been to each other,
a devotion we could no longer see.

Kyle Hemmings lives and works in New Jersey. He has been published in *Your Impossible Voice*, *Night Train*, *Toad*, *Matchbox* and elsewhere. His latest ebook is *Father Dunne's School for Wayward Boys* at [amazon.com](http://upatberggasse19.blogspot.com/). He blogs at <http://upatberggasse19.blogspot.com/>

The Unexpected Guest


Kyle Hemmings

My sister and I heard a crash in the middle of the night. We went to check on mother, who since hearing the news of father's death in the war, had locked herself in a guest room, had made it her own island. She hardly recognized us any more, only smiled and came out for necessities. We searched each room of the house until working up to the attic. There he was, legs splayed, arms akimbo, mumbling a language of impenetrable consonants and mystifying vowels, a soldier, not one of ours, had smashed through our flimsy roof, bits of his parachute that could not glide him safely into a new amnesia.

My sister, who claimed she only dreamed during the day and remained blank at night, turned to me and asked "What shall we do? Kill him? After all, his kind swept father into the skies." "No," I said, "not kill him. At least, not yet. He's now our prisoner." At first, we tied his hands and feet with the cord father used for Sunday projects. We fed him only enough so he wouldn't turn into a cloud, gave him enough water so he wouldn't turn into stone.

When he became fully conscious, he smiled and acted like he knew us all his life. At times, he chatted incessantly and laughed at what I imagined were his own answers. We untied his hands and feet but kept him weak enough, thin enough, so as not to overpower us and escape. My sister had taken his gun and playfully pointed it at him, sometimes saying "Pow!" He would wince.

She would ask from time to time, if he had killed our father. His large blue eyes were uncomprehending. She asked "Did you ever see our father?" I said to her, "You are dreaming again. He wouldn't even know what our father looked like." Slowly, we began to understand each other somewhat through hand signals, the communication of basic



needs.

We sang hymns to him or played chess, always beating him. Meanwhile, mother was still her own prisoner in another dimension of the guest room, talking to shadows. One night, she disappeared during an air raid, had perhaps broke from her self-containment, but at the wrong time. Perhaps, she was dreaming of being reunited with father, of meeting him by the train tracks.

Over time, as the prisoner aged and we grew tall and lanky, he treated us as his children making regular visits. He was so happy to see us. We allowed him to perform chores in the house, to make us meals. We dressed him in father's old civilian clothes. We let him loose outside the house, us, sneaking at a safe distance behind him, giggling, watching him stumble or become flustered when a stranger asked him a question. He never did learn our language. And we never told him when the war was over.

Goran Sedlar spends his time reading books, watching movies and hosting a weekly podcast show where, with his friends, they make fun of bad films. What he does for a living is mostly boring so he is forced to invent his own realities. "Remake" is his first attempt at writing a short story in English, although it is not his first published story. Goran was born in Zagreb, Croatia, where he still lives and shares his territory with two cats and a crazy cat lady

REMAKE

Goran Sedlar

Geraldine's life was nothing like the movies.

There was no plot, no budget, no beautiful people making everyday moments unique. There was no soundtrack in the background helping her distinguish meaningful things from the trivial, handing out cues when to cry and when to be happy.


There were no twists. If someone was written out of the story, they stayed out. She couldn't hang out with them in the reruns, she couldn't visit them in the theme parks, no matter how many angry fan emails she sent they'd never come back for the sequel.

So when her father announced that Mom was coming back home, *this was* something straight out of a movie.

Straight out of a horror film.

#

Father had them lined up at the front door, standing still, feeling like their lives were about to change forever.



The whole house was in an uproar. They had to clean everything until the place was smelling as if no one had been living there, as if this was one of those stores where people would go to check out the furniture and pretend they own it, pretend they could buy the kind of life they always wanted.

For Francis, it had all been a game. It had just been an excuse to run around the house and role-play. Francis the pirate, the hunter for lost toys scattered across the living room. Francis the cowboy, the fastest window cleaner in the Wild West. Francis the irritating little brother, a naive boy who can easily be tricked into performing boring house chores.


For Grandmother, all this excitement was a bottled fountain of youth. This was having at least ten years knocked off her mileage. She was able to clean herself (by herself) and carry on an intelligent conversation like her mind was present. Like she occupied the same reality with the rest of them. She dressed herself nicely, put on her shiniest dentures, and replaced the batteries on her hearing aid. And for some time now she appeared to be relevant. Like an old computer that had finally been upgraded.

Geraldine was the only one who kept reminding them this thing coming to visit wasn't really anyone's mother, or a wife or a daughter. They didn't owe any cleanliness or courtesy or politeness to this person. Had they all turned into Grandma and forgotten what had happened?

Father was the weakest link in this moronic family chain. Maybe she could've won over Francis to her side—what did he really know about their mother, having spent more time inside her than outside her—or Grandmother—who, if you were cruel, could've been easily convinced she never really had a daughter in the first place—but not Dad. Dad was an unrelenting force of joy.

He had dressed in his best suit (Geraldine wasn't hundred percent, but it looked like the suit Mom had bought for him), had taken a haircut, trimmed his nails, splashed some acrid cologne, and was now fidgeting his fingers nervously. For Dad, this was a date. For Dad, this was the best thing that has happened to him. Well, not counting the births of Geraldine and Francis of course. And not counting the day he had married their mother, of course. And the day he had slept with their mother for the first time (of course), but she was sure he would've never admitted to something like that.

Now, as they were wasting their Saturday evening standing by the front door, came a knock, and they all knew it was Mom. But not really Mom, Geraldine reminded herself. Just this woman who wasn't really anything to them. And Geraldine was a tiny bit glad the moment finally arrived. Not because of the visitor. No, no, no. Because, come tomorrow, everyone will have realized what she had been saying all along. And they could resume being them old, broken, selves.



The door opened to a woman in her forties.

"Hello," said the father, breaking this silence that had started to grow eyes, making them feel uncomfortable. "Did you have trouble finding the place?"

"No," responded the woman. "No, no trouble at all." And she stepped inside. Into their house, into their lives, with a confidence of having belonged there since... well, *always*. With an ease of being gone for a few hours instead of eight years.

"Hi Mom," said the woman to Grandma and hugged her like a life jacket. "Hi Frankenstein," she said, turning to Francis and embracing him like he was the long lost half of her self.

But the voice was wrong. Mom had had a warm voice like earmuffs covering your ears. This woman was a cartoon princess that was singing duets with wild animals. The voice was a mistake. Too big for Geraldine's memories.

"Hi, Gerry."

"It's Geraldine," said Geraldine and offered her a handshake. She didn't want to hug her. She didn't want to touch her either but completely ignoring her would've broken her father's heart. And she didn't have anything against her father's heart.

"Love your hair Geraldine," the mother woman said and accepted the handshake. Gerry sensed a bit of a resentment in the way her hand was grabbed.


"Hi Teddy," the mother said to her father.

"Hello," said Father, and fidgeted his fingers. "You look... beautiful."

No, she doesn't, thought Gerry. She looks nothing like she was supposed to look.

Her father took the mother's coat off and invited her to the dining room. Soon they were all at the table where everything had been prepared for a lovely dinner that was about to begin. A shy conversation started that tripped on too many awkward silences to have been enjoyable.

For the half an hour or so Gerry stared at the woman who was to be her mother and scrutinized her presence like it was a blasphemy. The woman's hair was wrong (it was longer than it was supposed to be) and the makeup was completely off because her mother, her real mother, would've never overused it like this. And there was this body language of her laugh that looked as if



she was suffering from some sort of disease of the nervous system. Nobody laughs that hard. Nobody throws their arms all over the place like they're drowning.

"What about you Gerry, any boys in your life?"

"Huh?"

"Do you like someone at school?"

"Yeah, that's personal."

"Well, Gerry, I am your mother."

"No, you are not," fumed Geraldine. She couldn't pretend any longer. All this insanity had been taken too far. She loved her father and everything, but enough is enough.

"Geraldine," interrupted her father, "don't talk to your mother like that."

"She's not my mother! My mother died eight years ago! If she's Mom where are the scars on her wrists?!"

It was like someone had screamed in a library.

"If she's Mom who died in our bathtub?!"

"Someone died?" asked Grandma, snapped out of her numbness.


"That's enough Geraldine. Go to your room," ordered her father.

"I just-"

"Now!"

There was nothing more to be said. As she was climbing the stairs to her room she could hear her little brother ask "Were you really dead?" and the strange woman answering "No, Frankenstein, I was just on a business trip. And that's kind of like being dead."

#



Geraldine woke up. It was four in the morning. She couldn't remember when she fell asleep and the state she was in, she would've probably slept until noon if it wasn't for her body insisting it was time to pee. She crept out of her room and was about to walk in the bathroom when she decided to investigate some noise coming from downstairs.

It was the woman, the mother-thing, putting on her shoes.

When she finished with the shoes, she took her coat off the hanger and stopped in front of the large living room mirror. It was still dark, too dark to see clearly, but Geraldine was able to discern the woman wasn't touching up her hair or anything, no, she had removed it from her head completely, revealing it to be nothing more than a blond wig.

Now, as a short-haired brunette, the woman looked kind of beautiful. As if that brown hair was the hair her head was made for.

Quietly, the mother-thing exited through the front door leaving Geraldine to finish what she had started. She went back to the bathroom and sat down on the toilet. Unlike her bladder, her mind was not relieved. The facts kept pounding inside her head. Again and again and again. Like an annoying song you desperately wanted to forget.

It was four in the morning, and the woman's clothes looked like they had been slept in. Geraldine understood the meaning behind that. She was not a little girl anymore.


Before being someone's mother, you have to be someone else's wife.

#

The next day Dad surprised her by announcing to everyone how yesterday's dinner went great and how, because of it, Mom would be coming back for another visit. Today.

When Francis began to celebrate the news by jumping around Grandma and shouting with glee, Father pulled Geraldine to the side and politely said to her, "Give this thing a chance Gerry. I promise, your feelings will change."

And she said, "Okay," but what she really meant to say was "Okay, I'll try to do that, but, hey, I'm just a teenager Dad, anything could happen."



Mom returned that evening.

Her long blond hair looked a bit different, and the makeup she was wearing was more discrete, but that thing still wasn't her mother. This was obvious as soon as the woman started speaking.

They were having dinner again. Mother decided to steal the show by making sure she didn't stop talking. She was going on about how wonderful the experience of carrying Geraldine had been, about the names Dad and her had argued about before they had settled on "Francis" for Francis. About a movie, they'd seen on their first date. All the usual stuff that make one's origin story.

But as hard as she tried Geraldine was unable to buy it. This person wasn't her mother. Even her stories sounded a bit... well... *wrong*. As if she had learned them by heart, as if she was reciting them exactly the way they were supposed to be recited. Like for a crowd. A bit too perfect. A bit too well rehearsed. And all these details about her mother being a secret agent in her youth, and the reason she'd met Dad was because he was assigned to her as a target, and how Dad had proposed to Mom while they were both hanging from a tall crane and below them gas trucks were being engulfed in a tremendous explosions. Well, that's not how things had happened. None of that stuff was true.

During one of Mother's long speeches, Grandma surprised Geraldine with one of her sudden flashes of sanity as she leaned to her ear and whispered, "This is not your mother. This woman is nothing like her. Why is she pretending she is? Why would somebody do that? Is it for the money?"

The mother-thing didn't hear the remark and continued with her stories. About how she had visited Italy, during her college years, and fell in love with Italian cuisine.

Unlike team Grandma and Geraldine, Francis was eating these stories like they were delicious pasta covered in tomato sauce. He loved the little jokes the mother inserted into her anecdotes. The wink she made with her unnaturally blue eyes. The expensive smell of her perfume. The motherly warmth she was radiating with. For Francis, she was Mommy dearest.

Geraldine was hundred percent her father loved the mother too. Not for her stories or her charm, but because she had those huge plastic breasts, bigger than anything her real Mom ever had, and good old Dad was drooling over them with his eyes, like he was baby Francis, eight years ago, and hungry. Dad was a boy; this was what all boys are like.

"That's precious," and "ha, ha, ha," was what Dad was saying now and then. Classic Dad. Classic Dad trying to be classically present, and there, and involved. Notice me. Notice me, you big



breasted rip-off of my wife.

Geraldine saw there was a notepad next to Dad's plate. Every other minute he would scribble something on it. Every time Mom delved into some new story about their past Dad would make a note. Like he was keeping track of her. Like she was delivering her lines from a script and Dad was making sure she didn't miss any.

"Can I be excused?" asked Geraldine politely, interrupting the Mother right in the middle of a funny story about Mom's prom night. "I have to go to the bathroom."

"Oh, come on, Gerry," laughed Dad, "I'm not running a jail here, you can pee when you want."

"And shit!" jumped in Francis, laughing at his little boy joke.

"Language, Frankenstein," reprimanded the mother-thing. "Little boys don't use that kind of words."

And Geraldine could see her father was pleased about the mother disciplining him. This was proof for him the mother-thing cared about the boy, that's why she is hard on him. But the most terrifying thing was that Francis replied "Sorry," and then the punch line, "Mommy". She got him. She got him hanging from her boob.

Geraldine went to the bathroom to pretend to pee. She was crying as she was browsing through her phone eager to share with everyone how much her life sucked. Maybe she should post a video of a depressing song. Or a selfie of her crying face. Or a picture of a dead animal. Anything that'll make her virtual friends feel just like she does.

It's so much easier when the world is crying with you.


When she came back, the mother-thing was on her feet and circling the table, collecting the dirty dishes.

"So guys, what'd you like to have tomorrow?"

"The same!" cried Francis.

"This was delicious, honey," said Father. "I can go with a little of the same too."

"I wanna go to bed," said Grandma.



Geraldine was the only one there seeing the bigger picture, only one not focusing on the promise of food, which by the way, if we talk about this particular meal, the mother hadn't even cooked. The mother-thing was here to stay. This whole agony was going to repeat itself tomorrow. And then the day after that, and then... well, the picture was there for everyone to see. Except everyone was blind.

"Whoa!" said the mother. "Whoa, whoa, whoa!" And Francis giggled like an idiot each time she said it. "Look at the time. Excuse me guys, Mommy's got to powder her nose." And she was off to the bathroom. And Geraldine sat there for a while feeling like crying again and then jumped out of her chair and ran after her.

Shit! She'd left her phone back in there. The separation anxiety was already starting to kick in. All those calls and messages she was missing. All the gossip, all the news, all the reminders. The world could be ending right now, and she would never have known it.

Geraldine knocked on the bathroom door, just to give the mother a split second notice to pull up her panties or hide any other embarrassment she was doing in there, and stormed in.

"Sorry, I forgot my phone."

The woman who pretended to be her mother was already relaxing, her blonde wig removed, half the makeup wiped off her face (but clumsily, like she was a hooker at the end of a long night's work). Her dress had been laid over the closed toilet seat, and she was sitting in an empty bathtub, like a lost girl, hugging her knees and long legs covered in silk stockings. Between her red lips was a lit cigarette and she was blowing smoke straight at an open window above the bathtub. Yeah, just like a little-lost-girl.

"Occupied!" cried the woman.

Geraldine picked up the phone and waved it at her, saying, "Sooooorry." But there was something in this little-lost-girl appearance Geraldine was able to relate to, and she quickly added, "Can I have one?", meaning the cigarette.

"Sure," replied the lost girl and handed her the pack.

"Aren't you supposed to forbid me to smoke?"

"Well, for the next 25 minutes, no, not really."

"What do you mean?" asked Geraldine and lit the cigarette.



"I'm not your mother for the next 25 minutes."

"Wait," said Geraldine, as it clicked in her head, and she exhaled one deep sigh of nicotine, "Did my Dad hire you?"

"Not me directly, the company I work for," said the lost girl and handed Geraldine her card.

It read: "Lazarus Experimental Theater" and then "We bring your loved ones back" and then "We never break character" and there were an email address and a phone number and a promise of a fifty percent discount for a first hire.

"So, you're a slave?" asked Geraldine. She forgot about her cigarette. This was way cooler than any smoke she ever had.

"I'm an actress. This is just a gig. Eight hours a day for the next six months I get to be your mother. If your dad is pleased, I will be hired for a lifetime."

"Lifetime? Jesus."

"Yeah, well, it beats waitressing."

"Do you have to sleep with him?"

The lost girl paused for a second, rolled her makeup-stained eyes, and smiled.

"Sweetie, your Dad doesn't have that kind of money."

Geraldine noticed how the lost girl sounded completely different from the role she was hired to play. Her voice was kind of sweet, gentle and calm. And she looked like that too. Lose this messed up makeup, fake tits and the wardrobe of a forty-year-old woman and she could almost be Geraldine's age.

"You're kind of honest about the whole thing. Don't you have to pretend? Like all the time? It says here you never break character, doesn't that mean pretending all the time?"

"Not all the time," said the lost girl and extinguished her cigarette in a piece of rolled up toilette paper. "For eight hours a day. But I get to have a thirty-minute break. That's why it's called a break, 'cause you get to break the character."



"I didn't know that."

"Well, you're still a kid, so you're excused."

When they returned to the table, the lost girl was the mother-thing again. The makeup restored, the wig back on, everything. This time Gerry didn't hate the woman as much, she kind of found her to be cool. But she could never love this woman. Sure, she could tolerate the made up stories about her mother's past or even the different body language and personality, but not the lack of emotion. There was no love in this woman. No passion for life. For her children. The lost girl playing her mother was as alive as Mrs. Gareth reading out loud the exam grades.

This was a job, not a life.


Grandma never revisited her sanity again. For the next couple of days, Geraldine tried to persuade her grandmother to team up against Dad and force him to pull a plug on the whole thing, but Grandma wasn't there anymore. The demented grandmother loved, l-o-v-e-d, the new mother, the new daughter. She loved the stories about how Grandma was really Her Majesty Elizabeth the Second, and how she had been fed up with her blue blood lifestyle and how she had orchestrated this master plan that involved escaping the Buckingham Palace, switching places with her double, and assuming the new identity of one Mariah Brooks, just an ordinary housewife with a husband and two daughters. And how she had learned to be the best mother in the world and raised her daughters to become master spies and powerful warriors.

It was a kind of idiotic reinvention of a history only a demented person could appreciate, making Grandma the perfect target audience for it.

#

The days went by like a montage sequence in movies.

Bit by bit the mother was shaping the house to match her new vision. Of course, it started with the furniture and simply moving things around and buying new things and making sure the interior resembled the days when her original had lived there. But like with everything else associated with this woman the change didn't reflect the past, rather it showed a strange kind of future. Eerily familiar, yet different. Like it was a memory no one really had.



Dad followed her around. He didn't carry his notepad anymore, no, he had gone high-tech and, every now and then, dictated words into his cellphone.

"What's your favorite color?" asked the fake mother one day when they were browsing through the latest furniture catalog.

"Err... I don't know. No one ever asked me that," replied Dad. And he whispered something to his smartphone and then he said to her, "You decide. Make it better."

Like everything else, she made it newer.

#

Geraldine found her father in his study. He was sitting on the floor surrounded by hundreds of his CDs and going through them like a junkie, making an obsessive inventory and writing down little pluses and minuses on a piece of paper.

"Are you throwing them away? Is it because of her?"

"Of course not honey, I'm just organizing my things."

"Dad, I know the whole story. I know she's just an actress."


Her father stopped and stared into her eyes. She could see his mind going through excuses like they were CDs, trying to find the perfect one.

"Why didn't you tell me? I get why not tell Francis or Grandma, but me, Dad?"

She stared back at his big, brown, anime eyes. For a moment there she was sure he would fall to pieces and start to cry.

"Oh, Gerry baby, you were probably just dreaming."

As soon as he uttered those words she was catapulted back. Way, way, back. She was seven, and it was a great day for being a kid, she had just finished playing in the mire, and the rain outside was watering down the world like it was God's special little garden. Her yellow boots were brown, and she was running up the stairs to tell her mother how being caught in the rain without an umbrella



wasn't really that bad. Mom was in the bathroom, so she pushed the door and said "Mommy?" only to find her mother lying in the steamy bath with her wrists cut open and hands as red as if she had been messing around with finger-paints.

Days later, when enough time had passed even a seven-year-old could understand that Mom will not be coming back, she crawled into her Father's bed and asked why had Mom done that? And he replied, gently stroking her hair, "Oh, Gerry baby, it was all just a dream. Mom is away on a business trip."

The flashback ended, and she was left with an understanding she could finally wrap her head around. It wasn't that her father was treating her like an idiot, it was just that his magic had worn off. A long time ago he was a powerful magician, one who could throw a white sheet over an elephant and make it disappear, make any huge terrifying thing disappear, but now, today, Geraldine could see the dirty trunk sticking out, the feet under the sheet, the whole embarrassing act. Now he had no power at all. And it wasn't because he'd lost the touch, it was because she wasn't the same.

When you grow up, the invisible wires are not that invisible anymore.

#

Something was missing.

Geraldine had a crappy day at school, one of the worst. There had been a fight with a friend and a break up with a boy and she had been *this* close to losing it and getting herself suspended so that when she finally got home she had only enough strength to throw herself on the bed and lie there with her eyes open.

Dry eyes.

But something else was wrong. Something she couldn't quite pinpoint.

She took a yellow piece of blank paper and started imagining her suicide letter.

But it didn't do the trick this time. She felt the same.

Geraldine turned on the MP3 player and maxed the volume.

Nope.



There was still a hole.

There was still a part of her not quite there.

She stood up on the bed and started jumping up and down screaming her lungs out.

But it didn't work, and she dropped to her knees, fighting for air like she had just been chased. And her eyes were crazy with stress, and her eyes were all over the place and that was when she found it. It was there. Above her bed, above her pillow, the thing that was missing.

Her room was covered with posters of her teenage gods, wall to wall. Usually, you couldn't tell the color of the wallpapers underneath, but now you could. It was pink with red hearts, 'cause you could see a naked patch of the wall above her pillow. There was no poster there. Just a piece of plain wallpaper revealing to everyone that underneath all that deliberate taste in movies she was still a little girl.

Her poster of Leonardo DiCaprio was gone.

#

The mother-thing was skipping around in the kitchen and singing like she was on drugs.

"Ain't no sunshine when he's gone" and "Don't worry be happy" and Geraldine was thinking about ghosts and how if the Ghostbusters had only been real she would have called them by now.

The house smelled of cookies and tomato soup and cinnamon. Grandma was wearing her prettiest dress she had probably bought back in World War Two, and Francis was sitting at the table and playing video games on his tablet.

"Where's Dad?"

"Oh, he'll be running a little late."

"You don't have to pretend when he's not around... these two don't understand a thing anyway."

"Why, Gerry, I don't know what on earth are you talking about?"

She was wearing an apron with little red hearts and had a pair of huge oven gloves, thick enough to slap something without breaking a nail. She placed the steamy tray of food on the table. The



smell of the freshly made tomato soup sweetened Geraldine's spite.

By the time they moved to the mashed potatoes in mushroom sauce there was still no trace of Dad.

"Did he call at all?" asked Geraldine, filling her plate with a ladle full of mushroom gravy.

"No, darling, he didn't," cooed the mother-thing, like she was about to burst into a song.

"He's never late," said Geraldine and whipped out her phone.

"No phones at the table darling."

"I just wanna check-"

"Darling," growled the mother-thing, a thin layer of anger brewing under those words, "please put down the phone. We're having dinner here."

This was the side of her Geraldine never saw before. She lowered the phone under the table.

"Maybe something happened..."

"Don't worry darling, everything is okay. Your father is just running late from his business trip."

Business trip?

The words slapped Geraldine out of her body.

She jumped out of the chair and darted for her parents' bedroom.


"Dad? Daad?"

The room was empty. So was the bathroom. Francis' room. The living room.

"Daaaaaad?"

No one was answering.

She called his phone, she checked the garage, she started to cry.



"Calm down darling, why are you acting like this?"

"What've you done to him?!"

They were having a standoff in the middle of the hall. The long narrow space seemed to amplify Geraldine's fear into anger.

"Darling, Gerry..."

"Don't call me that you stupid fucking bitch!"

But before Geraldine could grab something to throw at the mother-thing, the front door rattled and opened.

"Hi girls," said the man and stepped inside the house.

Geraldine stared at his beautiful face the way she'd stare at something hanging on the wall of her room.

"Hi, Gerry Sherry."

"It's baby... Gerry baby," she whispered.

"Whoa, sorry baby, don't know how that happened."

"Hi honey," said her fake Mom and kissed her fake Dad. It was an explosive kiss, not one of those "hi-darling" pecks on the lips, but a spit-swap worthy of a big budget explosions flowering in the background of their passion.

"Where's my Dad, my REAL Dad?"

The father-thing blinked incredulously with those knee-shivering eyes, smiled with that wrist-slitting face.

"But, Baby Gerry, I'm here," said the face of her favorite actor of all time. "I've always been here."

"You okay sweetheart?" asked her Mom. "You look as if you've seen a ghost."



"I don't know," said Gerry Baby Sherry Sweetheart Geraldine. "I think I'm having a nightmare."

Her new father stepped toward her ready to give her a hug. Even his smell was a smell of a celebrity's line of perfume.

"Oh Gerry Baby, no more bad dreams, I'm here to protect you," said the face of Leonardo DiCaprio.

"Stay away from me," she said. In another world, she would be running headfirst into his arms, but not in the world where he was pretending to be her father.

"Okay," he said, "we won't do anything you wouldn't like, right Mom?"

"Right," said the mother-thing. "We just want to love you."

"There's the door," said Leonardo DiCaprio lookalike and pointed toward the open front door through which he had just entered. "There's the whole wide world waiting for you if you want it. You don't have to stay here."

The promise of freedom was too sweet to resist, Geraldine slowly walked by the mother-thing and Leonardo DiCaprio until she was one step away from getting the hell out of there.

And then she stopped.


She couldn't move. She couldn't force herself to leave. The whole world was in front of her, but it was too big, it was never as big as at that precise moment. It was a monstrous mouth that was either gonna swallow her or spit her out.

"Well," said Leonardo DiCaprio, "don't tell me you're having second thoughts?"

"I'm not," she said. She was having first thoughts; she was thinking about how life had been great when she was a little girl and didn't have to think about anything, worry about anyone.

"What are my options again?" she asked.

"Well, you can stay here and be loved," he said. Forever was implied. "Or you can go out there and take your chance. But if you stay here you're gonna have to learn to relax some more, to stop asking so many questions. To enjoy the ride. To stay our little girl. And no more that sassy attitude your mother was telling me about."



"But I'll never be free," she said as if the girl her age could grasp the size of what that means.

"Well," said her Father, "choose. You can be loved, or you can be free. But you can't have both. You'll never have both." He said it like a real parent, like he knew that the best kind of promise must have a ring of threat to it.

For a few moments Geraldine was all thoughts and anxiety but ultimately she decided this was too hard, this was too much of an effort.

She grabbed the door handle and gently closed the door from the inside.

When she turned to face her parents she saw Father welcoming her with his arms wide open.

"C'mon Gerry Baby, c'mon and give me a hug."

She could sense Christmas lights in her brain slowly powering off. All that stress of thinking too much was lifted away as she fell into his arms. Her eyes closed, and her embrace tightened around the man who was asking for permission to be her father, to be her brain, to be her decision maker. In the corner of her mouth, a drop of an escaped drool formed and for the first time, in a long time, she didn't care how she looked to the world.

"Okay," she said and stuttered, "O-okay... da... err... d..."

It was no use.

Her mind was no longer her own.

...

Roll credits.

END

Stephen Scott Whitaker is a member of National Book Critics Circle, and literary review editor for The Broadkill Review. His poetry, fiction, and essays have appeared in dozens of publications. His previous chapbooks include the steampunk inspired The Black Narrows, the award winning Field Recordings, and The Barleyhouse Letters. Whitaker teaches theater, literature and psychology in rural Maryland. In 2004 he was the recipient of an NEA grant to adapt Romeo & Juliet into a rock musical. He lives on the Eastern Shore of Virginia with his family. He blogs on occasion at: <http://fieldrecord.blogspot.com/>

CHRISTY TO HER SPONSOR, JUNE 11, TUSCON, AZ


Stephen Scott Whitaker

Dear Valerie,

If the fuck all didn't catch up with me in the desert,
just like a rabbit finds itself open to a dog,
one minute everything is fine, the next minute
teeth clamp and tear into your spine and all you can do
is hang on for the ride. Know what I mean?

Woke up in my hotel with a .357 under my cheek,
a syringe and somebody else's works scattered around
the bathroom floor. Blood too, on my arms
from where I was cut long and lean
by glass or blade sometime in the night.

It wasn't deep, not nearly as deep as the gouge
in Marco's throat, which has me here, writing to you.
I wish the desert would open up or rise up
against me, or explode me into a thousand pieces



so not even the buzzards could stitch me back
together if they could, as if they were here
to bring us back, instead of to send our remains

to the far ends of a field, the sun weak in the sky,
where a redneck's radio crests the backroad like a slow wave,
where all those fallen trees melt into the earth.

WORST CASE SCENARIO

Stephen Scott Whitaker

If you'd glimpsed my lustful beats
then you'd surmise I'd be that poor broken mouth
found face first
in a back alley,
the mark of strangers on my face,
and the reek of urine
floating about my corpse like an aura.
My make-up a little too whorish,
the skirt perhaps too tight, or too short.
The kind of death that leaves strangers to wonder
if my mother must wear her face like wine
just to keep from being sick.

Who is to say that my kind of love is not beautiful?



WHEN IT COMES TO AN END DURING A STORM

Stephen Scott Whitaker

Oil lamps and the leaks that creep across the wooden desk
to you. There is no power
and no light beyond what our language can reach,
because the oak limbs are down across the lane,
because the marsh grass is pleated down

like your skirt was, that afternoon when the pond
was still only a pond
and we drank wine out of a paper cup
and smoked your roommates cigarettes.

Something beyond the marsh grass stinks
and it's not the dark tidal mud or the dead marsh hens
killed by the wild dog.

There's something in this storm season that reeks of scorched oil.

I think we both know we're talking about your heart.

Sara Bednark lives in Portland, Oregon with her husband, son, two cats and lovely dog Annie. Her writing is inspired by her eclectic interests and the way the sun sparkles off of pretty much everything. She is currently working on two middle grade novels, and a collection of creative memoir pieces.

On Fire

Sara Bednark

The match comes to life. A yellow flame dances near my fingertips. I light the long tapered candles on either side of the Buddha. Red on the right, white on the left. My meditation cushion waits in the center of the room. I set the alarm for thirty minutes. Finger the wooden beads of my mala. One hundred and eight sandalwood spheres threaded together to form one prayer. The strand is cold when I drape it over my neck. Its center rests close to mine. I close my eyes, breathe low within myself, then even lower. The next breath dives deep beyond my body, and I am still.


I never know what will rise when I sit.

1.

There was a fire. In a house. Lightning struck the roof. Old wood was eager to burn. Someone survived. Someone didn't.

Two photographs, that appear later in my life, tell this story clearly. In the first, my great-grandmother as a young girl, her long awkward legs poking from her Sunday dress, is surrounded by three younger sisters, a brother in black knickers, and her mother and father. Their faces serious, but soft.

In the next, the mother sits rigid with a baby on her knee, tight lines creasing her forehead. The father rests his hand on her chair. A younger girl leans her body into him for support. My great-grandmother, a little taller now, stands apart, making space for the three children that aren't there.



Lightning struck my great-grandmother's house when she was young. The children upstairs could not escape. This is why, when thunder rumbled at night and lightning flashed, my mom's footsteps echoed up our stairwell. And I needed to climb out of my warm nest and move down, to sleep on the couch, where I was cold, but safe.

2.

At five-years-old, fire found me in the world of dreams. My class filed into the seats of an auditorium. We were at an opera, enjoying the voices vibrating with emotion, when the alarm rang. Pushing and shoving, we all want to get out. I reach the main aisle, too late. The floor gives way and I look down as flames reach up to grab me.

I woke up sweating, scared, my heart beating hard. I shook my sister on the other side of the bed. "I can't sleep. I dreamt I died in a fire," I told her. "Just forget about it. Think about something happy like balloons," was her tired eight-year-old response. But how could I forget? How could I? All my happy balloons were fire red.

3.

On hot summer days in the country, dry hay is formed into bales, then raised to the loft of the barn. The bales are stacked tight to make room for more. If the farmer has been rushed, by fear of rain or a wish to move on, the hay might not be dry enough. Then a chemistry of gases builds up between the bales to create a heat so intense fire breaks out. A barn can be lost to this spontaneous combustion in a matter of minutes.

That story came from down the road, and reached our dinner table one evening. My young mind sucked in every detail. A farmer like us, not far away, looked out the window to flames. The barn was full. Cows trapped in their stalls. Horses screaming to be free. A fire too hot for anyone to do anything. For nights after, I closed my eyes to sleep and saw flesh burning off of bone.

4.

In the middle of the night, I wake up next to fear. It has settled neatly around me filling in the cracks I can't protect. My young son is no longer nestled under my arm, but down the hall in his own bed, miles away. To my frightened mind, a fire is a given. I plan each step I would take to save the most vulnerable of my family.

Nights like these are not new. Planning an escape has always been a challenge that confronted me no matter where I lived. Tenth floor of a college dorm. Down a long hall, in an apartment complex. It was even an assignment in grade school. Map your path to safety in case of a fire. But this was a problem I could never figure out. For eighteen years, I slept upstairs in a farmhouse



where there was no way out.

5.

Dirt followed the truck that sped into the yard. It was a neighbor. "Your field's on fire," he told my dad. "It's going to jump the road if we don't do something." Dad's instincts immediately kicked in. "Take the four wheeler to the pasture, and stop its advance toward the buildings," he told me and my husband. We grabbed shovels and gunny sacks and headed toward the smoke. Dad followed the road. He had thought the piles of brush he burned earlier had died out, but the wind brought them back to life and spoiled his calm afternoon.

Adrenaline rushed through my body as we drew near the fire. Finally, the enemy I lived my life fearing was right in front of me. It no longer lurked in the night. I was ready. And it felt good.

The temple bell rings on the iPhone. My thirty minutes of meditation are up. I open my eyes. The contents of the room have become crisp, clear. The angles of sun have moved to divide the Buddha into light and dark. I take a breath. Find balance and move. I consciously blow out the flame of each candle. Take my mala from around my neck. I notice it is warm now. They say, wood remembers the thoughts, the feelings, the energy it touches, and holds it. Then, fire must be its release.

James Hodgson has work published at The Cro-Magnon, JJ Outre Review, Chelsea Station Press and elsewhere. He lives in Manchester, UK and works in a large Human Resources department for a University. Find him on twitter @hodgsonson.

MINI

James Hodgson


"Don't worry," said Captain Mick. "We'll find her." They pooled their remaining bullets and dug in. Crossfire rattled on above them. Pok pok pok. Eleven men had six rifles. Ford, poor Ford, had a string of a grenades and a bayonet. Cold comfort. The weapons, even the good ones, wouldn't do much out in the slop.

And what slop. Two trench lines cutting over plain-land, with half a mile separating them at their narrowest and three or four miles at their widest. Between the trench lines spread a mire, a shining sea of wet swill, a space riddled with trenches gone before, with pillboxes and fox holes, with mine after mine. The air periodically full of bullets, spat from this side to that, that side to this. Who knew for sure if you killed anything? Mick never knew for sure. Instead he thought of Minnie.

"Remember lads," he said, watching the slop. "She's a tough cookie." Communications with HQ gone, what – eight months ago? Ten? No answers, no orders, no new directions. Just Them, peppering the fire with sky and waiting for the return. Day in, day out. Until a message came through about Minnie.

Until a message came through and told them that Minnie, sweet Minnie, had been flying about making maps for them, and somehow she'd got herself blown out of the air and landed in the slop, "and it's our job to rescue her, lads. Our job," he said, with purpose, "to get her back before she gets snatched up into the enemy's grubby paws. She'll have good maps for us. Minnie'll save us. Lovely Minnie'll save us."

Mick looked through the slit of the dugout. He took a breath in, narrowed his eyes, decided. The gunfire stopped. He sent Jeff out to sniff for a route. Jeff came back a good while later, caked in mud, said he'd found a system of old trenches hidden in the swill about fifty metres off that led to a



disused pillbox. “She’s there,” said Mick. “I know it in my bones, like I have a sixth sense about it.”

Mick squinted and decided. They would go up, up out of the foxhole and bring back Minnie. Up they went. The company slipped across the hinterlands on their bellies, writhing as eels do when you catch them and bring them to the air, totally vulnerable, full of anxiety. They wormed through the slop. Ten minutes went by. Twenty minutes went by. Mick dropped down into the safety of the trench. He felt washed in gratitude.

The slurry ahead was ankle deep. Mick though he recognised a helmet bobbing in it. For a moment he felt strange, as if he were looking at something hallucinated. “The helmet,” he said, to Ford, “the helmet is like Larry Smith’s. But Fifth Company were sent north. I’m sure the crest is from the Fifth.” Ford didn’t understand. It couldn’t be Larry Smith’s, not this near the enemy line, not this far south, not here.

Ford shrugged. Mick shrugged too, supposing that such similar instances were to be expected in a world of endless repetition. Gunfire, rainfall, cold. But Minnie was worth it. Minnie, sweet Minnie, MiNI to be proper: a Mapping and Navigation Intelligence. Minnie was a rare device, cherished both by Mick’s men and by the enemy. “Minnie, with answers to all our troubles. She can get us back on track, she’ll help us find our way, take the front and win the war.” Mick told his men this once again. If he believed it, they did. The company pressed on into a pale and unforgiving day.


#

“She’s close,” he told them as they slogged. The trench bent off to the left. Mick poked his head round the corner. A shot cracked through the air. “Blimey, lads, watch out.” Two bullets thudded into the clay and filled the air with dust.

Gino knotted his fingers together. Jeff hooked a boot into the cradle, cocked his rifle and popped up over the trench edge. “Ahead, sir, two of them! One to the left and one to the right!”

Mick gave Jeff the signal. Pok pok pok. Hiding under Jeff’s cover, Mick crept round the corner, only to see the two men standing, cowering, were boys. They fired at Jeff. Mick fired at them. Pok pok pok. One fell spread-eagled onto the other. Mick dashed forward, Gino followed behind him. Jeff had taken a nasty hit and lay moaning in the swill.

The pillbox was built up of three chambers. On hearing Mick’s fire, it seemed, the enemy abandoned the first chamber and barricaded themselves in the second. An oil drum blocked the door. Mick approached quietly. For a moment nothing moved. A rifled poked through a gap in the drum and took a quick pot shot. The bullet spun off the wall with a twang. Mick and Gino collapsed



against the walls. Silence. The rifle came through again. Mick kicked the drum and sent it flying backwards, the shooter scrambling on the floor like he'd been caught with his trousers down around his ankles, his hand on his Johnson. Mick shot at him and missed. A return bullet took a layer of skin from his cheek, another went left of his knee, another just shy of his arm. Three of the enemy, all of them shit shots. He pushed his rifle into the chest of the first and fired. Gino came round the corner and took out the second. Mick roared in the heat of it and shot his rifle everywhere. The third man pumped a bullet into Gino's stomach and laughed. Mick kicked his legs from under him before he shot him dead. Three men dead.

Mick brought his men forward. He looked at the bodies draped about the floor. Gino, gulping. For a moment he thought he shot Gino himself. He couldn't remember. All the bodies were caked in mud. The slop got everywhere. He felt sick.

"She's in the next room," he told them. "I'm going in alone. Don't want a pack of oiks frightening the poor lass. Besides," he grinned, "I reckon I've earned a bit of private time with our little Miss."

#

Mick entered the chamber and shut the door behind him. There she was. Sat on a desk, cool as anything.

"Hullo Minnie."

<Mickie! Gee whizz, am I glad to see you!> His heart filled with warmth at the sound of her tinny, sweet voice. Oh Minnie, love.

"How are you doing, pet?"


<I'm just swell! Sweller than I've ever been before!> He could tell the machine was relieved. Why do they make them sound like women?

"Did you get it, Minnie? Did you get a good look?"

<Mickie, baby, you won't believe what I saw!>

"What's that, doll?" He smiled. "Did you make us a map?"

<There isn't anything! Mickie, there isn't anything at all! It's all the same!>



He looked at the black sphere, it's grill flashing with green lights. "What are you saying, sweet-thing? Where's the map you made? Why don't you give tired old Mick the map you made?"

<Listen to me, Mickie!> the mapping device was stoked on something. <HQ sent me up about fifty miles from here. I was told to do a run from north to south, to chart the southern stretch of the trench, and report back. But there isn't anything to chart Mickie, nothing at all. Can you believe it? The trench dissolves a few miles out from HQ – there isn't even an enemy line, Mickie, it's all the same stuff! I thought I was wrong so I doubled round. I went over it a hundred times. No wonder the patrols get lost, Mickie. No wonder we all get so darned confused – the trenches aren't even opposed to one another! Not even the main lines – they're all muddled up! We're going round in circles, Mickie, all this time, all this time we've been fighting ourselves!> Mick said nothing. <Don't you see?> it went on <there's no-one else! The enemy is us, baby! They're just us!>

Mick couldn't hear it. He swallowed. He wondered how much work it had taken to get Minnie like this. How much time it had taken to twist her, fill her up with the pig-shit. To leave her useless. What was he going to tell the lads?

He looked at the dank room. He should have expected a trick of this sort. Just like the enemy to piss in the water. Couldn't they fight a clean fight?

<Mickie? Are you okay?> the machine sounded frightened. <What's going on, baby?>

Mick took a standard issue knife, and jammed the blade into the black sphere. He twisted it until he felt the wires snap. MINI squealed and whimpered before expiring. Why do they make them sound like women?

He returned to his men. "It wasn't her. Not our Minnie. Some trick they've cooked up to delay us." The men nodded. He could feel their hearts sink. He had a sixth sense for this sort of thing. But he would keep them going. That's what he does, what he would always do. He decided. "It's likely they've moved her south. Pool the bullets. Head up water, make sure the wounded are seen to. We'll stick it out here until the cross-fire breaks off. Get to it lads. The princess is in another castle." He looked out from the pillbox's mud-rimmed slit. Why do they make them sound like women?



Vanishing City

James Hodgson


Saul heard about the city as he boarded the 6 a.m. to Paris, just as he stepped on the train. A TV screen made the announcement in big letters--CITY GONE--and proved it with a tracking shot of a BBC reporter walking slowly along the outskirts of a desert. 'Completely gone', he said, 'and no-one can explain it. Live, from Alucia--'

Alucia. Alucia was located in the North East of Spain and boasted among other things a protected type of hard cheese, the 'Castillio de las Olivas' (a museum dedicated to the treacheries of the Reconquista) and an academy for the dramatic arts run by a decrepit golden-age starlet. Saul hovered in and out of the train door watching footage from on the ground: a military cordon encircled the scrubland, a sky dotted with helicopters, a faint yellow-brown haze in the air like oil rubbed through the sky. Thousands stood around the edges of the city, struck dumb.

Saul held his briefcase close. He shrugged, did not understand, did not understand any of it, or perhaps he was unable to process at that moment the news-report's contents, given his journey, given the purpose of his trip. The trip to end all trips. The trip to David. And who would blame him, that is, Saul, for David was about to die and he, poor Saul, would be the cause. In the briefcase hid a sheaf of papers--power of attorney--that let David drop from the mortal coil in a manner both painless and legal. And Saul the courier.

Saul sat down in his seat. A Gallic voice welcomed passengers onboard the train and hoped they had a pleasant time. Rereading his schedule, Saul began to worry about making his connection – irrationally, as it turned out, with the hours left between trains. He didn't want to think about a city going missing. He just wanted to see David.

Alucia popped up in a brief flash of headline--'City Gone'--from his neighbour's broadsheet. The rest of the front page was dominated by a flat expanse of gypsum sand, a few olive trees at the edges. Just emptiness. Saul shrugged off the chill.



It didn't take long for the train to slip away from the platform, canter through green, and then shudder into darkness.

#


The train gradually melted into the background and left Saul alone with his thoughts. He felt his mind switch back and forth from an almost-pleasant neutral space where nothing happened at all to an obsessive-compulsive focus on the package of documents nestled in his briefcase. He looked at his schedule again: the train would pull in to Paris, then he'd change, and then a short trip to the clinic by cab. He had it all planned out.

For some reason the lights flickered off. He closed his eyes and pictured the agonies of David, cradled in a bed, sweating through sheet after sheet. Saul considered this a two minutes' silence, but as the carriage continued on past two minutes and Saul felt his mind drift from the path, the agonies of David crept into his vision, in behind his eyes, and all the agonies he knew he, Saul, would face once the deed was done crept along after, until his head was steadily soaked in agonies, little, minor, bodily agonies, personal to him--the train a seed and agony the nascent plant predestined to take root--and so he opened his eyes. He was surprised to find himself producing weak, lukewarm tears. Huh. He was never usually given over to displays of emotion--that's why David loves me, he said to himself as he blinked it all back. I'm made of stronger stuff. I'm made of stronger stuff, he said to himself as the train emerged from beneath the sea.

Saul watched his own face staring from the window, hair glinting like a bolt of iron stuck into a cliff. He bunched his fingers together inside his pockets. He bought a bag of crisps and a Kit Kat from a hostess who asked if Saul had heard about the city in Spain. Saul replied that he hadn't. The hostess said it disappeared and was a miracle.

Kit Kat foil looks different on the other side of the channel. Contains more of something, more metal, who knows. Saul hovered his fingers over the lymph nodes in his neck and wondered if minute changes to their size meant anything. After licking the chocolate from his fingers he took one hand in the other and cracked his knuckles. Did they sound any different? He thought of David's hands, how they hollowed themselves out like dry bread. His own hands were ready. He would take the papers in the briefcase and pass them to David. In this simple act power of attorney would slide from one body to another--from David's parents to David--allowing the first to absolve themselves of the second, and the second to put an end to their own protracted suffering. Saul cracked his knuckles until they no longer popped. An hour later the train came to a stop.

#



He begun to feel sleepy as he entered Gare du Nord. With time to kill before his connection, he bought a cup of white coffee and a croissant filled with Emmental cheese, then drank the coffee, ate the croissant, and watched the news. When he saw the city pop up this time he felt as if he were being watched. Are they putting this all on for me? A shiver crept up his neck.


The French media, so obsessed with Alucia they reported nothing else, strung together a before-and-after shot of the city and played it on a loop. A Spanish town *muy tipico*--apartment buildings arranged in quarters and linked by narrow lanes, some trees set in boulevards and others in plazas, walls dusted with blotches of anarchic-looking graffiti, a wide griddle of streetlights. Appearing on the screen, then winking out. No-one could explain it, like any good trick.

He tried to push the city from his mind, watching the massive information boards transmute one far-off destination into another. Gate 45. Amsterdam. Gate 12. Brussels. David counted medicines out into a white plastic grid. Thursday. Zalcitabine, nine a.m., nine p.m. Abacuvir, nine a.m., nine p.m. He tried to turn Abacuvir into Nantes, Lamivudine into Chanterré, finding only a moment of success before each place-name sunk back into the gravity well of David's pharmaceutical regime.

Saul stared into his coffee. His reflection, warped by the cup, looked back, beyond him, elsewhere. He only had a half-hour wait. He watched the people mill around the station. Wisp-like thoughts of Alucia returned to him, as intangible as the city itself. He went to the information desk. His train had been diverted, and in order to make the switch he'd have to travel to the other side of Paris. For some reason this minor obstacle irritated him, reshaped the whole damned endeavour from an activity of caretaking, even chivalry, into a challenge. A slog. He wished he'd flown, sent the documents by airmail. He wandered the marble forecourt staring vaguely at random passengers. Alucia hung from every screen, appearing and disappearing on repeat.

Initially, David's mother had refused to speak to him. Saul, suspecting she laid the blame at his feet (as if their love had been a disease from the very start and he, as instigator, doubled up as both seducer and monstrous human pathogen), refused to parley. 'Look, it's not her fault. She's from a different generation', went David, 'she can't help it'. Saul retrieved the documents enabling her son's legal transition from living to dead with a silent saint-like indifference. The bitch could go to hell.

Crossing Paris by metro meant inhabiting a crowd of people. Saul watched a news report on a young French couple's tablet computer, clips in which Alucia winked out of existence alongside commentary from pundits who tried desperately to explain the disappearance as a freak geological accident, some kind of communal mistake of cartography, a stunt by a (government) media agency. Who knows why. Who cares? He made himself think of David's night sweats, when they first knew something was wrong, and clasped the briefcase in his hand. But how can it just disappear? The lights flickered on and off. How can it just vanish? He pressed his fingers into the



leather handle. David's hands. 'It's crazy to think of what your hands will build,' he confessed in the summer of their courtship, 'isn't it stupid? But, just imagine for a moment what they'll build-'

David had two years left in agony. They knew this for certain--he would not last longer than two years. The disease had ravaged his muscles, his liver and his all his fat deposits, so it was likely to be less. The disease brought a variety of secondary conditions along for the ride, including a kind of slow bone marrow degeneration which caused permanent aching everywhere there was bone. Each blemish on his skin meant something else: a way for the body to break down, a sign of the departure date toward which they were both flung, helpless as schoolboys. So David had said 'I want to go to that place in Switzerland. You know the one,' which Saul had eventually accepted.

#


Alucia was north east of Madrid. To get there, one would take the mainline train to Madrid and switch onto a local stopping service. The woman at Information said she'd given this information out a hundred times that day. Everyone seemed to want to go to Alucia, she said, *tout le monde, incroyable*. Saul had a full hour to wait for the 10.40 to Zurich, then a cab up to the clinic, so asking for a few harmless directions passed the time, that's all.

Flickering and wheedling like strange, excitable salesmen, the station's television screens began to deliver a more human story to public--a group of Aluseñan school children had returned from an overnight trip to find they had been orphanized in one swift inexplicable stroke, the story ideal fodder for a press unable to explain the vanishing and not above devoting screen-time to long pan shots of their bawling, tear-drenched faces. Fluff, then a cut to raw facts: military build up, talk of a regional evacuation, helicopters billowing in the air like packs of sparrows, the single grainy video clip of Alucia's passing. All eyes turned to the vanishing city, even Saul. The report produced a strange sensation within him, a sense of movement, but he couldn't quite name it or fully grasp its significance, at least not yet.

He watched a group of people run towards Platform 19. Then another group followed. Someone blew a whistle far off. A third group of running people--old women, men, a little dark-haired girl--collided with the crowds building on the way to the terminal. He heard shouting.

Platform 19. What's so special about Platform 19? Saul scanned the Departures board. Then he twiggled: Platform 19--the Green Line 1 to Pamplona, across the Pyrenees, from where you would take another train to Madrid, and then a train to Las Lluvias, and then a cab to Alucia.

But were they all going to Alucia, really? He cocked his head, tuning in to the talk that crackled through the air, whether students - "a kidnapped city. That's Alucia, right there. First contact, man.



Sure, of course, the aliens talk to us through the language of abduction. The language of abduction!" or pensioners in sharp-collared shirts. "It's everything they said it would be," one ancient woman whispered to her friend, "the footprint of God. The vanishing of the city is the end of the world. It's the rising of the Lord," she said. "Agnes, don't tell me you see his handiwork here?" The first nodded. "I've said my *Ave Marias* since I could talk and now it'll all bear fruit. The lord taketh away, Ana, the lord taketh away."

He took a walk, just to see, and found his suspicions correct--a long, grey-coloured train stood at Platform 19 surrounded by a bundle of excitable, energetic passengers growing by the minute. A young couple pressed up against his back, their unfamiliar bodies setting his teeth on edge; he moved out of their way only to bump into another couple at his side, and another to his left, behind him, a group of five, running, to his right, more, and before long Saul was bound up into what developed in a few minutes into a mad, snowballing crush, a crush that whipped him up even as he pushed backward, that caught him with its rhythm and mad excitement and bore him along toward the train. Saul panicked. After a few minutes he dropped down to his knees, entering a thick landscape of trousers and skirts. He attempted to push through before standing again sharply, afraid of being called a pervert. The swelling crowd grew around him into a mass of people spread out everywhere, yelling and whooping--thousands of faces, far too many for the train to Pamplona--flooding the rope lanes of the ticket queues and the spaces between the station's shops, filing out into the streets, utterly invincible.


Saul swallowed. Now he was the weak one. A woman nudged him - 'entonces? Nos vamos juntos, pobrecito, al milagro!' – and he too began to push towards the train. He didn't know why he did what he did. He acted without thinking. And what choice did he have? A conductor whistled to his left. He sat down, the train left Paris and begun its journey to Spain

#

Watching fields turn slowly into crags of land, Saul counted up the requests David had made during his illness. Hardly any. Both men became saint-like, he knew, both of them thinning out, the one demanding less and less from the other, and he, Saul, perfecting an ascetic existence as part of what was understood as an expression of devotion. Sometimes he felt like a river had carried off his reflection someplace; other times he felt like he was just as sick as David. He focussed himself on the sheep, smiling when they scattered and slipped into the thin mountain clouds, into the pines.

#

Growing tired in the heat, Saul kept himself occupied with the thought of a cool drink in the



Pamplona shade, but was, to his surprise, given barely minutes to sprint across Pamplona station to the next platform. Most of the subsequent journey was spent watching news about Alucia on his neighbour's laptop. The reports talked about the city in ever increasing tones of hysteria, pundits and anchors alike sweating and stumbling over the teleprompters. 'More things are disappearing as we speak. More people were missing even after the initial event. Some helicopters have vanished as well. It's getting worse, worse by the hour.'


A final change took him onto a smaller stopping service, each carriage swollen with people travelling to Alucia. He recognised the students from the Gare du Nord, who smiled at him. He smiled back.

By the time Saul arrived in Las Lluvias, the small town connecting Alucia up to the national rail network, it was early evening. He left the station and directed himself towards the main street in order to hunt out a cab. An alien, high-pitched birdcall cut through the light and set his teeth on edge. As soon as he saw the traffic he realised it was pointless to hope for a taxi; with road after road blocked up by unmoving cars, he would have to approach on foot. Others joined him. For a moment he felt as if he were about to break out of an enemy camp. It's like the great escape, he thought. What togetherness. The sky was golden for the most part and purple at the edges. He groped for David's hand, which instinct said should be just to the right, and set off for the vanishing city.

The road was not long, perhaps twenty minutes walk. Opening his fingers to the air, he realized in a single, terrible moment that he no longer held his briefcase--had he left it at Madrid, or even at Paris? Pamplona, in the dash? Las Lluvias, at the station, or perhaps even moments ago? He looked back. Nothing. Maybe he had delivered it already and forgotten. Yes, that was it.

Eventually, after scrambling up a steep-ish hill, they all came to the featureless blank space spread out ahead like a great erasing of the earth, a smudging of what you would expect to find at the end of a road, barely any sand or scrubland left now, just a vague mirage-like shimmer, orange-grey fizzing into grey-blue as the matter that was once land met sky. The military attempted a chain-link fence around the area but it only served to clink pathetically under Saul's feet. A few lone figures pushed against the crowd; some of whom shouted out that the city had been taken by the devil, over and over, in different languages although mostly Spanish. Diablo, Diablo.

The crowds walked on. A lone helicopter came down behind them, travelled over their heads and shot out in front, racing itself like a dog proud with a stick, then slipping silently out of the world to who knows where. Who knows where. Only the birds resisted the magnetism of the vanishing city – and who knows where birds go, after all, and perhaps the city vanished like a bird to the strange and mysterious parts of the world the birds already know about and move into freely, and that's



why here and there a swift played about with the links of the chainlink fence, undaunted by the city's gravity, because they already vanish quite easily and need not learn how to vanish again.

Saul smiled. He could remember how David held his hand, his fingers so weak at the end it seemed as if he wasn't even there, as if he were air. Saul closed his eyes.

He took his shoes off first. After a hundred paces he took off his blazer, his shirt and his glasses. The things propelling him from place to place seemed to thin out all at once, turned gauze-like--the great drama of an exiled son; the lover's final quest; the agony survivors endure--and without knowing why, Saul let them fall away, caught in an invisible tide that took them off someplace else. Saul knelt before the vanished city, wanting nothing more than to be a little bird. As the flat sand stretched out in front a great shaking overtook his shoulders and his arms. He pressed his forehead into the sand. It's a miracle. He looked up again to find other things went, other names: he saw a fading body tumble out of him. He gave a small cry. David unfolded from Saul, unfolded from all the stuff that wasn't his, before vanishing just like that, along with all the rest, to who knows where. Then Saul was alone, naked.

He felt light and breezy, dappled by the faded sun.

His palms pressed half-moon marks into the sand. Soon after they were gone as well.

Elizabeth Valtierra is a student of Charlottesville High School and has been previously published by Graffiti. She is a daughter of two, sister of a firefighter, and a proud aunt of her lovable niece. She hopes to succeed in life somewhere by doing something she loves. She is Mexican, enjoys Marvel Cinematic Movies, and an avid music fan. She is currently living in Charlottesville, Virginia.

dry circles

Elizabeth Valtierra

The night ended when I smell alcohol in her breath
And blank threats were made
as the pounding on the doors continue
The night ended when I arrive home to tears.

Drowning my weight with pills
The bags under my eyes became heavier
with guilt
Chains latched onto my ankles.

The night ended when the music vibrated my skin
and I shiver violently to the lyrics
listening to hopeless love songs
Never experiencing it all at the same time

The cold air burn my nostrils
Feeling the acidic taste at the back of my throat
And the burn loosening my muscles
Pointless conversation were created for distractions.

The night ended when I smell alcohol in her breath.
The night ended when I follow her steps.

Margaret Langendorf is a Bay Area screenwriter, unable -- despite many sincere attempts -- to break her addiction to prose. She is the writer of the feature film, The World Famous Kid Detective (2014), and of many educational, environmental and commercial short films. She is married and has two children.

Common Denominators

M. Langendorf

The most remarkable yard sale in the entire history of yard sales appeared sporadically and without warning in the driveway of 801 Cotton Court (off 10th Street) in Avalon Hills, Indiana.

And disappeared just as quick.

Take, for example, Tuesday, March 13th, beginning at 2pm and ending at 2:45 or 3pm (my notes are not exact.) Besides the unholy idiocy of setting up on a weekday, mid-afternoon, when most people work, who in their right mind has a yard sale when the ground is slushy and it looks like freezing rain any second? And who would do all that work—hauling tables and boxes out, pricing and arranging—for under an hour of selling?


No one in their right minds, that's who.

Or, to give you another: early November (November 5, 10-11:20am) while the snow fell, soaking everythin. What did Youssef—my landlord, I rent the mother-in-law apartment above the garage—see when he looked out of his window that made him think Let's get those folding tables out...? Even with tent covers, swaying precariously on metal poles above the merchandise, it struck me as bizarre. (The tent covers were not waterproof.)

And, more oddly still, he never plastered poster board YARD SALE signs with large hand-drawn arrows across a six-block radius to attract attention. Not a single one, ever. It was like Youssef didn't have the slightest idea how to go about having a yard sale, but went right on ahead anyway.

It may have been that recklessness that caught my eye.

Also, this serial yard sale didn't sell the same things that others did: things that might turn out to be



valuable, like comb back Windsor chairs with the original patina or antique Coca Cola signs, for instance. Or things that were worthless, but you never knew when you might need: odd-sized Tupperware with mismatched lids, jeans that still had some wear left in them or books with broken spines and dog-eared pages.

Instead, my notes indicate, it would sell a specific thing that a specific person was desperate for but could not or should not find anywhere, so the item was different each time. (This is hard to describe.)


For example, Weldon Wolfowitz found a perfect—totally mint—automatic tranny for a 1958 Ford Edsel Corsair convertible, only 6,00 ever made, so his Dad could finish the motor rebuild, so that he, Weldon, could drive the Mayor in it for the Fourth of July parade, instead of a borrowed Sebring. Yard Sale: June 29th, 8–10pm.

Or the time Mary Noodles found the size ten, navy blue Armani suit—the jacket alone cost five grand new, the dress three—with the tags still on it, in perfect condition, the day before her presentation to the board of directors in Indianapolis where they know a thing or two about spotting a hick when they see one. That presentation was make or break for her career (so-called career up to that point.)

Before finding the Armani, she was walking her Goldendoodle, Fritz, and just stopped by to be neighborly, she'd been planning to wear a grey skirt with black jacket that she found at Dillard's and baffle the board with her brilliant personality. A plan she didn't have one hundred percent confidence in, she told me later.

Youssef himself was the most antique thing at his yard sale. One of those guys somewhere between seventy and two hundred years old, you couldn't really say: frail, hair black as ink, face as wrinkled as a face can be before it slides right off the skull. At his yard sales, he held himself like a hard man, a fierce negotiator, with a deep scowl, which is not that unusual—the point is to make as much cash as possible at a yard sale, right—but this toughness was strange to me because his prices were so far off. When not hosting yard sales, he seemed quietly confused by almost everyone and everything. I thought he was stone cold deaf for the first ten years I knew him.

For example, he told Mary Noodles that the Armani suit was ten dollars (“Look at that eye-tal-yan stitching, you don't see that just anywhere, by God.”) and he wouldn't take a penny less, not from a sharp customer like her. When she handed over the cash, a ten-dollar bill she happened to have stuffed in her front pocket, he examined it minutely. (Was the area awash with counterfeit tens? Not to my knowledge.) And placed it in his wallet, looking extremely satisfied.



My interest in the yard sale began after I got pinked, kicked to the curb, canned, severed, axed, booted, job eliminated or fired. Take your pick. The presses at the newspaper where I worked shut down and the union caved like crying babies if you care at all what happened to us pressmen. (No one else did.) After twenty-seven years of working nights, which was when we printed the Front, Sports and Metro sections, I had nowhere to go and no one there if I went.

So, I went home to 801.5 Cotton Court (above the garage.) The place had its own entrance, a set of steps attached to the back, a kitchenette, bathroom – toilet, sink, small medicine cabinet with mirror, shower – and a narrow hallway that split the remaining space into a living room – couch, coffee table (scratched), chair, TV - and bedroom – bed, dresser. I'd lived there for eleven years since it had one wonderful feature for a night worker that I hadn't been able to find elsewhere: no windows in the bedroom.

And it was dirt-cheap, even by Indiana prices.

With my salary mostly saved and not many needs of my own, I decided to retire. This didn't work out as I hoped.


The silence became unbearable. I was never tired enough to sleep. The Internet was a void of ignorance and stupidity. In my apartment above the garage, the world was too still without the air vibrating around me (the effect of the presses running full blast) ten hours a day, more when we ran a special edition.

I looked in the medicine cabinet mirror and saw a forty-nine year old pressman, my hair worn off in a line across my scalp where the noise blocking headphones had sat for two point seven decades. My cuticles were gone from scrubbing away newsprint. My face, never much to begin with, looked pale and tired even though I was home at night for the first time in my adult life. It was as though I went into the basement of the paper during the bottom of the second inning and came out in the top of the eighth without much memory of the time passing in between.

(I wonder if Cal Ripkin Jr. ever felt like that? Probably.)

I needed something to fill my time. I had several false starts before deciding to investigate Youssef's yard sale. I tried growing competitive runner beans in milk cartons on my kitchen counter, but was beat out by a soybean syndicate. (You think they're not watching the little guy like a hawk? You bet your fanny they are.)

Then, I thought I'd buy a drum kit and join a band. I was quick with my hands and I'd be a natural at late night gigs. But the songs I remembered were all being featured on the oldies station (when,



exactly, did that happen?) and the big ballad (metal ballad – sometimes erroneously called hair metal) had gone the way of swing and the barbershop quartet. Still appreciated by a select few, of course, but dead all the same.

Then, I heard that blogs were the coming thing. I'd done The Jumble everyday for twenty-seven years, in ink, so I figured I could handle writing a blog. But, by the time I got all set up, figured out what it would be about (sports, I knew as much as those so called weekly columnists and a lot of people kept getting the daily paper just for the sports section, until they didn't, bastards) I heard that blogs were over and Vines and Instagrams were the way to go, but you had to have mostly pictures. So, then I needed a good digital camera.

Guess where I found it?

(Yard Sale: Monday, August 27th, 7-9:27am) It was perfect Nikon D-SLR, new in the box with the manual and all the accessories, including a sweet flash. A 10.2 megapixels with USB and editing software I could download from the website. Priced at forty dollars.

"Is this forty dollars?" I asked, expecting Youssef to say four hundred. I was already planning to offer him three seventy-five, (I'd have to run to the ATM), but go to four if he held his ground. That'd still be twenty percent of what the camera was worth. Youssef squinted at me and sucked in his cheeks.


"Forty and not a penny less from a sharp customer like you," he snapped.

I had to look away. *Batshit crazy.* I handed over the cash. "Don't suppose you have any lenses?"

"Course I got lenses," he looked deeply suspicious as though he didn't recognize me as his own long-standing tenant who lived above his garage, "why you asking?"

"... For sale, to go with the camera." I said, and followed his gesture to a box with a 50mm, a 70mm and a 20mm (wide angle.) Everything I needed and I knew a thing or two about photos – more the good versus the bad, not exactly about how to take them - because the photography department were famous for slipping in slightly out of focus shot and trying to blame it on us pressmen when it looked like a disgrace. So I always looked extra carefully before starting the run and developed a kind of a good eye over the years.

The lenses were marked fifteen dollars each. About a grand in lenses for forty-five bucks. Even for a yard sale, even for *this* yard sale, it was mind blowing. I got that high that bargain hunters get from finding a once-in-a-lifetime deal. This time I didn't question the price, I just held out the cash.



Youssef took it, muttering.

I took the camera and gear around the garage to my stairs so psyched that it didn't occur to me until later that I'd spent every dollar in my wallet: eighty-five dollars to the dollar, almost as though the camera and lenses had been priced especially for me. Impossible. Insane.

But that was the exact moment I decided I'd devote my blog/Instagram/Vine/Facebook/Tumblr/Twitter feeds to investigative journalism instead of sports, starting right here in ol' Cotton Court. In my own driveway, in fact.

It felt like fate was taking a hand. (Newspaper trivia: investigative journalists often got their start running the presses. Walt Whitman did both—journalist and pressman—before he got famous as a poet.)


I set up a tripod in the small window that looked straight down at the driveway. Youssef was already hauling his tables in, closing down for the day. (At 9:27am, as I've already noted.)

Not to say that I lived alone by choice. I'd had an understanding with Cleo Trepan at one point, the assistant manager (nights) in the distribution department. I liked her crooked smile, how she dressed in a certain pink that completely clashed with her fake auburn hair, and how she always had newsprint on her hands, like me. We went bowling, to the movies, I even took her to the Nutcracker (matinee) one year. I understood that, by the by, we'd get engaged, married, settle down, get a house, a nice ranch over on the west side, have some kids – a boy named Danny and two girls, Iris and little Rose - and so on. She'd understood she'd move to Reno with a biker named John Boy and deal blackjack to tourists.

Before she left, she said I'd never be anything more than a pressman. (What else would I be?) *She'd feel pretty silly if she could see me now*, I thought as I balanced the tripod and braced it on both sides with stacks of National Geographic's.

My plan was straightforward, I'd lurk above the sale, a stealthy eye in the sky like those cameras that caught people running red lights and I'd see and record all and publish it. But soon this lurking became unsatisfactory. I'd need quotes, the back-stories, and the details of the deals to really figure this whole operation out. And those were down on the ground where the people were.

The possibility that I missed just people was remote, of course. Pressmen are famous for their solitude. When the presses were running, it was incredibly loud and no one could talk to anyone. We did have scheduled breaks where someone would mention the little league team that wanted him to coach again because everyone else was at work during the day or talk about their kid who



was looking for part time work somewhere while he was at the community college studying digital media and for the love of Sundays, what the hell was digital media anyway? Did anyone know?

Or someone else's daughter who drove so and so's wife crazy with this Mohawk boyfriend and now she, the daughter, wanted to get a tattoo of a turtle because she knew what it was like to carry a heavy load on your back and the turtle tattoo would probably kill her mother, but that's how girls were these days. We all nodded and said she was a good girl, deep down, and then we got back to work.

My best friend, Rufus Martini, was a pressman (no surprise.) The day he got his severance check, he hopped into his Ford Fiat with Birdie, a woman who was not his wife, and headed south. Some say Florida, but I knew Rufus. He was in Southeast Texas on a shrimp boat where Phyllis, who was his wife of twenty-five grueling years, was never going to find him. He used to dream about shrimp boats over a beer after work. (Pressmen were not considered albies for drinking before nine in the morning, unlike other professionals.)

Most folks were shocked when Rufus took a hike. People often think big men (and Rufus was refrigerator big) were more reliable than weedy guys. I knew different. You can't work down line from a man for decades and not see a thing like that coming.

What did surprise me was Birdie. I'd rather have had a hive of angry wasps riding with me to Texas than that woman. She was a demented hummingbird of a woman, with a pointy nose, buzzing when she spoke which was too fast but somehow still drawing out all the s and z sounds, like a tire when the air was forced out of a pinhole. I wished them well. I understood. Not the decision to take Birdie (though his wife was no unfallen Eve herself), but the need to start again. To build a new life once they took away the routine, the camaraderie, and the whole identity that we had as pressmen.

It wasn't easy.

I got in the habit of looking through my camera as I passed by and lying with my ear pressed to the floor, listening, to detect the first sign of a movement in the garage.

It didn't take long before my vigilance was rewarded. Friday, September 3rd at 6:00am, the first table appeared in the driveway. I was drinking a cup of coffee when I spotted him. I took four hundred pictures of Youssef setting up. It was a cool, autumn morning and fortunately he didn't need the table tents, which would have obscured my line of sight. After that, I wanted to get down to where the action was.

I considered my strategy. Maybe I was going for a jog, I decided, and pulled on my sneakers and a



hoodie. (I was already wearing sweatpants.) I stuck my earbuds in and descended to the driveway.

I feigned surprise as I jogged around the garage from my stairs. Youssef puttered in his usual vague, unfocused way, opening boxes of odds and ends and turning them out on the table. "Need a hand, Youssef?" I said, my breath just visible in the cold morning air.

"The stove," he said and jerked his head towards the garage. Standing before rows of vertical shelves, turned so that only the sides were visible, was a cast iron stove, strapped to a pallet and with a hand-cranked pallet jack beside it.

Now where in God's name did Youssef get a cast iron stove? A stove strapped to a pallet with its own pallet jack, no less.

By the time I lugged it down the drive, backwards so the weight wouldn't get away from me, I was sweating despite the cool morning air. I angled the pallet to an empty spot between tables. "Here's good?" I wheezed. This sucker was heavy.

"Good." He smiled suddenly. Gone was the confused look. His eyes were clear, bright and alert. Knowing, even. The white teeth that flashed in his dark face took me by surprise. I revised my estimation of his age to closer to a hundred and fifty than two. "I'd about given up on you as an apprentice, worst of the worst you've been. Let's see if you can get any better." He nodded to the garage, "That box over there needs lifting."


I was bemused. "Apprentice?"

"You live in the apprentice's rooms, don't cha?"

"Er, well..." was all I could think of to say (pressmen were often socially awkward.) So I went and got the box. As I did, I felt a stab of guilt. Was my rent dirt-cheap because he'd expected me to help out with his crazy yard sales? With only them? Or was there more? Shoveling, raking, trimming hedges? Did someone tell me? I tried to remember, but it was too many years, too many shifts ago.

The box turned out to be full of jars of rusted bolts, mixed with some stainless steel. Each jar had a price sticker on top, like the one that had been on my camera box. I realized that the merchandise was pre-priced before it got out of the garage. This needed to be documented.

I didn't get to grab my camera (left upstairs - in the apprentice's rooms apparently) because sales got off to a brisk start. Chen Li, who was often seen in the neighborhood collecting recyclables in a



shopping cart, purchased the jars of bolts almost out of my hand. He gave a few crumpled bills to Youssef without a word. *Two old warhorses meet on the field of battle.*

I felt a shiver; I was getting close to the heart of the matter, the main mystery of Youssef's yard sale. Where did he get the stuff? I'd bet my life that he wasn't one of those people up before dawn, going to flea markets semi-professionally, either from a pathological need to haggle or, more businesslike, to buy low/sell high on ebay or at his own yard sale for that matter. First of all, he didn't drive, as far as I knew and surely he'd need a small truck, at least, looking at the amount of stuff in the garage. Second, how could he possibly know that total strangers would want the stuff we were putting out? Old bolts? It defied explanation.


Mary Noodles and Fritz (the goldendoodle) stopped by at 7:15. We stood together off to the side as Youssef sold the stove to a young couple whose passions in life were restoring a farmhouse in Brown County and each other. (Not necessarily in that order.) Mary and I shook our heads as the couple stared at each other in delighted wonderment, grinning madly over the perfection of the stove and the price, as Youssef alternately snarled and scowled at them.

I forgot about blogging as I got caught up in the game. It wasn't long (Yard sales: Sept. 12, 4:30pm – 6:05, Sept. 22, 8am-11:19am, Sept. 24, 9:30pm – 10:15pm) before the miraculous became almost commonplace to me.

Some highlights: a silver locket belonging to Bridget Gardner's grandmother, lost sixty years ago, was discovered in a pocket of a nylon jacket she'd bought from Youssef for fifty cents, with the pictures of her great-grandparents still intact and their names and wedding date engraved on the back. A complete set of test tubes, Bunsen burner (industrial size) and scientific scales for fourteen year-old Miles Hofstadter, needed to compete in a national science competition that had several scholarships at stake. A prosthetic foot, the kind that would cost a roll of dough because they were custom made, that turned out to be a perfect fit. And so on.

We got into a routine of sorts. When I heard the garage door open, I'd hike downstairs and help set up, moving boxes and tables under his vague direction. I'd make us coffee (apprentices make the coffee) if we needed it and hung out until he gave the signal it was time to close up. He showed me how to return things to their spots on the shelves, leaving empty space where the stuff we'd sold had been.

"You know what I think is so weird?" Mary said, "You know how at most yard sales, when you look through the tables, you can get the sense of the people? Their taste in books, how old the kids are, if they liked dinosaurs –



"Everyone likes dinosaurs." I interrupted, looking intently at my feet. (Shy around women.) She hit me on the arm lightly in the nice way.

"What kind of movies they bought on DVD – heck, even VHS sometimes. . But here," she nodded towards the tables, "nothing seems connected, if you know what I mean."

"You mean if someone likes a certain color, say purple, then there'd be more purple stuff? Common denominators."

Mary beamed at me. "Common denominators, exactly."

"The thing is, Mary," I told her, "I don't think Youssef is getting this stuff."

"Then who is?"

"Exactly," I said.

I decided to take care of Youssef's hedges, since I had time between yard sales, which led to replacing the paving stones around the small back porch. Our days fell into a rhythm of property maintenance and yard sales. My routine expanded into light housekeeping and putting food in his fridge. In all honesty, I may have saved Youssef's life because the bread I threw out of his breadbox was bright green and the label read, "Light rye." I considered chucking the entire breadbox, but caution got the better of me. I didn't want to overstep.

Finally, as Youssef got used to me, I got up the nerve and asked where he was getting the things he sold at the yard sale and how did he know what people would need and who was putting the crazy prices on stuff, and he said, "Hobgoblins."

I kid you not.

And he said it in a tone that implied I might have been dropped on my head as a baby a few times more than most people to even need to ask such a question, like it was obvious and any fool would know hobgoblins stocked the shelves of his garage. I stared at him.

"You've seen these... hobgoblins?"

"Seen? Seen?" spat Youssef, "Hobgoblins aren't for seeing. Then you could tell'em to get some things straightened out." Youssef cut his eyes towards me.



"Such as unsatisfactory apprentices?"

He cackled (half mad) and squinted at me. "You believe in oxygen?"

"Of course."

"Why?"

"Because without it, there'd be no air to breathe."

"Well, without hobgoblins, there'd be nothing to sell. Don't see'em, but the shelves *are full*."

"That's it? Hobgoblins are real because the shelves are full."

"You bet'cha."


I knew there was something fundamentally wrong in Youssef's reasoning, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I remembered the day my Dad said, this was not long before he died of cirrhosis that a drinking man drinks because if he stopped, the hangover would kill him. Dad was wrong too, but I couldn't figure out how to argue against him. So I ranted and raved, but he still died. This time, I stayed quiet and stared at the horizon. I didn't know what to think.

Youssef was wrong as well, of course, but the shelves were filled. And he certainly wasn't the one doing it. He could barely get up in the mornings by himself.

The next day, I went to the library. I wanted to find a story I remembered from when I was a kid about a shoemaker who cuts out the last leather he has (before he starves to death) and elves visited after he went to sleep and made such great shoes that the shoemaker and his wife were saved. I was a little iffy on the specifics. I asked for help.

The librarian (Mabel Potts – I went to high school with her mother) found it. It was in a book of Grimm's fairy tales. (A fairy tale! Ah ha! I knew it.) One of three tales, in each the needy person helped someone worse off than himself and got rewarded by help from the elves. I read them and was closing the book when I saw the old check out card, still in the pocket at the front of the book even though the library now uses computers. I pulled it out and read the last signature – Youssef – scrawled across the bottom of the card.

Mabel brought me more books, filled with similar legends of aid given to humans by elves, hobgoblins, sprites, fairies and animalistic gods—lions, mostly. They spanned the globe and the



centuries. These were stories a pressman would never credit, of course, being known, as a group, for our clear-thinking and pragmatism. On the other hand, absence of evidence was not evidence of absence (high school philosophy elective – 11th grade – Mr. Snyder.)

In a roundabout way, I brought the subject up to Father Dan, pastor of the Avalon Hills Lutheran church. He's known about town as something of a free thinker. "Hobgoblins?" he said, "Not in the Bible that I'm actually aware of."

I tried not to let my disappointment show. I'd been thinking some kind of official documentation—and what could be more official? People have to swear on it in court, don't they? – then maybe, just maybe I could accept somehow my life was now involved with more than the eye could see.

"But we do have angels. Lots and lots, in fact," Father Dan said.

Well, that was something, but was it the same thing?


I found myself spending more time with Youssef. I learned that he was from Jordan (the country, not the town of Jordan down in Owen County). In the evenings, I brewed us a pot of jasmine tea for him, coffee for me, and we sat on the back porch. He told me whenever the light in the garage was lit; it was time to set up the sale. When it went out, it was over. And, he'd never changed the bulb in forty years. (I thought that was going a little bit too far. Laws of physics.)

But I didn't want to argue with an old guy who turned out to have a nice, kind of vague laugh and was as polite and considerate as the most gentle of men (when not dealing with people at his yard sale.) Also, as I saw more and more people finding ridiculously priced, amazingly perfect items generally of no use or value to anyone but themselves, I didn't want to stop. I can admit the truth, I abandoned all ideas of investigative journalism; I was hooked.

In this case, the experience would have to be the explanation, I figured. Sometimes life is for getting on with living it, not documenting it with pixels and feeding the 24-hour news cycle which – I knew this if I knew anything – never, ever loves you back.

So I got used to people hugging me. People I'd never met in my life cried down my neck. I took to carrying tissues in my pocket and keeping my expression neutral, or we'd both be bawling and what kind of way is that to run a yard sale?

And, without me, it would stop. Youssef seemed to fade before my eyes, though a haggler could still get his attention. What did it matter if hobgoblins, trolls, a Mexican drug cartel, the 4-H club or Father Christmas himself were doing the purchasing and leaving the lights on? It was exciting



however it worked.

Just when I got the hang of all the eccentricities of the Youssef style yard sale, he broke his hip. I heard the crash while I was taking out the trash. He lay on the kitchen floor, a chair standing next to him. It looked like he went to sit down and missed. I called the ambulance and followed it to the hospital. Youssef was admitted and sedated. The doctors sent me back to his house to search for any record of his next of kin, a Living Will or any record of his personal physician.

Much to my surprise, I found a neat file with a Living Will, naming me as guardian, complete with an executed Power of Attorney. I called the hospital. They said that Youssef was sedated and wouldn't be in surgery until the morning. I gave them my cell and was told morning would be fine to bring the paperwork. I was just hanging up when I saw that the garage light was on.

Well now.

I stared at the light. It felt like this was some kind of test. An urgent question occurred to me. Was this my new life?

This is hard to explain, but I felt like the light was waiting. I hesitated. Could I do a job—an important job, people relied on getting their newspapers, damn it, until they didn't—for bosses I never saw? Never spoke to? *Well, I thought, I've got twenty-seven years experience that says I'm your man.*


So I set up the yard sale (December 2 – 4pm – 5:10) wondering if I'd need the tent covers. The day had been dry, but a cold wind was picking up from the northeast. I'd been ready for about twenty minutes when Mary Noodles and Fritz came by.

"Listen," she said, "there's a potluck in the church basement tonight. If you're not doing anything..."

I hesitated. Not because I didn't like Mary or potlucks. I liked both real fine, but her directness made me nervous. She saw my hesitation and drew back. "That sounds great," I said quickly, too quickly. This always happened to me. When I was afraid that I'd say something wrong, I'd say something too fast or get so tongue-tied I'd be about as useful as a Christmas tree the second week of January.

Mary said, "But?"

"But, nothing. What can I bring?"



She relaxed and I felt the relief I used to, after leaving a long shift in the dark of winter, when the heat in the car finally warmed up and blasted me in the face, forestalling death by hypothermia for one more night. "A side dish or nothing is fine. I made some cornbread. You want to ride over together?"

It was just then that I smelled rosemary; rosemary potatoes au gratin to be precise. I glanced around. And there they were, in a casserole dish on the folding table, covered with plastic wrap, steam still escaping from the sides, just like my mother made when I was a kid. My favorite. All my remaining doubts, about the yard sale, the hobgoblins, my part in it, all of it, fled. I smiled at Mary Noodles.

That'd be real nice, I told her.

#

Post Script: Rufus did return and came to see me. His wife figured out a way to attach his pension whether he was on a shrimp boat in the gulf or Timbuktu. He and Birdie had parted ways and Texas lost some of its glamor for him, so now he was headed north to a cabin on a lake, fishing and hunting and like that and did I want to go?

It was good to see him, but I was needed here, I told him. While we talked, he spied a Tibor Spey Fly reel marked twenty dollars. His eyeballs almost fell out of his head, "Is this right?" he asked. I squinted at him. "Twenty dollars and not a penny less...." I said.

Rebecca Havens has not, is not, nor never shall be not herself, which she probably is. She sometimes squabbles with expressing herself most precisely, and often worries about the state of the third sector, wherein all of her jobs have existed since before her graduation from the College Ritual in 2014.

Come Get Me For Adventures

Rebecca Havens

Miss Mary Alice Walkston is carving out a life for herself in a small Yorkshire, England flat. Most times, the only tie to the outside world is the radio, monitored carefully by the worldly attendant, and turned on as Mary Alice arises.

While others know alcohol-soaked
vomit,
pissed-in streets,
and fist fights,

Mary Alice knows walls and attendants.

This morning, as Mary Alice is groggily shaken by her bodily attendant, and fed all those pills which will soon allow her to awaken, fat drizzle pours from the clouds.

The radio is screeching: "*BBC1's Karl Roj reports:*

Every night, when the staff-count is limited and their duties are taken up with restocking, the same few produce items disappear across the entire Scarborough area's grocery store shelves: leafy green vegetables. Kale, spinach—"

"Miss Mary Alice, it's time to wake up," says her bodily attendant, pressing the pills into Mary Alice's mouth. She raises water to Mary Alice's lips.

After she swallows the pills, Mary Alice says, "Go now."

Her bodily attendant leaves the room, allowing Mary Alice to arise in peace.



At her father's demand, Mary Alice's days are filled with strictly-structured normalcy.

While other people of her age are attending 6th form, preparing for university, and taking their A-Levels, Mary Alice is...*not*. And has been *not* for quite a while.

As she opens her eyes, Mary Alice becomes distinctly aware of a sharp sticking pain on the pads of her hands—

a pain she cannot explain. As someone who is largely prevented from doing anything interesting, pain is *almost* a new experience.

The wake-up pills work their way slowly through her system, and eventually Mary Alice gains control of her limbs. She moves one hand up to her face to look for the source of the pain. Then the other.

There, buried in the pads of her palms and the tips of her fingers- throughout, really- are splinters. Her nails are caked in dirt—it is embedded in her cuticles, it is under her nails, it is in the ridges of the nails themselves.

And there is dirt in every crevice of her hands. Dirt is something Mary Alice knows only from walks and those rare scientific excursions with her worldly attendant. But there—

Splinters.

Known only from the time her father had had the old flat's floor redone, and she had escaped her playroom onto the unfinished floor, where she had danced,

twirling,

twirling,


until she felt something stab its way into the bottom of her 6-year-old-foot, and she screamed a long single note of primal betrayal.

She never got to play with that old childhood attendant again, but a new one had come to supplant her, and Mary Alice never much noticed.

Splinters.

She looks hard at her hands, wondering when her bodily attendant will notice. If not her, then surely the sporting attendant or the worldly attendant will notice. Someone was bound to call her father: a carefully timed call, so as not to interrupt or jeopardize a performance.

The wood that was woven into Mary Alice's skin looked different from any other wood she was used to; it wasn't shiny or brightly brown.



Mary Alice wishes she had a lock on her door.

Clever thing, she is pulling out her mother's antique necklace, the one of white gold, the one which is worth a filthy disgusting amount of money.

Mary Alice is lacing it carefully around the light switch, and the around the door handle. A quick twirl of the metal, and the door is secured by a wealthy knot.

"Do not come in. You shall break my mother's necklace if you try," she is yelling through the door. Footsteps in the hall, but she is beginning to pull the splinters out of her hand-

one

by

one.

A knock at the door. Polite, gentle.

She sets the splinters behind her lamp on the bedside table for further examination as she peels them out. Splinter by splinter. There seem to be about a dozen.

A more rigorous knock, though guarded. This time with whispers in the background.

It is 9:03 on a drizzling Yorkshire morning in a flat paid for by England's most famous classical composer. His daughter is picking splinters out of her fingers before anyone can find them , and a good deal of her attendants (five in number- the ones who are present this morning) have no idea what is going on.

Mary Alice has pulled out roughly half of the splinters, and the knocking is now frantic.

She makes no noise, just picks at the splinters carefully and slowly. She doesn't seem bothered by the dirt, which rings her pajama sleeves and has crept into every wrinkle of her palm-skin and finger-skin.

She hears, "The piano!" from outside her door, and she continues to remove splinters.

"Miss Mary Alice! Have you broken the piano? Are you all right?" yells her bodily attendant through the door. The knocking becomes less prevalent, though the necklace continues to ripple.

"Miss Mary Alice!" calls another attendant through the door.


"I am fine. I wish to be left alone by all of you for the entire day. You may tell my father," says Mary Alice, making no attempt to be heard through the door.

She grins into her hand. Splinter by splinter, she clears up her hand.

As she does so, the covers move to unearth Mary Alice's dirt-covered pajamas. She grins down at them. Dirt rings the bottom of her pajama bottoms, clings to the knees of her pajamas.

Mary Alice stares at the phone. She answers.

when he is playing for an audience or when he is furious.



Mary Alice sits upright, gathers the splinters, and hides them under the base of her lamp. Then she gets up, changes clothes (putting her dirty pajamas *not* into her hamper, but into the far, untouched reaches of the back of her closet), and even attempts to make her own bed.

When she is done, she unknots the necklace from around the door handle, and gently unhangs it from the light switch.

Her bodily attendant is standing in the hall, arms open. Welcoming a hug.

Mary Alice breezes by, on the way to her kitchen.

As she passes through her living room, Mary Alice sees the piano her father gave her, dismantled. All the pieces are in disarray, and the lid to the piano is missing.

Mary Alice walks past.

--

Sleeping pills dim the world, as Mary Alice closes her eyes on that eventful day.

Clean pajamas meet dirt-covered sheets, and Mary Alice feels the world grow larger, more friendly, and more distant as the pills course through her system.

"Now you come get me if you need anything, no going out to the garden tonight," says her bodily attendant.

Mary Alice is too far gone to respond. Her limbs have sunk into the bed, her head is heavy on the pillow.

"Come get me for adventures," says her bodily attendant, swaying.

Mary Alice feels herself nod, which gives way to trees, so many trees. And Mary Alice is suddenly up, aware of being up, aware of reaching into the back of her closet, pulling out those dirt-stained pajamas and she is putting them on over her nightgown, which already skims the floor.


Mary Alice is

dancing among trees,

she is twirling about them,

she is free.

She looks down at the roots of the trees, where they are grown into the earth at her feet. No wonder her pajamas last night were filthy—the outside is full of glory! Why had she never thought to run away like this, to meet the trees?



But this earth beneath her feet, upon deepest examination, does not match that earth that rings her pajama trousers from the previous evening, and Mary Alice wants to find the piano lid she took from her father. Perhaps she can yet piece it back together.

So she runs runs
in any direction,

runs
in all the directions, twirling around the trees, stopping only to examine – closely – the color of the earth beneath her.

Stopping only to be one with the earth.

--

"Miss Mary Alice, here are your pills," said her bodily attendant.

Mary Alice feels pills on her tongue and a water glass at her lips. She says, "You may go."

Mary Alice awakens,

feels the day grow heavy,

watches her shadow outgrow her,

and takes her evening pills.

--

Instead of her bodily attendant's normal check-in routine, Mary Alice is jarred awake by a scream.

"Miss Mary Alice, where is your hair!"



It is not a question.

Mary Alice does not respond, but begins to dig to the back of her closet, to gather her dirt-stained pajamas.

She will search for the right shade of earth before she swallows the pills that will steal away her freedom. She hardly notices the lightness of her head, the way her hair is now cropped to frame her face.

She runs,

she twirls around the trees,

she meets freedom with a playful s n a r l.

Her attendants run behind her, unsure- u n s u r e of their footing.

Mary Alice plays host.

"Let

me

show

you

what

I

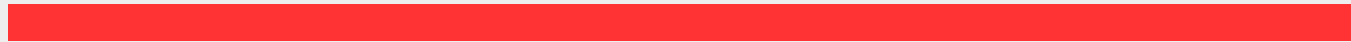
did

with

my

hair,"

she says.



Her attendants try not to trip as she leads them over,

under

and oftentimes back where they came from.

But slowly, they grow closer.

As they near the place, the attendants begin to cover their noses, they begin to breathe more shallowly, they begin to keep distance from air.

When they reach the place, Mary Alice is the only person who dares draw so near.

Hair

makes a ring of

blonde light that glistens
in the near dawn.

Stretching out like roots, as roots.

Up at the top, rot.

Rotting.

Leafy, rotting, rot.


Green stench,

Splayed out atop—

Thin, curved wood makes up the bulk of what is left. Being intimately familiar with them, the attendants recognize them to be piano lids.



After the fire, the police reported that a human heart was found at the center of what Inmate Mary Alice Walkston would only call her Freedom Tree. Her bodily attendant was never found.



*Tom Montag, Fairwater, Wisconsin, is most recently the author of **In This Place: Selected Poems 1982-2013** (a finalist for the Midwest Independent Publishers Association' award for books of poetry published in 2014). In 2015 he was the featured poet at Atticus Review (April) and Contemporary American Voices (August). Other recent poems will be found at Apeiron Review, Blue Heron Review, Crack the Spine, Eunoia Review, Hamilton Stone Review, The Homestead Review, Little Patuxent Review, Mud Season Review, Sand, Third Wednesday, Town Creek Poetry, Wilderness House Literary Review, and other journals. He blogs as The Middlewesterner and serves as Managing Editor of the Lorine Niedecker Monograph Series, What Region?*

THE POET GOES IN

Tom Montag

The old poet writes in the yard.
The evening deepens to shadow.

Somewhere the odd sound echoes.
An owl calls, calls again.

What will he say when he has
said it all, when his words fail him

once more? What will he do as night
falls away, no moon, no stars?

Will he enter his hut and lose
himself, disappearing into

the emptiness of his own silence?



THE OLD POET AS A YOUNG MAN

Tom Montag

He never understood what it was
he was doing. Never understood
the urge to do it. He did it,

that is all. He leaned over his desk
and tried to say what the sunset
had told him, what the dawn meant when

it finally came, what the rush of wind
conveyed. He was a young man then.
Hope still meant something. Wonder was

what wonder could be, a promise.
Yet it was never so easy as that.
He needed a sheepshed and silence

and enough sadness to blacken
the sky. He didn't know that yet.
You never want to know the day

nor the hour, nor the terrible
cost of each poem. You don't want
to know what the dark angel brings.



DEATH

Tom Montag

Death is not so much to fear.
I have lived with loneliness,

loss, and longing. Emptiness
is a meadow opening out

and a stream alongside it,
small birds singing the sun up.

Such promise. Emptiness is
practice for what comes next.

I pray that I'm ready.

Daniel Davis is the Nonfiction Editor for The Prompt Literary Magazine. His own work has appeared in various online and print journals. You can find him on Facebook and Twitter, or at www.dumpsterchickenmusic.blogspot.com.

Deadfall

Daniel Davis

We followed the trail up the mountainside, through a foot of day-old snow. With the skies still overcast, the night threatened to descend at any moment. The Native boy led, followed by Wilcox, then myself. Cullen brought up the rear, and every now and then I fashioned I felt his gun aimed at my back.

"We're no hunters," Wilcox told me at one point, when we took a moment to rest. "Why the hell did you get us into this?"

I scooped beans out of a rusty can and said, "I had no overwhelming desire to hang today."


"They wouldn't've hung us."

"Not you, no; you would've broke their damn rope, and they would've had to shoot you. Me, I'd have hung."

He stood unmoving; if he was hungry or thirsty, he didn't show it, not even after a couple hours' trek. Bundled against the cold in his fur coat, he resembled a bear more than ever, most of his face covered by hair, his tangled locks blowing free from beneath his coonskin cap. Most men his size would've been huffing for breath, but Wilcox looked as though he'd just stepped outside after a long nap.

"Weren't nothing to hang over," he said. "Just some colored girl."

"Since when a person's skin matter to you?"



"It don't." He nodded at Cullen. "Figured it would matter to them."

Cullen glanced over. "That was one of Mayor Smith's house girls," he said. "Been with him since before the War. Stayed on after. Mayor treats his Negros right."

"Besides," I said softly, "I've told you about treating women like that."

"You've told me many things, Horace. Can't keep track of all of 'em."

We plodded onward. I'd spent the last few hundred miles and however many years horseback; it felt strange to rely on my own legs. Hadn't had to do that in years, and it showed; I was keenly aware of my weight before long, and after an hour I was sweating even against the harsh breeze. Cullen seemed amused by my reaction; I had the dried skin of a man who'd spent time beneath the desert sun, who hadn't worn a coat in months. I had to keep half my face hidden by a scarf, the other half so chapped I expected it to just peel away. And the ache in my thighs and knees was so great that I had to slow down, let Wilcox and the boy get further ahead. Cullen didn't say anything; he slowed with me. A good twenty years on me, but he'd spent his whole life in these mountains, chasing men even worse than myself. Maybe even worse than Wilcox.

We passed the spot where the most recent miner was attacked. They hadn't cleaned up well; I saw bits of flesh hanging in low branches, dangling like macabre Christmas ornaments. Cullen followed my gaze and said, "I reckon they were too weary to get all of it."

"Or too afraid," I said.


He nodded. "That too."

Wilcox was examining something in the snow. Cullen and I wandered over; the Native boy stayed behind, his back to us, keeping an eye on the forest.

"Well," Cullen said, kneeling down and picking up a mason jar from the snow. The contents had turned to slush. Cullen opened the lid and sniffed, then twisted the lid shut again. He put the jar in his rucksack and said, "They brew some powerful hooch in these mountains. Men have their own distilleries, and sneak off from work when they can."

"You don't do nothing about it?" I asked.

He shook his head. "We did at first. Company's very particular about mixing work and alcohol. But we ain't had a company man, a corporate man, out here in a year and a half at least. And the



men work harder when they're half lit."

"And they don't argue about the shitty pay."

A grin spread beneath his gray mustache. "No they do not."

Darkness hit us about halfway up the mountain. Cullen called a halt. The Native boy began setting up two rudimentary tents from the supplies we'd brought. Cullen barked directions in the boy's tongue, his words awkward but apparently intelligible. I started a fire without prompting, while Wilcox wandered into the trees to relieve himself. He came back with a rabbit, it's throat slit.

Cullen coughed. "Son, how in the hell did you catch that?"

Wilcox didn't reply, so I said, "He's quicker than he looks."

Cullen gave me a look but didn't press. The boy cooked the rabbit, and we ate it greedily, savoring every greasy bite. The boy only ate from his own store, berries and nuts from what I could see. He caught me watching him and held my gaze until I looked away. He stared at me a bit longer before he resumed his meal. At his side, a knife glinted in the firelight.

When the meal was over, the boy ventured into the trees. Cullen leaned against a trunk and rolled a cigarette. He offered it to me; I shook my head. Wilcox also refused, and rolled one of his own. The two men lit up; their smoke mingled with that of the fire, and the wind chanced to blow it across my face. I welcomed the warmth.

"You were in the war," Cullen said, pointing at me. He motioned to Wilcox. "And you weren't."


"Most people figure the other way around," I said.

He nodded. "Yeah, I reckon. Except he don't look like he cares about anything enough to go to war over it."

"I do?"

Cullen grinned. "You didn't say a damn word in your friend's defense."

"I tend to let grown men speak for themselves. Most of them have the knack, I've been told."



He shook his head and spat to one side. "Nah. You didn't say nothin' 'cause you know what he did was wrong. You got a conscience."

I smiled. "There's many think I don't."

"A particular conscience, then. About some things, and not about others."

An owl hooted from somewhere nearby. I listened to it for a while, staring into the forest as though I would be able to discern it. Then I said, "Which side?"

"You or me?"

"You."

"Well, let's say if we'd met each other on the field, it wouldn't have been pretty."

"Never was."

He sighed. "No, I guess it wasn't. That why you like Negroes? You fight alongside them?"

"Who said I liked them?"

"But you do."


I shrugged and looked at him. "I like any man as much as the next."

"You don't like me."

"Sometimes I don't like the next man."

He laughed, which turned into a coughing fit. He wiped the back of his mouth when he was done, the snow beneath him stained with something dark in the dancing shadows. He saw me watching and didn't make any notion to cover it up, but he didn't say anything further. He blew out a steady stream of smoke and stared into the trees where the boy had disappeared.

After a while, the owl became quiet. A few other night birds, who had joined in chorus, also quit their banter. The forest didn't grow silent, but it stilled just the same, as though whatever wind had been blowing through it had suddenly died. Cullen sat a little straighter; so did I. Wilcox seemed unmoved; in fact, he almost appeared to be asleep. But I'd spent enough time beside him to tell



when he was awake. Cullen had given him a rifle, with just two shots, and Wilcox's hand was only inches away from the gun's stock.

A minute passed, then another. Hesitantly, the mountain came back to life. Cullen relaxed, but I saw his hands shaking as he rolled his next cigarette. He noticed me watching, and this time turned away.

We went to bed shortly after, Wilcox and I in one tent, Cullen the other. "The boy may come back," Cullen told us, "or he may spend the night in a tree. Either way, if you two try and take off, he'll raise holy hell. Maybe even put a knife in you."

"Too cold to run," Wilcox muttered, dipping into the tent.

Cullen's eyes met mine. I said, "We won't run."

He nodded. "I believe you. Him, not so much."

I paused, then said, "With him, running's the last thing you need to be worried about."

Cullen took a moment to digest that. He didn't reply, just tapped his gun and nodded.

I went into the tent and lay down on my blanket. It provided little warmth but kept the moisture away. I stared at the top of the tent, holes in the fabric.

Beside me, Wilcox said, "This is horse shit."


I made like I was asleep, though he knew I wasn't. He hadn't expected a reply anyways.

We found the boy's body the next morning, just outside of camp. I emerged from the tent. Wilcox stood over the mangled corpse, Cullen beside him. I walked over, and Cullen swore.

The boy's left arm had been torn from his torso. Most of his stomach was missing, and there was a large gaping hole between his chin and collarbone. His remaining hand had two fingers missing, as though he'd raised his arm in self-defense. His knife lay beside him, but I couldn't tell if the blood on the blade was his or not.

"How big is this damn cat?" Wilcox asked.

"She's sick, I figure," Cullen said. "They don't attack like this until they get sick or injured. And if



she'd been injured, we would've found her by now." He turned away from the body, closing his eyes. He muttered something in the boy's tongue, then added, "This cat's insane."

"He's the sixth," I said.

Cullen sighed. "Yeah. The sixth now, though most people in town will probably say just five still. But yeah, six. He's the smallest."

"Right here."

"Marking her territory, I figure. Damn things are territorial as hell. Probably sees the miners as rival cats."


"Doesn't sound insane."

Cullen shook his head and walked to the dying fire. "Trust me, boys, this isn't an ordinary cat."

We ate breakfast with the corpse at our backs. Cullen told us to leave the tents where they were; since the cat had shown a willingness to come here, it would probably return again. He told us we would spend the day patrolling to the north, single file, similar to tactics used in Southeast Asia to corral tigers. I thought of mentioning that they usually had at least a dozen men for that job, but kept my mouth shut.

Wilcox and I both had rifles. I was largely unfamiliar with the gun; I'm no sharpshooter. I'm quick when I need to be, and accurate on occasion. The rifle felt awkward in my hands; I hadn't relied on anything other than a revolver or a shotgun in a long time, maybe not since the war. Wilcox sensed my awkwardness; there may have been a small grin beneath his beard, but his eyes remained as hard and enigmatic as ever.

As we set out, a light snow began to fall. "There go the tracks," Cullen said, but we picked some up anyways. The cat didn't bother hiding itself. I'd heard they could do that, but this animal's brazenness unnerved me. I've made a life—and more—understanding dangerous men. Human beings, within their individual set patterns, are predictable. Nature is not. Your scholars will tell you nature can be tamed, but anyone who's spent an hour in the wilderness, terrain largely untouched by man, knows different. I've known men who were killed by the most mundane creatures—deer, eagles, rats. Thoughts of a bloodthirsty mountain lion sent shivers down my spine, into crevasses of my body even the cold couldn't penetrate. I'd volunteered to come to avoid a death sentence, but I couldn't help but think I'd simply chosen one broiler over the other.



We spread out, myself on one side of Cullen, Wilcox on the other. Our captor took a slight lead, walking with his head down, studying the track. Occasionally he would stop and raise one hand, motioning. I pretended like I knew what he meant, and crouched down with my rifle ready. Wilcox didn't react. He stood tall, gun at his side, barrel tilted downward to keep the snow out. He and Cullen occasionally exchanged a look. I wasn't sure Cullen would let Wilcox go, when this was over. It didn't take much brains to determine what kind of man Wilcox was, and what he was capable of. Cullen had a sense of decency that could be dangerous in the wrong situation.

At midday, we stopped to eat. "She's running us in circles," Cullen said between bites. "She's clever."

"She?" I asked.

He shrugged. "They're all 'she' until you know otherwise. Way I was raised, I reckon."

"It's watching us," Wilcox said. "Has been for some time."

Cullen nodded. "Yeah. She knows what we're about. Told you, she's a smart one."

"Thought you said she was insane," I said.

"The two ain't mutually exclusive, son. My wife's living proof of that."


As we were packing up, the forest grew quiet again. I felt the muscles in my shoulders grow tense, instinctively raising my head. I felt like a deer in a clearing, sensing the hunter's gun sight for the first time.

A roar erupted around us, seemingly coming from every direction. A deep, cavernous bellow of fury and hunger. I almost bit my lip. Nothing had made me feel such terror since the war, when I lay piled beneath my dead comrades, an enemy soldier standing over me, waiting to see if I would blink. I'd sworn, after I slit his throat, that I'd never let anything weaken me that way again. Yet when the cat cried into the sky, my bladder almost let go, and I felt my grip on the rifle slip.

The roar died away slowly, echo receding. The three of us were left staring at each other, Cullen's face taugth and worried, Wilcox's hidden and quiet.

"Jesus," Cullen said after a moment. "Sweet Jesus."

"Acoustics," Wilcox said. I cocked an eyebrow at him and he nodded once.



"Still," Cullen said. He wiped his mouth on the back of his sleeve. "That'll loosen the coils a little, won't it?"

I glanced around. "Any telling where it is?"

Cullen shook his head, but Wilcox nodded and pointed west. Cullen and I followed his arm. Our captor said, "What makes you say that?"

"Cause that's where it came from," Wilcox said, shouldering past him.

Cullen let out a breath beside me. "He always like this?" he asked.

Instead of responding, I secured my grip on the rifle and followed Wilcox. After a pause, Cullen followed. He quickly overtook the both of us, resuming the lead again. I could tell, by his occasional sideways glances, he didn't like having Wilcox immediately at his rear. I couldn't blame him, but had no energy to be amused.

Wilcox slowly dropped his speed, until he and I were walking side by side. I could feel him looking at me. I knew he could tell how deeply the cat's roar had gotten to me. He understood what it meant. I hadn't told him many stories of the war; there aren't many people I have told, in fact. But Wilcox understood, better than anyone, the nature of violence. He knew instinctively what I had seen, and he knew the toll it could take on some men. The price some of us have to pay to survive.

"Could just leave," he said. "Take off."

I nodded forward. "And him?"

Wilcox just looked at me.

I shook my head. "No."

Ahead of us, Cullen stopped and waited for us to catch up. He glanced at me like he knew what we'd been discussing; he didn't bother looking at Wilcox. Instead, he gestured to the thickening forest in front of us.

"Could be a den in there somewhere," he said. "Looks like a good place for her. They like the underbrush tight like that. Could be in there right now, just out of sight, and we'd never know."



"So we're going in," I said.

He nodded. "Only way to do it. Ever hunt lions in Africa?"

"No."

"Neither have I. But someone explained the principle to me once. I think he'd done it. Or maybe he just knew someone."

I eyed the forest in front of us. The underbrush did indeed grow thicker, almost impenetrable at spots. I saw a deadfall a few yards off, a pile of fallen trees and debris that stretched above our heads. No telling how ancient this forest was, how long those trees had been there, undisturbed by man. Maybe a miner on occasion, but only recently. Nature left to itself is a glorious and deadly thing.

I waited for Cullen to lead us on. He didn't. I watched him for a while, as he stared ahead, eyes unmoving. Eventually, he turned to me, and when his gaze met mine, I saw a decision in his eyes that neither of us liked. I can't say it surprised me much, though I had been hoping for better from him.

"Boys," he said, and I nodded to cut him off.


He sighed gratefully. Wilcox might have scowled at me over the old man's shoulder.

"Anything I should know?" I asked, as I checked once more to make sure I had a cartridge loaded and ready.

Cullen gave a dry laugh. "Can't think of anything, son. Whole bunch you should know, I reckon, that you never will. Shoot her before she gets you. That'd be about the gist of it."

I thanked him and set off. Wilcox hesitated, then followed. During our years of companionship, I'd sensed a few times when he weighed the notion of killing me. How easy it would be for him, to sever ties with what remained of his conscience. I'm not sure what he thought he owed me, but whatever it was, he had yet to shoot me in the back. As he surely would, if he were ever to do it. If Wilcox were to kill me, he would do it the same as any other man. Facing him, turned away—it made no difference. I'd be dead either way.

He held his fire and followed, his reluctance preceding him. I waded into the underbrush with more



than enough reservations for the two of us, feeling dead, dried things pricking at my clothing. Something solid crunched beneath my feet; after that, something soft that had once been alive. I felt it give beneath my boot, could hear the liquids squirting away. I didn't glance downward. I'd already seen enough blood for the day, and I had a feeling there was more to come.

When hunting a man, I try to put myself in his shoes. It didn't work that way with the cat; it could be anywhere, in spaces a man would never hope to fit. Even overhead, ready to drop down on us. My eyes moved restlessly, pausing on every shadow, seeing the cat in every pile of debris and every tangled knot of underbrush.

I stopped, closing my eyes. It was too much. I breathed slowly until the paranoia faded. When I opened my eyes, I saw the forest more clearly. It was just an animal. Vicious, yes. Unpredictable, yes. But just an animal. It couldn't out think us, it didn't understand the power of our rifles. We were in the cat's habitat, but we held the progress of mankind in our hands and our heads. The playing field was even.

Wilcox came up behind me. "This is pointless," he said.

I nodded. Perhaps. But it still had to be done. Even if we were to run, we'd still have the cat to deal with. I've never been one to lean too heavily on my pride; I've seen too many men die with pride in their eyes, when they could've turned and run and be proud another day. I'd made a deal to save our lives, but even if I wanted out, we'd still have to make it around the mountain. And that meant killing the cat.


Something moved in the forest ahead of us, but it didn't sound large enough to be the cat. Still, I raised my rifle halfway to my shoulder. If the beast came bounding after us, there would be no time to aim, but I needed the barrel pointed in the general direction.

Nothing attacked us.

"Squirrel," Wilcox said, though I didn't see it.

I sighed. My breath plumed in front of my face, drifting skyward. I concentrated on slowing my pulse, giving my nerves a rest. I saw nothing. I heard nothing. I looked at Wilcox, and he shook his head. It was possible the cat wasn't here. It could easily have continued on up the mountain.

A branch snapped behind us. Almost simultaneously, Cullen gave a shout. I spun, saw a flash of movement. One moment, I could make out Cullen's profile, watching us. The next, he was gone.



I didn't think. I fired the gun back the way we'd come, aiming high to avoid hitting Cullen. I stumbled through the underbrush, rushing back to our captor. I found him a few feet from where we'd left him, propped against a tree, hand across his gut, holding his innards in place. Blood seeped between his fingers, spurted out his lips.

I searched for the cat, but it had vanished again.

Wilcox remained standing, back to me, while I knelt next to Cullen. The surprise hadn't yet drained from his eyes; his gaze followed me down, and his free hand reached out, clutched my shoulder.

"Tell them," he said, pulling himself forward. "About me. And the boy."

I nodded. "Quiet," I said. I eyed the wound; there would be no surviving it, not even if we had a doctor with us. The cat's claws had ripped clean through Cullen's coat and abdomen. It had also clawed at his face; his right ear dangled by a thin piece of skin. As I watched, it broke free and fell into the snow, disappearing into the white fuzz.

"It's still here," Wilcox said. "I can feel it."

So could I. The cat had split us up; maybe intentionally, maybe not, but either way we'd weakened enough for it to strike.

Cullen's fingers dug into my shoulder. "Tell them," he said again. "The boy." He said something else, something I don't think was a word, then his grip loosened and he went still.

I stood and joined Wilcox. No movement in the trees around us. The woods had fallen silent at the moment of attack, and remained that way.


"Now we can run," I said. "Now would be a good time for it."

Wilcox shook his head. "Too late."

I thought I heard something behind me and glanced over my shoulder. It was just Cullen's body, sliding to the ground.

"It's there," Wilcox said. I turned to him, and he gestured in front of us.

I squinted into the forest and saw nothing. But I didn't doubt his instincts. I readied my rifle.



The cat burst upon us suddenly, from the exact spot Wilcox had gestured to. A massive, muscled beast, longer than a full-grown man, teeth larger than any I'd ever seen. It pounced almost silently, with only a huff and the rustle of the debris it had been hiding under. I fired at it before I knew what I was doing, my finger tightening on the trigger as soon as I saw the beast. By sheer luck, my bullet hit it, grazing the cat's side. Not enough to stop it.

The animal went for Wilcox first. My partner had his gun up, but the cat was on him before he could fire. Instead, he held the gun between them, the cat's body pinning it against his chest. Its jaws clamped onto his shoulder, and Wilcox roared into the animal's ear, as the two of them fell back into the trees.

I hurriedly checked my gun. Only one bullet left. I put the weapon to my shoulder and waited. The underbrush wrestled; something groaned. The cat hissed, or maybe it was Wilcox. Then stillness, and silence. I dropped to one knee, a smaller target, steadying the rifle. Waiting.

The silence stretched so long that the forest began to move again. First, a bird chirped somewhere above me. Then another joined. The forest seemed to exhale, and life returned.

Wilcox pushed himself to his feet. I lowered the gun and stood. When he joined me, he had a knife clenched in his hand. I'd seen the same blade on the boy the night before, around the fire.

"I didn't see you take it," I said.

Wilcox shrugged. He winced as he did so; his coat had been torn, especially around the left shoulder, where the cat had bit him. He tucked the knife into his belt, then turned and went back into the underbrush, reemerging with his rifle.

I didn't say anything further. We stood still for a moment. I glanced at Cullen's body, snow accumulating on his closed eyelids. I thought of his last requests, then pushed them aside and thought of them no more. Without comment, I turned and began to lead us further up the mountain, away from the town that had sent us on this futile quest. Wilcox fell into place behind me. As we walked, I kept half my attention on the sounds behind me, waiting to hear him fall. But he didn't, and we continued, as the forest grew colder and the promise of dark fall approached.

Perry Lopez is the recipient of the 2015 Trimble Prize for excellence in writing. He studies Rhetoric and Writing at UT Austin and does his walking by the river. When he is not writing depressing or excessively weird fiction, he is honing his new form of haruspication based on staring deeply and without focus into shag carpet.

Fire Ants

Perry Lopez


The Cuban's skin is black with smoke. He sits beneath the shade of the palm, cross-lashed with sunlight through the fronds, rolling a dead ant between his fingertips. As he toys with it, the soot comes off his pads and encases the ant in a sticky ball that grows and grows until there is no more ant-shape to it. Just a tiny planet of pitch, smoothly gyrating and gathering and dereticulate, obeying the laws of form. He is shirtless and shoeless and thin, his eyes are blood-webbed and watching. Thermo means heat means fire.

He cannot smell himself. Cannot smell the ocean either, though he can hear it. That mellow storm of crash and suck he has heard all his life. He cannot smell the rotting plantains, but tastes them when he breathes. Sweetness and salt in the air that burns in his raw throat, sticks there piquantly burning. His own smell covering everything, but then he cannot smell himself. All he smells is smoke.

"Ah Cristo, my eyes are stinging. I think I will go blind soon."

Arlo is drunk. He may in fact go blind. They went to the University of Havana together where he studied science and Arlo studied culture. Now he is drunk with a bottle of fine spiced rum in each fist and is crouching over the anthill, squinting and rubbing at his eyelids with the back of his hand, spitting dark gobs full of cinder-grit down on the mound—the mound that sits between the two men and pulses with their frenzy, those thousands, those millions, their knobby red bodies strung together like simple molecules. Swarming along their prickly vortices, building up their warren of dirt on the shore.

He rolls the ball of grime back on his thumb then flicks it into the beach-grass, shooting out so fast and small that his eyes cannot follow as it disappears soundlessly into the airy shush between



breakers. He looks back and searches for another.

“But so what if I do, eh? A man *should* go blind after seeing such a miracle as I have; the rest of the world would only disgust him! Make him wish he was in the dark, alone with just the memory.”

There are hundreds of them at his legs, drawn in by the acrid smell. They tickle-fight atop his toe-crests and caravan down along his shins; at his knees they eddy and trace out in strange ellipses, caught up in the foci of his body’s landscape, skirting his mountains. They are red and his flesh is black and they travel him without rest, cherry bright in the morning sunlight through the fronds, their tiny antennas held out like dousing rods, silly stupid things, searching him for their need, something to carry back to the mound. They are hundreds but he cannot feel them. They cannot bite him and he cannot feel them. The smoke-crust is far too thick and they will find nothing to eat of his body today.

One ant stands motionless atop his kneecap, wagging its tendrils and watching the others scuttledance by. He reaches down and carefully crushes its head between his thumb and middle-finger, then pinches it up and sets to rolling again just like the last.


Across, Arlo spits and drinks and bares his teeth at nothing.

“And can you believe the fool had no guards posted? Only a Captain could be so stupid, so secure. Pah! What do you think it was that finally woke him, uh? The whole damn town knew his house was burning before he did, the pig! How he ran out still naked from sleep and batting embers from his beard to find everyone watching! How he looked back and screamed *Oooooooh Mi Madre, Mi Madre, Dios ayuda a mi Madre...*”

Between them and the sea is a comb of palms, their scaly shafts serried close like whale teeth, the kind used for straining. And will they hold out the tide? No, no, of course they mustn’t. See the salted, sandy bands about their trunks, a meter high where the surge-tide has risen and will rise and rise and rise again. Carrying it all back out to waste until...

“...he tried at the flames again and again, you remember? By the time he gave up, the fool had no beard left at all! And then, oh brother, I will love you forever for this, how you gently pushed him aside and dove through the flames yourself! I lost count of the minutes you were inside, but you should have heard the Captain sing your praises! He wept and said he would make you a rich lieutenant, that he would kiss the dirt from your feet...”

...and then the Island and the Ocean would be concomitant, once the waves had ground flat the



strands and the mountains were all scorched naked and gray, when the roots were withered off and the hills sloughed in like dead jellies. Then the tide would seethe over the brim and this time it would not roll back.

“...but when the palm-thatch roof caught flame, I was sure you were dead. It went up all at once, an explosion of light and a *roar* like a hurricane squall and all these little red fairies floating through the night, but stinging us as they landed! Oh, it was a vision of hell, brother! I nearly knelt and wept beside that naked wretch, you know. But then there you were! Stepped right through the inferno, I saw it, and in either hand the Captain’s finest Bacardi! Unburnt, either one!”

He strikes and the ball of ash and ant is gone. Its last word is the sticky slap against his nail plate and then it is gone. But another has found its way squirming into his navel, testing there for entry, so he roots it out and crushes its body together. Sets then to rolling.

“From where I stood, I could not see his face. What was his expression, brother? I cannot guess it. But I was amazed, struck dumb. I was sure he would attack you, or at least lunge for his rum. But to clasp at your ankles as he did? To mewl like a babe and as naked, an appointed Captain? Mad with grief, I suppose. A man reduced to nothing...And you know, I never heard the old woman scream...perhaps she breathed in the smoke as she slept...never felt the fire...Ah Cristo, Cristo...”

Arlo speaks on, but he does not listen. He knows they must make an end soon.

So, when they have finished with the rum, he will say that they must go and join with them who fight in the mountains and in the jungles, *los Guerrilleros*, and Arlo will agree, and they will leave out before he sobers. The two men will tell the fighters what they have done and give them the bottle of Bacardi they have not drank from, to be used for burning, and then be welcomed gladly into their ranks.

But now Arlo has had enough. He hands him their bottle, thrusts the other into the sand, and goes off groaning to vomit into the beach-grass. The Cuban slugs once from the amber dregs, afloat with white flecks of mouth-tissue and black stars of cinder, then dumps the rest down onto the ant hill, the stream roping out in a sun-gold helix as it slaps at the mounded earth. And they die instantly beneath the liquid fire, curling themselves into neat little balls as the rest scatter out to nowhere and their home goes muddy-loose beneath them.

The bottle chugs once more and then is empty.

And when he is ready, he will walk down to the lapping waterfront. He will step out into the brine and let the waves lick him clean, clean of ants and smoke and the rest beneath. And the water will




go dark, of course, but then only for an instant, while inside his belly the rum will be burning.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in New Plains Review, Big Muddy and Sanskrit with work upcoming in South Carolina Review, Gargoyle, Owen Wister Review and Louisiana Literature.

NEW REGIME

John Grey

Each morning, as he dragged his
delivery carts to the village,
Hans saw fresh human heads impaled by tall spikes
towering over the narrow road.
He'd been in war and seen the carnage,
but this was different.
Every battle corpse he'd ever seen
appeared resigned to its fate.
But each look up was greeted by
an expression of total fear or complete surprise
and, in some cases, even grins.
He knew some of them in life.
A few were even good customers.
That was another reason he couldn't just keep
his eyes to the ground.
No more fresh eggs for Fritz.
Cancel Jacob's vegetable order.
It was better to treat each beheading
as the termination of a business arrangement
rather than an oncoming darkness
that would, ultimately, strip even a humble
farmer of his thimbleful of light.
For fixation on, even contemplation of the horror,
merely cast deeper its cruel shadow.
Better to rejoice in the purple harebells



by the side of the trail, or the lifting of the fog,
the delicate choir of birdsong,
than struggle to make sense of a sky
festooned with mouths and eyes.
He still had a job to do.
Even in living hell, the people must be fed.
The wooden wheels of the cart
clattered over the rutted surface.
Drops of blood fell like rain.
The head of Henry the Blacksmith
canceled his milk delivery.
The former village idiot pranced and danced
while the new one ruled from the castle.

Douglas J. Ogurek's fiction appears in the *British Fantasy Society Journal*, *The Literary Review*, *Gone Lawn*, *The Milo Review*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, and several anthologies. Ogurek is the communications manager of a Chicago-based architecture firm, where he has written over one hundred articles about facility planning and design. He also reviews films at *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*. More at www.douglasjogurek.weebly.com.

The Orange Berry

Douglas J. Ogurek

Newlyweds went to a hardware store to get paint for their first home.

"How about this?" The man pointed to a color called "Artist's Gray."

The woman said, "I'd rather get these two: 'Hey You! Red' and 'Reach Out Yellow.'"

"We don't live in a circus tent."

"And we don't live in a prison."

"This is a very elegant shade of gray," said the man. "I'd be happy with just one room in this color."


"Okay. You paint the upstairs bathroom 'Artist's Gray' . . . an 'elegant' color for the room with the throne. And I'll paint the living room the red and yellow. I'll even throw in some 'Artist's Gray.'"

#

The woman painted the living room walls. One was "Hey You! Red," one was "Reach Out Yellow," and one was "Artist's Gray."

The man painted the upstairs bathroom walls "Artist's Gray."

When he finished, he shut the door, then sat on his throne and admired his work. He opened the



window. He watched the birds, the neighbor's children playing on their jungle gym, the passing cars. He also studied a tall tree that grew right next to the window. Clusters of bright orange berries burst from the tree's branches.

The women knocked on the door. "Time to eat."

He looked at his watch. He'd been sitting there for two hours. "Will you please bring it up and slide it under the door?" he said. "I'm sorry, but I'm not quite done in here."

#

Later that night, the man stared at his "Artist's Gray" walls and listened to the sounds outside his window: crickets, the wind, the peeling of cars, dogs barking, children playing. Smells also drifted in: fresh air, clipped grass, lilacs, even a trace of blacktop. And for a few minutes, he could smell laundry detergent. He closed his eyes and remembered the backyard of his childhood home.

The woman knocked on the door again. "Time for bed."

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I'm not quite done in here."

When his wife went to bed, the man lay on the bathroom floor and stared at the ceiling. It was white. Tomorrow, he thought, I will paint the ceiling "Artist's Gray."

#

The next day, some neighbors came over. They smiled when they walked into the living room the wife had painted. The "Artist's Gray" made the red and yellow seem even brighter.


But the man stayed in his bathroom.

"Honey, why don't you come down?" said the woman. "You're spending too much time in there."

The husband looked up at his "Artist's Gray" ceiling and smiled. "I'm sorry, but I'm not quite done in here."

Later, he plucked an orange berry from the tree just outside his window. He held it against the gray wall. The berry was as orange as an extension cord.

He said, "I will write a poem about this berry." He stared at the berry the entire time the neighbors



were there. Sometimes, when he heard them laughing, he got mad.

#

At the end of the week, the man still had not come out of the bathroom. He continued working on the berry poem. Kids were playing outside. He stuck his head out the window. "Hey, keep it down out there!"

Later, the woman came to the door. "This is ridiculous," she said. "You have to come out of that bathroom. I'm worried about you."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not quite done in here." He was painting the bathroom floor "Artist's Gray."

#

One month later, the man was still in his bathroom. "Artist's Gray" covered the counters, cabinets, and shelves.

He still worked on his poem, but the berry had started to lose its brightness.

The woman pounded on the bathroom door (also "Artist's Gray"). "Please, please come out," she said. "You're missing out on so much."

"I'm sorry," he snapped, "but I'm not quite done in here."

#

Every day, the woman tried to get her husband to come out of the bathroom. And every time she asked, he'd say, "I'm sorry, but I'm not quite done in here." Still, she would bring up his meals, because she loved him, and she promised she would stay with him "for better or for worse."

#

Ten years later, the man sat on his "Artist's Gray" toilet and looked at his "Artist's Gray" bathtub. He still worked on his poem about the berry, which was brown and shriveled. He heard children laughing and looked out the window. They were eating mulberries from the tree in his yard.

"Hey you kids," he shouted. "You can't eat those. Go on home now."

One of the children yelled, "But mulberries are good for you."



"I know that, but you shouldn't eat them. They're much too beautiful to eat."

The children left.

#

Twenty-five years after the man first went into the bathroom, he was still in there.

His wife came to the door, like she did every day, to see how he was doing. She heard her husband crying. She knocked softly.

"What?" he said. "What do you want?"

"I just came to bring your dinner."

"Just slide it under the door. I'm sorry, but I'm not quite done in here."

As he worked on his berry poem, he smelled barbeque and heard people laughing and talking.

He stuck his head out the window. "Be quiet. Be quiet. I can't concentrate!"

He slammed the window shut, then noticed the only picture on the wall. It showed a Ferris wheel.

The man opened his can of paint, dipped his paintbrush in, and smothered the picture in "Artist's Gray."

#

On a summer afternoon fifty years after the man started painting, he sat in his bathroom—it was almost completely covered in "Artist's Gray"—and worked on the last line of his poem.

He opened the window. The sky was so blue that it seemed to buzz. Boys swung a red bat. Girls in bright greens and yellows played in a sandbox.

He tried to finish his poem, but the colors and sounds and smells interrupted him. He plunged his brush into his can of "Artist's Gray" paint. Then he stuck the brush out the window and tried to paint the sky, but he could not. He tried to paint the red bat and the girls' clothes. He could not. Then he tried to paint the paint telephone poles, the mulberries. He couldn't do it. He tried to paint the smells



and the laughter. He could not.

He closed the window. The sky's blue still oozed through the blurry glass. The bat's red still slashed, and the green and yellow floated and poked in the glass.

The man splashed "Artist's Gray" paint onto the window. He spread it with his hands until it covered the window.

That night, the man finished his poem, but his wife never came to the door.

The next morning, he heard a knock on the door.

"Sir? Hello. Sir?" It was a man's voice.

The man tried to paint the words. "What are you doing in my house? And where is my wife?"

"Sir, I have bad news," said the visitor. "Last night, your wife passed away."

#

Later that morning, the man opened his bathroom door for the first time in fifty years. He walked down the stairs and into the room his wife painted. The red wall shouted "Hey You!" The yellow wall bloomed. Then he noticed the "Artist's Gray" wall. The color looked different than the way it looked in the bathroom. How much more lively it was with the other colors.

Then the man stepped outside. Children ate Popsicles as orange as the berry he had plucked many years ago. A woman with a dress as white as lilies held hands with a man in a cotton candy blue shirt.


The man wept. These were people, and the colors people brought to the world.

#

That night, the man passed away.

#

A week later, the man's brother and sister came to sort out his house. When they were in the room the wife painted, they spent a lot of time laughing and talking.



But when they went to the upstairs bathroom, they became silent. "Artist's Gray" covered everything: the walls, the ceiling, the floor, the shelves, the cabinets, the counter, the tub, the toilet, the window, the picture, and the mirror. Even the lights.

A shriveled brown berry sat on the counter. Next to the berry sat the piece of paper with the man's poem, but they could not read the poem, because the paper was covered in "Artist's Gray."

