

# 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 We are always looking for well-crafted, previously unpublished, writing that seeks to capture an awareness of the human predicament.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](mailto:typehouse@peoples-ink.com)

## Editor

Val Gryphin

## Cover Photo

Homage To Black & White by Christopher Woods

*"Homage To Black & White" was taken in an abandoned house in Chappell Hill, Texas. There is always a forlorn sadness about old houses. And, if you think about it, there is also a sadness about old technology. The world moves on. We strive and stumble to keep up. A constant battle.*

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*James Wade is a journalist living in Austin, Texas. He writes short fiction to entertain his wife and his dogs. His wife is encouraging. His dogs are not impressed.*

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# Wasting Water

James Wade

It was autumn, when we saw the cloud.

The heat had not relented, at least not to any degree we could measure with the sweat from the back of our necks. But we knew because of the calendar that it was October 13, mother's birthday. If sister and I stayed up tonight, we'd hear her crying-- or "wasting water" as grandma called it-- through the wall.


Back when father had a job, before the sun forced everyone inside, I had loved this time of year. Crisp evenings were spent watching men throw and run and tackle, and the world around us was filled with orange and yellow and red. But the remaining leaves had fallen long ago, when there was nothing better to do. They were relieved to end their struggle. And the trees, those that weren't dead already, were grateful to be rid of the weight.

The reservoirs were long-dry, the desalination plants had failed repeatedly, and by the time we saw the cloud, October had become just another month on the calendar. It was a word on top of blank boxes with numbers to help us count. When we had marked all of the boxes we would turn the page and begin again, writing the new total in the top corner. Today it said 736-- more than two years. It wasn't the first drought, but it was the longest.

The morning, as always, started with prayer. It was silent. We breathed through our noses, so as to not let the moisture from our mouths evaporate. I asked God to watch over mother and father and sister. I asked Him to kill the dog that had bitten father. I didn't see the dog, or see any bite marks, but I heard grandma telling mother that "the black dog has bitten Daniel hard." She said grandpa, before he died, was attacked by the same dog. So I also asked God to make sure father didn't die.

The cloud was on the morning news, but mother and father didn't say anything about it. Father was still asleep, or at least still in bed, and mother was working a bowl of tepary beans with her hands,





hoping the oil from her skin would moisten the contents. The drought-resistant legume had replaced earlier definitions of food in our vocabulary. Mother's back was to the television as she stood in the kitchen, staring at the unfinished tile backsplash. Father, on one of his good days, had begun to replace the weathered and blistering wallpaper above the stove. But the bad days were back too soon, and the now the project lingered in some sort of purgatory, a symbol of our family, our father, our world.

Despite our immediate environment, sister and I listened to the news that morning with palpable excitement. We ran out the front door, our eyes wide, to see it for ourselves. It wasn't much, but it was something. It felt at the same time familiar and foreign, like seeing a guardian angel appear at the foot of the bed. I should have been comforted by its presence, but instead I was alarmed to be witnessing something so unnatural.

We craned our necks on the way to school so that we could watch it through the heavily tinted bus windows. It's as if we couldn't take our eyes off it for a single second, for fear it would vanish as suddenly as it had appeared.


None of the teachers talked about it. We were handed papers with the usual instructions: don't over exert yourself; if you **MUST** go outside, stay in the shade; keep your verbal communication to a minimum. None of the children talked about it either, but there were several fingers pointing up toward the sky, and a sea of nodding heads. We all saw it. We just weren't sure what it meant.

"No use sitting around waiting on rain." The phrase had picked up steam in the early days of the drought. It was a way to incite an action in pretty much any scenario, while also commenting on the absence of precipitation. As the months turned to years, and the earth began to die, the humor of the words were lost-- replaced by something much more somber. A resignation, a surrender to the inevitable.

Our school was small, so sister and I were able to eat lunch together, even though she was in 3rd grade and I was in 6th. She passed me a note asking if I thought it would rain. I wrote back that I didn't know, and that she needed to eat more of her beans.

Her next note said she thought it would rain because she had prayed for it. The cloud was an answer to her prayers, and it would rain, and the rain would fill up the swimming pool we used to go to with mother and father, and we would all play and be happy. Then she snatched the note back and quickly scribbled at the bottom that she was sick of these stupid beans.

I doubted God had specifically chosen sister's prayer to answer, but I didn't tell her that. In fact, I doubted a lot of things about God, but I didn't tell anyone. I just continued to pray, and breathe



through my nose.

# # #

By the time the bus dropped us off that afternoon, the cloud seemed to have grown. Maybe sister was right, I remember thinking, allowing myself to hope for the first time. My optimism was short-lived. We hadn't noticed the ambulance at first, because we were too busy staring at the cloud. But just as we exited the bus, two men came bursting out the front door of our house. They were carrying a person dressed in white sheets with red splatters that looked like abstract art.

Mother followed after them, her hands trembling and her eyes wasting water. Sister and I stood frozen, and as the men rushed passed us I could see my father's wrist was wrapped in a cloth that had the same pattern as the sheets, only much more red than white.

"Was it the dog?" I asked, running toward mother. "The black one?"

She looked at me, confused at first, and then cried harder.

She disappeared into the bedroom and reemerged moments later with the keys to a car I barely remembered we owned. She told us to stay inside and keep the doors locked. She was going to go the hospital to be with father. Then, just like that, she disappeared again.

"We should have gone with her!" sister cried. "When it rains, we could have all gone to the pool!"


"Hush," I said. "Use your notes." She had not noticed the blood on the floor, leading to the old bathroom. Even after we put in the outhouse, father still spent hours at a time in there by himself.

"We should have gone!" she persisted. "The hospital is close to the pool!"

"It's not going to rain! I snapped. "The pool doesn't have any water in it, so it isn't a pool, it's just a pit!"

I knew something was wrong with father. I didn't know what it was, but I knew mother couldn't fix it. And if the cloud couldn't fix it, then a stupid swimming pool wasn't going to help either. I was confused and scared, and I took it out on sister. I didn't even go after her when she stormed out the door.

Once she was outside, I opened the bathroom door and saw what there was to see. My father must be dead. Nothing could bleed that much and go on living. I felt sick.



The world around me began to grow dark, literally. The outside light had faded. I checked the clock, realizing that it was too soon for dusk. I slammed the bathroom door and bolted down the hall. When I flung open the front door, and tilted my head skyward something wet hit me in the face. The first drop was above my eye, then one landed in the middle of my forehead, another on my cheek. I looked up and down the street and saw more children and adults, running out of their houses. Arms were held out, perhaps to embrace the rain, or to thank the Heavens. People laughed and danced, and a giant grin crept across my face.

“Gracie!,” I called out. “Gracie, you were right!”

I looked around the side of the house, and in the backyard, but sister was nowhere to be found. I went back inside, checking every room, thinking maybe she had snuck past me when I was in the bathroom-- still nothing. I asked neighbors if they had seen her, but no one had. They were so caught up in the excitement of the rain, I’m not sure they heard my question, or cared.

I was worried about sister, but I didn’t know what else to do, so I went home and watched the rain through my bedroom window. I listened to the sound it made on the roof, I felt the wetness it left in my hair, and I embraced the chills my damp clothes were giving my body. I reached for a blanket, rested my head against the window pane, and soon I was dreaming about black dogs, red sheets, and a happy family at a pool.

The pool.

I woke with a cramp in my neck. As soon as my eyes opened, my feet were on the floor and I was rushing toward the garage. The tires on my bike were flat, and I didn’t wait the entire time it would have taken to fill them properly with air. Instead, I pumped until I felt a hint of life in the rubber, then tossed the equipment aside, hopped on the bike and began to pedal as fast as I could.

# # #

When the rain began to fall at the hospital, father was asleep. Mother stood at the window and watched, her hand over her mouth.

“Daniel,” she whispered to him. “It’s raining. It’s really raining.”

She stroked his hair and kissed his face.

Then, two miracles in the same hour, father opened his eyes and looked at her.





"Happy Birthday," he managed, a thin smile struggling to spread along his lips.

Mother laughed, and happily let her tears fall. Nothing in this moment was wasted.

# # #

When the rain began to fall at the old swimming pool, Gracie had been crying under the slide. She wiped her eyes, then rubbed them, almost in disbelief. She had barely been six-years-old the last time water fell from the sky, and even if she couldn't possibly understand the significance of this moment, she still jumped for joy.

"Rain!" she screamed, in her little girl voice, to no one in particular.

People all over were joining together to celebrate, to thank the God of their choice, to laugh, to cry, to fill rain barrels. Something magical occurs when good things happen-- things that everyone can be thankful for. A war coming to an end, a cure to a disease, the solution to any problem that has long presented itself as a part of the global, human condition-- these things are cause to connect with one another despite past differences or disagreements.

Those sentiments, those emotions, those needs, were surging through Gracie. She wanted to share this moment with her family. She scrambled out from under the slide and began to sprint toward the gate.

After a long dry spell, concrete, like a roadway, is far more susceptible in terms of slickness. Our dry spell had been historic. Gracie wasn't thinking about that, she was only thinking about getting home to me. If only I could've pedaled harder.

She must have slipped, according to the doctors, and when her head met the concrete it was at just the right spot, with just the right amount of force.

# # #

This time the black dog bit both my parents. And even though the reservoirs began to refill, mother and father still didn't open their mouths much.

And now, every autumn, on my mother's birthday, the town gathers to celebrate the return of the rain. But we stay home. We don't sing or dance or pray. We simply continue to collect water, breathing through our noses, preparing for the next time there are no clouds.

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*Joe Russo* has been published in *Linguistic Erosion*, *Farther Stars Than These*, *Leaves of Ink* and *Door is A Jar* magazine. Joe is currently working on second full length stage play entitled "(Color) Rose," about a struggling marriage, and a collection of short stories, "America's Sweethearts," which showcases interesting, odd jobs that nobody usually thinks twice about. When he isn't writing he is interning at theaters across New York City. You can read more of his stuff at his website <http://joerusso8writer.wix.com/creativewriter>

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# Rumors for the Dead Boy

Joe Russo

Here where the facts about  
The dead boy:  
He was a son,  
A brother,  
A friend,  
And a lover.

He was found in the lake,  
Facedown,  
Shirtless,  
And pale.

His eyes half eaten  
And his left hand  
Torn off.  
Bone,  
Tendon,  
Muscle,  
Everything  
Gone.

The first rumor went like this:  
"He was pushed."

The second:  
"He was pushed by one of the Klank brothers."

The third:  
"Kevin Klank pushed the dead boy."

The fourth:  
"He was pushed at the end of a fight by the middle Klank boy."



The fifth:

"It was a gang war."

The sixth:

"The dead boy was high."

The seventh:

"The dead boy was drunk."

"Just like his father."

The eighth:

"The father pushed the poor dead boy into the water  
After a night of beatings."

The ninth:

"The dead boy was drunk and decided to  
Take a swim."

This is where the dead boy's mother  
Laughed.

"He can't swim."

The dead boy was buried  
Three days later.  
Closed casket.  
Small gathering.

The first rumor went like this:

"I heard it was closed cause his face  
Was eaten by the gators!"

"No I heard it was melted."

"His hands were eaten dummy."

"You know I heard from a friend of a friend  
That his right hand was eaten as well."

"No real loss there-"

"Have some respect!  
The boy is dead!"

The dead boy's mother went home  
Shortly after burying her  
Only son next to her father.  
Her head's in a daze.

"Heard she took pills during  
The ceremony. In front of  
God what a pig."

"No she was ill during the ceremony.  
Did you see how she coughed all the time?  
Poor thing."

"Poor thing my ass. She killed that  
Poor boy. She pushed him."



"I saw her do it!"

"Now she has no one.  
Wonder what she's gonna do now?"

"Did you see that man she  
Had over about two days ago?"

"A big one. Black as the night."

"No. No I heard he was white."

"Heard it was the carpenter himself."

The dead boy soon faded.  
From the news,  
The mouths,  
And the eyes of the people.

"I heard he did it because  
He was a homo."

"You know someone told me  
The same thing."

"I saw him with another man."

"I think it was a Klank brother."

"No remember that girl he was dating  
Oh, what's her name -"

"The fat one?"

"I heard she was pregnant."

"She dropped outta school and he  
Followed right after her. Stupid."

"Poor babies.  
All of them."

Here where the facts  
The dead boy wanted to die.

The dead boy took  
A handful of pills,  
A bottle of Jack,  
His fathers,  
Swallowed each fear,  
His mother,  
His father,  
His brother,  
His pregnant ex-girlfriend,  
And finally swam,  
To the ones unwilling  
To hurt him.

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*John W. Dennehy is an American author of macabre fiction, often focusing on psychological horror and suspense. He earned a degree in English/Creative Writing from UNC Wilmington, and a Law degree from Suffolk University Law School. His work has been accepted by literary journals and anthologies, such as SQ Mag, Sanitarium Magazine, Disturbed Digest, The Stray Branch, Calliope, The J.J. Outre' Review, Winter Shivers, SNAFU: Wolves at the Door, Dark Monsters, The Haunted Traveler Vols. 1 and 2, and Ghost Papers. John currently has a novella and a novel under review with a publisher. He lives in New England. Find him at: <http://johnwdennehy.com/>.*

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# Desert Highway

John W. Dennehy

Doug Cantrell swung his framing hammer in rhythm with other workers. Hammers smacking nail heads echoed through the narrow commercial building. They were converting an old warehouse into office space.

His powerful arm moved steady. Thinking about his troubles, Doug sunk nails with swift blows, precise and fast. When the hammering stopped, Doug had covered more ground than three framers. Monotonous work, he was thankful to be inside, out of the Arizona sun.

A bead of sweat ran down his brow. Doug raised a calloused hand and wiped it away.

The fighting bulldog tattoo on his forearm kept the nastier workers at bay. Different from the others, he was clean cut with a muscular build. Doug's eyes had a piercing glint. His mind drifted to Becky, as the crew stretched out. Most of them had sketchy pasts, drinking, drugs and maybe time in a correctional facility.

Workers laid out lumber for another stud wall, and Doug thought about how he'd blown the relationship. Then the foreman called out: "Nail it!"

The break was over soon after it began. Doug pounded nails in a couple of swings. Frustration drove his pace. Soon he bumped into the guy ahead of him.



"What's the rush?" Lester said. "We get paid by the hour."

"Yeah," Davy added. "Ole Jarhead is gonna' work us out of a job."

"Any of you have a problem with me," Doug said, hammering away. "We can step outside."

Nobody responded. They stood idle, not daring to speak.

"Nah, we've got no trouble with you," Davy finally said. "Just wish you'd slow it down is all... so the job lasts longer. Some of us have families, and might not find anything for a while after this."

The foreman stepped over, eyeballing them. "What's the hold up?" he barked. "Get back at it. We've got a deadline to meet."

The crew returned to work, hunched over, driving nails home. Doug looked the foreman over.

"What's your problem, Cantrell?" the foreman snapped.

"I'm done, Hank."

"What do you mean?" Hank said.

"I mean... I'm done," Doug said, stepping to the water cooler.

The foreman trailed after him. "We've got a few hours left before quitting time," Hank said, sounding nervous.

"That's not what I mean," Doug replied, taking a long drink.

"Was afraid you'd say something like that."

Hank moved closer. "Look, you're my best worker," he muttered. "If it's money, maybe we can make a deal."

"This isn't about money." Doug shook his head.

"What is it then?" Hank said, panic in his eyes. "You push that crew along. And I've got an impossible deadline. It's my ass if we don't get this project done on time."





"That's not my problem, Hank."

"Look, you can't do this to me." Hank grabbed onto Doug's arm. "We can work a deal. There's a bonus in it for you."

Doug looked at the hand on his arm. "Sure you want to be doing that?"

Then Hank let go of Doug's arm.

"A man shouldn't have to quit to get paid what he's worth, either."

"Well, you never complained before." Hank sweat profusely. "I've tried to take care of you. Pay you more than the others."

Doug unhooked his tool belt, and walked toward the door. A deadening silence pervaded the warehouse. Not a single nail was hammered. Everyone stood looking at them.

"We're not done yet!" Hank yelled, growing bold. "You step out that door Cantrell, and you're fired."

Shaking his head, agitated, Doug glanced back at Hank. "Why'd you have to go and say a thing like that?"

Hank stood there looking at him stupidly.

"I'll be gone a few days," Doug said, opening the door. "Let me know if you change your mind."

Doug didn't look back. But he heard the foreman let out a sigh.

# # #

Outside, the sun beat down on the open desert, a heat so intense it felt like walking into a wall. Even the rocks looked hot. A person could dehydrate without knowing it. Perspiration evaporated as soon as it reached the skin.

Doug walked to his motorcycle parked under an overhang. The sun had moved, hitting the rear fender. He lifted the flap to a leather saddlebag, and stowed his tool belt inside. Doug pulled out a black leather vest and put it on.

Checking over his red Indian Scout, he gave both tires a kick. The spoked black rims jostled with



each whack.

He climbed onto the leather seat and straightened her out. Flipping the kickstand with a work boot, it snapped up, and then he worked the throttle. The V-twin engine roared.

Doug put on a chopper skull helmet. Glossy black with chrome goggles fixed to the front, it had a 2nd Marine Recon Division decal plastered to the back. He pulled the strap snug.

Wheeling the bike around, Doug looked for Hank to come barreling out the warehouse door. He waited a moment, but all was quiet. Coward.

Doug put the bike into first gear with the toe of his boot, and then cruised down the sidewalk toward the parking lot. When he got to the industrial road, he shifted into second and hit the throttle hard. The bike accelerated. He sped down the road, quickly moving into high gear.

The Scout hummed along. He grinned at the sight of a roadrunner darting away. Doug headed toward the Interstate. He only got a few miles out of Yuma when traffic gridlocked from an overturned tractor trailer.


Doug wheeled the bike around, and headed back to the last off ramp. He meandered through some desolate roads, until he got on Historic Route 80. A desert highway spanning 180 miles from Yuma to San Diego through stretches of desert plains, rocky foothills, ghost towns and wastelands.

Pulling down his goggles, Doug prepared for the ride ahead. The old highway had two lanes in each direction, but a stretch of desert separated the east and west lanes. The sun beat down hard. Patches of sand had blown into the roadway, causing him to downshift and ease to the passing lane.

Wind picked up as Doug moved further west. Gritty sand slapped his sunburned cheeks, and it caked up his lenses. He had to stop and wipe the goggles clear. Getting back on the road, he hit the throttle, and his mind drifted to Becky.

Cutting off work and riding through the desert was spontaneous. He could stop and call her. But talking on the phone wouldn't work. Never worked for him. People don't come clean talking at a distance. The only way to break through to Becky was face to face. Looking her in the eyes, she couldn't hide her feelings.

The rural highway cut through the Sonoran Desert. A vast badlands that would never be developed. He ripped across vast plains near the Mexican border.



The sun baked him, wearing at his vigor. A week of laboring in the stuffy warehouse, and now he rode through the hottest desert in the country. Lowland mountain ranges framed the plains; jagged dark peaks abutted the horizon.

A couple hours on the road, and the arid plains thickened with cacti and scrub brush. Beyond the plains, the road ascended into foothills. He pressed the Scout up windy hills where the roadway carved into the hillsides. Cragged slopes of tan rock lined the highway, reflecting heat and bright sun.

He kept up the pace, putting the miles behind him. Once he crested the mountains, Doug would descend toward the coast. Another stretch of desert lay between him and San Diego.

The Scout handled the hills well, but the steep grade bogged down the engine. Wind no longer blew across the sun baked highway. Heat rolled off the asphalt, as he climbed the hilly terrain.

Doug's lips dried out; he pressed onward, planning to reach the coast by evening. He desperately wanted to see Becky before she left.

The bike meandered through the windy hills. He leaned from side to side, coasting on the declines with an occasional squeeze on the brakes. The road leveled off. Doug expected to descend the mountains soon.

# # #


A dilapidated diner sat on the roadside of a plateau. The exterior was chipped stucco, and red trim ran around the building. Faded lettering advertised the diner's wares: BREAKFAST, MALTS, HAMBURGERS. Gas pumps out front hadn't been upgraded in decades, if ever.

A sign jutted from the roof reading Al's Café. An old pick up truck and a dusty sedan were pulled in front, suggesting the diner was open. Doug decided to take a break from the road. He downshifted and carefully pulled onto the gravel and dirt parking lot.

Doug found a smattering of broken tar to support the bike. He flipped the kickstand down, and cut off the engine. Dismounting, intense heat radiated from the bike, making him long for shade.

Doug stepped inside the diner and found it cool. The place wasn't well lit. He stood at the threshold, waiting for his eyes to adjust, and breathed in stale air.

A couple of air-conditioners were jammed into spaces above the picture windows. Rough looking



men sat in a booth nearby. The counter with swivel stools was unoccupied, except for an old-timer in a corner.

Doug took a seat at the counter and looked around for service. The place was dead. Cool air felt good, though. Behind the counter, dinged up stainless steel walls marked off the kitchen, with a ledge for taking orders. Doug glimpsed the galley out back. It was empty, nothing cooking on the grill.

Looking around, everyone had been served, so he remained hopeful. He heard footsteps. A scrawny man approached from the backroom, wearing baggy jeans and a soiled t-shirt. He held a pitcher of water.

Ice clanged against the metal, whetting Doug's thirst. The scrawny man approached flashing a smile and nodded. The grin lasted longer than necessary, revealing a mouthful of decayed teeth.

"Howdy, my name is Ernie," he said, stepping to the counter. "Saw you pull up on the bike. Figured you could use some water."

"You figured right," Doug said. "I could use a couple glasses."

Ernie nodded and reached under the counter. "Here you go," he said, placing a glass down.

Doug watched as water splashed into the glass. Ice cubes clinked against the sides. He waited impatiently, then reached for the glass and gulped half of it down.

Sipping the rest of the glass, he watched, while Ernie stood beside him, eagerly waiting to fill it up again. Doug couldn't help notice Ernie's nervous eyes, peering from an emaciated mug.

Something beneath the surface wasn't quite right.

Doug finished the glass of water, and Ernie poured another. Doug's throat adjusted to the cool water, so he guzzled the next one. When he put it down, Ernie shook his head, amazed. "My that was fast," Ernie smiled.

The third glass was meant to be sipped. Doug left it on the counter taking it slow. Ernie put the pitcher down and looked at Doug.

"You gonna' have something to eat?" said Ernie.



"Got enough time. I'll take a look at a menu."

"You passing through to the West Coast?" Ernie asked, fishing for a menu.

"Headed to San Diego. And I hope to be there tonight."

"We don't get a lot of people coming through here anymore." Ernie smiled and slid the menu over. "People that stop are always on their way to the West Coast, though."

"Guess that makes sense," Doug replied. "This old highway heads straight to San Diego."

"You going out that way... lookin' to start a new life?" Ernie stared at him expectantly. It was as though he wanted Doug to answer in the affirmative.

"No. That's not it, exactly."

Ernie tightened up. A stern grin cast on Ernie's face, but darkness quavered in his eyes. They locked glances for a moment, then Ernie looked away, reaching for a dishtowel. He wiped the counter bashfully. "Didn't mean to pry," Ernie said, apologetically.

"Guess I'll get a burger." Doug shrugged, handing back the menu.

"A burger," Ernie repeated. "That's a good choice. We do burgers just fine. You want any fries with that?"


"Sure, and I'll take a diet soda too."

"You've got it," Ernie said.

He sounded upbeat, as though getting past an awkward moment. Doug took him for a misfit. Felt sorry for the guy, skulking around a diner in the middle of nowhere. He probably slept on a cot out back.

When Ernie finished wiping the counter, he didn't head to the kitchen. He lingered. Doug looked him over. "There's just one small item of business," Ernie finally said. "You have to pay for the burger."

Doug shrugged, lifting his hands, baffled. They glanced each other over for a moment. Ernie seemed diffident. He wiped the counter a third time.



"Well, I was expecting to have to pay for the meal."

"That's not it," said Ernie. "We require you to pay up front."

Doug canted his head, partly bewildered by the strange guy, and somewhat amused by the diner's policy.

"This ain't got nothin' to do with you." Ernie glanced at the roughnecks. "We get a lot of riff-raff, so we have a policy for everyone."

"That's fine," Doug said, pulling out his wallet. "What do I owe you?"

"Let's call it an even ten dollars," Ernie said. "That's free refills on the soda. And you get an extra helpin' of fries. The tip's included too."

Doug pulled out a crisp ten dollar bill. A photo of Becky in dress uniform flipped into view. He slid the bill over, and noticed the misfit looking on. Ernie shook his head and grinned. "That's a fine looking girl, right there."

Doug took a sip of water without responding.

"She in the Navy?"

"Yeah, she's a nurse stationed in San Diego."

Ernie looked at the tattoo on Doug's forearm and smiled. "You must of met her when you were in the service. That where you're headed now. To see that pretty girl?"


Doug nodded. "She ships out... first thing in the morning."

Ernie grabbed the ten and headed toward the kitchen. Commotion came from the nearby booth.

A man with Apache features stood up. He wore a long knife sheathed to his belt. His companion was a greaser, wearing a silk dress shirt and gold chain. He had dark circles around his eyes, and wrinkles prematurely creased his face.

The big man pounded the table and shouted at the greaser. A sugar dispenser fell over, and rolled across the Formica tabletop. It crashed on the tile floor. Then the big man reached for his knife.





The clamor caught Ernie's attention. He rushed to the counter, fumbling underneath. Coffee cups rattled. Plates dropped to the floor and shattered. Ernie hurried to the table, holding a sawed-off shotgun. A wild gleam emanated from his eyes.

The men stopped arguing.

"Just sit down there!" Ernie snapped. "And quit your bickering."

The greaser leaned back in the booth, coolly looking at Ernie. His compatriot snapped the sheath closed and sat down. They sat still watching Ernie's eyes dart back and forth. Neither of them moved, afraid he'd squeeze the trigger.

"We're all set," the greaser said. "It was just a minor disagreement."

"Well, you two need to settle down. Or else I'll show you both to the door."

"Like I was saying Mister, we're all set. Thank you for clearing things up."

"And someone's going to have to pay for that," Ernie said, pointing the shotgun at the broken sugar dispenser.


"That one's on me," the greaser replied. "Why don't you take care of the man's order? You don't need that shotgun anymore."

Ernie nodded and swung the barrel away. The greaser smiled. He couldn't hide his relief at Ernie stepping out back with the gun. His companion held a stern look the entire time, never revealing fear.

The old-timer slid a few bills across the counter, and then hopped off his stool and trundled out the door. A wave of dust kicked up outside and blew past the windows. Then the old-timer's pick up tore out of the parking lot.

# # #

Doug sipped his water without saying a word. He figured the sedan belonged to the greaser in the booth. The tags were from back east, New Jersey. Ernie got a dustpan and broom and cleaned up the broken plates and sugar dispenser. He lugged the shotgun around with him the entire time. Then he finished cleaning up and stepped back to the counter.



"Don't mind them," Ernie said, dumping the debris in a trashcan.

"Seems like they've settled down. Hope that's the end of it."

"Wouldn't expect much more out of them," Ernie replied, grinning. "I'll get going on your burger, so you can get back on the road."

"Can I use your restroom?" Doug asked. "Been on the road awhile already."

"No problem. Just go straight back and it's on the left."

Doug looked over his shoulder. The men in the booth quietly finished up their meal. He figured they'd settled down. Walking out back, he noticed Ernie head into the kitchen. He leaned the shotgun against a stainless steel sink.

Doug opened the bathroom door. He stepped into a dank room. The porcelain toilet and sink were tarnished. Streaks of grime ran down the inside of the bowl. A small window overlooked the back of the property.

He relieved himself and washed up. The scuffle at the booth had sent adrenaline pumping through him. Doug splashed cold water on his face, trying to settle down. Something shimmered in the sunlight outside and caught his attention.


Doug stepped from the bathroom, and glanced out a little window. The terrain dropped off just beyond the diner. Twisted metal poked through scrub brush; shiny chrome window trim of a domestic sedan reflected in the sun.

Turning to head out front, he heard a squeak on the tile floor, and caught a glimpse of the shotgun stock, just before it cracked into his head. Doug stumbled, and passed out before hitting the floor.

# # #

Doug came around and heard muffled rattling from an air-conditioning unit. A peaceful sound that mollified him. Disoriented, he couldn't remember what had happened.

His head throbbed. A squeak on the tile floor brought everything back. Blood matted his left eye, impairing his vision. He tried to wipe it clear, and realized he was restrained. The dim light made everything obtuse.



Doug perused his surroundings: a storage room, approximately twelve by six. The door was slightly ajar. A camp cot lined a wall, and a makeshift nightstand rest beside it, assembled from an old crate. The opposite wall had shelves crammed with supplies for the diner. He'd been tied to a chair; rough rope chafed his skin.

A vintage chair. It had chrome legs and red vinyl seating. His arms were tied behind his back. Each calf was tethered to a leg of the chair. The rope felt tight, very tight. Doug tried to wriggle his hands free, but the binds didn't budge. His skin burned, and the swelling caused the rope to grow even tighter.

Footsteps squeaked on the tile floor nearby. Doug stopped fidgeting and listened. The steps halted. Then the door swung open. Ernie stood before him, eyes darting, a wild gleam in them. Doug had seen it before, a killer's eyes; some guys overseas had it, as though they enjoyed combat.

Blood stains splattered Ernie's t-shirt. He stepped into the storage room, leaving the door wide-open. He held the shotgun so tightly that his fingertips turned white.

"Soldier boy," Ernie grinned. "You're back with us now."

"I'm a Marine veteran, not a soldier," Doug snapped.

"What's the difference?"

"Soldiers are in the Army," Doug replied. "Marines are in the Marine Corps. We're not soldiers."


"Do you think I'm stupid, or something?" Ernie snarled. "Look who's tied to the chair, and helpless for Pete's sake."

"That might make you crafty," Doug said. "And you have some guile. But you sure as hell are one stupid son-of-a-bitch."

"Why I ought to crack you in the head again," Ernie retorted, lifting the shotgun. He made like he was going to slam Doug in the head. But Doug didn't flinch.

"Most people would be shittin' their pants about now," Ernie said, shaking his head. "But here you are with smartass, mouthy words." Ernie shook his head. Then he smashed the shotgun butt into Doug's skull, and everything went black.

# # #



Doug awoke to a crash, followed by clanging, and breaking glass. A few minutes later, Ernie returned to the storage room.

"That was fast," Ernie said, grinning stupidly. "You weren't out long this time."

He wasn't holding the shotgun anymore. Now Ernie had license plates in his hands. He stepped around Doug and put them on a shelf. Plates were stacked high. The latest acquisition appeared to be a set of New Jersey tags.

Ernie leaned over and grabbed a paint can from the bottom shelf. "Don't worry," he said, reaching for a brush. "This don't take long to clean up."

Doug pictured the two roughnecks blown all over the diner walls. Ernie scuttled out of the storage room. This guy is insane, Doug thought. Nobody knew where Doug had gone when he left work. And the chance of a cruiser pulling into the Café was slight. He wiggled, trying to loosen the ropes, but it was a feeble attempt to free himself.

He heard the floor squeak, and Ernie returned. He wasn't smiling this time. "You were trying to get yourself free?" Ernie demanded. "Weren't you?"

"You're damn right," Doug snapped.

Ernie left and came back with the shotgun. The blow hurt like hell, but didn't knock him out this time. Doug flopped his head over and pretended to pass out. A good hour went by while Ernie painted the diner, concealing what he'd done.


Then he came back and put the paint can away. Ernie didn't say a word.

He grabbed Doug and tilted the chair back. Slowly, he dragged Doug into the galley. The chair legs wiggled, as Ernie hauled him along. The scrawny bastard was stronger than he'd figured.

Squinting, Doug noticed the grill, sizzling hot. Ernie turned and looked him over, examining him closely. Ernie stepped to the grill and put a spatula on it. Then he turned around and bent close to Doug, peeking at him. Ernie's eyes darted from side to side.

"Ah, you've gone and played possum on me, haven't you?"

Doug didn't respond to him.



Ernie gave him a shove, but Doug didn't move. "Well, I know just what'll get your attention." He picked up the spatula and stepped behind Doug. Ernie pulled on Doug's wrists, exposing his forearm. Then he pressed the scorching hot utensil against the fighting bulldog tattoo.

Doug screamed, wildly shaking his head.

"Looky there," Ernie said, smiling proudly. "Finally got ole soldier boy to break."

"You haven't broken me!"

"Well, let's see about that." Ernie heated up the spatula again. "We'll definitely have to see about that."

Then he scorched Doug's forearm again, pushing the hot metal into his skin. The flesh charred and blisters bubbled up. Ernie stepped back to the grill, and Doug pushed into the floor. He tipped the chair over, falling backward.

Doug landed with his arms pinned, but a few screws snapped.

A leg wiggled free.

Ernie spun around.

Shock in his eyes, followed by rage. Doug jerked his leg, shearing off more screws. Both legs were free. He rolled over as Ernie stepped toward him, holding the spatula.

Doug strained but his hands were bound tight. Ernie swung the spatula, hitting him in the back. The corner of the utensil cleaved into his shoulder. Doug rolled and tried to get away. Ernie followed after him, wielding the metal instrument wildly. The next blow struck Doug's wrists, cutting into the rope.

It was impossible to avoid a buffeting. Doug grinded his teeth, and took a beating. Then he maneuvered himself into a position to stand. A barrage of blows struck him in the head and chest. But once he got to his feet, Doug tilted the chair back, and smashed it into a wall.

More screws snapped and the chair fell to pieces. He worked to free his hands of the rope. Pieces of twine fell to the floor.

Panic registered in Ernie's eyes.



Dropping the spatula, Ernie bolted for the storage room. Doug struggled to free himself.

The shotgun chamber opening echoed through the empty diner. Doug heard Ernie fishing around for shotgun shells in haste. Deer slugs fell and reverberated off the floor in distinct heavy thuds.

Finally free, Doug heard the shotgun being pumped. He ran toward the storage room. Ernie rushed out, and Doug surprised him. Doug grabbed hold of the barrel and jerked the shotgun free.

The muzzle exploded and a slug ripped through the diner.

The noise stunned Doug for a moment, ringing his ears. Ernie pounced on him full of wild rage. The attack lacked control or deliberation, but he was wiry and Doug had a hard time shaking him off.

Then he flipped the shotgun around and drove the butt into Ernie's head.

Ernie dropped to the ground, and Doug pumped another round into the chamber. The pump action reverberated through the silent diner. Ernie squirmed on the tile, trying to get away. His hand found purchase on the spatula.

He sprung from the floor, madly rushing at Doug. Pulling the trigger, Doug only felt recoil, as Ernie flew back against the wall. Ernie dropped to the floor, leaving a trail of blood in his wake.

# # #

Doug wiped his prints from the shotgun, and then tossed it on the floor. He cleaned up any trace of his presence, and stepped outside into the hot sun. He kept a first aid kit in his saddlebags. Doug patched himself up, and wrapped a wet towel around the burned forearm. He climbed onto the Scout and fired up the engine.

Heat radiated through the desert. For a moment, he thought about calling the police, but had little time to catch Becky. Doug pulled onto the desert highway, as the sun began to set. A wave of orange and magenta creased the skyline, and San Diego lay ahead.



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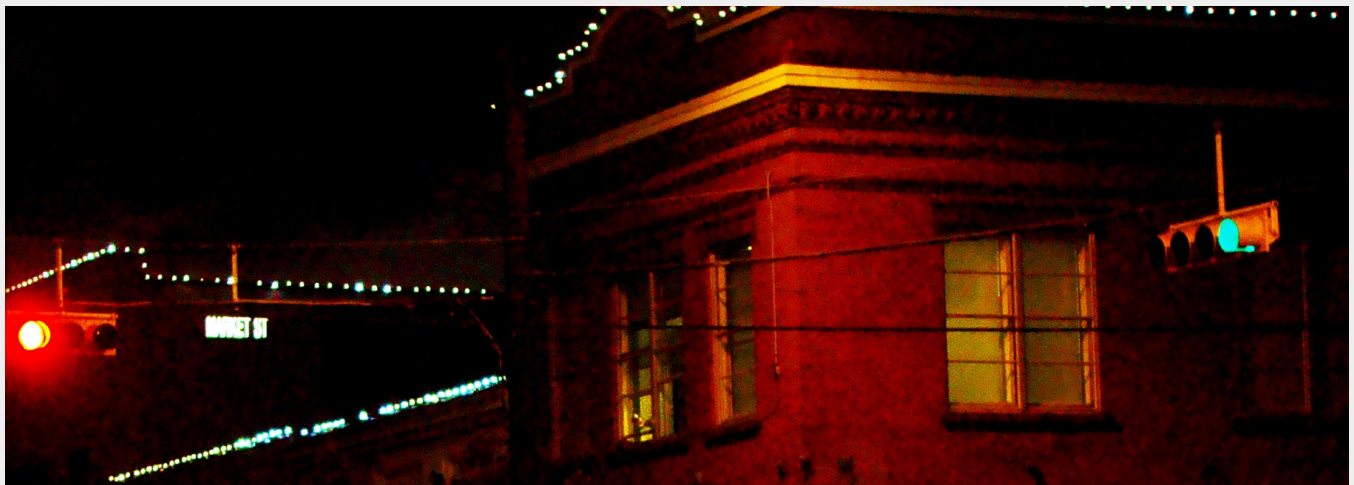
**Christopher Woods** is a writer, teacher and photographer who lives in Houston and Chappell Hill, Texas. He has published a novel, *THE DREAM PATCH*, a prose collection, *UNDER A RIVERBED SKY*, and a book of stage monologues for actors, *HEART SPEAK*. His work has appeared in *THE SOUTHERN REVIEW*, *NEW ENGLAND REVIEW*, *NEW ORLEANS REVIEW*, *COLUMBIA* and *GLIMMER TRAIN*, among others. His photographs can be seen in his gallery [-http://christopherwoods.zenfolio.com/](http://christopherwoods.zenfolio.com/) He is currently compiling a book of photography prompts for writers, *FROM VISION TO TEXT*.

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Big Mouth  
Christopher Woods

*"Big Mouth" was part of a carnival midway show at a county fair in Bellville, Texas. Notice how the people walk by him/her with such nonchalance. They don't know if this creature has had dinner yet, or if it might be time to feed on passersby. I kept my distance.*



Red To Green  
Christopher Woods

*"Red To Green" was taken during a night parade in Brenham, Texas. What does the photo say? Go, or stay. Maybe it depends on one's mood. There can be adventure in going. This we know. There may also be some degree of safety in staying. Life is like this, always having to decide.*

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*Jim Plath is an author of fiction and poetry. He holds a BFA in creative writing from The University of Nebraska at Omaha, and his work has recently appeared in The Lowestoft Chronicle, Amarillo Bay, and The 3Elements Review, among other journals.*

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# Dancing on Tenth Street

Jim Plath

To the din of slow traffic, on cobbled  
sidestreets where a dreadlocked man played  
Coltrane for spare change to a gallery of  
collar-less shirts and pocket-squares, you  
hummed a misremembered melody, and  
measured bourbon droplets in the fold  
of your tongue.

I asked if you could taste the musk  
of the Missouri on Tenth Street, and  
you said you'd learn The Blue Danube  
Waltz if your ankles didn't turn  
to string.

Do you still name the ground squirrels  
at your feet, or have you found new  
sounds to push the minutes  
forward? You never said. You  
just laid your arms about my  
shoulders, and washed your  
breath with the whiskers on  
my jaw, asked me to tell you  
a story where the characters'  
names don't matter, and the  
dragon doesn't win, but you  
wanted the end to spread you  
thin like old paper, part your  
lips until they showed more  
than flesh, and wept like split  
pomegranate.



I thought of you in a dream  
where whispers spilled from  
the gray chins of sidewalk  
guitarists, and I wondered if  
you ever found your story, or  
if you settled for a melody,  
shared it with passing cars and  
parking meters, spent it on the  
stares of lunch-break drunkards,  
forgot to know their names, or  
hoped they'd store your breath.

Only facts carry ugliness and  
don't shrink. Only fiction fears  
brevity.

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*Alexandra Gilwit* thinks of this story as an alternative history of her life if things had gone a little different when she was younger. She is a writer who is obsessed with first person perspective, especially from a female voice. As a woman, she aims to raise women up out of the one-dimensional role of coercing men to do good and bad things, and giving them their own voice. Her goal is to acknowledge that women are just as peculiar and just as vivid as their male counterparts. If you want to see what else she is working on please visit her website!

[www.agilwit.com](http://www.agilwit.com)

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# Wild and Beautiful Creatures

Alexandra Gilwit

This afternoon I followed a peanut butter sandwich smashed into the bumper of an 89 Honda Accord with Tennessee plates down Route 27.


Now I'm somewhere even more bumfuck than where I started.

This morning I was on my front porch picking at the paint chips on the rocking chair my parents got back in the 80's. Ever since before I could remember, the damned thing has been peeling paint. The Florida heat made an assurance to that. And so instead of sanding it and starting over, my dad just keeps painting over the chair with a fresh layer of white paint.

Once, when I was a kid, my best friend Billy and I covered our naked bodies and that chair with markers. My parents almost got mad, I saw my mom's eyes squeeze up like she was going to yell, but then they just gave up and opened again, and she turned to my dad and said, "Pete, get the paint."

Mom and Dad and I don't talk much. I suspect that they share a conversation or two in those hours that I'm not around but as of yet I haven't witnessed anything more than some light talk here and there about the weather, usually at meal times.

Down here in Florida there are two kinds of weather, hot and rainy. Especially where our house sits, right smack dab in the middle of the Everglades.



When I was a kid, living in the Everglades was a point of pride. Especially in the summer when I was free from school and lawless, and the days wouldn't stop till like 9 or 10. Billy's mom was similar to my parents in that she didn't care much for giving us rules. We both just had to be back before dark. Billy and I would run through the woods and build time machines with sticks and capture caterpillars and find dead animals. We were wild back then. Nothing could stop us, not even the bug bites.

That's back when our houses were one of a few dozen and there were dirt roads winding every which way, and wild horses and gators running amuck. It was paradise.

Now my city is just one big slab of concrete and asphalt. Developers went ahead and made a bunch of stupid cookie cutter homes for cheap and dried up the Everglades and made "civilized" folk of us dirty kids.

The only good thing all this development brought was a Publix Grocery Store. That is precisely why Billy and I quit school and started working there. We both started at bagging groceries, but now we are managers. That was about 7 years ago.

# # #

Yesterday Billy told me he was leaving. "Why?" I knew why, but I said it anyways, because that's the polite thing to do when your best friend has just broken your heart.

"I gotta get out, Kel." My name is Kelly, but Billy never calls me that, just like I never call him William. Billy looked kinda wild when he said this, like he was running from something. For a second I wondered if he was finally going to tell me that he was gay. We were both in our 20's now and sad virgins. Well, I *technically* wasn't but I don't like to count it because the guy that did it didn't make me bleed.


I knew Billy was gay back in elementary school when we both met Jake. Jake had been living in the Keys, but after a hurricane took his house and carried it to sea, his family had to relocate to our little oasis.

# # #

We were both instantly impressed with Jake. He was tall and lean and full of strong opinions about killing the poisonous toads that had overrun our little community. "They are an *invasive* species."

We both asked him what that meant and he tilted his head slightly up and let his tone rise with





authority. "It's when a species just shows up in a place it doesn't belong and multiplies till it uses everything up." Jake's dad was some fancy biologist and taught Jake a bunch about our neighborhood. When Jake would join us on adventures he would often stop us to explain what a plant or animal was and we ate it all up.

# # #

Of course Billy and I both had a crush on Jake, but neither of us would admit it. One time, after playing rough in the backyard, I accidentally stepped on Billy's glasses after they fell off his face. Jake sat with him as I ran to his house to grab him another pair. While rifling through some stuff on Billy's desk I found a love note that Billy had written Jake.

I never said anything to Billy about it. I think he eventually worked up the nerve though, because pretty soon after that Jake stopped hanging out with us. After that, Billy got really weird. One time, while watching our favorite TV show, Billy asked me to take off my clothes. I listened because it didn't seem like that much of a bother. Billy took his clothes off too and we both looked at each other for like five minutes then put our clothes back on. He also kept asking me to kiss him at school. So much so that we both ended up getting in trouble with the principal. It was as if Billy was trying to change his mind or something. I just went with it, just like I went with all of our schemes.


But Billy never actually told me anything, probably because our little town wasn't too keen on homosexuality. The word "Faggot" was our towns' favorite word for anyone acting a little off. I knew that there was nothing wrong with being gay, though. In my opinion, and maybe this is on account of my loose upbringing, rules are made to be broken. But I couldn't tell Billy that. I just had to play along, just like he was. We were both 23 and still playing pretend.

I played along because Billy played along with my stuff too. He was the only person I ever told my secret to who didn't look at me like I was an alien. And he only ever used it against me once. But I don't want to get to that right now. I mostly wanna just recap the day, because in my opinion, someone following a sandwich through the greater Seminole nation is a bit unhinged.

# # #

First of all, I HATE peanut butter sandwiches. There was a time when I was a kid that it was all I would ever eat. So much so that my parents used to get me to eat other stuff by saying it was a peanut butter sandwich, and I was just dumb enough to comply.

But eventually I got the stomach flu, and when it was all over, I could not for the life of me separate that feeling of nausea with the peanut butter sandwich I had eaten 24 hours before. In retrospect it



was probably the glass of milk that did it, but the mind does what the mind does.

Mom and Dad weren't much during that stomach flu but that wasn't a surprise. The two of them wouldn't notice an elephant in a tutu if it was dancing two feet in front of them, or at least that's what Billy's mom would say. I remember her talking about our old neighbor, Bathsheba, once. Right after Bathsheba got it on the highway.

Bathsheba had been a pale breed, the kind that burns in the sun, with wide-open dark brown eyes and dark hair. She would spend all day sitting on her front stoop until her daddy would come get her at the end of every day. Billy and I usually knew when it was time to go home when we couldn't see Bathsheba on her porch anymore.

"Ha! I hear she was naked when that car got her!"

"Mom! Her daddy can hear you!" That was Billy, always scolding his mom.

"No he can't, he's probably in a state or something over there!" She fired back, throwing her hand out in the direction of Bathsheba's house. "That woman was dumb as rocks, hasn't spoken a day since January '87. What a God-awful name."

"Mom!"

Turning to me. "You know her daddy was a pastor back in the day, I bet you he named her that because he thought her name'd keep her virginal. Boy was he wrong! Stop it Billy!" Billy was trying to grab at her coffee mug. She carried that thing around everywhere. Everyone knew it was filled to the brim with vodka but no one seemed to mind except Billy.

"Back in her day, Bathsheba was a whore." Billy walked off in a huff but I kept on listening, mostly because I was too terrified of Billy's mom to ever disappoint her by leaving while she was talking. That wasn't strange though, she was a very aggressive and blunt woman, with fiercely feminine features, that seemed to terrify everyone other than Billy. She was easily the most beautiful woman in our town, but the kind of beauty you didn't want to touch. I can't quite explain it, other than saying that her face was sharp and pointy in a way that made me nervous. Even her blonde hair was the kind of shade that, rather than reflecting light and radiating against her skin, seemed to swallow up light. She never ate either, or, at least, she never did in front of Billy or I. Instead she drank from her coffee mug and sucked at her cigarette, lacquering both with the red lipstick she always wore. I'd say she was a vampire if she wasn't so in love with tanning. Ten more years and her browning skin would be leather, but she didn't seem to care.

"Old Bathy. You know why she never talked, right?"

"Why, ma'am?"

"They say she suffered an emotional break."

"Huh?"

"I don't know exactly, I honestly just think that's fancy talk for her daddy beat her everyday since her first period. Wanted to beat the sin out of her or some dumb god-fearing shit. But Mrs. Larson down the street thinks that she lost her mind after she killed that family of four drunk driving. But that happened at least a year before she went stupid so who knows?"

"But then why did she just sit there, ma'am?"

"I think one of those loony doctors gave her a lobotomy, if you ask me. Or maybe it was her daddy that did it. Poor thing couldn't notice an alligator in a bonnet if it had been nipping at her heels."

They say Bathsheba left in the middle of the night in nothing but a blanket and just walked out to the highway and right in front of a car. When I was told about it, I pictured her walking out in the yellow light of the street lamps and opening her blanket like it was a cocoon, looking like a wild and beautiful creature. I don't know if it's proper to think this though so I never told anyone about it, not even Billy.


# # #

Billy's mom had the wildest moods of any of us. She could be playing with my hair one minute and telling me how she always wanted a daughter or, like that time when I was 8, after getting caught in a mud fight with the Pearsons's mutt, I ran through looking for food. I grabbed for an apple and Billy's mom appeared out of nowhere like a snake hiding in tall grass, clutching a butcher knife. The red polish that she always had on her nails gave me the impression that she had just finished off Billy, and I screamed as she grabbed my hands by the wrists.

"Next time you come into my house with dirty hands I will chop them off!"

I ran out and didn't come back for 10 months. Billy tried to explain that that was her sense of humor, but I couldn't shake the way her shrill voice flew at me.

I think she does like me though, despite herself and her moods. She doesn't care much for my



parents, though. Five Christmases ago she got extra drunk from her mug and yelled, “Your mother is an idiot. You know that?” as Billy told her to hush.

“No, ma’am.”

“‘No, ma’am,’ like you don’t know, or ‘no ma’am’ like you disagree?”

“I don’t know, she just doesn’t talk much.”

“That woman could never handle much, I gotta say.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t listen to her, she’s nuts.” That was Billy.

“Don’t talk to your mother that way! Listen, your mommy was a spoiled little brat when we were little. Her daddy was the richest man in town.”

“I never heard of that.”

“Ha! That’s because of the drug scandal.”

Billy hit her at this point. “That’s enough mom! Why you gotta do this?”


Billy’s mom just pushed Billy off of her and kept on going. “Yeah, honey, your grandpa was a thief and a coke head. Got taken away for life but died of a heart attack a week in jail. Your daddy is no better, he – “

“Mom! Stop it!” Billy slapped her so hard it woke her up from her drunk, and she looked at me, and I swear I could see some love, or maybe it was pity, in those terrifying eyes.

“I think it’s time for mommy to go to bed.” She stumbled away.

# # #

I can’t blame her for what she feels about my mom. Mom hasn’t stepped foot outside in years, nor has she made any attempt to acknowledge any of our neighbors when they pass by. She has this habit of sitting at the far end of our old, dusty floral couch to peer out the blinds, like one of those sad house cats that seem to live in windowsills. Pretty sure that’s all anyone ever sees of her. Dad



is always moving around in circles through our house like he's got something to do. It's only in those rare moments when the light has made it far enough through our curtains that I'm able to see how grey they've gotten, a consequence of years indoors.

Whenever I walk outside I can feel the air follow me out, soaking with my family's sweat. It's similar to the way the air gets around here right before a thunderstorm. Sometimes I joke to Billy that my family is making our own weather patterns in there, he has yet to laugh, but that won't stop me from trying.

# # #

I'm pretty sure Billy doesn't get the joke because he hasn't been in my house since we were five. I think it's because of the mess in there. There's stacks of everything from magazines to lamps collecting dust and mildew. We got an entire tower devoted to milk cartons with missing children on them, their toothless smiles watching us as we eat. That particular tower covers a photo of my mom holding my baby sister on that white rocking chair, back when it was just starting to peel.


My parents started collecting stuff when I was a toddler and they haven't stopped. Just about the only thing that isn't collected are pillows. Those have been banned from the premises, making my place feel as hard as it looks.

It's getting to the point where we got more stuff than air in there. It used to be fine when I was little and could run out and play in the woods, but now the woods are a new suburb, and my house is even more closed off to light, as the toilet rolls and picture frames pile and the lamp shades lay about the floor like those land turtles that careless drivers hit on their way down the Loxahatchee.

I deal with the claustrophobia in my own way. On nights when you can hear the thunder rumbling in from the distance, I like to climb the grapefruit tree next to our house and jump on the roof and watch the storm clouds gather and move toward me, like an oddly comforting war. The rain usually comes soon after, in light waves, cancelling out the heat sticking to my skin and hair, and offering peace from my overrun palace below. It's at these moments, when I'm alone and free, that I remember to feel grateful to be alive.

When I was younger I used to feel sorry for myself. Like this was all my fault, and that my parents were the unlucky ones. But now I know it's the reverse, or at the very least, it's even: between me and the two of them. We're all to blame.

# # #



When I saw that sandwich, something struck me, deep. I wasn't raised with much religion, but I imagine that the experience was similar to what religious people feel when they see the things that assure them that they are on a path towards something.

Or maybe I'm just crazy. It was a matter of time, with all my years of bagging groceries and taking bullshit from newcomer Floridians.

It's funny how newcomers can't spot one another if they were screaming into each other's faces. And yet, they stand out like a big, old dead tooth in a mouth of pearly whites to the rest of us.

My biggest complaint about them is how they are all always in a hurry, like time itself is running out. I hear them talk when they check out at the registers at work, they're all going somewhere important and rushing the check out as best they can as they nervously glare at their watches. They are the ones with all the plans and routines, who see the future as something they can hold in their hands. Only true Floridians understand that time isn't a thing. I think that's why whenever you talk to one of us all we ever do is talk about what has already happened. It's because we all know that the future doesn't matter until it's happened, and nothing we do will make it happen any faster or slower.

I never bother explaining this to the newcomers though; plans and routine are what keep them going.

I say this mostly because of Rachel Johanson, "Miss Rachel," the nurse from Poughkeepsie, who moved two houses down from me around the time our town started getting built up. She was a slight woman with grassy hair and freckles who would get overheated just from walking out the front door. When I was younger and didn't know better, I used to follow close behind her in case she fell over. Billy told me it was rude so I stopped. He was good at that stuff, his grandma taught him, she's long passed now.

Miss Rachel was one of those lonely ladies, the ones that never quite found a spot in the world, and instead of sitting in it, plan every second of their day out until their identity is just movement, moving from one appointment to the next, in an endless series of meaningless distraction. This is something I realized much later, though. As a kid I just thought that Miss Rachel was the busiest woman I had ever met.

One night, when I was eleven and dead set on running away, I marched right past her house with my backpack and a flashlight and I caught her sitting on the porch looking out at the street. It wasn't uncommon to see a neighbor on their porch, but the way Miss Rachel was sitting was pretty odd. Her back was rigid and her feet were wrapped around either side of the chair legs, like



someone was trying to drag her off of that porch or something.

I decided that this deserved a pit stop and walked right up to her porch. "How are you doing tonight Miss Rachel?"

"Hello, Kelly."

"What are you doing out here? I don't think I've ever seen you sit still before."

Miss Rachel laughed I think, although it sounded more like an exhalation. "That sounds about right." I went over and sat next to her, looking out in the same direction, trying to see what she was seeing. "I'm watching the cars, Kelly."

"Oh, but they never come this time of night."

"Not the cars on this street, the cars out there." She was referring to the highway that hugged the east end of our little town, the same one that got Bathsheba. I usually ignored it, but looking now it was hard to miss. Just a couple of miles off in the distance, it glistened with little lights streaking by. The faint shuffling of tires rolling over asphalt, blending in with the crickets' song.

"What's so special about those cars?"

"Nothing really, it's just something I do when I have down time."

"Oh."

"Wanna know a secret?"


"Sure, Miss Rachel."

"I watch them waiting for a crash, I keep hoping to see a pile up."

"Why would you want that?"

"Have you never wanted to watch the world fall apart? To give birth to a dancing star?"

I looked at her with the most confused look I have ever given another human being. She saw my look and retorted, "You're just too young to understand."



"No I'm not! I'm twelve in two months!" I sat up tall in defense.

I think I convinced her because she kept on going. "Don't you ever get sick of all these rules?"

"Yes ma-"

"I think I would like it if the world was turned upside down. Maybe then I would actually have a chance." I didn't want her to know that I didn't understand so I just nodded and we both got quiet again and continued to watch the cars. "I just found out that my dad died. He was 92."

I looked up at her "I'm sorr-"

"Me and him were really close growing up, but he hasn't remembered me in years. I came to visit him everyday at 4 o'clock sharp, but he kept thinking I was just the nurse. He's why I moved down here, but the truth is, I think he died a long time ago, all a person is is their memories afterall and he couldn't remember anything past six. He was pissing himself before it was all over."

"Wanna know my secret, Miss Rachel?"

She didn't really say yes, but I knew that this is the way secrets went. You get told one, then you gotta share one of your own. Secrets are on trade, it's the way the world works. "When I was two I suffocated my baby sister with a pillow. I don't remember doing it though, does that mean that it's ok?" Miss Rachel was still watching the cars when she answered.

"The thing is, I'm starting to wonder what the point was for all of this? All my life I've been working and saving for something big, and now I'm left with no body and nothing *real* to do." She sounded distant but distinct as she spoke, like this was the first time she had ever thought about herself in her life.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Why don't you head home now, don't you have school in the morning?"

"Tomorrow is Sunday."

"Sleep well too, honey."

Miss Rachel left a month later. I don't know where she went because she didn't say bye.



# # #

I don't remember my baby sister, sometimes Billy pretends he does, but that's probably because I've shown him the picture of her that I carry in my wallet. She was a smiley little thing, just barely 16 months.

Back then, my parents were different. They talked a lot more. That's what Billy's mom told me once, at the end of her fourth vodka mug. She never mentioned it again. I think Billy gave her a lecture about discussing my parents in front of me.

I once read in a psychology book that people don't make concrete memories till they are about three. By that logic, I have never had a memory where I wasn't a murderer.

# # #


The feeling you get from knowing that you ruined everything and you can't even remember is something similar to the feeling you get when you wake up from a night of blacked out drinking and there are bruises and scrapes all over, and you don't know how you got where you got. There's a ton of anxiety involved, and a ton more guilt. The guilt is never constant though, it ebbs and flows like the low hanging clouds that hover over my neighborhood just before a rainstorm. Sometimes I'm swallowed up by it, and other times it just hangs softly by my side. Either way, it's always there.

# # #

Today felt more hot than usual. It usually takes me a long time before my body really heats up, but today it was bleeding sweat. I noticed this right around the time that Billy broke my heart on our lunch break. We were both outside, sitting on the handicap railing, eating our subs and watching the clouds get heavy as they rolled along the horizon. I remember seeing a family of armadillos cross the street as Billy said the words he said. I remember a rumble of thunder sound off in the distance, calming my building nerves as I watched this armadillo family fight its way across the road. Florida drivers are an unforgiving breed.

The littlest one got it. A blue Ford truck swooped in like the hawks that fly overhead looking for tiny cats and rabbits to grab. At that same moment, and with that same violence, I turned and pulled at Billy's collar and told him that I couldn't come with him.

"Why?" This time he was being the polite one. But I didn't have an answer, just a feeling. He sensed this and got off the railing to look at me, as I steadied myself to keep balance. "It's not your fault, Kel."



"What's not my fault?"

"You know what I'm talking about. God, we never talk about anything. We both let this place tick our lives away." He was pointing at Publix as it hummed back, radiating with electricity.

"You know as well as me that there's no time out here."

"That's the problem! We are both just rotting out here. I mean, look at yourself. You've let your sister run your whole life! God, it's not even your parents' fault and look at them. You're all trapped."

That word hit me hard in my gut, *trapped*. I leaned forward, and buried my face in my hands. "If I can't blame somebody, then I'm stuck. Don't you see that?"

"I see that you've spent too much time in that house, living through your parents' punishment."

I got up at this and started back towards the sliding glass doors of Publix, already feeling the blast of a/c hiding behind their seal. "Break's over, we gotta get back."

Billy didn't move. "I'm leaving Kel. Now."

I didn't look back at him as I walked in. I just went straight through, past the rows of shopping carts and over to the office to sit and stare at the wall clock that told me it was exactly 3 o'clock.

Before I could even catch my breath I was called down by the cashier at lane two. She was having trouble with a customer.

# # #

The only other time that Billy and I had ever gotten into a fight was after Billy's dog, Nappie, got it from one of those poisonous toads. This was back in middle school. Billy totally lost it. I wanna preface this by saying that Billy very rarely lost it. In fact, he's the best secret keeper I've ever known, and he definitely has the best poker face if he ever found a taste for gambling. But Nappie was Billy's baby. He was a gift from Billy's dad, before he shot himself in their backyard.

Billy didn't really cry, I'm not sure if he ever learned how to. He just kinda yelled and broke a chair. I tried to hug him, although I was not really sure how to hug. Luckily he pushed me away and grabbed at the BB gun he got two Christmases earlier and just said, "Come." I followed him and we wound up out back. He looked for a bit then cocked his gun and aimed at the ground and shot. Then he yelled, "Goddamit!"



I said, "What?"

And he said, "I didn't kill it."

I ran over and found one of those toads bleeding from it's belly, with it's little webbed hands still grabbing around, like a fat lady on a tile floor. Jake ran over to us around then. "What're you guys doing?"

"Billy is trying to kill off the invasive species." Billy glared at me when I said that. Jake grabbed for the BB gun and took aim, but couldn't find it in him to pull the trigger.

Billy grabbed an old pink pail that must've been lying around for years and dropped it on top of the toad, trapping it. This time I yelled. I couldn't stand the thought of that thing trapped and bleeding out.

I grabbed the gun from Jake and kicked the pail off and shot the toad again. The thing stopped moving and Billy looked up at me and said, "It's funny how easy it is for you to kill something."

I dropped the gun and ran away so that Billy couldn't see me cry.

Billy apologized later that day. He found me tying knots in the sawgrass and he just said, "I'm sorry."

And I said, "Okay." And we both looked at each other. I cried, but he just gritted his teeth, his way of showing affection. And I knew then, just like I know now, that the only thing keeping me from joining my parents is Billy.

# # #

The cashier who called for me was young, close to the age that I started here. I even saw some of that same defiance that Billy and I once had, hidden in her eyes. Her customer wasn't young at all. She was nearing 70 and had the look of impatience that all recent retirees from the north had down here, even though they had no place to actually be. Newcomers.

I asked what the problem was, even though I had a fair idea. The old lady was holding a stack of coupons and gritting her dentures like this was the Alamo and we were the Mexican army.

"She wants me to take these coupons but they are all expired."



"Coupons don't expire!"

I decided to take this one. "Yes, they do ma'am. Let me look at them."

The woman shoved her shaking hand towards me, gripping those papers with fury. I looked through them quickly then looked back at her. "Ma'am, most of these coupons aren't even for Publix. In fact," I pulled out one of the last coupons from the stack, "this is the only Publix one. It's a buy one get one for black beans and it expired last June."

"Coupons don't expire!"

"Ma'am this coupon won't take much off your total anyways, why don't you just let it go."

She didn't. "I want to speak to the manager!"

"I'm the manager."

"Well, then I want to see your manager."

"I don't have one."

"Well, what am I supposed to do about this coupon then?"

"Let it go?"


She glared at me, I could feel her rage glower through her pale, dry skin. This woman wasn't going to stand down until she got her 59 cents taken off her bill. I looked at her cart, she had enough food to feed an army. I had seen this before. Sad, lonely old ladies trying to fill their empty, white-washed condos with more food than their waning appetites could manage, just to have something to do as their lives settled into dust.

"We are an invasive species, ma'am." I was thinking about Billy and my sister and trying not to cry.

"Say that again?"

I straightened my face. "I'm going to redeem this coupon for you, but this is a one-time thing. Please check for the expiration date next time."

I typed my password into the register then walked away, away and out of that goddamned, self-



contained prison and back out to the clouds and thunder and the dead armadillo, now a pancake on the asphalt.

I got into my car, the one that I technically shared with my parents, but that they never used. And started towards home. I wasn't sure if I quit or if I cared. For a moment I worried about what they would do without two managers, and what my parents would do without my weekly paycheck. And then, right about then, that sandwich nearly cut me off on my turn. I remember noticing the plates first, because they were out of state, which is a rare sight this deep into the peninsula. And then I saw that sandwich and I laughed. And then, all I knew is that I needed to go wherever that sandwich was going.

Now I've been following the thing for over an hour.

# # #

My little sister's name was Emily. Kelly and Emily. What a duo we would've made. That's what always hits me hardest. Well that, and the photos of her tiny body that have slowly been gobbled up by all of those piles of my parent's stuff. Like she's dying all over again, except this time slower and more labored.

Sometimes, when I'm alone, I like to imagine what she would be like today. What my parents would be like. How me and her would've traded secrets between the wall we would've shared and got into fights about who was crazier on our block. How normal our world would've been.

# # #


The car finally turned off the highway and much like gravity, it pulled me with it, straight into a gas station. I parked right behind it and sat with the motor running, too scared to get out.

A girl got out. She was not much older than me, and seemed to be alone. She walked over to the pump and I worked up enough courage to get out.

She didn't even notice me when I walked over, which is probably why she jumped when I said, "Hello."

I looked inside the foggy windows of her car and saw a large pile of clothes and toiletries thrown about like she left someplace for good and in a hurry.

She looked up at me with a mixture of confusion and apprehension and responded.



“Yes?”

“You have a sandwich smashed into your bumper.”

“I do?” She left the pump in the nozzle of the car and walked around to where I was standing. When she saw the sandwich she just started to laugh and I followed suit. The thing wasn’t even peanut butter, I could smell the tuna from where I stood.

# # #

I’ve never had a tuna sandwich before. I couldn’t even tell you what it tasted like.

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# Sex and violence (in a field near Hoofddorp)

Janelle Ward

She sat next to him on the train. Out of the corner of her left eye she could see he was well dressed: a combination of ruddy leather accessories and wool. His facial hair was prominent enough to signal a deliberate look. His hands were large and clean. In his hands he held a tablet. He was reading a book called *The 4-Hour Work Week*. She smirked at the irony: It was 7:20 on a Wednesday morning. She thought about using this line but instead remained silent. She did not want to speak, especially with an audience of commuters. Silent, stern Dutch commuters, trying to wake up with bad coffee and free newspapers. He shifted next to her and her heart rate rose. Her fingertips tingled and goose bumps formed on her arms beneath her cashmere coat.

She sat next to him on the train. Striking, yes, especially the way she loosened her long, dark hair from its clasp right after settling in her seat. Especially her sigh of satisfaction for snagging the last place in the carriage. That sigh spoke of other narratives, other roles she could play, other scenarios where he would like to hear her exhale. Her fingers were pale, long and delicate. Her nails were manicured in dark pink. She smelled faintly of Chanel. The two middle-aged men across from him were leering at her, and he wasn't keen on picking her up with them as hostile witnesses. He saw her glance at his reading material and observed a smile tease the visible corner of her lips. She removed a blue silk scarf from around her neck. She squirmed a bit, getting comfortable. He was aware of his heartbeat.

Minutes passed. The carriage was silent. Fields sped by, dewy and green, even in December. There was a distant thud and the brakes were applied. Arms rose to protect bags. Hands gripped paper cups a bit tighter. The train came to a quick, controlled stop. There was nothing unusual about the stop, except its location – in a field near *Hoofddorp*. Her nose wrinkled slightly. She zipped open her handbag and removed her mobile phone, sweeping her thumb to check the calendar for



today's first appointment. Probably she'd be late. She started a draft email and waited for the announcement that would explain the delay. Then she paused, and soaked in the presence of the male next to her. She inhaled his cologne and imagined breathing that smell on his bare skin. Intoxication.


He sighed with irritation. The conductor had just made the obvious announcement: A collision. No more details. Public transportation is so convenient – until it isn't. He checked the time on his tablet and then located his mobile phone. He thought about calling his office but decided to send a text. He didn't want her to hear his voice just yet. He wanted to speak to her directly, or her to speak to him directly. Was she even aware of his presence? Wait, a half smile from her direction. His confidence soared.

He was watching her. She was sure of that. She smirked and then turned toward the opposite window, making an effort to be demure. She saw the conductor running outside in the misty field. His face was as white as snow. Moments passed. A shaky announcement followed. *Dames en heren, we are sorry to report we have collided with a person. The delay will be substantially longer than expected.* Her groan produced a low tone in comparison to the chorus of gasps rising around her. Others murmured and turned to strangers for comfort. They said the things that Dutch people say to each other in difficult situations. It was a time to come together, to focus on what they had in common. Language, unsurprising, without harsh or obscure accents, provides that connection. An elderly woman began to cry. A small child, not understanding, asked his father for clarification. She realized an email wouldn't be sufficient to excuse her presence. Irritated, she dialed her office and waited for the line to connect. *Evelien? Yes, it's Cara. I'm not going to make it to the staff meeting. There's been an accident and I'm stuck on the train. My apologies.*

Police and ambulance traffic descended on the quiet field. He could hear the sirens approaching even as he stared at her, now without restraint. She had revealed herself, her foreignness, with a simple phone call. He deliberately shifted in his seat so their shoulders touched. His right thigh flexed and rested lightly against her left thigh. She did not protest. She did not move away. As a challenge to himself, he called his office without breaking their physical contact. He wanted to see if he could do so without his voice trembling. *Hi, Walter, it's Mark. I'll be later than planned. The train is not cooperating.* He ended the call, pleased with his composure. Certainly she doubted her effect on him. A little insecurity can be useful in situations like this. He was also insecure, though. They had both laid their cards on the table. Two outsiders. They both knew it and everyone around them knew it. Would it bring them together? Or push them apart? Some are attracted by such distinction. Others are repelled.

Arousal. Blood supplies shifted, moving away from intellectual zones. Hearts thudded as he felt her and she felt him, even through layers of clothing. Imagined fantasies: his was in his bedroom. She





would throw off her cashmere coat, her blouse and skirt, and stand before him, glorious in grey silk lingerie. Hers was right here, in the carriage. She didn't imagine his undergarments. The coupling would take place almost fully dressed. There would be other passengers watching them. Some would be shocked, of course. Others would stare greedily, jealous of a passion they could never experience. Most people weren't lucky like them. This kind of chemical attraction happens only to a privileged few, and they belonged. The rest are fated to be spectators, nothing else.

Their pupils dilated as they sunk into their fantasies. Their breathing harmonized. His chest rose with hers, hers fell with his. A policeman walked by the window carrying a transparent bag. It contained some of the deceased's internal organs. The elderly woman started crying again, this time in loud, jerky sobs. The father of the small child worked quickly to distract his son by drawing an item from his backpack.

Time passed. The train started, groaning and creaking as if after a long sleep. The spell was broken. They shifted in their seats, suddenly aware of the world around them. She played solitaire. He resumed *The 4-Hour Work Week*. His stop approached. He rose and finally made eye contact with her. There was an electric jolt. They glanced away from its power. It was truly shocking, unnerving, the connection two people can have, without ever speaking directly to each other. Silently and separately, eyes downcast, they marveled at the weight of the human experience. Then, once more, they stared at each other before he left the carriage.

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# Drop Down

Joshua Britton

We'd been up in that tree forever it seemed, me and Janey. Thank God that girl came along. Otherwise, who knows how much longer we would've been trapped. Those fuckers weren't giving us a chance, that's for sure. There wasn't anything to do but sit and wait it out.

This was the most intimate we'd been. Together almost two weeks, but all that time, while walking around during the day or even setting up camp for the night, we could always be reasonably sure it was safe to go behind a tree and squat. We could even get a good ten or twenty yards away from each other for more privacy and still feel safe. Not up in that tree, though. We were comfortable enough that we didn't feel like we were going to fall at any second, but it's not like there was anywhere else to go.

For me it was no big deal. I barely had to pull down for number one. And Janey would look down, or away, averting her eyes. And then I could just let it fly. Right on those fuckers' heads. Right into those fuckers' mouths. It was almost funny. Even Janey smiled.

For her it was a bigger deal. She had to pull down most of the way, and then girls have to squat, at least part way, and then aiming was problematic.

"Should I just go in my pants?" she asked. She was uncomfortable not only because I might see, but because the crowd below would be watching. They didn't have the sense to shut their eyes.

So that's how it came up. We didn't know how long we were going to be up there but we had a feeling it would be a while. And she was the first one to think about it. I told her she shouldn't. It was unhygienic, she might get an infection, it was kind of disgusting, it would smell, and she would be uncomfortable sitting there in wet shorts and underwear. It was up to her, of course, and she

eventually agreed.

So she stood up and, with one hand, grabbed hold of a branch above her. Balance was key. If we fell, then forget about it. Then she undid the button on her shorts with the free hand. She pushed them as far down as she could while still holding onto the branch, and then shimmied them the rest of the way to her ankles. Then, with one arm wrapped around the trunk of the tree, I held on to her free hand so she could lean back slightly and take her own turn at pissing on those fuckers' heads. I tried not to look. I really didn't mean to, but I saw a little. I didn't tell her I did, though, and she didn't ask. Her aim was all right. She got a little bit on the branch we'd been sitting on, but not much. Not so much that we wouldn't sit back down.

That went pretty well, I said, after we were re-situated on the branches. No big deal, right.

"Right," she said, but her face was beet-red and stayed that way for a few minutes.

If there was just one down there, then I thought I could take it. I could jump on it, and knock it over. Then I could kick the hell out of its head, killing it senseless. Then hopefully Janey would be able to drop down, no problem, and get a good distance away. Then I could run and catch up to her, and that would be it.

But I'd never killed one before. That was unusual. I was lucky. I'd seen others kill them, but not me. They were monster-like enough, though, that I thought I would be able to without freaking out.


Janey had killed one, sort of. In the beginning, before we even met, she'd kicked one down the stairs and it bashed its head open on the doorstep, or something. I had to practically pull that story out of her. She didn't want to talk about it. I thought it must've been someone she was related to, like her brother, or mother or father. Boyfriend? I didn't think she had had a husband, even though I guessed she was old enough. If she had been married, she would've gotten married pretty young.

"You can talk about it if you want," I said. "I'm a good listener."

She shook her head. "I'll never want to talk about it."

But there wasn't just one of them down there. There were ten. And they were persistent. There wasn't anywhere for us to go.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The girl was the first normal we'd seen since we climbed up there. We hadn't been talking much, me and Janey. She didn't say much to begin with. We weren't mad at each other, or anything, but now there really wasn't a whole lot to say. We were pretty cozy



up there. I was leaning against the trunk and she was leaning against me. We could practically hear each other's heartbeats, and each other's stomachs growling.

I saw the girl first. Our tree was at the edge of a clearing and the girl was in the middle of it. And it was a good-sized clearing, too, like a football field, only bigger. Maybe a couple football fields. I nudged Janey and pointed out the girl.

And then one of those fuckers – not one of ours, but a different one – was walking towards her. And she didn't even notice. Like she didn't care, or maybe didn't realize.

In the girl's defense, some of them didn't look as bad as others. Some of them, especially the new ones, you had to look twice to know whether or not to avoid them. It wouldn't be hard to mistake one of them for a normal dude if it was dark, if you were tired or high, or if you lost your glasses.

I was worried about that last one. I had contacts in, and I had two spare sets in my backpack, and I even had contact solution. That had been my biggest concern when I realized I was going on the lam. The contacts were in my backpack, and I kept my glasses in one of the side pockets of my cargo shorts. Those were more important. The contacts were way more comfortable, but they were disposables, and weren't going to last forever.


Janey said she had perfect vision, so she didn't have that to worry about. She was lucky. I was prepared to guard my glasses with my life. Except that would defeat the purpose. I was already planning on finding some way to strap the glasses around my head so I wouldn't lose them during action. If those fuckers ever let us down.

I didn't know what I had been thinking with those cargo shorts. It was already starting to get cold at night. Once we were down – if – finding a pair of long pants was going to be a priority. For Janey, too. Her shorts were shorter than mine. She started shivering before the sun was even all the way down. I did what I could to help keep her warm, but I couldn't do much. I rubbed my bare legs against hers.

"Does that help at all?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said, and actually smiled. "But it feels nice." Her face turned beet-red again. Strange times to be a prude.

Going up in the tree was a bad idea. That's obvious now. We were just so tired, though. There was an attack and I thought I had lost Janey. Then I saw her running around the corner. She was pointing in one direction so I went that way, too. And we couldn't stop. Those fuckers were



relentless. Every time we thought we had lost them and took a moment to try to catch our breaths, they showed up again within a minute or two. We ran for hours. Finally, we were leaning against the tree and hadn't seen one of them for a few minutes. And we thought if we went up into the tree, out of their general field of vision, we could rest up a little longer, massage our hamstrings or whatever, and then get going. They never seemed to look up, not unless there was a reason to. We would just have to be quiet. No big deal.

It might've worked if we were faster. Janey got up, no problem, but I was still dangling when one of those fuckers came through a clearing and saw my legs for a split-second. Then it started pawing at the tree like an idiot. Then another one showed up. Then another, and finally ten. They didn't leave and they didn't lose focus. They just stared at us, waiting. There had been ten of them, surrounding us, the whole time.

What I should've done was hop down and run off immediately. That first one would've followed me and left Janey to rest up in the tree, undetected. And after a bit she would be able to get down and run off herself. But if that happened I didn't know if I would be able to find her again. I thought if we ever got down, I was going to make Janey promise, no more trees, ever.

I'd been in a group for a couple weeks before running into Janey. It was a big group. People kept getting picked off. We'd lose one or two every other day or so, but then we'd pick up stragglers along the way and replace them. People really bought into the whole safety-in-numbers thing. Then we got ambushed, and I lost everyone.

Janey had actually hidden out in her house for a while. That must've been great. She got forced out eventually. Then she hooked up with a couple people, but they both got nabbed. Then she ran into me. We were together most of the day before I asked what her name was.

"So, do you want to know mine, then?" I asked next.

She shook her head. "Not really."

"Why not?"

"Because," she said. "Maybe it won't hurt as much when I lose you."

I didn't know how we were going to get down, but we needed to, or we were going to starve to death. What little water we had had was already gone. What little food we had had was already gone. Finding food hadn't been an issue when we were on the ground, but we were always on the move and hadn't stocked up, just whatever fit in my backpack. I didn't think it would be hard to find



something once we were down.

There were leaves on the tree. I ate some leaves. They were ok. Janey ate some leaves, too. But it was September. There weren't going to be leaves on the trees forever.

I didn't mind knowing I was going to die, but I didn't want to know I was dying. I didn't want to starve to death in a few days, but the other option - jumping down from the tree - guaranteed pain and suffering. I didn't want pain and suffering.

I had my eye on this rock. I thought I could dive onto it. I didn't want to still be conscious after I landed, but if I landed head first on the rock I might die on impact. Or at least I might be knocked unconscious and not know that I was dying until later, after I was already dead. And while they were busy with me, maybe Janey could get down and run away. I didn't say it out loud, but that was all preferable to starving. As long as my head didn't miss the rock. I wondered if Janey had given it any thought.

And then that stupid girl. She was our savior. Maybe I should've tried to warn her. She practically walked right up to that fucker, so nonchalantly that I thought maybe it was a normal dude after all. We couldn't actually tell from that distance, even with Janey's twenty-twenty vision and my contacts in. Then it grabbed at her. She might've been burnt out before, but now she screamed. She screamed loud, but there was no way she was getting away from it. And it took its time on her, too, going to town on her mid-section. And all the while she kept on screaming.

That got the attention of our fuckers below. Like they instantly forgot about us. Probably did, they were so stupid. One-track minds. They all started rushing best they could towards the commotion, like a bunch of idiots. Janey and I watched the carnage, hardly believing our good luck. Eventually the girl stopped screaming and it was just a pile of fuckers on top of each other, like pigs at a trough.

I nudged Janey and gestured that it was time to go. Before we could even make a move, though, there was more screaming. It was a couple of normals on the far side of the clearing. Probably the girl's friends. They turned around and ran in the opposite direction. They had a good head start, but the pile of fuckers chased after them, anyway. Except for a couple that stayed behind to finish up the girl.

It was too bad about her, but it was good for Janey and me. We were finally getting out of that tree.

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*Rob Hartzell is a graduate of the University of Alabama MFA program. He lives and works in Morrow, OH. He is at work on a story-cycle titled "Pictures of the Floating-Point World", from which "The Erotic Death Machines of Terry Gordon" is taken. Other pieces from the cycle have appeared most recently, or will appear, in the Upender, Milkfist, the Black Rabbit and the Startling Sci-Fi: New Tales of the Beyond anthology (New Lit Salon Press).*

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# The Erotic Death-Machines of Terry Gordon

Rob Hartzell

Artist Terry Gordon's machine-plays have always been deeply unsettling on several levels, even more than the Survival Research Labs projects that inspired him. Where the performances staged by the latter tended toward a sort of nihilistic spectacle – like a demolition derby being staged for an audience of Baudrillard-quoting latte-sippers in leather jackets – Gordon's work has always tended toward something more anthropomorphic. Where Mark Pauline invited us to watch bigger machines destroy smaller ones, Gordon's machines have always invited us to view them as something almost human. Not quite human, perhaps, but something close enough that they could wring some level of empathy from the human beings watching them.

His latest work, however – "The Exhibitionistic Spectacle of Erotic Death Machines," (which is being staged locally at the Museum of Contemporary Art this weekend) – is something quite apart from his own work, and Pauline's. It's almost as disturbing as those early SRL performances almost fifty years ago, and perhaps even more so, if only because it brings together the most visceral aspects of SRL's work with Gordon's empathetic treatment of the machines in his plays.

(A warning: in the text that follows, there may be "spoilers." *Caveat lector.*)

The "Exhibitionistic Spectacle" begins with a decidedly-pornographic scene: the curtain opens on various dildo-bots, nanoplastic vaginoids, and other machine-wired sex toys which have been modded and rigged, almost beyond recognition. Live actors/actresses – a first for Gordon's oeuvre – mount these machines and ride them to orgasm. Some actors/actresses make use of two or three of these devices to bring them over the edge, as it were. Porn actress-turned-performance artist Julia Kensington is perhaps the most well-known of the cast, and her climactic

accommodation of 8 robots at once is both shockingly over-the-top, and hauntingly erotic, a fitting note upon which to end the first act.

In the acts that follow, the humans are absent from the stage, leaving us alone with the machines. Act two begins as the 'bots roll around the stage in a pattern that's loose enough to look random, and tight enough to suggest something scripted – or choreographed, like a dance. Rubber penises molded onto pistons, move in circles with vibrating vagina-bots and quivering, disembodied silicon mouths. Each makes a circle with the others in their turn, after which one pair – a blue-and-red double-penetration 'bot and a buzzing black anus/vagina combo made of what appears to be silicon – commandeer the dance floor. A mouth approaches the DP bot; a massive rubber cock approaches the A/V combo, but neither is able to cut in on the circles the dancers trace on the floor. When they finish, the DP and A/V bots approach each other; the DP-bot extends its phalli to gently – one is tempted to say "almost chastely" – touch the A/V machine's openings, and they wheel offstage as a couple.


The robots left on stage begin to dance again, vibrating and cycling with varying levels of speed, intensity and volume. The spotlight follows the massive red cock and the mouth-bot to stage left, where they pump and buzz in something like the rhythm of a conversation. A couple of times, the mouth-bot turns away, buzzing angrily, but the rubber dildo vibrates and pistons steadily, and this appears to placate the mouth. Eventually, the two conjoin, each one pistoning back and forth, the mouth around the cock, the stage darkening as they begin to pulsate faster and faster.

In the next scene, we see the DP and A/V bots enter a storage room, apparently the DP-bot's. And, in a move that's become standard for Gordon, this scene plays out along similar lines to the preceding scene, but to much different effect. Where the choreography in the previous scene was rough and loud and angry, in this scene, it's much slower and gentler and more tentative, at least until the two achieve a sort of implied climax, and come to rest with their pistons slumping on each other's chassis at scene's end.

The next act opens with the sex toys from act two's dance scene now gathered in a circle. The rhythm of the buzzing back and forth between bots is decidedly suggestive of a tribal council – or an office meeting. The DP bot sits at the head of the circle, and is flanked on left and right, respectively, by the massive red dildobot and the A/V bot. The dildobot, at some point in the proceedings, begins to buzz and piston, turning in the direction of the DP bot as if to suggest a confrontation. The DP bot extends both its pistons and begins buzzing loudly; it advances on the dildobot, which retracts its pistons, and (to the sound of the DP bot's furious buzzing) leaves the room, defeated.

Outside the room, as the meeting carries on, the dildobot is met by the mouthbot. The red dildo






and the mouth buzz angrily back and forth, and ultimately, the dildo storms away when the mouth appears tentative. The mouth rolls back and forth, buzzing to itself as if soliloquizing, until the end of the scene, at which point it reveals that it has been built with jaws. It opens and closes its jaws loudly, ferociously; the moment is every bit as unsettling as one of SRL's infamously-roboticized animal carcasses.

What follows next is likely not surprising to either Shakespeareans or SRL fanatics alike: The mouthbot encounters the DP-bot, and appears to be making supplications of some sort, which the DP-bot refuses. At which point, the mouth-bot attacks the DP-bot, biting the first phallus off savagely, then pistoning itself as it makes short work of the other one as it pummels the DP-bot to pieces. The A/V bot enters the scene and buzzes loudly – it almost sounds as if it's buzzing the Morse code "SOS" pattern (three long buzzes, three short ones, then three long ones), but it was difficult to tell at the performance I attended; the acoustics of the parking lot outside the museum are less than ideal for some of these kinds of subtleties. The dildobot enters the scene as the A/V bot calls for help, and aided by the mouthbot, the pair tear and bash the A/V bot to pieces alongside the DP bot's remains, with a brutality that had more than a few viewers at the performance I saw dabbing their eyes, or even fleeing the scene.

At this point, the dildo and the mouth begin to buzz angrily back and forth at each other; when the dildobot attempts to roll away, the mouthbot pistons out and grabs it in its jaws. There is a moment of tense silence, during which the two bots circle each other, only to fall into machine-coitus again. This time, it's much more violent than in their earlier scene, and the two bots beat each other to pieces alongside the robots they've just destroyed.

In the final scene, back in the main chamber, the humans have rejoined the robot cast, and have once again commenced with a human/robot orgy; there are numerous pairings of flesh and steel and rubber and silicon, culminating again in a moment in which Ms. Kensington is serviced by multiple robots; mouths buzzing (and clamping?) on her flesh as she is penetrated by the others. Through all this, the remains of the other robots are visible to the audience – they lie smoking in a room adjacent to the main chamber, unnoticed by the celebrants therein. The spotlight dims first on the main chamber, then on the room where the dead robots smolder; as the lights dim on them, they begin to spark, and a fire breaks out just as the spotlight goes dark and the noisy electronic soundtrack fades to silence. The hissing of the museum staff's fire extinguishers is almost inaudible under the applause of the crowd.

Gordon has said in recent interviews that he would like, when the technology is feasible and affordable, to have his actors controlling the robots more directly – whether through brainwave monitoring, or something else entirely. "I'd like to see what would happen if an actor were to be able to control even more finely the actions of their robot – for example, by giving it its own body



language – without having to master a complicated set of controls, or think about their technique. Bodily actors don't worry about technique when they're in the moment, and neither do any of the puppeteers I've talked to. I'd like to see what might happen when a human performer can wield their 'bot as fluidly as a puppet – or indeed, their own body."

It's true that this "Spectacle" does not make use of such technology – at the performance I attended, the robot puppeteers and their controls (which looked, for all the world, like hacked PS5 controllers) were plainly visible in their box to the side of the staging area. It's equally true that pieces like Gordon's "Spectacle" suggest tantalizing possibilities of expression, of nuance and subtlety and even emotion that may be possible when that technology finally is available. But even more than that, the aesthetic surprises Gordon's growing body of work continues to deliver – his ability to take the work of SRL and countless imitators since and reinvest it with something like a beating heart – suggests that there may be something of unexplored substance in the medium he's chosen to work in.

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# Knots

Lori Gravley

Her practiced fingers  
can copy anything, a pattern seen once in a magazine,  
the memory of her mother's rooms, the delicate numbers  
of ladies who'll let her work fall to the floor  
catching the air in its symmetrical loops and hesitating  
for just an instant before they throw  
them into green garbage bags of old clothes.  
They remember their grandmother's drawing rooms  
and doilies draping the fragile arms of stuffed chairs,  
framing the crystal vases and figurines on the shelves.

She ties everything in knots.  
Social Security pays for her two-room trailer,  
peanut butter and dry beans.  
Her delicate lace sells for four or six or eight dollars.  
It's easy to add a ten to the six, sixteen,  
and buy better yard and oxy to soothe  
the crocheting every day, the yarn gathering her fingers in her lap.  
At the church bazaar, ladies sign their charges without looking  
careless, trusting, too lost in memory to see the deceit.

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**Beth Bonness** loves taking photographs and writes poetry in the early mornings before she wakes up too much. She grew up in Wisconsin, and moved to the Northwest with her Computer Science degree and her husband, where they raised their three daughters in Portland, Oregon. She fell in love with the beach and enjoyed climbing Mt. Hood, once. After thirty years working in product development and marketing, and one too many acquisitions, she left high-tech corporate culture to write. Her poetry has been published in the *Timberline Review Literary Magazine* and she's currently working on a memoir, *A House Falls from the Sky*, about saving a 100-year-old mansion with her husband.

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behind the clock  
Beth Bonness

*I love Paris, especially the Louvre. When I visited with my mother and four sisters we were touring Musee d'Orsay and I was drawn to the view behind the big clock ; a perfect window to spy on the Louvre.*



reflections  
Beth Bonness

*Another photograph from my trip to Paris with my mom and sisters after I rendezvoused with my husband. The controversial Pyramid, by I.M. Pei, is a perfect juxtaposition of contemporary glass and light with classical French architecture.*

*Nikon D70*





hiding  
Beth Bonness

*While in France with my mother and four sisters, we toured Monet's garden in Giverny. I had no idea Monet designed his own gardens to paint. Although I took many photographs of his gardens, this is by far my favorite –the contrast of the black serpentine tree branches with the foliage created a chaotic sense of calm.*

*Nikon D70*

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*Nick Muzekari lives with his wife and five children in Hatfield, Pennsylvania. He seeks to convey truth, mystery, and beauty through story. He is the author of "A Gift for Matthew," a picture book about the ancient art of iconography.*

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# Healer

Nick Muzekari

Falurt Burkwolff rode into the cold rain that pelted his face and neck. Through the dark, wet mist he could see the faint glow of a gatehouse torch half a mile ahead.

She lay in front of him, wrapped in a tattered shawl and blankets, sprawled over Messenger like an oversized doll. He had been able to slow the blood, but couldn't stop it, even with the leather tourniquet; the troll's blow went too deep. A healer within the fortified Ashen was her only hope.

"No admittance!" called a strong, youthful voice from the gatehouse.

"She's dying, lad," Falurt cried, his words frozen and fading.

"Everyone is! The plague has come upon our mothers and children. The gates stay shut...that's the decree."


"Have you no healer?" begged Falurt. Messenger shifted restlessly and neighed.

"One's been sent for...but only for the people of Ashen. Now move on." The young guard raised the tip of a large bow.

A bright flash above momentarily lit the area, followed by thunder that moved across the sky like an army of horses slowing their speed.

Falurt breathed heavy and shook his head. *Cursed trolls.*

"Move on!" barked the watchman.



Falurt huffed once more and steered Messenger away from the gate, to a path that followed the wall for a bit and then swept off downhill into a forest.

Within the cover of trees, the darkness bit into Falurt 's soul. He shakily lifted the girl from his horse and laid her up against a tree. The rain had slowed, or maybe just wasn't reaching the forest floor. His old bones ached.

He soon had a small fire going. Its heat and light brought comfort to his natural sanctuary. He turned and glanced at the girl. At least she would die peacefully, in the warmth and glow of flame, he thought. He leaned up against another tree and let the heat soak into his eyelids and stiff throat; weariness from his travels began setting into his skin like thick, heavy blankets.

A quiet, distant roar echoed through the shadowed night, jarring Falurt's heart and bringing him to a confusing wakefulness. He sat up and peered into the depths of the forest; into the mass of shadowy pillars descending into blackness. He listened, hearing only spits of popping fire and the steady, dull patter of rain visiting the canopy. A cold wisp of air moved across his face.

He reached into his rucksack and withdrew an ivory-sheathed seax. He brought it close to him, letting it rest upon his thighs. He leaned back and closed his eyes, taking in the damp air around him. Soon, the nearby fire warmed him into a luring heaviness again. He thought of the girl as his mind and body began to drift.

When he had found her she could barely speak. Her wound was deep. Who she was or where she had been going, he did not know. She had been clutching a furled scroll tightly in her right hand. He tried lifting it, but she moaned and clutched it tighter, so he let it be. He couldn't just leave her.


A nearby shout woke Falurt. He gazed around, clutching hard on the handle of his seax. After a moment he saw that the girl was gone; a pile of clothes and blankets lay at the foot of the tree, alongside the bloody tourniquet.

He forced himself up in a daze and thickly scratched the stubble on his chin and cheek. More shouting shot through the night. He untied Messenger and mounted him. Up the hill he trotted and out of the forest.

There she was, standing in front of the gates, wearing only a dirty white undergarment that flapped in the cold wind like a flag of peaceful surrender. A dark stain, darker than the evening sky, streaked her thigh. Her hands were raised.

The watchman had his bow drawn and fitted with an arrow.





"No," Falurt whimpered, dismounting Messenger and beginning to run. His foot hit a half buried rock. He stumbled and fell.

From the ground he caught sight of a glow, ever so faint, beginning to emanate from the girl's hands. An arrow went into her chest with a calm thud. She gasped lightly. The glow burst into a radiant flare, quenching the night in glaring whiteness, causing Falurt to shut tight his eyes. When he opened them, the light was gone. The girl lay on the ground with the fatal arrow standing erect.

Falurt picked himself up and went to her. "Don't shoot. No, oh my, I'm just...I have her, put down your bow!"

The guard hesitated, then complied.

Another sentry appeared, quickly scanning the scene below. "She tried using some kind of enchantment on the gates, sir," the young guard said, though his eyes and posture revealed some uncertainty.

Falurt reached the young maiden and took her lifeless, supple head in his arms. She was warm and breathless. He felt the soft part of her neck, near her throat—stillness.

He grabbed hold of her legs and dragged her to Messenger, panting. Back into the forest he rode, quite amazed that she had managed to pick herself up and walk the hill to the gates in the middle of the cold night with such a severe injury. And how had the blood stopped? There was not a single drop on the icy ground where she had trailed. Had *she* stopped it herself? He had been unable to get it to stop, even with the tourniquet. He was confused but too weary to ponder it further, and now that she was dead, what did it matter?

At the campsite, the fire was out. Falurt lay her down near the same tree he had propped her up against the first time. The air was bitter. The ground was stiff. He was parched and shaky. He eventually managed to get another fire going and then fell into a strange, disturbing sleep.

A few hours later Falurt was again wakened. He gathered his wits about him and listened: something was moving through the trees, not many yards from where he lay. The snapping, crunching forest debris was growing louder. The muscles in Falurt's neck tightened. He forced himself to stand, his back sliding up the rough bark as the tree braced him.

Footsteps; closer, louder.

The hammering of Falurt's heart ripped through his chest. Sweat, full of heat and fear, now ran



easily into his eyes, blurring his vision. He withdrew his blade and gripped the handle with all the might that was present in his thick, stubby fingers.

The quiet was eternal. He suddenly felt faint and released a whimper from his lips.

A large hand reached around the tree, shattering time, and seized his neck. His feet lifted off the ground. He couldn't breathe. He moved to use his seax, but in that instant he went flying through the air. His body slammed into the hardness of a thick tree. He grunted, breathless. Pain exploded beneath his ribs, all the way into his lower back. Darkness enveloped him. He forced his eyelids open in terror and saw his attacker.

It came forward like a living tree with twisted limbs and dark, veiny flesh. Its oversized skull protruded upward, above a set of yellow eyes within vast dark sockets. It opened wide its mouth and snarled; a devilish sound that resembled a hiss coming from a wounded throat. Thick saliva oozed between its sallow teeth, spilling to the ground. Its hissing turned into a shout, something of words, in a language Falurt couldn't understand. Then the creature came toward him.


Falurt's soul screamed within him, and it was then that he realized he was still clutching his weapon. He screamed out and sent his blade lunging forward just as the troll crouched over him. It sunk into the beast's chest, cracking through bone as it went. The troll's head snapped back and it coughed, deafening and sickly, weakly throwing its hands upon the handle of the fatal weapon that was stealing its life away. It brought its head down one last time, and looked into Falurt's eyes. Then it crumpled to the ground next to him.

Falurt groaned. His back burned with pain. His legs were numb. He stared at the creature until his breathing became deep and slow. He stared until exhaustion took him.

# # #

The single trill of a forest bird roused him. It was morning. The troll, dark and ugly, face down in the shade of the forest floor, looked like a mound of upturned earth. Not more than ten yards away, the girl lay sleeping where he had put her, never to wake. Rays of soft light streaming through the canopy illumined her face. Just beyond her was Messenger, hungrily sniffing the ground.

Falurt tested his mobility and discovered he could turn a bit. He rolled onto his side and tried raising himself. A sharp pain swiftly ripped through his lower back. He cried out and collapsed. When the pain subsided some, he tried moving again. The pain continued sweeping through his back with each movement. He clenched his teeth with force and drug himself across the forest floor toward the campsite, trying to maneuver in ways that afforded him the least amount of



suffering. He reached the girl and began to crawl over her legs, keeping his eyes fixed on Messenger. He felt another ripping pain in his back and collapsed on top of her. He stayed there and steadied his breaths.

Beneath him, her legs felt warm. He stayed in the warmth and rested. Slowly, the warmth increased. He was perplexed, but the warmth only grew stronger and felt good against his battered body. It penetrated his stomach and chest, moving through the muscles slowly like water filtering into sand; moving, searching, seeking. It continued to radiate through his body and then into his back. He felt the pain subsiding; melting away like frost beneath fire. He stayed there, atop her, in wonder, taking it all in. He wondered about everything that was happening, and yet had no questions. His mind was clear, peaceful; a quiet cove in the sunlight.

The pain in his back was no more. He felt refreshed and healthy, even a bit younger. He reached up and ran his fingers across his chin, feeling the stubble, just to make sure he hadn't altogether become a different man.

He dug his hands into the garment that covered her, wanting more, but the warmth drew back until the coldness of her lifeless legs pressed against the pit of his stomach.

Falurt got up with ease and stepped back from the girl, his eyes searching her mysterious presence. He reached around and felt his back, smooth, solid, and without pain.

He crouched over her and searched her clothing bit by bit until he found the scroll. His breaths became rapid as he unfurled it and read. He drew in a breath of moist wind. He let his lips curl ever so slightly. He looked over at her pale-gray face and nodded.

He walked calmly to Messenger and climbed atop.


# # #

"The decree is still in effect!" shouted the guard from the tower.

Falurt ignored the warning and rode Messenger to the gates.

The guard drew a bow and quickly fitted an arrow. He closed an eye, tilted his head, and pulled back the loaded string.

Falurt withdrew the scroll and waved it above his head for the guard to see.



The guard slightly relaxed his aggressive posture and lifted his cheek off his rigid hand, opening his eye. An inquisitive look formed on his face.

Falurt took out his seax with his other hand and, leaning forward slightly, held the scroll against the wood gate. He drove the dagger through it, pinning it securely.

"Old man, what is that?" shouted the guard as Falurt was beginning to ride away.

Falurt stopped and turned his horse around. "The message Ashen sent out for a healer." He glanced over towards the woods he had come from. "Perhaps there's still hope for your mothers and children before she returns to the earth." He turned and left.

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*K.A. Liedel is an emerging author based in Delaware. A former staff writer for Slant Magazine, his work is informed by Southern Gothic, surrealism, true crime, existential horror, and military history. "The Ghost of Kaixian" is Liedel's third published short story; his writings have previously appeared in Bird's Thumb and Flapperhouse magazines.*

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# The Ghost of Kaixian

K.A. Liedel

Mr. Chen lived close enough to the Three Gorges Dam that he could see all of it from top to bottom, and to him the dam was, you'll excuse him, a structure unlike any other. Staring at it as he often did, he found that its mood changed depending on its distance from the river: the spillway was as grim and humorless as a prison wall where it let the water out, its massive jaw clamping down on the Yangtze. But at the top, along its mighty parapet, quaint-looking platforms sprouted up as red as coxcombs, their color so vivid, so striking, it was as if they were blushing at their own grandeur.

For three years, ever since his retirement, he'd take the half-hour walk from his modest flat in Dabagou to the riverside ballast and absorb the immensity of it. The dam had split the Long River clear in two and flooded any little village or corporate park that dotted its shadow. It had been a great controversy, that. Still was. But as Chen often reminded himself, there is no space for the old good when newer ones beckon. The damn was far too great and far too important to tolerate the lesser, quainter feats of man that presumed to bask alongside it. They could no longer be allowed to exist. They had to be erased, buried, drowned.

On typical days, Mr. Chen would admire the dam for an hour, two in good weather, and then amble back to Dabagou to indulge in his usual breakfast of congee and eggs. He lived a widower's life, and with no children of his own he was forced to discipline himself to keep time's nagging hole – so small in our youth but stretching wider and wider every year, even as we ignore it – from swallowing him up. The job was good for that, certainly, but after he hung up his hat he turned to routine. There were walks in the morning, then gardening on his small, square balcony at midday, afternoons for exercise and light napping or perhaps cleaning when it was absolutely essential, then always a light dinner since money was tight, perhaps reading after that, and then early to bed



so he had long, leisurely nights to dream the dreams of a more reckless man, who drank and swore and smoked and took what he wanted – from women, from the world, from creation. He was imagining himself as Old Liu, that mangy dog.

Liu was one of Chen's former colleagues, the wildest of wild cards there ever was, retiring out of the blue after he spent years swearing he'd die on the job. He disappeared as quietly as he worked. Chen liked to imagine him now, freed from his habitual violence and off in the great yonder, in lands glazed by the amber of a more romantic time, having all the adventures and affairs he was sure he'd never muster the courage to enjoy himself.

So it went for three years, living quietly and modestly and dreaming wildly, until one day, a stormy-looking kind of day, Mr. Yu arrived. He was dressed the same as when Mr. Chen was still in his employ – a three-piece suit perfectly fitted to his scarecrow figure, black like the color of coal, with a white shirt underneath so clean and so starched that it looked to be carved from pearl. Mr. Yu smiled at him when he opened the door, his thin, scraggly mustache fanning across his lips.

"Ni hao, Chen," Yu said. He held up his black, lustrous parasol as a kind of pointed salute.

Chen was silent, as usual, nodding slightly.

"What, you're not happy to see me?"

"It's been a while," Chen said quietly. He added, "I'm retired."


"Yes, I know," Yu said dismissively. He leaned in and peered into Chen's apartment. "May I come in?"

He did before he had heard the answer, blowing in through the door like he was marching to war. The flat was sparse and small and as white as a hospital and the furniture just as petite, matching the diminutive size of the potted plants, each of them barely rising more than two feet from the floor, all finely pruned. Several books were stacked on a corner chair and on top of those was a framed photo of Chen's late wife. The light that soaked it all came in from the windows bright and gray.

Yu scanned over everything, one eyebrow arched. "You didn't retire at all, Chen," he laughed. "This has to be a cover. Where's the rest of you live?"

"How's that?" Chen still waited at the doorway.

"I'm saying this, all this, is much too boring."



"Well, I'm happy with it," Chen said simply.

Yu nodded his confused face and set his parasol down against the wall. He kept glancing around and sighing, silently judging the one-room flat as he straightened out his jacket, pulling harshly at the front flaps. Chen watched the veins on the tops of his hands stricken up as he did it. Looking at the whole of him, he thought Yu resembled some vulgar mix of Charlie Chaplin and Doc Holliday, with a drunk-but-not-so-drunk lean to the way he walked and violently exaggerated arm movements that bent like a boxer's. Chen watched as his former employer swept away the seat of a nearby chair and then, sitting, beckoned Chen to join him. Chen did, wordlessly.

"I'm here on business," Yu announced, unbuttoning his jacket by one notch. "You already knew that, though."

"Yes."

Yu bore one hard eye on him. "I don't quite understand the hostility, Mr. Chen."

"I'm retired," Chen asserted in his polite manner.

"Right, I realize you're retired. You've made that clear. But I'm looking around right now and, honestly, do you know what I see? Chen? Honestly now."


"What?"

"I see desperation." He dug his pointer into his square knee and then dug it again with each word. His pants were so well-ironed and rigid that there was neither a wrinkle nor any sort of impression left. "I see a man who wants a chance to be something again, even if it's in secret. Because what's better, really, than a secret that doesn't need to be shared? Confident in its own value. Tell me that, Chen."

Chen nodded to be civil, but his eyes held his thoughts – unimpressed, tired, and waiting eagerly to say no so that this awkward little reunion could be cut short.

"Listen," Yu said, sitting forward, his mouth twitching like some invisible hook was pulling at it, "I know finances might be a concern. Why not leverage your talents from time to time, live more comfortably? Much more comfortably."

"I'm retired," Chen said again.



Yu scoffed in an explosion of breath. He made more conversation, of course, but they were merely parts of a larger filibuster, biding the time to see how well they could wear down Chen's resolve. Every day for the next two weeks went the same. Yu would visit and plead, and Chen would politely refuse. The skinny little man would be everywhere in Dabagou, waiting on a corner or in a shop, often never saying a word, begging silently with his leer of a face.

On the first day of the third week, however, Yu came round again, but this time Chen gave no answer. Instead he looked at Yu, really looked at him. He knew him well, knew his persistence and his tenacity, that he would haunt someone like a ghost just to get a favor. That he was deceptively ruthless, malicious even. He'd be at Chen's door every day, every week, for years and years, for eras untold, needling him until his will broke under the aggravation. Chen would say no such thing out loud, of course, but truth be told, he could think of no purer hell than constant company. He wanted to be left alone to his walks and his garden and his dam. The master of his own days with all the wide-open possibilities that it promised. Old Liu.

"Excuse me," Chen said that final time, ever courteous, "but if I agree to this, free of charge, will you leave me alone? That can be the deal."

"No pay?" Yu asked, surprised.

"That *is* pay," Chen declared. He folded his hands together, modest as always but satisfied with himself. "Yes?"

Yu smiled, his eyes suddenly bright, brighter even than the midday sun. "Yes, yes, of course. Peace and quiet, for sure. For sure."

Chen stood up silently and went to his little stove, no bigger than one of those miniature fireproof safes, tucked away in the corner of the flat. It was glazed in a shellack of bright teal paint. The stove had been Mrs. Chen's favorite, an odd junkyard relic that she had sussed some charm out of. Chen thought of the daily affection she had shown it as he pulled a hot kettle from one of its burners and poured Yu and himself some tea. The drink came out golden and writhing with steam and it filled the tiny apartment with a spicy aroma, like the inside of a smokehouse.

"What will I need to know?" Chen asked, handing Yu a cup.

Yu took it gratefully, almost eager. "Xie xie." His thin hands folded over it as if he were protecting it. "The town is local," he said cheerfully. "Kaixian. You know, actually it's no town at all. That great big dam of yours drowned it." He laughed. "I'd say you could walk there, but in this case, you'll have to row."



"The mark is there?" Chen asked, confused.

"Yes," Yu said, fanning his eyebrows and sipping his tea for dramatic effect. All his efforts of the past three weeks were paying off, and it showed. He touched his lip as a bit of the gilded liquid dripped out but even that was slightly celebratory. "Your target, Mr. Chen," he intoned, "is a dead man."

# # #

The tall apartment buildings in Kaixian poked out of the water like a set of gray, crooked teeth, angling up from some hidden depth from which they were anchored. They were rotted just the same, either dark and peeling or calcified, sometimes both, crumbling away into the black soup. Fossils now. Vestiges. The mist moved on the surface of it all like smoke from a bomb, and indeed, whenever a strong enough wind rode through to clear the mist away the debris and the shattered rock and the tangled pieces, both manmade and earthly, looked as though they had suffered through a parade of world wars. The town had been conquered by an army of water.

Mr. Chen navigated it with a narrow, shabby motorboat Mr. Yu had purchased for him. They had held the briefest of conversations before he left the river's edge.

"I'm not saying for sure it's a *jiangshi*," Yu told Chen as handed him a flotation vest and a push pole. "That would be ridiculous, right?"

"I've seen ridiculous," Chen said nonchalantly.

"If the dead rose from their graves to steal from the bastards who wronged them, I'd be the poorest man on earth." He planted his spitshined loafers on the edge of the boat to steady it as Chen sat down. "Anyway, my guess is it's just a grifter dressed like a ghost."

"So why even bother with him?"

"I wouldn't care," Yu explained, "except that Kaixian is an important route. The *most* important one, in fact. You know how hard it is to get that shit, what's it called –"

"Acetic anhydride."

"Right! Thank you, yes. I'm glad you still remember. Anyway, you know how hard it is to move that? With the way it smells?" He barked a laugh out. "Hard as hell, Chen. This is the only place you can do it without attracting a crowd. No one's watching the flood zone." He put his hands on his hips like he was about to do a dance. Again, Chen had always thought him a strange little man. "But the

smugglers won't move it if they see a *jiangshi* hopping around," he said. "They're superstitious fucks."

As Chen revved up the sputtering motor Yu lifted his foot off the boat. It drifted away peacefully from the shore.


"Why not just get Old Liu on it?" Chen called, perhaps one last stab at getting out of the whole thing.

"The old crow man?" Yu laughed. "You know he's nowhere to be found. You thinking of pulling a disappearing act, Chen? If the *jiangshi* is still hopping around come tomorrow, I'll know it was him who talked you into it." Then he waved him off, half congenial and half dismissive, smiling his salesman's smile.

Like everything else Chen had owned or operated, the boat was modest but serviceable. Much the same could be said of himself. He was dressed in his usual work wear, the oxford-slacks-oxfords combination, with nothing else on him but what he had carried to every job for three decades – his scuffed Black Star pistol and a medium-sized chef's knife, crossed and tucked into his belt on the small of his back. An out-of-place look, for sure, but only passably dangerous. The human hairballs that were Kaixian's scavengers watched him with a kind of guarded curiosity as they dipped their nets into the dark water, skimming for anything of value. He did not belong here.

Chen navigated the jutting leviathans carefully, shutting off the engine where necessary so that he might guide himself safely with his push pole. The depths were cratered and snagged where they hid, grabbing at the pole and coughing up whatever had slipped beneath the depths: Pants and shoes, much of them toddler-sized, dog collars, newspapers and books, tangles of appliance cords, buckets, scarves, umbrella fabric and bits of pine, buckleless belts, moldy bedsheets, even nests of hair that must have gathered from all the drainpipes in the village and congealed into one black mass. Each item had been damned or forsaken in its own way, streaked with black silt dried like tear stains and twisted or balled and made impossibly dense by the amount of water they'd soaked up. When the sun had set he could no longer see them but he still felt their weight on the end of the pole.

After an hour or so of that he was finally able reach a clear span of water further south. The boat pattered up again and through the lazy fog he could see his destination – a pinnacle rock, knotted and gray, signaling to him from further down the river. On the tip of the rock he thought he saw a figure, shadowed against the blue night. There was no light to see it by except the cold glow of the moon but as he neared the great wall of stone that reared up there were suddenly volleys of orange and red strobing the sky. Flares from the scavengers and fishermen, by the looks of it. Shot up to



help them spot abandoned treasure floating in the dark. Their soft light exposed the jiangshi, as well, and from where he sat it was no more than an immobile, faceless creature, even when the flares cracked. No dancing zombie or ghoul, just a body chained to a stone.

Chen tied to his boat to an exposed stump and then climbed up the tower of rock, using his hands in places where the wet stone defied him. The spidery light of the flares revealed his path. At the top was a bare ledge mounted by a higher peak, some girder perhaps, the last one standing on this now-unrecognizable structure, and it was here where the body was fastened. Chen knew, even before he stood to examine the face, who it was. Indeed, Old Liu's bloated eyes, so sapped of their impudence as to be docile, stared back at him. The light of the flares shooting up went dead in their centers – no reflection, no chance spark. Just ash and void. He had been done a while back, a year as far as Chen could tell, and by the distended fade of the crow-shaped tattoo beneath his left eye it was clear he had been left in the elements to rot and wither the whole while. Even the bird tattoo had blotted and dried like a purple tear.

"People will know me by my voice," he used to say to Chen when they saw each other, smiling his black-toothed smile, "like the crow. I don't say much, but when I do, it's death."

And on that word, *death*, the body before him began to writhe, an unholy life conjuring up from its rotten flesh, summoned almost. Chen knew it was a vision just by the way the air shimmered and the light blurred. He must have inhaled something in the sea of junk, some drowned gas line leaking up over the surface, or maybe fumes coming off a cache of anhydride. At least, that's what he told himself as he watched the dead man come back to life. Its jaw flapped and its skin wriggled and the teeth, worn down to pebbles, chattered out words. Its eyes were still lifeless as it spoke.

"You'd done a foolish thing," it told Chen.

"I know," Chen answered simply. "Walked right into a trap. Just like you before me, from the looks of it."

"Well if it's not broke," it laughed, sounds like a profane, ear-shattering cough. "Listen, you know they'll just keep on doing it until one of us smartens up."

"That'll be the day."

"And that's why it works so well, Chen," Liu's corpse intoned. It peeled mouth looked like it was smiling. "We're like slaves on a chain, all of us cleaners. We don't deserve any better because we never had a will of our own. Just eager fingers on a trigger. That's the joke – the big joke. All those guys we took out, they never knew it, but we had just as much control as they did. Less even. Less



than the mark. That was us.”

Chen nodded, looking up and down at the Crow Man, noting how his flesh was somehow both swollen and withered. The little miracles of death.

“Speaking of jokes,” Liu’s corpse went on, “there’s one here somewhere about you imagining up a conversation with a fake *jiangshi*.” Another laugh clattered out. “That name – it ain’t so funny now, is it? How different am I now than I was when living? Eh? I’m dangling from a noose, just like the old days. Nothing more than a corpse either way.”

After that the body was silent. Chen collected his thoughts and looked out onto the great, flooded expanse of Kaixian, glowing under the red lights and then fading to black again. He already knew it was too late. He had lived too many years and looked down the barrel at too many gangsters to pretend otherwise. There were already two such men behind him, both surefooted. He never turned to face them, nor ever tried. There was never even an effort to run.

When the shot rang out it was a like a dull explosion and before he ever felt the pain he smelled the sour burn of the gunpowder and flinched just slightly from the heat of the blow, small enough that in the dark it didn’t happen at all. He knew his death would be a messy one. The bullet entered near the back of his right ear and came straight out the other side of his face, driving its hot odium through any tissue and muscle that dare stood in its way and splitting through the cheek hard enough to send the bone reeling into his eyes. Truthfully, he felt more annoyed than anything else. The messy ones were needless – the job was both art and science, demanding cleanliness and speed and efficiency. Suffering wouldn’t do, at least not for its own sake. Whoever did it would have to learn. Pity it would not be Chen who would teach him.

So at last when Chen fell he fell facing the sky, his eyes filled up with blood, his lungs drifting into soft whips of breath. He saw them now, difficult as it was. The first man was Yu, of course, silent and watching. His nameless, equally well-dressed associate was nearby – a young man, this one, his long, black hair strapped up into a bun. The scavengers were there, as well, but they preferred to keep their distance. There was not much to say, at that point, as they waited for the steady hand to die, the last of his kind after Old Liu, just a dying man staring up at the stars that blinked and burned in their archaic rhythm.

Only when Chen’s eyes had petrified did Yu muse out loud, looking out over the water that had drowned Kaixian.

“Three years.” He chuckled lightly, though his voice was heavy with thought. “If they ever talked to each other, all of the cleaners, they’d know what was coming after three years. Shit, maybe they



knew anyway.”

The young man was much more practical, and his voice sound put-upon. “I don’t get it – why not just kill ‘em the day they leave?”

Yu scoffed as loud as he could. “You have to let them relax,” he explained. “These are contract killers. There’s an instinct that lets them smell it a mile away. Better to think you’re coming out of desperation, you know, one last do-me-a-favor job.”

“Yeah? Is that what’s waiting for me?” the young man laughed.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, kid,” Yu snapped. “This kind of thing is reserved for the legends.” He looked down on Mr. Chen’s body, into the flooded eyes, to see if there was anything left. There wasn’t. “He took out over a thousand men. You believe that? Almost as much as Old Liu over there. And all he wanted was some peace and quiet.”

“No shit. Well you gave it to ‘im, at least.”

Yu nodded absently. “Funny we need to put them down this way. Treat the old dogs just like the strays.”

“Old dogs know too much,” the young man agreed. “All the warm spots in the house, where the food is stored, where the master sleeps. They lived any longer, they wouldn’t be dogs anymore.”

Yu grunted out his agreement begrudgingly. Together they cut Liu’s body from the rock and then heaved it over, watching as it bubbled down beneath the black water, interned to its tomb. As for Chen, he had the distinction of being the next man to take up Old Liu’s foul duty. Yu and his young handler wasted no time in putting him on the black, oily throne, the blood still seeping out of his hardening body as they secured the rope. He was tied just the same as all who had come before him, a man balancing on a stone peak, a piece of bait strapped to its hook in wait of the next unfortunate catch.

But Chen’s dead eyes looked on. The sclera were dull at the edges but the insides were full with the long, flat shape of the dam and the dread mist rising up from the bottom of its spillway. The gray and cream girders leaking out with water like the baleen of a whale. The river snaking on towards the sea somewhere beyond the blue smog. They all beckoned from their distances, goading him, flaunting their might. There he was to wait, watching it as though he were still living, watching and waiting until the sun swallowed the earth and the Yangtze no longer distilled the various acts of men.

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**Mark J. Mitchell** studied writing at UC Santa Cruz under Raymond Carver, George Hitchcock and Barbara Hull. His work has appeared in various periodicals over the last thirty five years, as well as the anthologies *Good Poems*, *American Places*, *Hunger Enough*, *Retail Woes* and *Line Drives*. It has also been nominated for both Pushcart Prizes and The Best of the Net. A full-length collection, *Lent 1999*, was just released by Leaf Garden Press. His chapbook, *Three Visitors* has recently been published by Negative Capability Press. *Artifacts and Relics*, another chapbook, was just released from Folded Word and his novel, *Knight Prisoner*, was recently published by Vagabondage Press and another novel, *A Book of Lost Songs* is coming soon from Wild Child Publishing. He lives in San Francisco with his wife, the documentarian and filmmaker Joan Juster.

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# The Box

Mark J. Mitchell

But none of the little boxes  
Inside the little box in love with herself  
Is the last one.

—Vasko Popa  
(Translated by Morton Marcus)

1.

He sat in the silver room. Purple light  
bounced straight up, breaking angles with no noise.  
He watched one wall—not the wall of his choice—  
The bright white jacket held his shoulders tight.  
His head wouldn't move. Those unfinished eyes  
could learn to swivel in darkness. This box  
was one lonesome dimension—day and night  
flowed from gray switches cold doctors enjoyed.  
His hours there burned in his mind and a new past  
was granted him. He blinked when they pulled  
his goggles free. He rose. Shook. Dusted his hat  
against a pant leg. As he left they told  
him which day it was, gave him a fresh box  
of tissues. Said each visit was his last.

2.

There are small movies in the box sometimes  
and crackling static can shape a soundtrack.  
He doesn't notice—there are broken lines  
his eyes follow, His shapeless mind builds racks  
to hold things he never thinks. Just behind  
that silver wall, the purple light, blank eyes  
are watching. He knows and he watches back  
without laughing. Still, movies flash past—nine  
or ten—he never counts. They just unspool  
and film drips across the floor. He might know  
better. He likes small games. He likes to fool  
his smooth brain so days feel a bit less slow.  
As they let him out he blinks before his eyes  
pull focus. The world floats like a cracked jewel.

3

The box wasn't silver on the outside—  
It changed—one day a castle, next a tomb  
with dates and epitaphs blank. He could write  
stiff numbers and words but inside the room—  
or box—there was only humming purple light  
and waiting outside his eyes couldn't see  
a shape—the goggles projected small moons  
everywhere—at least across the inside  
blank walls. Low voices whispered as he passed  
from the out to the in. There were flat hints  
that hovered like a sneaky cloud of glass.  
It blocked all other colors, the dyes and tints  
his eyes were forbidden to guess or see—  
So—castles, tombs—He knew they wouldn't last.

4

A box. A room. This place. A door. He comes.  
Perhaps. Sometimes. Or not. There's light. Or not.  
Blue. Purple. Goggles blind him. They're small drums  
held flat against his face. Hardbound. He's got  
no say. No one to want his words. He hums.  
He played and lost. So here's a place—a door—  
a stool to hold his shape. He thinks it's not  
quite true. But how can he begin—become  
a person who can know anything? Light  
here conceals—it hides—bounces off foil walls  
and falls between his eyes and exit. Night  
is just like day here. There's no sun to call  
him outside—to sing a tune that's a door—  
opening to elsewhere—to naked sight.

5.

He counts silver lines, violet light that  
slides down and around him. His plastic eyes  
can never move. Everything here is flat—  
reflective walls—floors—his stool—the small lies  
he's been told. One dimension—like a map  
he can't read. So he tries to count each change  
as if he could learn something—become wise—  
He sits—silent in his humming room. What  
might happen won't be something he can see—  
this light is meant to hold him in the dark.  
If he tried to listen—find a melody  
in waves that drown him so slowly—to mark  
a rise or fall—a sharp or flat—a change—  
any small thing—he'd move—he'd be able to flee.

6.

Before the box, a room—a table, yes—  
Geometric mishap that measures the shape  
of space. It's almost—but not quite—a desk—  
the bodies of small animals are made  
specific there—and a sink to refresh  
the surface—hands—wait—do people work here?  
A hint of white in silver—a soft swish  
of fabric against flesh. Someone must make  
the purple light sing. He's never seen them—  
not one brave face. The box holds no windows  
(he's always in the box). But at the end—  
And it must end—when he rises and goes  
past that steel table—there's a note he hears  
that's not a voice, but it lets him pretend—

7.

No clocks—no circles—He's forgotten time—  
A hum—yes—light that doesn't change—just on  
or off —He must grow old and leave behind  
a minute here—flat grainy days must have gone  
by. He can't tell. The box is built to blind  
his blank being—that's the one thing he knows.  
A room might be there—all angles and lines  
and cold staggered lights—Maybe they're beacons  
that guide—someone. Purple light, but no face  
appears. There are no clocks and his cool hands  
can't count seconds. It's all made to erase  
those marks he left on the box. Like sands  
unraked in a stone garden that he knows  
have scattered. No time. This box. Now. This place.



8.

What's that?—A sign?—A smudge—a fingerprint,  
as if someone—small print—a girl—had marked  
her place and walked away—not looked back since—  
but here—another soul in this box, this stark  
space. Touched once, she left just this deadened glint  
on purple light. It means a life was here—  
not his. Not—his captors?—at least some hint  
of hope—not hope, but something that's not dark,  
that's brighter than the hum. Did she get out?  
A trick. The box keeps him. Reflected light  
just buzzes—with no flowers but bee-loud—  
He remembers bees. He imagines flights—  
he sighs. If she can't see him, she might hear  
his breath as he hides in his net of doubt.

9.

Almost a breeze—almost a slip in time.  
Ozone—a storm—a scent of someone lost  
outside the box—behind the box. He tries  
to turn—to move his legs. His hands hold fast  
against his sides—thighs stiff—only his eyes  
can seek the source—a whiff of an out there  
he can't conjure with his trapped silver mind.  
But everything he thinks he knows gets tossed  
aside. He drums short fingers hard against  
his hard sides. Exhaling his cool sorrow  
while plotting a way past this false defense  
that fooled him yesterday—not tomorrow.  
Now he knows they come from another mind  
and that it's not a real box—it's a fence.

10.

His hands can move. They touch his face. What now—  
His eyes are free—goggles—just gone. These walls  
are only foil. He begins to see how  
it was all done—so easy, cheap—he'd fall  
for it again, he knew—while the tricks showed—  
cold, naked, exposed—if he tries to look  
at them, they'll trap him another way. Now  
it's time to leave—if he can—and to fall  
if he must. There's fresh sky above the box  
and light isn't captive to tinted glass.  
His stiff body—fragile—can stand, can walk  
away from silvered illusions—pass  
through differed colored rooms before he looks  
at that sky—before he learns how to talk.



## CODA

Boxed—slapped around by something he can't see—  
Eyes enslave him—nameless silver threats that  
seek absences everywhere—behind this black  
door—unopened—beside this purple sea  
change that's rolling from outside—that he  
hears but can't see. He's still alone. He must  
know that with his bones—empty, naked dust—  
hearing birds and traffic—almost new—his  
mind knows more—but he can't stop this  
looking for unsafe rooms he cannot trust.

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# The Girl in the Glass

Dana Mele

The dead girl was there when I opened my eyes, staring at me in the grim web of smashed glass, smiling my smile. She was freshly dead, a crack of blood running down her face like a rich, oily tear, from the eye that was missing. Her other eye was swollen to a slit, and a thin purple slice of iris was all that was visible. Her hair was matted ratty brown, and there was a scar under her lower lip, a thin white reminder of a fall in paved summer playground. My chest ached to bursting and pain perforated my thoughts as I reached to touch my face, to feel my eye socket, and I thought, "I didn't survive this crash."

But before I even had the presence of mind to glance beside me to the passenger seat, to look over my shoulder to check on the others, the door was yanked open and there were arms under me, pulling me out into the smoky heat, and the sun broke over me and I knew the way anyone knows. Of course I survived. I was still there.

But so was she, and she rode with me to the hospital, watching me in the florescent glint of the EMT's eye as he bent over me with wires and bandages. I avoided her gaze by focusing on his nose, bulbous and sweaty with large pores. "Am I going to die?"

"You're going to be grand, Katie." He pronounced my name with a thick Irish accent, so there was an invisible "h" in there after the "k." *K-hatie*.

"What about the others? What about my friends?" Now he avoided my eyes, and I couldn't see her, my dead twin, anymore.

"You're going to be grand," he said, and I knew none of them made it, not Sloke, who had taken his last bump of coke an hour prior, from my key that was still stuck in the ignition, not Viv, whose

spare tampons were in my pocket because none of her purses matched the shoes that she *had* to wear last night, and not Gary, whose graduation ring, new and shiny and perfect, hung around my neck on a flimsy gold chain.

He'd hesitated when I chose to wear it around my neck instead of on my finger.

"That way you'll be here," I had told him, placing his hand over my left breast where my heart sung in its cage. "Not here," I flipped him the finger and he laughed and bit my shoulder.

Now the ring felt soldered on.

"It's not your fault, now," the EMT said. There was a mechanic, metallic quality to his tone. It sounded like something he'd said many times to many survivors. I closed my eyes and he went away, but she didn't. In my mind, he had christened her. Khatie. My damned doppelganger.


The first morning after my release from the hospital I went to work, because I didn't know what else to do. I dressed myself without looking at my reflection, trusting my tights and tunic would hang on my body just the way they always did. I slid my card through the timestamp machine and laced up my skates, and the smell of grease and cooked flesh eased up my nostrils as I pinned my nametag on my chest and took a seat behind the counter, waiting for the first order of the day.

Wren, who had only been manager for a week, placed his hand on mine under the counter. "If you ever want to talk," he said. His skin was rough, and I felt the callouses on his fingertips from years of clamping down on metal guitar strings.

"Thanks," I said, and didn't say another word until he finally took his hand away.

A melodic *ping pong* sounded, and the number 7 flashed in red neon on the order screen. I avoided looking at Wren, because I knew Khatie would be there in his glasses, but as I stood, he took both of my hands and held them until I turned to glare at him. There she was, grinning madly, but she was different. She had aged. Her skin was ashen and had taken on a waxy quality, and the swelling around her eye had eased, revealing a thin ring of violet like a halo around the depths of her pupil. The blood was brown and dry. I yanked my hands free and headed out back to take my order. There was something disturbing about the fact that she had changed, more disturbing than the fact of her actually existing. She wasn't just a vision. She was there.

I purchased a pair of dark sunglasses from the drugstore on the way home. They were flimsy toy gun plastic, with pink camouflage frames, but they were the darkest lenses I could find. Anything to dim the features of my grim reflection. The next morning I covered my bathroom mirror with brown



paper, and the top half of my bedroom mirror, and taped the window shades down with duct tape.

I couldn't completely keep her out, though; there wasn't enough paper in the world. She was there at the funerals, in the glass of the framed photographs of the dead and in the glossy sheen of Gary's mother's eyes. Edith was doped up, chemically curtained from the rest of us, from her son who lay perfect and blameless in his coffin and from the girl she never approved of, who was the instrument of his death.

Khatie was there a week later, in the metal cabinets of the doctor's office where they pronounced me healing well. She was in every vision of myself, and every time she appeared, Khatie had decomposed a little more. She smiled and mimicked me, raking back her hair when I did, sneezing when I sneezed, turning her head to look away from me when I turned away from her. But when I snuck another look, with dim and diminishing hope that she was finally gone, there she was, stealing a glance at me.

I visited a community mental health center, and they gave me the number of a grief counselor. I called up the grief counselor and she directed me to a survivors support group meeting in the basement of a church. I attended one meeting, filled up on coffee and tinny tea cookies, and left early after alienating myself from the lot of them within the first five minutes.

"My name is Katie."

"Hello, Katie," they chorused.

"I killed my boyfriend, my best friend, and her fuck buddy."


They stared.

"It was an accident, but you know."

The silence was thick and noxious, the way NyQuil tastes. They didn't know.

"Can someone tell me it goes away? The vision of my corpse following me everywhere. I mean, what do you do with that? Does that ever go away?"

In the eyes of a handful of widows and a couple of orphans, I saw that this was not a common problem. A dozen tiny Khaties glinted at me derisively. Like I'd broken some sacred agreement by discussing her. The group leader's mouth hung slightly open.



"Honey, you should see someone about that," suggested a scruffy man who smelled like the hot juice at the bottom of a garbage can. He reached for my hand and I felt my fingers flick back reflexively. "Be glad you have this time. Be glad you have this space."

I filled my Styrofoam cup, scraped a tray of cookies into my purse, and excused myself from the survivors.

Khatie wasn't a ghost. I was sure of that. Ghosts are the remnants of dead people, and I was very much alive. I still gagged at the smell of burgers at work and burned my tongue on hot coffee. I still felt shame when I wrapped myself around a warm body, because Gary was tucked away in the earth cold as dark glass, but his ring still hung around my neck. I still cramped like anything when I bled. I was all of the human things.

As months slipped by, I began to feel self-conscious when I was alone because I knew that even if I didn't see her, she saw me. I resisted the urge to pick my nose when it itched, even though there were no tissues handy and no living eyes to see. I stopped drinking the juice out of olive jars, a weird habit I've had since I was a child, because I felt like it would disgust her. I was careful not to laugh, not to smile. She wouldn't understand. I didn't take a perfectly nice bartender named Ted home with me because I felt like Khatie wouldn't approve of my dating again so soon. I really regretted that one. His hands were like warm cookies in mine and his smile was both devilish and boyish. He asked questions that led the conversation down winding paths, and I felt light and tingly after we'd spent almost all night chatting after hours in candlelight, in a corner of the bar, far enough away that I couldn't see Khatie shaking her head from the mirror behind the rows of glass bottles.


"What's the worst thing you've ever done?" He asked over the dregs of a bottle of Chianti.

*I survived.* I couldn't bring those words to my tongue, though. They were rotten and penitent. I stalled, tasting the lip of my empty glass.

"Did you just take a sip of air to avoid answering that question?" His eyes were brilliant in the candlelight and all I saw in them was pigment and pupils. I stared into them, intoxicated by Khatie's absence.

"That's it," I said. "That's the worst thing I've ever done."

When I got home in the early dawn, I showered for the first time in a week. I shaved my legs and counted my gray hairs. I looked at myself and saw me, just a flicker in the mirror before Khatie appeared, white with fury. But I was there.



After three weeks of dark corners and candles, and after I had twice turned Ted down for a dinner date during waking hours, he stopped calling, and when I stopped in to see him, the devil was out of his eyes. He smiled politely and took my order and then turned away to talk with someone else. I decided Khatie and I needed to talk.

I chose a public restroom at a gas station downtown because it was neutral territory. Any place that was mine was also hers, so home wasn't an option, and anyhow, I didn't think I had it in me to just turn her out. No, we would discuss this rationally and reasonably.

She was horrible to look at by this point. Her flesh was crumbled off and the missing eye socket was like a black hole. Her other eye was almost gone, but there was a faint purple light, the ghost of the eye, fixed steadily on me.

"It's over," I said. The violet shimmer in her socket pulsed and my lungs hollowed.

She opened her lipless mouth and her teeth clicked together. "It's never over. Not for me and you."

"It has to be." I folded my hands to keep them from shaking too visibly. "I have a life. You don't."

"Of course I do," she said, grinning with her teeth. "I have yours."


I smacked the glass with my palm and felt it crack against my skin. "What do you want from me?" She laughed a dry paper laugh and I hit her again, drawing blood. "What do you want?" Once again and the mirror shattered and warm blood covered my lacerated fingers.

She shook her head at me in the fragments of mirror that hadn't slid to the ground. "It isn't a matter of wanting, Katie. We're not separate. I can't just leave you to your nose picking and Ted fucking. Your nose is mine. Your heart is mine. When you kiss, I kiss. When you dream, I dream. Go ahead. Go back to Ted and apologize. I like him. I really do. I like his hands. The warmth."

Someone was banging and shouting from behind the backroom door. I felt my blood begin to cool in my veins, and a smooth, serene darkness spread through me. "I'm not sorry," I said dispassionately. "I'm just not."

Her violet eye moved down my neck and I placed my fingers over my chest protectively. Through the slivers of pain I felt the chain that hung so lightly I almost never felt it. Gary's ring was molded into my breastbone. It had to be there, because he wasn't.

"I'm not." I undid the clasp of the chain.



"Aren't you?" Khatie said, soft as a breeze. She stretched her hand out to me, a challenge. I placed the ring in the cold bones of her palm and she closed her fingers around it lovingly, and then placed it around her own neck.

"Fair is fair," I whispered.

"It isn't," she said. "Haven't you at least figured that out?" She turned away from me for the first time, retreating into some dark distance.

I felt cool air on my chest where Gary's ring had been. "You won't come back?"

She paused, played with the ring around her tiny neck and then looked back at me, and I knew before she said it. "I'm never going to be gone, Katie. You won't see me if you don't look for me. At least for a while. That's the best I can give you. Eventually..."

I nodded, accepting her terms. "Of course, eventually."



