

Sybil's Garage No. 7

Where can you find a television that sees five minutes into the future? Where can you find dragons trapped in a jar and an illness which turns people into glass? Where might you find families who sell their brainpower to corporations for penny wages, or dead relatives that sit down for family meals?

Why, in the pages of *Sybil's Garage No. 7*, of course.

In this seventh issue of the highly acclaimed series, you will find twenty-seven original works of fiction and poetry from today's top talent, with suggested musical accompaniment, our trademark design aesthetic, and much more. But be sure to leave a trail of breadcrumbs on your way into *Sybil's Garage*, or you may not find your way out.

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Richard Larson Alex Dally MacFarlane Anil Menon
E.C. Myers Adrienne J. Odasso Eric Schaller
Alexandra Seidel Amelia Shackelford Amy Sisson
Sonya Taaffe Marcie Lynn Tentchoff Jacqueline West
& A.C. Wise

Sybil's Garage

no. 7

featuring
Hal Duncan
M.K. Hobson
Alex Dally MacFarlane
Anil Menon
Sonya Taaffe
and many others

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Sybil's Garage No. 7

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Sybil's Garage No. 7

Edited by Matthew Kressel



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For Christine, to read on the beach, perhaps

They come into my house, stinking of weed and prostitutes and sweat. They look at the indentions in the sheets where my family once slept. They cry. They say a prayer. They curse God. The floor is rotten from all the tears.

Sometimes I hold their hands. They do not feel me. Sometimes I whisper in their ears. They do not hear me. Sometimes babies look up at me and giggle and point and cry when their mothers can't see me. I touch them all to try and leave a fragment of myself behind. But they forget. They always forget.

How many will remember me in a year?

My father always said, "Don't curse the darkness. Light a candle!" I thought that was a silly, useless saying, until I heard you sing.

You heard my screams, Jeff, and turned them into music.



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*263 Prinsingracht
Amsterdam
Holland*

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Editor's Note

to the sound of Two-Headed Boy by Neutral Milk Hotel...

YOU MAY HAVE noticed something's different around here. Like the size of the book you are now holding in your hand (unless you're reading the e-book version, in which case you'll just have to take my word for it :-). This little 'zine has changed. We've abandoned the so-called "half-legal" print-size familiar to connoisseurs of 'zines for a more traditional 6x9-inch size. And for the more astute among you, you may have noticed we are using an ISBN number instead of a magazine's ISSN number.

Well, what does all this mean?

It means, quite simply, that we've grown. The little magazine that could, which started in the back of a print shop in Hoboken in 2003, is now being distributed all over the world. To facilitate our growth, we've had to make some changes. But the heart of *Sybil's Garage*, the excellent fiction, poetry, and artwork that you have come to know and (I hope) love, will remain. In fact, these changes have allowed us to expand the issue into the largest one yet. And this issue is, in my humble opinion, the *best one so far*.

What has not changed is my dedication to make each issue a unique work of art. It is also my sincere hope and desire to continue to publish *Sybil's Garage* far in the future. I hope you thoroughly enjoy the poems, stories and essay that follow as much as I do. If the quality of these works is any indication of the future of the magazine, I'd say it's a bright one.

—Matthew Kressel, Brooklyn, New York, June 2010

By Some Illusion

Kathryn E. Baker

to the sound of Around You by Ingrid Michaelson...

"THIS IS RED."
 "This is blue."

"This is orange."

"This is green."

I could only imagine that *this* is what being on a rolling sea would feel like. I want to vomit. I want to scream. I want to reach out and touch the vivid blues and greens, oranges and reds. Everything had shape in my world, and now it seems my world has changed forever. I long to touch what Jane names a sweater and wrap it

around my shaking body. If not just for the warmth of its embrace but to regain the sense of limitation. I want to be squeezed and secure again.

This is too much.

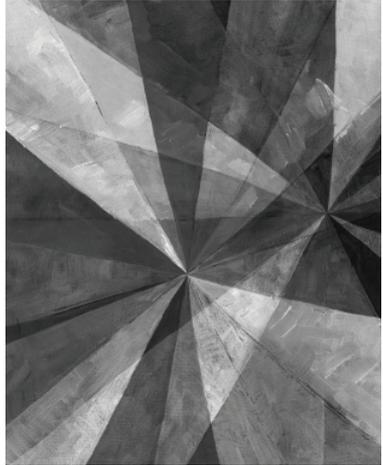
Touch has become a poison now as I run my fingers along something she calls "grass" and qualifies it with yet another color. I know grass. I know the prickly — yet soft — feeling upon my bare feet. Her words don't match my own.

The only way to define what I feel involves using concepts such as "kaleidoscopic" and "confusion." Ultimately, these are the states of mind that I'm beginning to marry.

My stomach churns again as I look up. I begin to drown in whispered, "white clouds" and "blue sky." I manage to point a shaking finger at a blob that quickly takes shape as a "bird." A "seagull" to be exact.

I sway. Jane steadies me. Despite her efforts, I lose my colorful and textured lunch all over the front of my yellow sundress. I remember the smell. I vomit again.

Jane is careful as she undresses me and walks me into the shower. She pours a thick liquid in her hands which smells like pomegranates. "Pink,"



she offers.

"Your hands. What are they?" I ask, for the first time remembering Jane is not just words.

"Flesh... peach, um, white," she responds as she calmly starts to wash my body. *My body!* Curves of *my* breast, *my* hip, *my* legs, and *my* feet. I point excitedly to my toenails which do not match the rest of my skin.

"Purple. Don't you remember? I painted them yesterday," Jane says with a smile upon her lips. Pink lips. I lean forward and brush my own against hers. She closes her blue eyes and for a moment I am tempted to ask her to open them again. She slips a hand around my waist and pulls me close. Water slides from her neck, off the arteries which throb with each heartbeat. Her breath quickens with each tender touch as I trace my lips down her chest.

Now she is the one to sway as I find myself upon my knees.

She is so beautiful.

Black dresses. Black high-heeled shoes. Black jackets. Black-tie.

"Burgundy," Jane whispers as she anticipates my next question. The curtain is drawn to each side of the grand stage where musicians are tuning their instruments. The conductor bows and taps his wand upon the music stand. Each instrument is lifted to ready lips and hands.

"Somewhere over the Rainbow" begins to play as a larger-than-life woman appears upon a large screen behind the orchestra. I immediately grab Jane's hand. "Dorothy Gale?" I whisper and Jane nods. "Black and White?"

"Just wait."

I grasp onto Jane's hand as the tornado lifts the house and then quickly drops it. I follow Dorothy as she opens the now-brown door. Subtle changes suddenly overwhelm as she opens it. Jane is watching me instead of the movie. She hands me a Kleenex. I suddenly realize that I need it.

Jane sleeps heavily. Her eyelids flutter rapidly as she twitches and reaches out to pull me closer. Her chest rises and falls under the overly large shirt which has ridden up over her hip. She has kicked the covers off again. I trace my finger over the smooth curve. An action I had done so many times before, yet this time, it is new and exciting. I shiver at the new remembrances and with eyes closed, Jane automatically reacts to my tremble by pulling the comforter up around us both. I was used to this suffocation.

It was in these hours of the night where breath and white noise became companions. Now, trees weave their shadows upon the walls and red digits

change upon the nightstand. It is no wonder that I cannot sleep.

Even when I lose the battle, the dreams are more frightening than the unsteady streams of consciousness. There are colors in these nightmares that I still haven't named.

The grandfather clock strikes five and I turn my attention to the open window. The ghosts are finally retreating as darkness starts to lighten.

IT WAS IN THESE HOURS OF THE NIGHT WHERE BREATH AND WHITE NOISE BECAME COMPANIONS

I fold my hands in my lap as I sit upon the examining table. The white paper crackles as I shift. The fluorescents are unpleasant.

The clock's second hand ticks at a steady interval. I am still not familiar with the numbers. I can grasp the concept, but it is only through practice that I get to places on time.

I wish Jane were here instead of at work. These new routines are hard to get used to. She was so proud when I asked her to throw out all of my auricular crutches. I only realized after I had asked her to return to her job, that she was one of them.

There are moments, like this one, that I want to scream. I want to pitch that tantrum over and over when frustration and stress become too much. I need *my* words, *my* past experiences, *my* old intimate and *fading* world.

The door opens and in walks Doctor McChord. Dark skin, dark hair and dark irises. His seriousness is coupled with a smile as he extrudes a long, cylindrical object from his pocket. Bringing it close to my face, he flips a switch and for a moment, I am blinded. I tense, torn between the world I knew and what I've been granted. I relax as everything comes into focus.

"So, Rachel, how do you like your new eyes?" he asks as he begins to untangle a long white cable. He sighs as he plugs it in to the handheld device. "My wireless scanner is down, we'll have to go analog on this one."

"Difficult to get used to." I nod and offer him the data port behind my ear.

"I told you it would be hard, but worth it. You get to experience something very few people do." There is a momentary shock as I commune with the machine beside me.

"Which is?" I ask between shivers.

"Rebirth. When all senses are working in concert, everything is new again." He smiles and puts a hand on my shoulder. "Embrace this and learn from your new pallet."

Yet, there is irony here. I feel it as he unplugs the cable and turns away to analyze results. It is in my quest to fix the defect of my birth; in my journey to experience all the aspects of my humanity, that I rely on the artificial.

The doubt flees as a knock on the white door is followed by a familiar voice.

She came after all, and as Jane enters, *all* of my senses create the most beautiful of symphonies. ♪

Seven Leagues

Lyn C. A. Gardner

to the sound of the Love theme from The Winds of War by Bob Cobert...

HOW

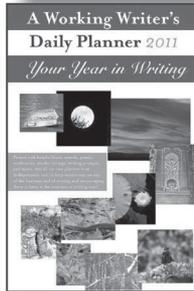
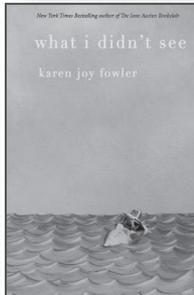
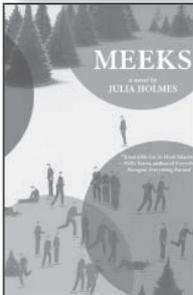
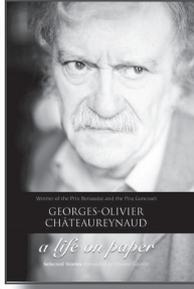
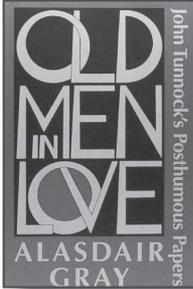
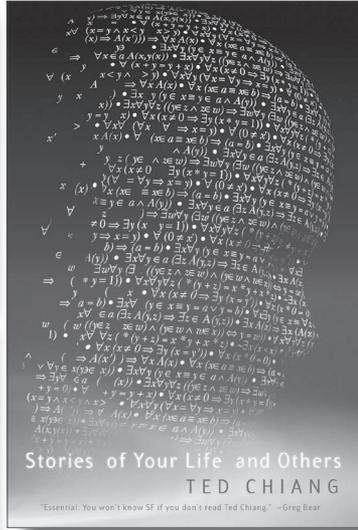
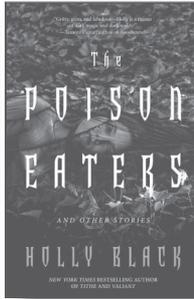
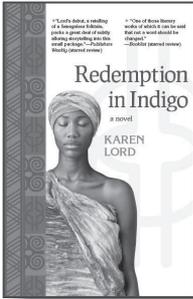
HOW MANY LEAGUES have these boots carried me,
so weary now, their soles worn thin to paper
with Swiss cheese holes that let me feel the earth,
keeping me grounded though I fly over water
and skim over dry land?

My topcoat brushes through the cloud and damp,
its black worn gray, its silken lining rotten,
the elbows patched, the buttons torn away
by the groping, desperate hands of the forgotten.

How many now I've lifted in my arms,
mothers and babes, hard men and little boys,
their arms but sticks, their bellies bloated, need
dulling the anger, fright hiding the pain?

Given the gift of simple chance,
someday these lives—refugees from wars,
victims of their governments and ours,
the starving innocents who always suffer
for another's greed and power—
may turn out to be the doctors, scientists,
saviors who protect our world
from the coming night. Meanwhile, I shield them
in what's left of my coat, strain my arms farther
than I thought possible, take a deep breath
and dive back into the inferno
to pull them clear from hell—
my boots, my legs slower now, that false step
waiting up ahead as I slowly
grind the magic from these boots
and wear out the remnants
of my ordinary life
to save them. 🍷





We're celebrating a fantastic list this year. We've already put out superb collections from Holly Black and Georges-Olivier Châteaureynaud as well as cracking novels from Alasdair Gray and Karen Lord. Still to come is our second *Working Writer's Daily Planner*, this *Year in Writing* being 2011—what fun that is. There's a dark, buzzy debut, *Meeks*, from Julia Holmes then in September minds will pop and hearts will crack with Karen Joy Fowler's new collection, *What I Didn't See*. In October Kathe Koja's huge, sexy, historical novel, *Under the Poppy*, will amuse and arouse and be accompanied by our reprint of Ted Chiang's glorious debut collection, *Stories of Your Life and Others*—one of the best books we've ever read. Then we have *Paradise Tales* from Geoff Ryman, and, peeking into 2011, we'll reprint Kelley Eskridge's thought-provoking debut science fiction novel *Solitaire*.

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Suicide Club

Amy Sisson

to the sound of Haunted by Kelly Clarkson...

THE FIRST RULE of Suicide Club is: tell frickin' everyone. At least, that's what Crake told me when he took me to see my first match. He didn't mean it literally, though. He just meant it in the general fuck-you-to-the-cops-and-suits way that's the point of the whole thing, really. Once you start going to matches, you better keep your mouth shut about the details or the cops will be all over you, threatening to come down on your family and trying to turn you into a rat. And if you ever start playing instead of watching . . . well, let's just say that if the organizers find out you've been letting things slip, they'll whack you long before you get around to dying in a match.

Besides, you don't really need to tell anyone about Suicide Club because everybody knows about it by now. It drives the cops and suits into a speech-making frenzy, but everyone else loves it. I'd been watching the netcasts for at least a year before I went to my first live match. It's not easy to get invited; you have to be pre-approved to go in with someone the organizers already trust, which is why I was bumming around with Crake. If you pass muster, a couple of weeks later you might get your own invite, an anonymous text with directions and a code only fifteen minutes before match time. You have to be close enough to get to the ring, find your assigned entrance, and show the code to the bouncers before it starts, but the organizers seem to know where you are so it all works out. The rings are a little hard to find because they're all alike: small enough to stay under the radar, big enough to hold the live audience, and generic enough not to be easily identified from the netcast.

The first live match I saw was a one-in-four, and I wasn't sure exactly what to expect because Crake wouldn't say much. My buddy Nelson had told me that even though he'd only seen them use pills on the netcasts, he heard they sometimes play by hanging, with one trapdoor that opens while the other ones stay shut. Some dusthead even told me he saw a match by beheading. I didn't believe that for a minute, but I thought about how freaky



it would be. Even if it was only for a fraction of a second, if you won that match you'd hear that blade whooshing down and you'd *know*, just before your head said goodbye to your body.

'Course it really is just pills, but it's more dramatic than that sounds. Besides, pills are quick, random, and hard to rig. With trapdoors or guillotines, *someone* would have to set one of them to working. Then there'd be a big temptation to fix the match so you could whack someone you didn't like or cash in on the betting. Some fans argue that Russian roulette would be better, but the organizers say it would be too messy and way too traceable. With pills, they just stick the placebos and the kill-pill in a jar, and the players each grab one without looking, simple as that. Then they drink them down with the beverage of their choice, the audience holds its breath, and one of the players topples over. The first time I saw it live, I couldn't help but think, right up until the last second, that Suicide Club might really be some elaborate net hoax. But when the players sucked down the pills, I could feel the death in the room and see it in their faces, even before the winner's body hit the floor. And then I knew that it was just about as real as it gets.

When the winner's dead-man switch started transmitting his suicide note, the crowd went wild. The note wasn't eloquent, but hell, we weren't expecting Shakespeare. We screamed and yelled, and some of the fans jumped onstage to console the losers or look at the winner's body up close, but the organizers made sure they scattered pretty quick, which was one of the rules. There's no settling up in person; all that happens on the net when they wire the winning bets to numbered accounts, not to mention the consolation prizes for the match losers. The bookies have to get their cut too, but it all has to be untraceable, so the organizers use player and audience avatars right up to the end, when the winner's face is revealed along with the suicide note. That way, the cops can't ID anyone except the deader, and it's not like it matters much in that case.

If I thought scoring an invite to watch a match was tough, getting sponsored to play was even tougher. You have to have at least one suicide attempt on record, dated a year or more before you go to your first match as a spectator. That's so they can sniff out the fakers and thrill-seekers and spies, and Crake says the Club organizers got mad skillz for spotting forged hospital records.

So no, there's really no way to fake it. You have to want to die.

The trouble is, I haven't. Died, I mean. I've wanted to, but it seems like I'm the luckiest, or maybe the unluckiest, bastard on the face of the planet. Your first match as a player is a standard one-in-ten. The odds are pretty good you'll survive that one, and the unbelievable rush plus the money and

the attention spurs you on to the one-in-nine, the one-in-eight, and so on. Once you've lost a few matches, you start to get a bit of a following and the bookies raise your odds, so you make a lot of money that you're gonna want to spend pretty fast, for obvious reasons.

You usually have a couple of weeks before you're up again, because there are more players now than ever, with matches going on in different cities every day. If you make it to a one-in-two, you're a real celebrity, and the Club has long since been putting you up in safe houses, because the further you go, the more likely the cops will eventually ID you, even with the avatars. So it's a weird life, but it's not so bad. I mean, they give you all the drugs and booze you could ask for to pass the time between matches, and the sex ain't in short supply either. You can tell the groupies just want to brag that they were the last one to screw a player before the kill-pill, but who cares? I pick the hot ones, and then I pretend for a little while that we're normal, that we have jobs and a future and there's a point to all this crap.

And if a one-in-two'er is a celebrity, then I'm fucking Elvis. I've lost twelve one-in-twos, a Suicide Club record. That should tell you something about my luck. The fans argue that I must be cheating, or the organizers are rigging it. If they are, I sure as hell can't tell you how they do it, because the Club takes security pretty damn seriously.

The thing is, I'm not so sure I want to die anymore. Before I started playing, I didn't know what it would be like to meet so many people who feel the same way I do. I guess I figured everyone was in it for the thrill, but the kids who come to matches and hang in the safe houses are just tired of having no jobs they can apply for except the army, tired of watching their friends come home with arms and legs blown off in a war that's got nothing to do with us. They're fed up with having no way to go to school and having nothing to do but surf the net. And when we sit around and bitch about this stuff the night before a match, that's the only time I ever start to think that maybe there's something we can do about it.

But I gotta keep playing, because this is bigger than me now. *This* is our war, 'cause we chose this one for ourselves. *This* is what we can do about things; it's the only thing that ever got their attention. So the country's said "fuck you" to us? Well, I guess we've found a way to say "fuck you" right back.

As for the future? Well, I got me a match tomorrow: my lucky or unlucky thirteenth one-in-two, all depending how you look at it. Maybe I'll see you on the flip side, in which case you won't be seeing this note just yet. And then again, maybe I won't. ❧

She came in to my house with her parents. It was 1998, long before iPods. She was just a little older than me. She had her headphones on. Her eyes were far away. The little spinning disc on her hip made rainbows on the wall as she turned into the sun.

I thought she was hiding. They do that here. They try to block out the truth any way they can.

I leaned in to say discomforting things in her ear. To make her feel me. To awaken her.

And then I heard a voice sing. "And she was born in a bottle rocket, 1929, with wings that ring around a socket, right between her spine, all drenched in milk and holy water, pouring from the sky."

You never said my name, but I knew who you were singing of.

The girl with the music wasn't hiding. She was drowning. In me.

And so were you.

I never found out her name. I never got to thank her.

The Noise

Richard Larson

to the sound of Zombie Boy by The Magnetic Fields...

IT WAS A zombie apocalypse but everyone had figured out how to deal with it except for me. I was hiding in my apartment, terrified to leave. I called Nicole and I said, "I just wanted to make sure you survived your commute. Your apartment is so far from the subway."

"Dude," she said. It sounded like she was sorting her mail. I pictured her standing next to her kitchen table, stacking bills into small piles. The same table where we used to play Scrabble until dawn when we rented a house together in college. She would usually win when we played Scrabble because she would play words like *ba* and *eh* in all the right places, while I spent too much time trying to perfectly position a word like *bereft*.

"Should I be worried about you?" she said. "Should I come over?"

"You don't understand. It's dangerous out there."

"What are you so afraid of?"

"Zombies," I said. "They're everywhere."

"Zombies. Okay," she said. "What are you doing *right now*?"

I was huddled on the floor expecting the worst. "Listening," I said. "Next door. It's happening again. It's relentless." The noise through the walls had become a perpetual thing at the exact moment that I decided never to leave my apartment again. It wasn't natural. There should be laws against it. "Oh my God," I whispered into the phone. "I am so disturbed."

"What does it sound like?"

"I can't describe it." I put the phone to the wall just as it got even worse. "Did you hear?" I asked.

"That is definitely a situation," said Nicole.

I had gotten used to avoiding the windows but now I had to think



about the walls, too. I crawled on the floor toward the television. I wanted to be careful but I also desperately needed to drown it out. I needed to do *something*. But the TV did not turn on when I pressed the button. I kept pressing it. “Oh no,” I said.

“Yeah,” said Nicole.

“No, I mean,” I said. “It’s *animal* in there. It’s scary.”

“Maybe they’ll die if they stop. Maybe this is all they have left.”

THE ZOMBIE HAD GIVEN ME AN EXCUSE TO ESCAPE FROM THE BAD DATE

I had been on a date the previous evening and I walked with the guy from the theater at Union Square where I had fallen asleep during an embarrassingly bad remake of a classic scary movie. We were heading to dinner. The guy said, “That was awesome.”

“The movie?”

“You didn’t like it,” he said.

“I don’t know how I could be expected to like it.”

“Are you one of those people who don’t like anything?” he asked seriously. “Are you one of those people who can only have a conversation as long as it’s about how everything sucks? Because my last boyfriend was like that and I’ve had it up to fucking *here* with that.”

I waited only a second before asking, “Can I get *his* number?”

That was right before the zombie came out of nowhere and grabbed my wallet out of my back pocket and then chased me back over to the East Village, as if I had other wallets there that he could steal. The zombie had given me an excuse to escape from the bad date, but it still wasn’t exactly pleasant. The zombie was making weird sounds, like he was trying to climb out of his own body. He was wearing iPod headphones which weren’t attached to anything. He kept saying, “Brains, brains, brains.”

Now I was scared because he could still be out there. He could be anywhere. I rolled into a ball on the floor of my apartment after Nicole had to take a call from her boss, and Jimmy came over after I called him, even though I had meant to call a guy named Jackson who I had met at a bar a few weeks ago, but I guess I had deleted his number and Jimmy was once again the first “J” in my phone. When he answered, I just went with it. I hadn’t called him in over a year.

“Hi,” he said in the doorway, squinting. He was wearing a huge hat and a trench coat. Maybe this was his way of hiding from zombies. He looked at

me more closely and then said, "You look terrible. What happened to your face? And why are you so dirty?"

"You've got to hear this," I said.

He was perplexed at the noise next door but then he found it funny and we decided to compete with them in terms of noise because it seemed like something to do with ourselves that might accomplish something, or at least pass the time. Afterwards he said, "It's good to see you again." He was naked but hiding under the sheets. "Do you have any pot?"

He crawled over to the dresser and opened a drawer, sifting through my collection of zombie novels, zombie action figures, zombie DVDs, zombie comic books, zombie short story anthologies, zombie sketches, zombie make-up, and photographs of me posing with various famous zombies.

"You're up to your head in zombies," he said.

He finally pulled out my pipe and a dime bag, not like he really wanted the pot but like he wanted to show me that he remembered where I kept it. "Thank God," he said when he found it, like he was satisfied that nothing in this world ever changes.

There was a sudden and abrupt silence. "They stopped," I said. Now all I could hear were the zombies outside, swarming, like they were finally bored with everyone else and wanted to eat only me.

"Do you think they were impressed by us?" Jimmy asked, gesturing next door. "I tried to be louder than usual."

Jimmy lit the pipe, cross-legged and sexy, half of his body still beneath the sheet. He inhaled and held the smoke in for a long time, his eyes never leaving mine. When he let the smoke out there was so much that it seemed like he had disappeared inside it, like a genie back into a bottle. But then there he was again.

"You didn't mean to call me tonight," he said. "I could tell."

"Yeah," I said.

"For a long time I didn't know what to make of you." He passed the pipe to me. "The way you ended things. I think I managed to hate you. My friends told me to hate you."

"Friends always say that."

I felt the high coming on moments after I took the hit. This is what we used to do together, and I felt like I was traveling back in time to a place where I had forgotten all the rules. I remembered being high with Jimmy one time and he had told me the story about how, when he was a kid, he had watched *Ghost* after his parents went to sleep one night and from then on he always saw Patrick Swayze in scary places, returning from the dead to tell Jimmy who had killed him. Not normal ghosts, not the sheet-and-two-

eyeholes kind of ghosts, not the kind of ghosts that appear out of nowhere to mess everything up. It was just Patrick Swayze. Jimmy's mom would ask him what he was so afraid of when she found him quivering on the bed, sweating, and he would just whisper, "Patrick Swayze."

"Maybe this was a bad idea," I said. I coughed and my eyes watered as I tried to contain it but it came out anyway, burning my throat on its way up. For a second everything hurt.

"Whatever," he said. He crept over to me on the bed and kissed me, his tongue creeping cautiously into my mouth. "I forgive you," he said, not like he meant it but like he was trying the words on, seeing if they could ever be true.

I didn't even really remember how things had ended with Jimmy. One day he just wasn't around anymore. I remember ignoring a particularly desperate text message.

Actually, that's a lie. Except for the last part.

I lied about the zombie chasing me from the movie theater, too. At least I lied about the zombie stealing my wallet, and I lied about getting away. This is what the zombie actually did:

He chased me, and then he caught me, and he grabbed me by the neck and threw me into the wall along the south side of Tompkins Square Park. My head hit the pavement and blood started gushing out. The zombie kicked me and said, "Hey faggot, do you like this? Is this what you like?" And then he dragged me. We made it as far as the playground before he said, "This'll be fine," and then he held my face down while he tugged violently at my jeans. I tried to scream but there wasn't a voice there anymore; it was all leaves and dirt, just me and the ground and everything else down below. "Don't," I tried to say, but only because that's what everyone says, and even then I don't think any sound came out of my mouth.

I think I managed to escape, but I can't really be sure. Maybe I'm still there. But that's why I had called Nicole: to remind her that zombies were still something we had to watch out for.

"There they go again," said Jimmy as the noise next door came back in a violent way. He looked at me like he was trying to figure something out. "When you called, I hoped for something. You shouldn't call me."

"What?" I said. I couldn't really hear him. My ear was pressed to the wall.

"I was sick back then," he said. His eyes were red and creepy. He reminded me of someone, but I didn't want to think about it. "I was really sick and you didn't call."

I wanted to get out of there but I knew that I had brought this on myself. I looked out the window and then at the door, at the wall and then back at Jimmy.

"Do you even remember?" he asked. "I was in the hospital alone. My family had to fly here to be with me."

"What was I supposed to do?"

"You were supposed to call," he said.

I remembered that I did not call. I hadn't thought that I'd be able to handle hearing the zombie in his voice, even if it was just a little bit of zombie, like if he mentioned brains on the phone when I called then I knew I'd just completely lose it. But I mustered the courage to visit him one night after I had been out drinking with Nicole. I remembered driving to the hospital, getting out of my car, and walking through the parking lot to the front of the building. I remembered looking up at the windows, all of those rooms lined up in rows. And I remembered the faces, all of those zombie faces coming to their windows one by one and staring down at me, their flesh dangling and falling from wasted bones.

But zombies don't have feelings, right? So why were these zombies so sad?

I remembered running away.

Now the sounds through the wall from next door were becoming particularly vicious, almost like someone was being eaten, but enjoying it. I took another hit. "Leave me alone," I said. I concentrated on making Jimmy disappear. Maybe someone would fly through the wall to save me. Or maybe zombies would break down the door and he would run away and I would say, "Fuck it," and just hand over all of my brains and be done with it.

"What was that?" he said.

"The buzzer." I stood and stumbled over some dirty clothes and finally made my way to the door. "Hello?" I said, pressing the button. "Hello?"

A few seconds later Nicole was inside. "I had to see for myself," she said.

Jimmy had gotten dressed quickly. He looked cute, all disheveled and stoned, wearing my T-shirt by mistake. Or maybe on purpose, as collateral.

"Wow," said Nicole over the noise from next door. The noise was like a zombie audio book playing while a zombie movie was on the television and zombies were bursting through the windows to eat our brains. Everything all at once. "It's even more terrible in person." She cringed as she noticed the scrapes on my face. "And you look like shit."

"Hi, Nicole," said Jimmy.

Nicole shuffled over to the wall. "They must know that everyone can hear. It's like performance art or something. Maybe they get off on it." She banged on the wall but nothing changed. There was a drawn-out wail from next door as I looked around for my pants.

Jimmy regarded the wall dubiously. "Have you seen these people before?" he asked me. "The ones who live next door? You must have. Like in the hallway?"

I pulled on gray sweatpants and a white tank top. "I used to see people go in," I said, thinking about it. "But it was always different people."

"Do they ever come back out?"

Someone was thrown against the wall next door and Nicole screamed and jumped back, falling on top of Jimmy. They both started laughing hysterically. The noise from next door persisted as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

"It's like they're under siege," said Nicole, recovering. She was having the time of her life. Nicole was the kind of girl who wanted to be a part of what was going on but she wasn't interested in making things happen on her own. She was like one of those storm chasers, you know, who was probably really boring when there wasn't a storm around. The zombie apocalypse suited her. "We should take a look," she said.

"No," I said desperately.

Nicole stood up and walked closer and closer to me until her face was inches from mine. I became very nervous. "You're stoned," she said. She laughed but she looked sad.

"The zombies made me," I said.

Jimmy offered her the pipe. "Want some?"

"We're going out there," said Nicole.

"Where?" I asked, but I knew where.

"You can almost tune it out," said Jimmy. "You can almost get used to it."

I had not gotten used to it. The noise had started all at once and subsided only temporarily, as if to tease me. This was before the zombies had snuck into the city over the George Washington Bridge, or maybe through the Lincoln Tunnel, but even with the problematic timeline I was convinced that the events might be somehow related. Zombies were everywhere and zombies were loud, and zombies also craved attention. I began to hear the noise at the office, in line at the supermarket, at the gym. Sometimes it was the only thing I could hear. Someone would be saying, "Sir? Sir?" And I would just be like, "Huh? What? Speak up."

"You seem weird lately," Nicole said one night at happy hour. She was

having trouble with a new client and a girlfriend had just dumped her, but she usually just quietly drowned her sorrows with merlot while listening to me talk about the most absurd of my co-workers.

"I can't concentrate with all of this racket," I said. I drank and drank. I had been editing a special zombie issue of *Cracked Out Cultural Studies*, the magazine I had worked for since college, and I was beginning to suspect that plans were in the works for an invasion. But I didn't know what to do about it. "This is madness. What did you say?"

"Is something going on?" she continued. "Boy trouble? Look, I told you to stop fucking those creepy guys you meet at bars. It's like fucking the same person over and over again but never getting to know them any better."

Nicole had really liked Jimmy. But they had inadvertently become a *team*, like overnight, and when I had a fight with one of the two of them, it had always felt like the other one was there, too, standing against me, and I was all alone on the other side. She almost killed me when I stopped returning Jimmy's calls. She literally picked up her knife at the restaurant and started waving it around in the air, like she was already preparing to start fighting zombies. "What the fuck," she had said. "Seriously."

I didn't tell her that Jimmy had gotten sick, didn't tell her that I was scared to go and see him. She would have said that this was because hospitals reminded me of my father and that I had to face my demons and stop being a pussy about things. So I just sat there at the restaurant with her and tried to eat my salad, even though I couldn't taste it at all. I picked up the lettuce leaves and dipped them in ketchup. I doused them with pepper. Nothing seemed to help.

THE ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE SUITED HER

I suddenly remembered, standing there in my apartment during the zombie apocalypse with Nicole and Jimmy, how much Jimmy liked strawberry Pop-Tarts. He used to eat them in bed next to me while he read things like *Middlemarch* and Proust and we smoked pot and everything was better than it had been before. He would always say, "There should be a word for this," and then he would kiss me. We never said *love* but we felt it. I had met him at a bookstore and I remember thinking that this was a good place to meet someone good. I remember thinking that above all things Jimmy was *good*.

And this had seemed worth running from, I guess. I ran from Jimmy until I started running from zombies, and by then I was running from everything.

But now all three of us were crawling out of my living room window and then we were on the fire escape. Nicole inched forward and Jimmy followed. I held onto a belt loop on his jeans, terrified. We were six floors up. This was not okay. If we fell, we would either die immediately or we would be eaten by zombies. But there was the city down there and it didn't look so bad, really, not from way up here. It looked like somewhere I had never been before but also somewhere that I'd like to visit someday. But the zombies looked hungry. I didn't know what to do. I tried to say, "I was raped last night," but I knew it would come out as a joke.

Jimmy asked, "What do you think we're going to see in there?"

"Ummm," said Nicole.

"Patrick Swayze," Jimmy said with a shudder.

"They probably block the window or something," I said hopefully, looking back toward my apartment. "There are probably curtains. We should just go back inside and watch a movie. But are there any movies anymore that aren't zombie movies? Oh no," I added, mostly to myself, as I remembered that the TV was broken. I felt helpless and out of options.

"Do they make any other sounds?" Nicole asked me, trying to gather clues. "Have you ever heard them just, you know, talking? Do they watch football on Sundays?"

I didn't say anything, but I had my suspicions. This wasn't just a noise. Everywhere I looked, there it was. Everywhere I looked: zombies. But there was Nicole up in front of me, her hands on the railing but really she could have been flying. And there was Jimmy, my fingers in his belt loops and then around his waist. We were telling the world that it was now or never. It was still dark but there would be light eventually. And maybe if I could see the problem, I'd be able to figure out how to solve it.

"Oh my God," said Nicole, looking through the next door window. "Oh my God."

I couldn't tell what the big deal was because I suddenly couldn't hear the noise anymore and I had thought that it was gone. And I didn't know what I was going to do if something else was gone. But then Jimmy turned to me and grabbed my hand. "Are you ready?" he asked.

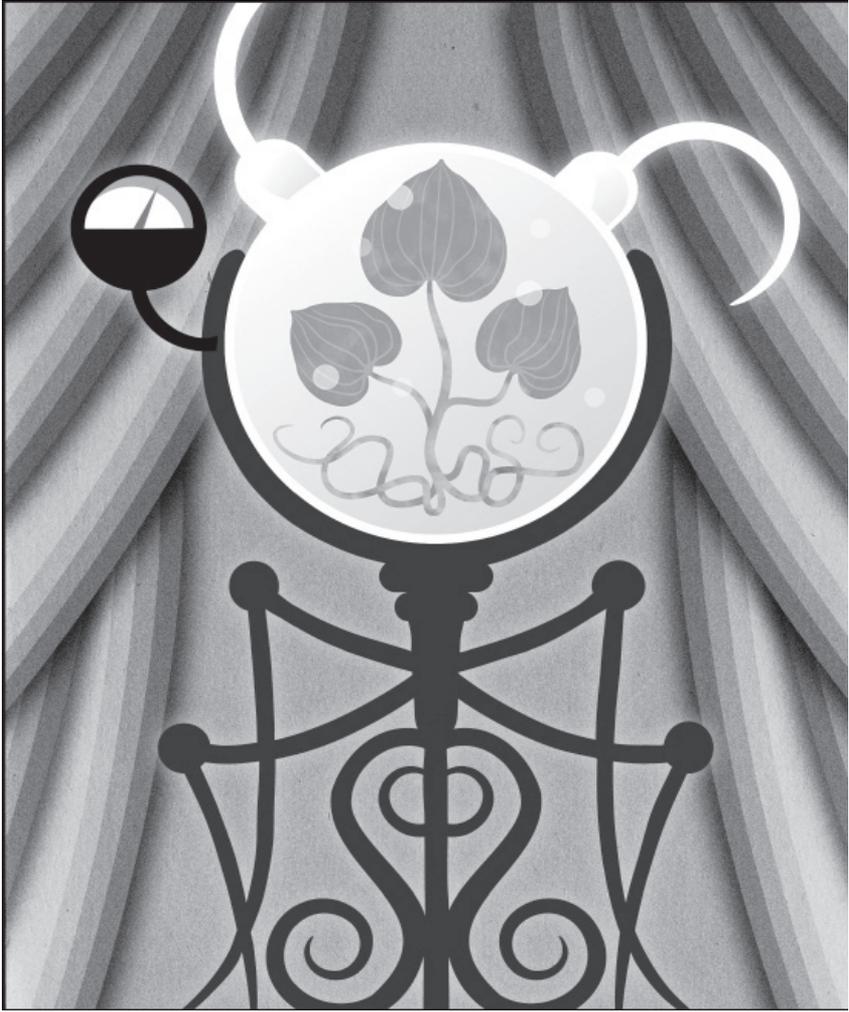
I wasn't sure, but there we were anyway, peering inside. At first all I could see was me reflected back at myself. I looked at my face for a while. Then I screamed as if something was violently ripping its way out of my body and I punched the glass as hard as I could, making as much noise as possible, and when it broke but didn't immediately shatter, I punched it again and again, my blood mixing with the pieces as they fell. And then I saw that there were two zombies inside the apartment, lying under a blanket

on the couch and looking toward the window in a sort of perplexed way, like maybe they had been expecting a pizza delivery but were confused because I was coming inside from the wrong direction.

At least I think they were zombies. They broke apart like zombies, and even with Nicole and Jimmy screaming for me to stop, I ripped them into pieces that would never be able to find each other again. I wanted them to feel permanently broken, torn apart. I wanted everyone to feel that way so that maybe then I wouldn't be the only one.

And then it was just me standing there: shaking, crying, but whole. Not a zombie at all.

Actually, that's a lie, too. 🖤



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A History of Worms

Amelia Shackelford

to the sound of Her Friends the Wolves by Coil...

DELIA WAS CHASING butterflies across the ambergris beach. As she ran, her feet sunk in, stuck, gummed and released invisible clouds of sweet scent. The butterflies flapped drunkenly overhead and down toward the surf. Delia followed the one with the red wings as it tumbled back and forth just in front of her until she was up to her ankles in the sudsy tide.



In the cellar, Maxwell hunched over his workbench. His left hand curled itself around the bottle of vinegar wine next to him as his right adjusted the focus on his ancient microscope. Under the lens, a dragon curled and slithered back and forth in its pool of water. Brilliant red and glowing from the backlight, it looked enormous, but when he took his eye away from the scope, Maxwell lost it entirely. Scraping his stool back across the gray stone floor, he wondered if the worm would grow any larger, and how much.

Sitting up to stretch his forever-bent back, Maxwell listened to the ocean that licked up to the beach, but not up to the hill he'd built his house into.

In the dunes between the hills and the beach, a troupe of small men and giants were setting stakes and stretching tarpaulins. A day ago they'd come on a boat with the tide, slogged up past the ambergris and the butterflies, and started to work. In another day, the carnival would be lit and open for business. A few days after that, a ship with eggshell sails would blow into port, and the carnies would disappear again.

From Delia's place in the surf, watching her feet disappear as the ocean washed the sand up over her toes, the carnies' hammers sounded like jangling bells. She watched the red butterfly flip and turn over the waves and wondered how long it would stay out before it grew too tired and had to come back in to land.

"They're going to inter my mother's ashes on this beach next week."

Another girl's voice floated over the bell-hammers, and Delia turned away from the butterfly ocean to see the bookseller's daughter, Irene, with her ginger hair blowing in her face. Irene had lost her mother and her left index finger on the same day two years ago. Now Irene wore a funny harness that held on a new pewter finger with stiff joints she had to oil twice a day, three times if she went to the beach. Irene smoked Newport's that she bribed a sailor to bring her by the case.

Delia turned back to the ocean, but the butterfly was gone. She hoped it had found a whale to rest on, and that the whale would not dive back under the waves too fast for the butterfly to catch flight again. "The carnival opens tomorrow. Are you going?"

Irene didn't answer but took a slow drag on her cigarette, then flicked it away and turned inland. "There's lunch at the store if you want some," she said over her shoulder.

From the widow's walk he'd built onto the roof of his hill house, Maxwell watched the carnival's progress through rusted binoculars. The big top's red and dirty-white striped skin was pulled over its skeleton poles. The Ferris wheel unfolded itself slowly, and the carnies hanging from its joints seemed to be futilely trying to hold it down. The wheel rose, though, slowly shaking its hangers-on and sending them away to pull on tent flaps and hoist carousel horses.

Bored with the slow progress of entertainment, Maxwell swept his binocular gaze down to the beach, to the figure off to his left running away from the ocean toward the dunes. His daughter, with her black hair falling into her large, green eyes and her torn blue trousers rolled up to her calves, was always running from one thing and after another. He lowered the binoculars and looked at his wrist watch: still broken.

"Storm's comin' in, boys! Raise yer backs!" Feet quickened. Backs bent and straightened. The wind picked up and licked at the tarps and tents, but the ropes held fast. The Ferris wheel groaned but did not move, and the crew boys tied their last knots, steadied their last loads, and ran for cover. And then the rain came.

As the first drops hit the top of his balding scalp, Maxwell put his binoculars down and turned to descend back into the house. The thunder was soft and distant still, but the lightning out over the gray waves promised a spectacle just a few moments away. Maxwell turned from the ocean and his running daughter and descended back into the house.

The storm caught Delia at the outskirts of town, and she ran faster. When she reached the bookseller's, her hair was plastered to her head like a small black cap, but her father's old dress shirt, with the ink stains at the cuffs, was only slightly streaked. Irene brought her a towel, and there was coffee on the stove.

"My father's taking lunch upstairs today. He doesn't feel well." In the kitchen at the back of the house, Irene poured coffee into two brown porcelain cups set on either side of the rough wood table her father had never gotten around to sanding smooth. She did the trick where she stirred the steaming coffee with her pewter finger. Delia crossed her legs under her in the large, straight-backed chair and watched. She took secret pleasure in the trick and stared unblinking, every time, at her friend's nonchalance, but she never said a word about it. Like butterflies in the surf and mothers in thunderstorms, everyday magic tricks had a way of disappearing, especially if you talked too much.

Then, sipping at her coffee, Delia watched as Irene set her left hand flat on the table and began absently to oil the hinges of her magic finger. Delia's mind wandered away from her, and before she knew that she was speaking out loud, she asked, "Do you think my mother ran away with the carnival?" As soon as she spoke, her cheeks felt hot, and she stared hard down into the dark brown liquid in her mug.

Without looking up, Irene put the oilcan down and took a cigarette from the pack in her shirt pocket. "No," she said, lighting up, "Not with the carnival."

In his study, Maxwell pulled his chair to the window and selected a book from the pile on his desk to peruse for the afternoon. The book was a history of worms, and it turned his thoughts to the dragon in the cellar. Perhaps if the storm blew through, and the dragon grew just a bit, he could sell it for a profit to the carnies by the ocean.

The rain and wind battered the house for the rest of the afternoon, and Maxwell fell asleep to the rhythm of creaking wood and rolling thunder.

In the morning, the sun rose over a calm ocean. Fronds littered the beach and lay plastered over the carnival's tents and wagons. A few shingles had worked loose off Maxwell's roof and scattered down into the dunes, and a few more grains of sand had blown into town.

Luis Escamilla shoved the door of his wagon open, placed his fedora on his head, and stumped down to see where things stood. Despite its efforts,

the storm hadn't put much of a dent in progress, and the razorbacks wouldn't have to do much make-up this morning.

Delia opened her eyes and stretched. The cot in the back of the bookseller's was familiar and warm, but it was time she headed up the hill home.

When she got there, she called out, "Papa? Papa, are you home?" It was a ritual more than a question, as her father had only left the house once in the two years since her mother ran off. He would be in the cellar with his vinegar wine and his microscope and his monsters, or he would be on the widow's walk watching the ships pass the island up for better ports and inlets. She walked into the kitchen and put water on the stove to boil, then drifted back into the front room and stretched out on the fainting couch by the window. She watched the ocean, all still and pretending nothing had happened the night before. Then her eyes drooped, and she let the light from the window and the shadows of passing clouds play on her senses.

"**Someone** ta see ya, Boss," the hunchbacked man-woman slurred out of the stubbled side of its face.

Luis Escamilla pulled himself out of the trade he'd been reading. Taking a pen out of his left pocket, he slashed a hasty circle around the conjoined twin acrobats and looked up at the thin man with the wisping red hair and the bundle clutched to his chest. "Yes, sir! What can I do for you this fine day?"

"Well, sir, Mr. Escamilla? I think I have something here, might be of interest..."

Delia opened her eyes from a floating dream and sat up abruptly. The kettle was whistling, and a constant gray sheet was falling over the dunes and the ocean. She sat up slowly and padded into the kitchen to take the kettle off the stove. Her hair was in her eyes, so she brushed it aside and walked upstairs.

In her bedroom, with a pair of pinking shears in her hand, Delia turned her back to the wardrobe mirror. Looking down at the thick, blue carpet, she held a handful of hair away from her head and began snipping and sawing at it with the scissors. As the sliced strands fell on her shoulders and floor, she closed her eyes, smiled, and took another handful.

When she was done, she turned around to look at the cropping and the large eyes staring back at her. She ran her hands over the uneven crows' feathers and smiled at herself.

Irene woke up to a gray sky and gravel stinging her shoulder blades and elbows. Something warm and viscous trickled down from her brow and pooled in her right eye.

At suppertime, when Delia should have heard her father's footsteps coming up the creaky, wooden stairs from the cellar, the house was silent. She had been sitting in the kitchen, forgetting to mind a pot of spaghetti, when she came to realize the time. "Papa?" She stood up slowly and let herself drift out into the parlor, listening. Wary, she walked deliberately into the hallway. She put her ear to the cellar door and heard nothing. Then, her heart beating too fast, she walked up the back staircase. Her father was not reading by the window in his study, and he was not shaving in the bathroom or taking a nap in his bedroom.

Finally, taking a deep breath, Delia walked down the long hallway to the back of the house. The ladder stood in its place against the wall, and the hatch to the widow's walk was closed.

**HER EYES DROOPED, AND SHE LET THE LIGHT
FROM THE WINDOW AND THE SHADOWS OF
PASSING CLOUDS PLAY ON HER SENSES**

Maxwell placed the sack on the table gingerly. Then, slowly and with great care, he unwrapped the tiny jar that held his dragon. It wasn't visible yet, but it had certainly grown significantly since the day before. "Do you happen to have a microscope in your establishment, sir?"

Delia ran out of the house, but stopped at the rusted iron fence. She squinted down the hill. Down that way she could run straight ahead into the carnival and the ambergris beach. Her father used to take her to the shore every day to find shells and new species to sort and name. She thought hard about her father and started for the beach, but then she thought better of it and — veering off to the left — ran for town.

"**What** happened?" Delia stood with her toes turned in next to the spare mattress at the bookseller's. Irene sat up on the bed with a bandage over one eye and a pack of ice on her forehead.

"Do you remember two summers ago, when the Christian wrestlers

came to the island, and nobody knew what happened to your mother?" Irene lit a cigarette and leaned against the wall. Her unfocused stare moved from her feet to the opposite wall and out the window.

Delia crossed her arms over her chest and looked down. "I remember your mama got hit by lightning that day..."

"And my finger got cut off..."

"Did you have a seizure?" An hour ago, running down the dust road from her house, Delia had found Irene on her back in front of the apothecary. "You looked dead, like your ma..." She stopped, but Irene's expression stayed fixed.

"The masks they wore came from Mexico... An old holy man makes them and paints them and gives them to the wrestling company to spread the good word."

"I gotta go find my papa..." Delia took a step back. "I'll check on you later," she said quickly and ran out of the room.

"**Are** you trying to make a fool of me, Mr. Maxwell?" The carnival manager bent over the microscope someone had found in a storage wagon. Dust crept up around its edges, but cowered away from the marks of a hasty rag.

"No, sir, no... I... It's there, I assure you..." But when Maxwell bent to the lens, the red worm that had grown to three times its size in a day was nowhere.

"Alright, my good man, I see you're disappointed, and I believe you. Have two tickets to peruse the ten-in-one, free of charge!" Escamilla pushed the tickets into astonished Maxwell's right palm. "Take your jar and your shy dragon home. Perhaps next year he'll want a visit, eh?"

The naturalist stared at the crumpled stubs in his sweating palm.

The next evening Luis Escamilla stood outside the ten-in-one, looking for his new friend, the naturalist. He saw a girl who might have been the red-haired man's daughter. She was tall and thin with a bandage over one eye. Luis stepped forward and began to call out, but the girl was not with the naturalist. She was holding hands with — and being dragged along by — a younger girl with a scruff of short black hair on the top of her head.

Escamilla followed the girls at a discreet distance, watching them peer into the vats and jars with their cloudy fluids and their queer inner green and blue lights. The girls stopped briefly at the jarred specimens but lingered far longer at the hunchbacked half-man and spoke politely and for quite a while with the dog-faced boy.

When they had passed on to the fat lady and the human skeleton in their

mock kitchen making love to one another with their eyes across the table, the manager approached Fidel the dog boy. "Beautiful girls... What did they ask you?"

"If I'd ever been here before."

"And?"

"A couple years back. With a wrestling act. Religious theme. You know the one."

Luis nodded, staring after the shorter girl pulling the taller girl along out the tent flaps into the night. He did not see the awkward man with the thinning red hair and two crumpled tickets in his fist looming behind him.

"**Does** it make you feel better?" Over the sound of the midnight ocean and the smell of acrid ambergris, Irene's voice washed over Delia's back. Sitting in the sticky sand-grit, she watched the phosphor waves roll over themselves and pulled her knees up to her chest.

"What?" Delia looked up at her friend.

"Does it feel better? Knowing?" Irene crouched down next to Delia and cupped her hands against the wind to light a cigarette. She took a drag, then handed it to Delia. "It doesn't, does it?"

Delia wiped her eyes and took the cigarette between her thumb and index finger. She took a deep pull, coughed briefly and exhaled.

The red-haired man stood over the body of Luis Escamilla. The naturalist stared unbelieving at the corpse, and the corpse stared back at the naturalist — equally unbelieving. Neither man could hear a sound, and then the half-woman screamed, and the carnival descended on Maxwell.

In the morning, the tents had been skinned and their bones bundled and packed away. No one saw the carnies tear down the Ferris wheel or the carousel. No one saw them board a ship with eggshell sails, but in the morning they'd left nothing but their tracks out to the bay.

A week later snow fell on a procession all dressed up in moth-eaten mourning clothes. The bookseller led a line of black umbrellas down the beach dotted with blood-spatter colored butterflies.

The two girls hung back, away from the procession, on a crumbling stone wall between the beach and the dunes. With hidden eyes under wide-brimmed black hats, they shared a cigarette and watched the line move down the beach.

"At least you still have your papa." Delia pulled her father's old dinner

jacket close around her.

“He’s leaving tonight.” Irene’s voice was steady. She’d finished crying a year ago. “He packed a bag this morning, and I saw the ticket on his desk.”

“Your papa’s running away?” Delia tried to look at her friend from under her hat, but she couldn’t see anything.

Irene shrugged her shoulders. “Your mama already did.”

“With Christ-witnessing wrestlers,” Delia started to smile.

“And your father’s dead?”

Delia’s smile disappeared, and she took the cigarette Irene offered her, “For killing that carnival man.”

“And my mother’s scattered across the beach.”

“And the butterflies are all dead now.” Delia exhaled a stream of smoke and handed the cigarette back to her friend.

“Except maybe that one you chased into the surf.”

“Yeah, except maybe that one.” Delia squinted out across the gray ocean and remembered tiny red wings and a disappearing mother. ❧

One October Night in Baltimore

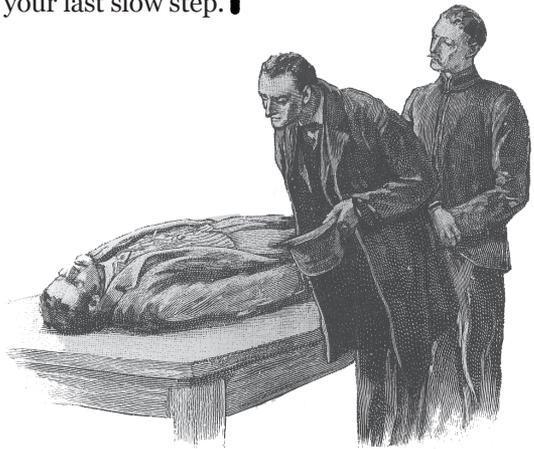
Jaqueline West

to the sound of The Fabulous Destiny of Charlotte Mittnacht by DeVotchKa...

IN WHAT SMOOTH structure would you have put this:
the crypt of rhythm, hymn-lined halls of rhyme,
or to the music of your own slowing pulse,
that lopsided waltz lifting you from street to street,
your shoes barely touching the cobblestones.

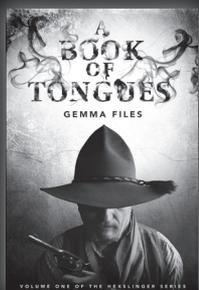
In what cool tomb or forgotten palace
did you finally lie down: on the bier of a spattered curb,
within the golden halo of a gas lamp, not so late
in the year that snow would reach you, only the featherings
of frost — the world slowly turning under its wool cloak,
setting loose its beauties, letting them fall.

And all your ghosts, the fevered and the cold,
watched, speechless, as you settled in your above-ground
catacomb. If only Annabelle had reached out with a hot cup of tea;
if that black bird had croaked anything but “nevermore” —
but instead, their silk hands threaded your breath down the neck
of another bottle, taking the ticking of a weak heart
for your metronome, guide of your last slow step. 🕒



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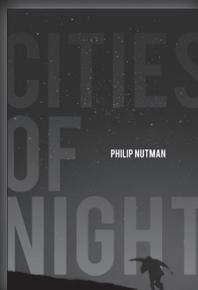
GEMMA FILES

**A BOOK OF
TONGUES**



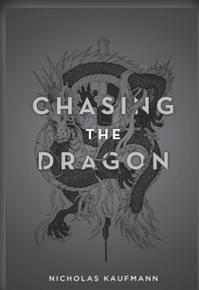
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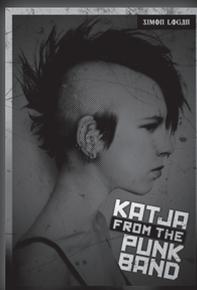
PHILIP NUTMAN

CITIES OF NIGHT



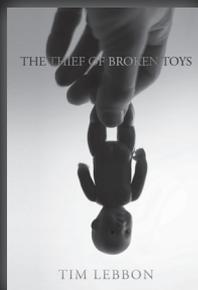
NICHOLAS KAUFMANN

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Thinking Woman's Crop of Fools

Tom Crosshill

to the sound of Elektrichka by Kino...

I COME HOME to my family of fools as Queen of the Universe, unaware of the future careening toward me with screech of tires and groan of metal.

I struggle for sanity, but my brain is drunk on conjunction. In the empty coffee cups and discarded needles on the stairs, I glimpse marvelous vector spaces. The stench of sweat, beer and cat urine that wafts from the Niexsens' forms an olfactory tensor



connection, dense with possibilities. I pause at the top of our landing to look across Johannesburg, a panoply of lights blurred in the pounding rain; the splash of each raindrop on my skin screeches the geodesic, the geodesic, sharp and deadly.

Mustn't give in! I shake myself and fumble with the keys. Insertion. Rotation. The door swings open. I enter the dimness of home.

My family, they're waiting for me. No, of course, they're not waiting. To wait is beyond them. As I turn on the light, Awande shambles in from the bathroom. Vacant eyes. Drool at the corner of her mouth. She steps past me, sits down on our faded couch next to Vukhani.

Vukhani, my husband, doesn't even stare. His eyes are half-closed. His eyelids flutter now and then. Our other children, Lisa, Thulani, sit on his left, slack-jawed.

Within me, something painful stirs to life. Though the lines of Lisa's cheek sing to me of parallel transport — oh, it connects, it connects, like a rainbow! — the beauty's not enough for me anymore. Ruthlessly, I peel myself away from the symphony of stars. Painfully, I separate myself from the arpeggio of reason.

I walk over to our router where it sits on its pedestal in the corner like some ancestral idol. I jack in and give my family their minds back.

The world slows. Its colors wash out into gray. I sink to my knees. Tears

flow down my cheeks — tears of relief, yes, but also of sadness. The beauty's lost. I'm Queen no longer.

“Mommy!”

“Mom!”

“Nomsa, my love.”

My family wakes from their stupor. Slowly, they wake me from mine.

I JACK IN AND GIVE MY FAMILY THEIR MINDS BACK

Later, much later, when the kids have done their schoolwork, dinner has been cooked, and dishes have been cleared, and bedtime stories told, I lie in the dark with my back to Vukhani's chest. He nuzzles my ear.

“A good day,” he says to me. “Five hundred rand.”

“They put me in Dr. Zala's group today,” I say. “Her rates are generous.”

But her work...it leaves me changed. Some nights, after long sessions at her planetarium, I dream I'm a black hole, devouring my family and Johannesburg and the world. Some nights I dream I'm a supernova, bright, furious, burning all. Whatever the dream, I'm always alone in the end.

“We're lucky Dr. Zala likes you,” says Vukhani.

“Uh-hmm.” A heaviness has grown in me, for days now, for weeks. “I think Awande wants to go to college. She won't admit it — she's a good girl — but I can tell.”

“I think you're right,” he says.

“We'll lose C5 if she goes.”

A silence. Sometimes he's a coward, Vukhani.

Anger builds in me, and I turn in his arms to face him. “The University won't hire me with only four conjuncts. Plenty of others with more brainpower than that.”

“Yes,” he says, looking at me with those big dark eyes of his. Steady, unblinking. Almost as if he's still under.

“I want her to go,” I say. “Somebody in the family ought to.”

He turns away, rolls onto his back. I fight an urge to grab his arms as they slide off me. I wait instead, trusting him.

“We'll sign up with the Factory,” he says at last. “It can't be that bad. One week off every month. If we alternate, that's three weeks in, five out for each of us. And the kids will be free.”

“No,” I say.

I've been to the Factory. Seen its massive hangar, with the cots, row upon row of cots, stretching into the distance, where the dim light fades into darkness. The drones who sleep there for weeks and months on end, dreaming others' dreams, solving others' problems, never glimpsing the outside world.

I've seen those who return. Their trembling limbs, their pasty skin. The way they speak, vowel tripping over vowel as it leaves the mouth. The miracle of massive conjunction, creativity engine of the twenty-first century.

"We'll wait until spring," I say. "We've got time yet."

Except.

Except.

Except...

A month later, I stand on the corner of Republic and Hans Strijdom, burnt rubber in my nostrils, and watch them take Vukhani away in an ambulance. It's a stupid accident, senseless — he didn't look when crossing the street. His heart stopped. The electroshock they applied fried his conjunctive implants, beyond repair, beyond replacement.

I allow myself one week to cry. One week with my children, unconjoined. One week to deny what I must do.

Early the following Monday, I stand at the Factory door. The sign says, 'Johannesburg Serial Conjunction Station No. 3' but a factory is what it is — no windows, gray brick walls a city block long, one side fenced off and dense with transformer boxes and thick cables.

I close my eyes for a moment. The roar of the city — a nameless roar that could be any city's, anywhere, but which in its slow, heavy thrum cries Johannesburg, Johannesburg — fills me with a nostalgia, almost as if I never expect to hear it again. When I do, will I still know it for what it is?

For a moment, relief washes over me — I have an excuse. I should turn around, leave, go home. But home, my family awaits. What will I say to them?

If I go home witless, they'll keep me. They'll teach me. Vukhani, Thulani, Awande, Lisa.

I knock. An attendant all in white comes out and takes my name. Checks her list. Asks me to enter and sits me down behind a desk, gray and sterile.

"Occupation?"

"Conjoiner."

"IQ?"

"130."

"Education?"

"Some school."

“Good. Very good.” Question, answer. Question, answer. She scribbles away at her notes until she’s satisfied. It doesn’t take long. “Come with me,” she says and takes me through a door.

The hangar opens up before me. Vast, uncompromising. The sound of ten thousand chests rising and falling with breath. The sharp smell of antiseptics. I shiver as I walk by the supine bodies all around me, but not because I’m cold.

This is all we are now. Africa, brain trust of the world. Thinking so others don’t have to. Some stories never change.

I lie down on my assigned cot and jack into the router, and prime myself to go under. To ride the geodesic again. I’m afraid, but I have courage. When I wake, my family will be waiting. Me no Queen. Them no fools. ¶

Indian Delight

Alexandra Seidel

to the sound of Hanayagi by Ensemble Nipponia...

A BREATH OF jasmine hints
that the air is temple-born
a pearl in jungles so green
that you might drown in leaves
deep roots and tigers
know the earth
and butterflies that catch
the honey light of the sun
clothe the skies
saffron dyed my fingertips
and cinnamon my hair
this jasmine
temple-spoken accent of a scent
made my dress
and kissed color to my forehead
and my cheeks
it was mangoes that fed my lips
and topaz that dried my eyes
hot spices wove my gilded tongue
that knows the song of ancient stone
and long lost tombs
and princes
and princesses
that love in colors deeper and brighter
than pale pages could tell
the wet earth smells of rain
in a place where past and present meet
close your eyes
and follow the smell of
age-old jasmine that is wiser
than the stones that built the temple 🏯



I listened, I listened, how many times I listened, until
the words flowed through me like honey.

And I wondered, what made you think I'd never be
afraid? I'm not afraid for myself anymore. After what
I've been through, what could possibly frighten me?

No, I'm scared for everyone, Jeff. They make all sorts
of promises and vows which they never keep.

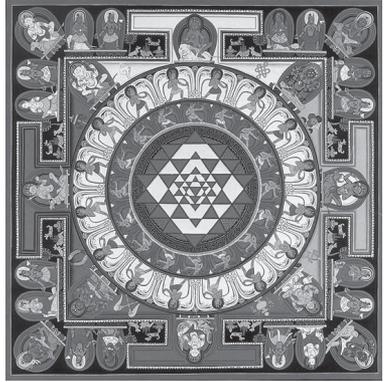
All of you break your vows. All of you forget. Again
and again and again and again...

The Unbeing of Once-Leela

Swapna Kishore

to the sound of Bridge of Sighs by Shakti with John McLaughlin...

IN PERSISTENCE-SPACE, once-Leela cannot see anything. Or feel, or taste, or smell. But she is still Leela Manchanda who worked at Naveen Traders, Bangalore, and who looked after her mother. Her memories still exist — all, except for haziness about her transition. Sharp in her mind (or whatever she still has — she cannot see herself) are beeps of modem connects, and endless ramblings of cricket commentary. Sharp are the cold and metal smells of her glass and steel office cube, and the chill air she exhaled as she walked out of her office that last time, and then, as she entered home, the smell of Mother, sour, stale, and full of reproof. From some things there is no escape.



The onces are communicating again, using a mechanism they don't understand. Once-Leela aligns to them to escape memories of before.

“—a census.” That is once-Sarah.

To once-Leela, once-Sarah's vibration has a depth that connotes a stolid masculinity. Surely Sarah had been a tall buxom woman with manly biceps, had an evangelistic zeal about Christianity, and an incongruously delicate cross dangling from her neck. Leela, nominally a Hindu, is secular (if not downright atheist) and is surprised at how Sarah's name generates such a strong stereotype.

“Census?” says once-Leela. “Why?”

“We should know how many of us are here,” once-Sarah says. “How else will we fulfill God's purpose of saving us?”

“We can make our own gods and own purpose,” says once-Maya, a nervous trill to her vibration. Must be typical New-Age, with rounded specs and an anorexic frame, her nervousness causing a tremor of fingers as they brush back limp hair.

Once-Leela wonders suddenly what stereotype the others tag to her

vibration. No one stays abstract too long.

"I assume we are worth saving," booms the ever-energetic once-Milind, probably handsome, determined, like Shah Rukh Khan in *Chak De India*. "I'm game for a census."

"Census of what?" once-Leela asks. "We don't even know what we are or how we came here. We could be a mutant species, all mind or soul or bare consciousness. Or excised brains squatting in formaldehyde vats, thanks to a scientist." That's from *M.A.D.* comics: a bespectacled man in a flapping white coat.

"The point is, what next?" says once-Milind. "And why?"

"Does it matter?" Once-Leela can't stop the sarcastic edge in her 'voice' even though other onces will pick up the nuance.

Once-Milind persists. "If we are a new species, we must ensure we — you know — propagate."

"Maybe we are immortal," says once-Leela, annoyed. "But most likely we are dead."

"Or virtual constructs in a program, or brain dumps of people who are still living," says someone once-Leela does not recognize.

This space could be seething with gazillions of onces, all eavesdropping and grinning at our stupidity, thinks once-Leela. She will shut up; why make a fool of herself when she can remain unnoticed?

"Let's start the census," says once-Sarah. "Let's begin by listing ourselves and our families."

Families. Mother. Dead and gone, lucky her.

"**Looking** after a demented person is difficult," the super-specialist told Leela when he diagnosed Mother. Leela gaped at the doctor, hurt at the insulting word, but his matter-of-fact tone and direct gaze made her register that he was using 'demented' as a medical term, technical and exact. Thus began her unlearning and learning.

Mother had Alzheimer's. Her brain abounded with dead and dying neurons full of tangled tau (It took Leela a while to realize this was *tau*, a protein, not the metaphysical Tao). Beta-amyloid plaque crowded spaces between Mother's brain cells (or so the doctors expected to find in an autopsy). That meant messed up and absent memories, inability to think, learn, or do 'activities of daily living.' That meant difficulty.

Difficult was an understatement.

"Your mother lies," declared the latest home-help, twenty-first — or was it twenty-second? — a few months before Mother choked to death. "How can she remember her childhood and then claim I didn't give her breakfast?"

"She has dementia," Leela tried explaining.

"I've looked after old ladies." The home-help strapped tight her bag and slung it over her shoulder. "I know meanness when I see it."

"Dementia is different from normal aging," Leela explained yet again. "It is..." But even as she talked, she recognized the futility. Trained nurses were unavailable and unwilling to work as home help; others saw dementia as a rapid version of aging, and considered Mother stubborn and inconsiderate.

Mother, on her part, was suspicious to the extent of paranoia.

"Why should I believe you?" she asked Leela only too often, her face wrinkled with mistrust. "Who are you?"

"I'm your daughter." Leela fought a familiar twinge of helplessness in her chest. She knew the theory, she had read innumerable books and created login IDs in too many online support groups, she could chant the jargon like an alphabet game: A is for antecedent, B is for Behavior, C is for Consequence, right up to V is for validation. Pity for her, the sequence ended with 'Z is for a Zero life.'

Mother, demented.

"Use counselors," suggested online support groups (she had no time for the present-in-flesh variety).

So she tried.

"Never ask why," a dementia care counselor advised Leela. "Ask any other question. Ask when, what, how, who, where. Never why. It will drain you."

"No?" But Leela asked herself 'why' when she cleaned Mother or mashed food for her; she asked it when Mother tore off her diaper at night; she asked it when she saw a face vacant of a person behind the eyes. She asked it of herself when she surrendered her own career, one missed meeting, one slipped deadline at a time, till it stretched too thin to sustain itself. She asked it of the mirror where a crone stared back at her, eyes ringed dark, shoulder bones jutting out at the throat, anxiety etched deep into her once-smiling face.

"Learn from your mother to live in the moment," the counselor droned on. "Cherish the gift of care-giving. Admire the way your mother is fresh every moment."

Crayon drawings decorated the soft-board behind the counselor. You cling to sketches your children make, Leela thought. My mother doesn't remember me. Why my mother, dammit, and why *me*? And who am I if the person I live for does not recognize me?

Once-Sarah and once-Milind are facing problems with their census.

"We suspect not everyone stands up to be counted," once-Milind explains.

Once-Leela does a nothing-body giggle. "Stand up? Like you've got eyes, and everyone here is flesh and bones."

"It was figurative," once-Milind says stiffly.

"I'm sure more people will come forward soon," once-Leela says quickly. Funny how, even in a world without form or face, free of obligation, she wants to reconcile. A pleaser.

A once vibrates its presence nearby. "Leela? Leela Manchanda from Naveen Traders? Recognize me? I'm Sujoy Bose, your boss." He sounds pompous even here.

"I don't understand why you let your mother affect your career," Sujoy told Leela when she handed in her resignation a year before Mother died. "People continue normal lives despite parents with problems."

Not from what support group members said — those living normal lives were those who had siblings to do the actual care-giving.

"A negative attitude doesn't help," Sujoy continued. "You must—"

Leela's mobile rang: home. "Excuse me," she muttered.

"You never cooked food for me," Mother's voice was shrill. "There's not even a katori of daal or one thin chapatti—"

"Everything's in casseroles on the table, Mother," Leela whispered fiercely. "Daal, vegetable, curd, roti. Hasn't Lakshmi fed you?" The maid dropped by every afternoon to warm the food and serve Mother.

"A Koli woman tried to enter the house," Mother said. "I hit her and she ran away."

Lakshmi, oh. Another worker lost. Leela looked at Sujoy. "I have to go home. Mother's totally disoriented; she could even walk out."

He shook his head. "Really, where's your creativity? Lock her in."

So that she breaks the window and calls the neighbors, claiming torture? Leela patted her resignation letter in front of Sujoy. "I don't have a choice."

She has a choice here, now, in persistence space. She ignores Sujoy.

She thinks, instead, of Mother. It is lucky Mother died before this transition, whatever it was. Even in before-world, Mother had forgotten her name. She could not communicate in any way, or learn anything new. How would she have managed here? Once-Leela imagines Mother, bewildered, a curled-up fetal ball of unbeing.

"**Once** we get a complete picture of all present, we must make an action

plan,” says once-Sarah.

Once-Leela stays in the background, refraining from comment.

“But surely we are dead...” says once-Maya.

“This is not about religion, and I’m not discussing post-death scenarios,” says once-Sarah. “I feel alive, so I act as one who lives. We think, therefore we are.”

“I think we are Atman,” says once-Maya. “Atman just exists; I’m not sure it acts.”

Rebirth. Karma. The belief that we carry on through births accumulating and working off karma like dieters work off calories, and it’s always a losing proposition — whatever you do, you pile on bad karma like adipose.

“And is this a waiting station between deaths and births?” once-Leela asks, intrigued.

If so, what will her next life be like? Images fill her: golden sands, sapphire waters, emerald palms. No, silly, that’s like a holiday brochure — in fact, it’s the Goa tourist brochure she saw on Sujoy’s table ages ago.

“Once-Sarah is right; we must act,” says once-Milind. “Remember the *Bhagawad Geeta*, when Lord Krishna exhorts Arjun on the battle-field?”

Restlessness seizes once-Leela — suddenly she wants out. Out of this limbo or heaven or hell, or a set of jars in a lab or a computer simulation. She’s damned if she’ll let herself be used for a purpose she doesn’t know.

IT’S ALWAYS A LOSING PROPOSITION—WHATEVER YOU DO, YOU PILE ON BAD KARMA LIKE ADIPOSE

“**Faith** in God,” Mother told thirteen-year-old Leela, “is a confidence in a being outside. Instead, have confidence in yourself.”

Leela had asked Mother about religion, faith, God. She was shaken up after reading *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* (hidden inside her bio workbook, because Mother hated ‘cheap’ thrillers by ‘that Chase’). Rich, spoilt Miss Blandish, brutalized by Slim Grissom, committed suicide after being rescued. “I’m a person without any background, any character or any faith,” Miss Blandish told her rescuer. “Some people could cope with this because they believe in God.”

Can religion help handling whatever this is? Stuff like faith, hope, love?

In before-world, Leela called herself Hindu because her parents did so. She watched the Ramlila drama in Parade Grounds every Dusshera and ate spicy potato chaat after the effigies were burned. She burst crackers on

Diwali, and slurped over syrupy gulab jamuns. She read *Mahabharatha* comics and acted out scenes with toy bows and arrows. She did not bother about intricate underpinnings of religion like advaitism or sankhya. Come to think of it, Leela knew Adam and Eve just as well, and mugged up Bible favorites for inter-college quizzes. Like Mathew 7/7: *Ask and ye shall receive.*

Ask whom? For what?

“**Why** me?” Mother asked Leela on her more coherent days. “What is the *reason?*”

On such days, Mother’s face registered the horror of her one-way ride into oblivion. Leela dreaded these more than times when Mother cursed, abused, or hit. Tools existed for difficult behavior — deep breathing, eye contact, validation, distraction. She could parry questions with fiblets, unrelated answers, oblique answers. Difficult patient days required creativity, fatigued Leela, and made care-giving a heavy and awesome occupation.

A mission.

But on days when Mother showed flashes of cognizance, Leela was torn by the full measure of Mother’s loss. And of her own. Death, neuron by neuron, memory by memory.

Enough, screams once-Leela to herself. Stop brooding like once-Maya. Snap out of this. You wasted enough time out in the ‘before’, after Mother’s death.

Leela had not resumed a normal life after Mother died. A care-giver without her patient, everything seemed meaningless. She had no wish to contact friends who had dismissed her as a stay-at-home bore when she was house-bound and overwhelmed with care-giving, because she could not share vacation anecdotes of China (or Greece, or New Zealand). What Leela needed instead was a brand new set of friends, but that would take energy. A job — okay, after a break — but where was the energy to relax? Three months crawled with inertia and indecision.

Enough, repeats once-Leela. When she first registered her transition to wherever she is, she assumed this was intended by an overarching God entity to be a neat way of resolving her claustrophobic past, an expansion, a way forward. Some benevolence would grasp her hand and move her on gently, effortlessly. At a minimum, it would gift her with new friends, a new community. But now she knows that the only way out of the hell inside her is the way she makes herself, because even here, where Mother is obviously not, she is trapped inside that corroding overwhelm.

So what if she does not know what persistence space is, or how she transitioned here? She has tackled that with labels: the 'once' prefix for names, the phrase 'persistence space,' and these give structure and comfort to her new reality. So what if she has no senses? She can think, and isn't that how one navigates the world? Isn't that how the world started — with a word, a thought? A primordial Aum?

Thus will she act now, through her mind.

Once-Milind was right — we must act.

“When I was a child, I was raped,” whispers once-Maya. “Fear haunted me throughout my college, my job. I hated men. Then I started meditation.”

Once-Leela absorbs this information. “Did that help?”

“Sometimes. Mostly, though, I feel a crawling on my skin when there are men around. That once-Milind, for example, is always talking about propagation—”

“We are formless here.” Surely once-Maya can see how irrelevant such fear is now? “If you *have* to remember the past, pick up something pleasant to remember — maybe from your job or a good friend or your family...”

“Guess you are right,” says once-Maya, not sounding happy at all. “But it’s not easy...”

No, it’s not.

Once-Leela herself is a cluster of personas — the affectionate daughter, the overwhelmed one, the indifferent neighbor, the efficient professional, the self-actualized woman — and she cannot determine her ‘me’ in a flavor-of-the-moment style. Her mind flits between them at random, her mood fluctuating accordingly. Luckily, something unites them into an overall sense of ‘I’ — but suppose the integrating thread breaks? When beads fall off a broken necklace, where’s the necklace?

Disintegrated like Mother? The glancing thought of Mother throws once-Leela off on a tangent. Is this persistence space merely her imagination? Is she a mind sealed from the outside, in coma, or...demented? Unwinding thought, circling...was this what Mother went through?

Forget it. Mother is her past, to be folded away.

If once-Leela really wants to understand this funny...*adventure?*... she must move beyond thinking. Not bewildered by disease, but choosing to let thoughts drift in and out, cumulus clouds obscuring a softness of being, and allowing glimpses of cloudless skies. Reaching beyond thought — not *before* thought, not *without* thought, but *beyond*.

Once-Leela releases the thought that thinking must stop, and its texture lightens and softens as it drifts away, insubstantial, inconsequential.

Hey, this is fun.

Too many of once-Leela's memories are heavy with emotional substance; she cannot ignore them. The more she pushes away a memory, the more it bulldozes its way back in a 'don't think about the pink elephant' way. She must accept and resolve these memories to be free of them.

Thrilled by the challenge, once-Leela parses her memory threads. Her innumerable sub-personalities would fascinate a shrink. Timid ones, skulking ones, angry ones, suppressed all her life, but expressed in that perpetual shoulder-ache she had in the before-world, that stubborn sinus.

Sometimes, though, she wants to give up. Like when she glimpses an evening a few months before she quit her job. The memory, twisted and tucked away, is the black of a charred paper ball.

She unfurls it reluctantly. Late evening. A business meeting ends. Her car battery is dead. A colleague from a different branch offers her a lift home. Traffic is heavy, and waiting times at red lights extended. They talk. They find common interests, hobbies. They argue politics, discuss terrorism. They chuckle over the humor of *Bheja Fry*. Finally he stops at her apartment complex. They both bend down to pick up her laptop bag.

Leela feels his hand brushing hers, smells his Old Spice. Her chest is all aflutter. She almost calls him in. Then she remembers. Mother is late enough into her dementia to be paranoid, to accuse, to blame, but early enough to sound coherent to an outsider in a limited social interaction. Coherent enough to embarrass. So she thanks her colleague and walks away, aware of his hurt — not even invited for a cup of *chai*?

She enters the apartment, busies herself immediately with chores, with Mother, stays busy till late at night when she stares at the ceiling where the fan whirrs round and round and round, creaking with every revolution. The Old Spice still tingles her nose. She will have to wait till Mother...dies. Wanting someone dead...

Once-Leela remembers the sick taste that filled Leela's mouth, though her eyes remained dry.

If tears were possible here, once-Leela would shed them. But even without tears, the memory fades off under the brightness of her attention.

Has the memory gone, or has she merely surrendered access to it? Well, she is free if the connection is severed. A tree falls in a jungle — so what?

“The census results puzzle me,” says once-Milind. “Our detailed survey is showing far fewer people.”

Once-Leela has removed the emotional footprints of most of her

memory threads; this discussion doesn't interest her. "Really?" she draws in a bored tone.

"Why don't people participate?" he says. "Look at me, I'm eighty years old, I have had three heart-attacks, and I'm still active."

Eighty? Ouch. Out goes her Shah Rukh Khan stereotype. And this chap is obsessed about 'propagation?' She thrashes around for a new face to tack him on — Morarji Desai? Sitaram Kesari? Atal Bihari Vajpayee? Oh, and who knows, once-Sarah may be slim and delicate, and Maya a muscular sort. Anyway, tacking images to onces is like clinging to thought. Pointless.

Without an image tacked to him, once-Milind is easy to ignore. She resumes her letting go. She wonders sometimes (fleetingly) why Mother had a problem. With every released stream of thought, her surroundings get buoyant.

A memory after a long time.

Leela is in class, sociology. Or psychology? A professor lectures from a diffused podium. Leela is drowsy, inattentive. But what he is saying is important now, in persistence space.

Why? What?

Once-Leela gropes for it. She wavers at its edge, flounders, despairs. Damn.

Later, once-Leela pays for the lapse.

This weakness of *wanting* a memory makes her feel horribly loaded, far more than ever. Like a life-long frutarian after eating a roasted pig.

Everyone makes mistakes, she tells herself. Cut yourself slack. Don't be hung up on the goal. You aren't on a deadline.

She resumes her disengaging, and the spurts of lightness occur more frequently now.

The onces crowd her, alarmed.

"Stop harming us," says once-Sarah.

Once-Leela is mildly puzzled. "I'm not doing anything to you."

"Sometimes I cannot remember who I am," once-Sarah says. "You have taken away my memory."

"I didn't even know you before this happened," says once-Leela.

"Oh, yes?" says once-Sarah. "Don't you remember me?"

Only as a stereotype, a muddle of people I knew, once-Leela thinks. She allows her reaction to flow out, unsaid; she is translucent, barely retaining an image or idea. She is atremble with what lies beyond, hoping, waiting, and trying not to.

“What about me,” once-Maya says. “Was I not a friend?” Something in her tone gives once-Leela pause.

She senses some memories edge slowly up, find no purchase, and surrender to nullity. A slender thought lingers. *Find the last strand, and then there will be none.*

A once ripples faintly, “If you surrender, you destroy not just yourself but—”

Projections. A stick-figure professor. *Oh!*

The onces around her are projections. Jumbles of people. And projections of projections. No wonder the numbers declined as she released memories. Stop thinking and they will disintegrate, every one of them.

So simple.

Should she? Is it nihilism? No, it is the lightness of unbeing, indescribable. Beyond pain and suffering.

Once-Leela pauses to mark the finality of what she is about to do, and then releases her last thought into the embracing vastness. She is so small, so insignificant, but then she is everywhere and everything. No one and everyone. And there is a potentiality of a beginning, and the freshness of it. ❧

How the Future Got Better

Eric Schaller

to the sound of Once in a Lifetime by The Talking Heads...

THE FOTAX PROCESS. “Your taxes fo’ nothing,” is how Uncle Walt defined it. He stole that joke from a late-night talk show. But even though he didn’t bother to read the brochure, he had caught at least one TV special and knew that *Fo* stood for *photon* and *Tax* for *tachyon*. “Now pass me another roll,” he said, “a warm one from the bottom of the bucket.”



Mom always insisted that everyone sit down as a family for dinner, but had consented to eating a half-hour earlier than usual so we could watch when FoTax went live. Five-thirty in the pee-em, would you believe it? “Might as well be eating lunch twice,” is how Uncle Walt phrased it, but he said it soft so that Mom couldn’t hear, and out of the corner of his mouth just in case she could lip read. “Hey! What about that roll? A man could die from hunger at his own table.” Little sister Susie — Suz to the family — passed him the bucket and let him dig for his own roll. He fingered every one, muttering the whole time, “Cold and hard as a goddamn rock. Probably break a tooth and wouldn’t that be just my luck. There’s a sucker born every minute and, by God, this time that sucker is me.” Took him so long to find his roll and butter it that by the time he got around to taking a bite we were already talking about ice cream.

“Hold your cotton-picking horses,” Uncle Walt said. “What’s the future got that we ain’t got now?” But he powered through his chicken, coleslaw, and dessert and long-legged it to the living room before anyone grabbed his favorite lounger.

Mom played with the settings on the new Sony receiver by the TV set, squinting at a pamphlet in her hand labeled ‘READ THIS FIRST.’ “Set it five minutes ahead,” big sister Elizabeth called from her seat on the couch between Dad and Gramps. Elizabeth insisted upon being called by all four

syllables of her given name but, to her credit, had memorized the instruction manual as soon as it was out of its plastic wrapper. Probably memorized the Spanish edition too, just in case. "Setting the time closer to now reduces the chance of gray spaces and ghosting," she said. "Don't forget to tune to channel one-hundred-and-thirty-one."

She might have said more but was interrupted by a frantic knocking at our apartment door. It was the Willard family, Pa Willard in the lead, Ma at his elbow, and all the little Willards, indistinguishable from each other with their chocolate-smears mouths and cherubic curls, peering through the bars of their parents' legs. "Can we join you?" Pa Willard asked. "Our receiver didn't arrive."

Ma Willard shot him a dirty look. "You forgot to sign up," she said. Before the argument could escalate, and the Willards were always arguing, Mom said, "Come on in. Everyone's in the living room. Suz, would you grab some more chairs for the Willards?"

Which is why, when FoTax went live, there were fourteen of us crammed together in one small room. Our TV was seven feet on the diagonal, and the Willards might have come over even if Pa Willard had remembered to order their receiver. Last anyone knew they still had their old forty-two-inch model. As you might guess with both families together, and even granting that Grammy started to nod off as soon as she settled into her chair, it was kind of noisy. But everyone went quiet and stared at the TV screen when the little green numbers on the receiver flickered to six o'clock.

But nothing happened.

Nothing changed.

All you could see was the blue of an empty channel.

"What a gyp," said Uncle Walt. "You made me rush dessert for this?"

"Maybe it's not set to the right channel," said Elizabeth. "One-hundred-and-thirty-one is what the manual said."

Mom reacted like she had just been called stupid, but got up and checked the setting again anyway. "One-three-one," she said, "See, it says one-three-one."

Then, without preamble or warning, while Mom tapped her finger on the illuminated part of the screen that, to her credit, did display the proper channel, an image abruptly replaced the blue background.

An image of us.

Or most of us anyway. The vantage point looked to be above and a little behind from where we were sitting. But you could see Uncle Walt's balding head protruding above his lounge, the shoulders and hair of Dad and Elizabeth and Gramps on the couch, and, beside them, Mom sitting rigidly

in one of the wooden chairs brought in from the dining table. Two of the golden-haired Willard kids shared another wooden chair beside her. In the image, they, or rather *we* were all watching the TV. You could see just about one-third of the TV screen, and on that image of the TV there were tinier versions of us clustered around a still tinier version of the TV. And on that miniature TV...well, you get the picture.

Suz, surprisingly, was the first to notice the difference between the image on TV and the positioning of those of us clustered around it. "Hey Mom," she said, "you're sitting down in the TV picture. On a chair." Which of course was true. But just as true was the fact that here, in the real world, Mom was still standing beside the TV where she had been checking the channel.

"That's because it's the future. And in the future Mom's already sat down again." Elizabeth said this using her most infuriating know-it-all voice, as if she had also seen the same thing but hadn't bothered to say a word because it was all so self-evident.

"What if I chose not to sit down?" said Mom, suddenly inspired as she looked at the seated image of herself on the screen. "What if I continued to stand here by the TV?" Even as she said this, before she had finished speaking, her image on the TV started to turn gray and fade away like smoke.

"Hey, you're ghosting," said Elizabeth, genuinely excited. "I read about that. Maybe you'll disappear altogether."

"Oh, I don't like that," said Mom. She sat down in the nearest empty chair, and the image of her on TV came back clear and sharp.

"I want to ghost too," said one of the Willard kids, already making a move like he was going to jump out of his chair and dance around the room.

"No you don't," said Ma Willard, and shot him a look that could freeze, and did.

Uncle Walt was the next one to make a discovery. "You know what?"

"What?" Mom said. She didn't look at him but kept her eyes fixed on her seated TV image.

"I was wrong."

"You, wrong? Now that I find hard to believe." Uncle Walt was Mom's younger brother and, according to her, had been so spoiled while growing up it was a wonder he didn't stink all the way to China. "Not that I find it hard to believe you were wrong, mind you," Mom said. "But that you would admit it. That I find hard to believe. Please tell, and I hope to God someone is recording this."

"I was wrong about the future. It does look better."

"Better than what?"

"Better than now."

“How’s that?”

“In the future, I got a beer.” Uncle Walt gave a little nod like he had just scored a major debating point, but was too polite to rub it in. He was right. The TV version of Uncle Walt was reclined in his lounge, an extra pillow behind his head, just like the real version here in the living room. But on the TV, in the cup holder of his lounge, was a silver can of Coors Light.

Uncle Walt got up, went to the kitchen, and returned brandishing his Coors Light like it was the Holy Grail. He triumphantly popped its top and settled back into his lounge. Now there was absolutely no difference between the version of Uncle Walt on TV and the one in our living room.

We watched then in silence, waiting to see if we could pick out anything else, waiting to see what we would do next, even trying to make out what was being shown on those screens within screens within screens that should, by rights, show us the future in five-minute increments. In some ways it was like a ‘What’s Wrong With This Picture’ game where you study two seemingly identical pictures and try to discover the differences. Only here they didn’t tell you how many differences there were.

And that wasn’t really fair.

Pretty soon Mom started talking about the obits with Ma Willard. Dad told Pa Willard about the funny noise our refrigerator made, sometimes squealing like there was a mouse trapped inside it, and Pa Willard responded with the obvious, “Well maybe there is a mouse trapped inside it.” Elizabeth told the Willard kids a ghost story, with Suz adding atmospheric wailings at the appropriate moments. Gramps asked Gramma if she wanted a bedtime martini, then laughed when all he got in response was a colossal snore.

Uncle Walt wasn’t the sort to say he was getting bored with a program, at least when he was one of the stars. But after about fifteen minutes, he leaned over to me and asked, “Isn’t there a new episode of ‘Nut Jobs’ on?”

I tried to remember what day of the week ‘Nut Jobs’ ran, and if they were already into repeats. I was just about to check the listings when I saw it. I spotted a difference. Me. Not Suz. Not Uncle Walt. And certainly not all four syllables of Elizabeth.

“No,” I told him. “‘Nut Jobs’ isn’t on. But there’s something just as good.”

“How do you know?”

I pointed at the TV.

Five minutes into the future we were already watching it. 🍷

Glourious Homage

Quentin Tarantino's Love Letter to Cinema

Avi Kotzer

*to the sound of the original movie soundtrack of
The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly...*

EVER SINCE HIS directorial debut with *Reservoir Dogs*, Quentin Tarantino has been both praised and condemned for his referential filmmaking. With *Inglourious Basterds*, however, Tarantino has crafted his ultimate tribute, paying respect not just to iconic movies, historic pictures, and cult classics, but also honoring cinema itself.



The movie's premise of personal and collective Jewish revenge against the Nazis during World War II, in a parallel universe, unfolds as an episodic tale in which two sets of characters alternate appearances and ultimately converge in a final, bloody scene. However, the relatively straightforward plot is a thin veil that barely cloaks *Basterds'* real meaning: film is so powerful that it can out-muscle history itself, amending the most horrifying event of the 20th century.

Inglourious Basterds takes its name from *The Inglorious Bastards*, a 1978 film directed by Enzo G. Castellari. The plot points and storylines of the two movies have few similarities, although one of the main themes, "men on a mission," runs as a common thread through both. Tarantino has resisted giving any logical explanations for the typos in the title, except to say they were a "Basquiat-esque" touch. The misspellings also allow the director to take ownership of the phrase and, in effect, create his own film brand.

Tarantino's original idea for the movie was to meld spaghetti westerns and World War II films, but eventually the concept morphed into something else, a mixture of revenge fantasy and Holocaust neo-revisionism combined with pure cinematic tension, the result of prolonged dialogue sequences interspersed with graphic carnage. In many ways, *Inglourious Basterds* is the typical Tarantino film, containing all of his usual touches: lengthy, meandering conversations permeated with explicit violence and gore, and references to both obscure cult movies and famous films. But while

his previous pictures have featured genre characters that run the gamut from the everyday Joe to the badass woman, *Basterds'* protagonists are reflections of cinema itself, from the locations (France, a movie theater) to the people (actors, producers, critics, screeners) and even to the inanimate objects (cameras, projectors, nitrate film).

With the exception of three brief scenes, the entire story takes place in France, an uncommon exclusive setting for World War II films, which usually occur in Germany, Poland, or other Eastern European countries. But France is a cinematic mainstay: it's considered by many to be the birthplace of movies. It's the country where, on December 28, 1895, the first-ever paid public screening of a movie was held.

Two sides face off in *Basterds*: one symbolizes the origins of film, its first creators and promulgators, those who see movies as art as well as entertainment; the other represents the usurpation of motion pictures by fascists, those who see movies as a tool to promote hatred and control people. The first faction is personified by two distinct types of filmmakers. Shosanna Dreyfus represents autonomous civil resistance and as such stands for independent creators, cinema *auteurs* (she is French, after all), while Aldo Raine's unit represents Hollywood and the big film industry (his soldiers are Jewish). The second faction is embodied primarily by the Nazis and, to a lesser extent, by the Soviets (*Nation's Pride*, the film screened in the final scene of *Basterds*, has several references to Sergei Eisenstein's Bolshevik propaganda film *Battleship Potemkin*.) And it is here that Tarantino establishes his overarching subtext: this is a battle for the soul of cinema. Within the ever-expanding, scattered war that is taking over the world there is a more centered, more focused conflict: movies must be rescued from the clutches of totalitarianism, the resolution of this smaller clash will bring about the end of the greater war.

The movie is divided into five chapters and follows the typical structure of a "men on a mission" film: two sets of characters and their motivations are introduced (Chapters 1 and 2), they recruit team members and move forward (Chapters 3 and 4), and ultimately face off with the enemy in a final showdown (Chapter 5).

Duel out of the sun

Chapter One, titled "Once Upon a Time... In Nazi-Occupied France," is an obvious reference to Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*. Indeed, the opening scenes of both movies end in the massacre of an entire family. Those words also serve to cue the viewers that they are about see a fairy tale.

It's 1941 and Colonel Hans Landa (played brilliantly by Christoph Waltz, winner of the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for this role) has arrived, with an entourage of Nazi soldiers, on the farm where Pierre LaPadite (Denis Menochet) and his three daughters live. The German invites himself into the Frenchman's home, requests a glass of milk, and then asks LaPadite to send his three daughters outside. When the men are finally alone, Landa requests permission to switch to English. The colonel is an analytical and clinical man, and his motives are sinister. He is all smiles, soft-spoken, and well-mannered to a fault, but his politeness belies the reason for his presence.

LANDA

Now, are you aware of the job I've been ordered to carry out in France?

LAPADITE

Yes.

LANDA

Please, tell me what you've heard.

LAPADITE

I've heard that the Führer has put you in charge of rounding up the Jews left in France who are either hiding or passing for Gentile.

Instead of explaining to LaPadite why he's there, Landa compels the farmer to do so himself, and thus forces the audience to wonder whether LaPadite and his family are Jewish, or if they're hiding someone who is. There is no third choice, no other reason for this visit, and LaPadite knew this from the beginning; now the viewers do, too. In this way Tarantino brings them into the room for the showdown. In effect, Landa and LaPadite are engaged in a duel, but unlike the gunfights in westerns, the two men are not standing under the blazing sun in a desert wasteland; they are sitting inside a small cottage on the hills of cow country. And instead of opposing each other with revolvers, they are using words and emotions. There is no six-shooter waiting to be drawn out by a gunman, but rather a piece of information that Pierre LaPadite needs to keep inside his head. LaPadite finds himself in a situation that is the polar opposite of a gunfight in the Old West; here he can win only if he manages to keep his weapon holstered.

Each man carefully measures every word and movement. When the farmer protests that his house was already searched for hidden Jews, Landa

counters by reassuring him that his presence is a mere “reduplication of efforts... a complete waste of time.” Yet he proceeds to extract as many details as he can about the one Jewish family that remains unaccounted for in the area, the Dreyfuses. Meanwhile, and perhaps to calm his nerves, LaPadite has taken to filling and smoking his pipe. When the colonel asks LaPadite to recite the names and ages of the members of the Jewish family, the Frenchman takes his time, struggling to remember. Soon Colonel Landa seems poised to leave, an apparent victory for LaPadite. But in reality he is merely setting up the farmer for round two.

The second round begins exactly as the first, with a glass of milk. It will, in fact, be almost a mirror of round one, only with a different victor. Landa talks about the “Jew Hunter” nickname bestowed upon him by the French and then proceeds to pontificate about the Jews and Germans, comparing the former to rats and the latter to hawks (who naturally prey on rats). He does not offer an animal comparison for the French, forcing LaPadite to choose sides.

LANDA

If a rat were to walk in here right now, as I'm talking, would you greet it with a saucer of your delicious milk?

LAPADITE

Probably not.

LANDA

I didn't think so. You don't like them. You don't really know why you don't like them. All you know is you find them repulsive.

While the colonel continues talking, the farmer keeps smoking his corncob pipe. And then Landa makes his crushing move: he pulls out a pipe of his own. But the German's pipe is a stage prop, a huge calabash like the ones smoked by Sherlock Holmes in the early Hollywood movies. Not only is Landa saying “my gun is bigger than yours,” he is stating “I am a true detective, sir, and you cannot fool me.” Pure theater. LaPadite's reaction is clear: he stares incredulously at the monstrosity dangling from Landa's lip as he lowers his own pipe beneath the table in defeat. Landa realizes this, and he offers the Frenchman a way out. Although regulations state he must conduct a search, he will not do so if LaPadite reveals anything that would make such a search unnecessary.

So far, Landa's visit has lasted about fourteen minutes (both in real

time and movie time), fourteen minutes throughout which Tarantino has continuously stretched a rubber band of pure tension through brilliant, uninterrupted dialogue. And now he brings in absolute silence for an interminable ten seconds, during which viewers see LaPadite break down in front of their eyes. The audience itself is crying the Frenchman's tear as it rolls down his cheek while he confesses that he is indeed hiding Jews under the floorboards of his house, and then uses his pipe to point out their location to the SS Colonel. And now it's revealed why Landa had switched to English; the Dreyfuses do not speak or understand the language. Landa orders his soldiers to come in and shoot through the floorboards. Miraculously, one of the members of the family, Shosanna, not only survives the massacre but also manages to escape from the house. Landa points his pistol at her but does not fire, allowing her to disappear into the woods.

Kosher Porn¹

Chapter Two, eponymously titled "Inglourious Basterds," opens with Aldo Raine (Brad Pitt), a lieutenant in the U.S. Army, reviewing a group of Jewish-American soldiers who will be dropped deep into French territory. As he paces back and forth, he describes their mission.

RAINE

And once we're in enemy territory, as a bushwackin' guerrilla army, we're gonna be doin' one thing, and one thing only: killin' Nazis ... Nazi ain't got no humanity. They're the foot soldiers of a Jew hatin', mass murderin' maniac and they need to be destroyed. That's why any and every sum-bitch we find wearin a Nazi uniform, they're gonna die ... Now, I'm the direct descendant of the mountain man Jim Bridger. That means I got a little Injun in me. And our battle plan will be that of an Apache resistance.

Towards the end of the movie it is also revealed that the lieutenant hails from Tennessee, the birth state of Tarantino himself. It's obvious that Aldo is the alter ego of Quentin, who has Cherokee blood running through his veins. The director has decided to insert himself in the movie and join the fight.

1 *Eli Roth's description for the film's scenes in which Jews obtain violent revenge against the Nazis.*

At this point the audience gets a glimpse of the men he will be leading. Seven of them stand at attention in a single row, looking like anything but soldiers. In fact, one could almost say they are flesh and blood incarnations of some of the classic anti-Semitic drawings and cartoons that have appeared for hundreds of years in books and newspapers. It's as though Tarantino is throwing them back into the face of Nazism, which is about to find out exactly what these caricatures can do. The eighth man stands apart from his tribal brothers. He has a completely different appearance. Taller, stronger, with a glint of unbridled cruelty in his eyes, he offers a sly smile when Raine speaks of their murderous mission to obtain one hundred Nazi scalps for every soldier under his command.

The film cuts forward in time to a conference room where Adolph Hitler (Martin Wuttke) is complaining about Raine's unit.

HITLER

How much more of these Jew swine must I endure? They butcher my men like they were flies! Do you know the latest rumor they've conjured up in their fear-induced delirium? The one that beats my boys with a bat. The one they call "The Bear Jew" ... is a golem.

Tarantino has tapped into one of the oldest Jewish urban legends, that of the mythical being brought to life from inanimate matter. The golem myth was known throughout Europe, and the Nazis had a particular fascination with the creature.

Hitler summons Private Butz (Sönke Möhring), the only surviving German soldier of a recent ambush by the Jewish commandos. Butz's story is shown in a flashback, which begins with The Basterds scalping the dead Nazis of his unit, looking to fulfill their quotas. Butz explains how his commanding officer is asked by Aldo Raine to reveal details about a second German squad. Upon refusal, Raine brings out Donny Donowitz (Eli Roth), the enigmatic eighth Basterd. His imposing physique makes clear the origin of his nickname. The Bear Jew clubs Butz's commander to death with a bat, and Butz coughs up the information Raine needs. Then the secret of The Basterds' notoriety is revealed.

RAINE

When you get home, whatcha gonna do? ... Are you going to take off your uniform?

BUTZ

Not only shall I remove it, but I intend to burn it!

RAINE

Yeah, that's what we thought. We don't like that. See, we like our Nazis in uniforms. That way, you can spot 'em, just like that. But you take off that uniform, ain't nobody gonna know you's a Nazi. And that don't sit well with us. So I'm gonna give ya a little somethin' you can't take off.

As Raine pulls out his own knife and points it at Butz, the movie cuts again to Hitler's conference room, where the soldier removes his cap to reveal on his forehead a scar in the shape of a swastika. And so it's clear how the rumors about The Basterds have spread far and wide. Butz is one of many living, walking soldiers who carry the message with them everywhere they go.

Here Tarantino is touching on two themes simultaneously. First, he creates a modern-day version of the Cain and Abel story. In the Biblical account, after Cain kills Abel, God punishes him and also gives him a mark as a warning for other people not to harm Cain (so the punishment can be carried out to its fullest extent). In *Basterds*, Raine carves a swastika on Butz as a warning to other Nazis about what awaits them. In essence, Raine is doing the work of God, underscoring His "absence" during the period in which the Holocaust occurred, a controversial theological thesis that is still being debated today. Tarantino also provides poetic retribution for the prisoners of Auschwitz, the most notorious concentration camp of the war. Those who managed to survive it had to live out their existence with tattoos on their arms, a constant reminder of the horrors they had endured. With the swastika scar, the Nazi soldiers will spend their years being reminded of their own evil every time they look in the mirror. By intellectualizing this part of the revenge fantasy, Tarantino goes beyond the simple "blood and guts" payback that many film critics have bemoaned in *Basterds*.

In the original script there was an extensive back-story about the Bear Jew, but this never made it to the movie and the absence of a past helps define Donowitz as a golem. And he is the all-American golem, one who uses a Louisville Slugger (from the quintessential American game, baseball) to deal with his opponents. Tarantino has been criticized for casting Eli Roth as Donnie Donowitz, and the actor's portrayal does seem one-dimensional most of the time, but that only furthers the idea of a brainless superhero

created with one purpose in mind.

Hollywood vs. Hitler

Chapter Three jumps forward to June of 1944 and back to Shosanna Dreyfus (Mélanie Laurent), who is changing the letters on marquee of a cinema called Le Gamaar. The movie that has just ended its run is *The White Hell of Piz Palü*. Fredrick Zoller (Daniel Brühl), a young German soldier, tries to flirt with Shosanna. He learns that she is the owner of Le Gamaar, an inheritance from her aunt.

ZOLLER

I love the Riefenstahl mountain films, especially Piz Palü. It's nice to see a French girl who's an admirer of Riefenstahl.

SHOSANNA

"Admire" would not really be the word I would use to describe my feelings towards Fräulein Riefenstahl.

ZOLLER

But you do admire the director, Pabst, don't you? That's why you included his name on the marquee, when you didn't have to.

SHOSANNA

I'm French. We respect directors in our country.

With this exchange, Shosanna seems to be criticizing the Nazis for turning German directors into tools of their party's political ambitions. Case in point: although by 1944 Riefenstahl the actress had become a celebrated filmmaker, Shosanna clearly considers her more an instrument of the Nazi propaganda machine than a real movie director. As for the film itself, *Piz Palü* will prove to be a key plot point later on.

When Zoller asks Shosanna for her name, it's revealed that she has changed it to Emmanuelle Mimieux; her new first name is Hebrew for "God is with us," very appropriate for someone about to wage cinematic jihad against the Nazis. The soldier and Shosanna meet again at a café, where she finds out he is a war hero turned movie star. Joseph Goebbels decided to turn his exploits into a movie called *Nation's Pride*, and Zoller has played himself in it.

Later, Shosanna is taken to a restaurant to meet Josef Goebbels (Sylvester Groth), who is introduced as the Minister of Propaganda, "leader of the entire German film industry." Tarantino identifies Goebbels

not as the number-two man in Hitler's Third Reich, but rather as a film producer. And so the cinematic battle lines are drawn: it's the Nazis against the world yet again, and each side is beginning to recruit soldiers. Hitler has a producer and an actor; French cinema has the movie theater owner and the theater itself.

Thanks to Zoller, Goebbels agrees to hold the premiere of *Nation's Pride* at Shosanna's movie theater, but not before checking the place himself. At this point Hans Landa reappears; as head of security for the event, he insists on vetting "Mademoiselle Mimieux." The sit-down between Landa and Shosanna mimics the duel the colonel had with LaPadite, including a tension-filled moment when the German orders a glass of milk for the Frenchwoman. But this time Landa appears to have been fooled, as he doesn't seem to realize Mimieux is Shosanna.

That night, Goebbels and his entourage attend a screening at Le Gamaar, and approve the venue for the premiere. After they leave, Shosanna and Marcel (Jacky Ido), her projectionist, hatch their battle plan. When the theater has been filled with Nazis for the premiere of *Nation's Pride*, they will burn it down by setting fire to the stock of old nitrate film they still have (which is three times as flammable as paper). While Marcel wants to resist Shosanna's plans, he is helpless to do so; his love for her compels him to go along.

SHOSANNA

But that's not all we're going to do. Does the filmmaking equipment in the attic still work? I know the film camera does. How about the sound recorder?

MARCEL

Quite well, actually. I recorded a new guitarist I met in a café last week. It works superb. Why do we need filmmaking equipment?

SHOSANNA

Because Marcel, my sweet, we're going to make a film. Just for the Nazis.

Shosanna has finished recruiting her army in her personal war against Hitler. Joining the theater and its owner in their fight are the projectionist, a camera, a sound recorder, explosive nitrate film, and a movie itself. Interestingly, all of these elements, which are the tactile, physical ingredients of filmmaking, will be taking on the intangible, ideological side represented by Goebbels.

A Big, Ugly Mess

Chapter Four, titled “Operation Kino,” begins with Lt. Archie Hicox (Michael Fassbender) of the English army being briefed by General Fenech (a miscast Mike Myers) and Winston Churchill (Rod Taylor). It’s revealed that Hicox speaks fluent German and that, before joining the army, he was a film critic who published two books.

HICOX

Goebbels considers the films he’s making to be the beginning of a new era in German cinema. An alternative to what he considers the Jewish-German intellectual cinema of the twenties, and the Jewish-controlled dogma of Hollywood.

CHURCHILL

You say he wants to take on the Jews at their own game. Well, compared to, say, Louis B. Mayer, how’s he doing?

HICOX

Quite well, actually. Since Goebbels has taken over, film attendance has steadily risen in Germany over the last eight years. But Louis B. Mayer wouldn’t be Goebbels proper opposite number. I believe Goebbels sees himself closer to David O. Selznick.

Tarantino reinforces the notion of Goebbels as a producer, and a successful one at that. The distinction that Hicox makes between Mayer and Selznick may refer the fact that Mayer, founder of MGM and one of the creators of the Hollywood “star-system,” was a major studio head who believed in bringing crowd-pleasing, wholesome entertainment to the masses, while Selznick was an independent film producer — his most famous movie is *Gone With the Wind* — who, like Irving Thalberg, preferred to adapt more serious literary works.



Hicox learns that the British know about the premiere of *Nation’s Pride* and that they want to blow up the theater. In order to carry out his operation, Hicox will be joining The Bastards and a female double agent, Bridget Von Hammersmark (Diane Kruger), a German movie star who is

spying for England. The rendezvous occurs in a tavern that was supposed to be empty, but instead hosts a group of celebrating German soldiers. While Aldo Raine and most of his men stay hidden in a nearby house, Hicox and two Basterds, all dressed in Gestapo uniforms, enter the tavern and sit with Von Hammersmark.

Emboldened by drunken stupor, one of the soldiers questions Hicox's German accent. When the soldier is scolded, an SS officer that had been sitting hidden from view intervenes. Major Hellstrom (August Diehl) demands that Hicox explain his curious speech inflection, and here the Englishman proves that his background in film is essential to the mission's success.

HICOX

I was born in a village that rests in the shadow of Piz Palü.

HELLSTROM

The mountain?

HICOX

Yes. In that village we all speak like this. Have you seen the Riefenstahl film?

HELLSTROM

Yes.

HICOX

Then you saw me. You remember the skiing torch scene?

HELLSTROM

Yes, I do.

HICOX

In that scene were myself, my father, my sister, and my two brothers. My brother is so handsome, the director Pabst gave him a close up.

The critic's extensive knowledge of film has saved the day, at least momentarily. Unfortunately, the Major decides to join Hicox's party at the table. After some tense conversation, Hellstrom is about to leave when Hicox commits a mistake that reveals his identity as an Englishman. Hellstrom calls Hicox's bluff and a bloody shootout ensues; only Bridget survives, albeit wounded.

Raine gets the actress to a veterinarian for treatment, and she explains that the mission is ruined because none of the other Basterds

speak German, and they were supposed to attend the event as members of the German film industry. Then Bridget reveals the big news she was trying to deliver to Hicox: Hitler himself will be attending the screening of *Nation's Pride*. Raine decides that he, the Jew Bear, and a third Basterd will accompany the German actress to the premiere. Tarantino's alter ego will attempt to assassinate the Führer. Back at the tavern, Colonel Hans Landa has discovered clues that point to Bridget von Hammersmark. The final face-off has been set up.

Silver Screen Showdown

Chapter Five, "Revenge of the Giant Face," opens with the premiere of *Nation's Pride*. Shosanna stands in front of a mirror and applies her makeup; when she smears rouge on her cheeks, it brings to mind a Native American warrior painting his face in preparation for battle.

A brief flashback explains that she and Marcel have shot some film (its content is not yet shown), coerced a developer to create a 35 mm copy of it with a soundtrack, and then spliced the copy into a reel of *Nation's Pride*. Shosanna and Marcel have used physical movie activities — acting, filming, editing (and eventually projecting) — in their fight against Goebbels, an eminently intellectual cinematic enemy.

In the theater lobby, where leaders of the Nazi party, SS officers, filmmakers, and celebrities all intermingle amongst hanging movie posters and Nazi banners, Shosanna greets Zoller and Goebbels. For his part Hans Landa locates Bridget Von Hammersmark, who is flanked by Raine, Donowitz, and another Basterd, and approaches them. When Landa asks about her companions, Bridget introduces them as Italian filmmakers: a stuntman, a cameraman, and his assistant. Tarantino has added three more cinema soldiers to the efforts of the Allies. While Raine stays behind with Landa and Bridget, Donowitz and the other Basterd go inside the theater with the rest of the crowd. Later the audience will learn that both men are strapped with dynamite.

Landa asks to have a word in private with Bridget while Raine remains in the lobby. Inside the office, the colonel presides over a very theatrical revelation to show Bridget that he knows she is a traitor to her country. Then, after strangling the turncoat actress, he orders his men to capture Raine. Raine and Utivich (B.J. Novak), another of the Basterds, are transported to a tavern outside Paris, where Landa is already awaiting them. He tells Raine he is willing to let their mission play out if they can cut him a deal. While Raine considers his decision, the movie cuts back to Le Gamaar, where *Nation's Pride* is in full swing. As Zoller the actor takes

down American G.I.s one by one with his sniper rifle, Zoller the spectator squirms uneasily in his chair. For all his bravery and hubris, he is yet another victim of war, a man who is uncomfortable with being cast as a hero by his party and his people.

The Bear Jew discovers where Hitler is and calls the other Basterd to join him. Meanwhile, Marcel take his place behind the screen, where all the nitrate film reels have been piled up like logs in a gigantic bonfire. Shosanna places the last reel of the film, which contains the film she and Marcel made, into the projector and waits to make the switch.



While in the tavern Colonel Landa discusses the terms of his surrender with Raine's superior, in the theater Shosanna switches the final reel, a process which Tarantino shows step-by-step, once again impressing upon us the manual aspects of film. Everything seems to be going well until Zoller shows up and forces his way into the projection room. Shosanna realizes her plan may be compromised and shoots him with a gun she had concealed. But before Zoller dies, he manages to get off a few rounds of his own. Shosanna expires without knowing if her scheme has succeeded. At the same time, Donowitz and his Basterd comrade have disguised themselves as waiters and successfully attacked and killed the two men guarding the door of Hitler and Goebbel's theater box. Unaware of what has happened, the two Nazis continue to heartily enjoy the movie.

And suddenly the climax is upon us. Zoller's face appears in a close-up on the screen, followed by Shosanna's.

ZOLLER

Who wants to send a message to Germany?

SHOSANNA

I have a message for Germany. That you are all going to die ... And I want you to look deep into the face of the Jew who's going to do it! ... Marcel, burn it down.

Hitler and Goebbels are up in arms, yelling for the projectionist to stop the movie, but it is too late. Marcel flicks a lit cigarette on the pile of nitrate film and the entire screen goes up in flames as Shosanna has the last laugh, literally. The fire spreads quickly throughout the theater. Before Hitler and Goebbels can exit their balcony, Donowitz and his companion

break in, machine guns blazing. At this point the attendants are in panic mode, scrambling to get out, while Shosanna's voice continues to taunt them, making sure they know whom their executioner is. "My name is Shosanna Dreyfus, and this is the face of Jewish vengeance," she says. The Basterds add to the terror by shooting at the crowd from above. As Shosanna's laughter echoes throughout the theater, the audience can make out her face projected against the smoke and fire, a silver ghost looking down at the chaos she has created. The Bear Jew turns his attention to the Führer — already dead — and empties his machine gun into Hitler's face, effectively pulverizing it. As he does this, the bombs detonate and the entire theater explodes in a ball of fire. Tarantino has the movie theater metaphorically swallow and digest its evil occupants. The final battle has ended, and cinema has defeated Hitler, ending the war nine months early and altering history.

Meanwhile Hans Landa and his German radio operator have reached the American lines with Raine and Utivich. Landa instructs the radio operator to uncuff his "prisoners," and then officially surrenders to Raine, handing him his sidearm, his knife, and Raine's knife, which the colonel had kept. As Utivich cuffs Landa, Raine shoots the radio operator dead and orders the Basterd to scalp him. Then Raine asks Landa the same thing he has asked countless other soldiers: whether the colonel will take off his uniform once he gets to his new home in the U.S. For the first time in the movie the viewers see fear reflected in Landa's eyes (and some might consider this enough of a victory).

R A I N E

I mean, if I had my way, you'd wear that goddamn uniform for the rest of your pecker-suckin' life. But I'm aware that ain't practical. I mean at some point ya gotta hafta take it off. So I'm gonna give you a little something you can't take off.

The lieutenant uses his knife to carve a swastika in Landa's forehead as the German screams in pain; this is the first time this action is shown in the movie, and Tarantino gives it a very graphic flourish. As Raine and Utivich examine their work, the lieutenant offers his opinion.

R A I N E

You know something, Utivich? I think this just might be my masterpiece.

The final line in the movie is directed as much to the carving as to the film itself, whose credits have started rolling. Tarantino uses his alter ego to toot his own horn, but who can blame him? *Inglourious Basterds* is truly a masterpiece. Ten years in the making (the idea popped into the director's head in 1998), well-paced, sharply written and brilliantly directed, *Basterds* is a fun film that runs the gamut of emotions thanks to the mostly first-rate casting of a multinational group of actors.

Inglourious Basterds operates on two levels. The first one involves the storyline and its uniqueness among all war movies in which plots against Hitler were hatched: in *Basterds* the conspirators actually succeed in killing their target and ending the war. Thus, Tarantino evokes the idea that cinema can be much more rewarding than real life. The second level is almost a meta-filmic allegory: *Basterds* is not quite a movie about making movies, but rather a film about the power of film, its strength as a weapon that can alter the course of history.

The film is peppered with allusions to other movies, from the borrowed musical scores to most of the character names. There are enough references to create a lengthy laundry list; the IMDB trivia page for the movie runs seven pages long, and Internet research yields an unending number of web pages that pop up with new information and interpretations. This is the type of film that can and should be seen more than once, as every viewing will surely produce new discoveries and insights.

Since 1992, Tarantino has been the foremost referential filmmaker out there, paying tribute to countless movies and genres. With *Inglourious Basterds*, he has crafted the ultimate homage to cinema. It's a shame that the members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences did not agree, for surely they would have rewarded his effort with their highest honor: the 2009 award for Best Picture.

This version has been abridged. To read the entire essay by Avi Kotzer, which includes more in-depth commentary, visit www.sensesfive.com

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*If only this story were true. Emack she'mo.
May his name be erased.*

The Telescope

Megan Kurashige

to the sound of the Chaconne from the Partita No. 2 in D minor for solo violin (BWV 1004) by Johann Sebastian Bach...

ON THE DAY that Martin's leg turned to glass, they took out another seat from the theater. It left behind a space in the scalloped row of blue velveteen: a gap just large enough for the special chair with its box of cotton batting, its rubber disks for eating shock, its custom snaps and buckles and slings. Four wells in the floor held the chair's wheels, and in the middle of this square were flat gold letters and numbers. They reminded Martin that he was at the back of the theater, right out on the farthest edge, where the distance from the stage was greatest and the length of the ramp, softly sloped and carpeted from the elegant lobby, was short.



He was wheeled in at the end, after everyone else had tramped down the aisles and found their seats. Only once the audience settled itself to rustle programs and whisper could the parade of glass people begin. It was safer then, when there was less danger from a careless foot or from the awkward lifting and climbing of legs that happens between theater rows.

Attendants in pale green suits pushed the glass people in their chairs. They checked the ground for treacherous wrinkles in the carpet, for stray ticket stubs and abandoned balls of tissue, always ready to dart ahead to avert a sudden, tragic crack. The glass people sat still. Some of them covered their glass parts with scarves or cleverly sewn jackets, but even the most accomplished tailor failed to make a chair invisible, and the other people, those unafflicted and whole, stared.

They couldn't help it, Martin supposed. Their eyes caught the smallest reflection and chased down every odd shine of light. They looked with desperation, because no one knew where the glass came from, but at least they did it quietly and only from the edges of their faces.

Martin pinched the tips of his fingers, feeling for imaginary flaws in the nails, while the attendant secured his chair. The boy, much too new at the job, made conversation.

"You are in for a treat," he said. His hands fluttered at the wheel brakes.

“A treat. Everyone tells me how you can’t miss this one. They say it’s the best show of the year.”

The boy would not stop talking. Martin could see the proscenium arch above his bent back. It was the wrong shape from this angle, smaller and flatter than he remembered. He looked down and spoke to the attendant again.

“Haven’t you seen it then?”

The boy crouched beside the wheels. He kept a cautious space between his body and the box that held Martin’s leg. The box was filled with yards and yards of downy fiber that cushioned the fragile expanse of shin, ankle, and foot.

“Not yet. Haven’t had the chance. We always arrange the transportation while the show’s going on. I’m sure I’ll make it one day.” The boy stood up and took a small brass telescope from the zippered pack at his side. “Every seat comes equipped with a telescope now. You might as well be on stage yourself, no matter where you’re sitting. There isn’t a bad seat in the house.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, sir?”

All along the row, all throughout the theater, attendants in their green suits asked the same question. They checked straps and brakes for the last time, then slipped sideways between the rows and escaped up the aisles, leaving a piebald theater behind them. The chairs with wheels interrupted the waves of blue velveteen, and the people in them sat so still that the reflections on their limbs did not change.

They did not dare shift their weight to look up at the translucent, fractured ceiling lit like a giant chandelier. It had been built by an artist, a famous one, and people had used to buy tickets just to tilt their heads back and look at it before a show.

Martin wished that he had walked down the aisle, at least once, with his head tipped backward to admire the ceiling’s entire length. It was the kind of thing that was easy to forget when you worked in the theater, like going to the tourist spots in the city where you lived. He sent someone a postcard of it once. They still sold them in the lobby. He had seen them on the way in and thought, for a second, that he should buy one.

“It’s such a gamble.” A man in the row in front of Martin spoke to the woman who sat beside him. He waved a hand at the stage. “How can they go out there, with everything we don’t know, and risk something like that? What if it happened in the middle of a show?”

The woman shook her head. She had pear-shaped diamonds pulling on her ears. “I think they’re mad. Crazy on endorphins or hormones or something. They’d have to be.”

Several seats to the left, a man with a glass neck spoke to his neighbor without turning his head. "It's the only way I can remember sometimes. That's why my doctor says I should come as much as I can. If you think something enough, it translates into your nerves somehow and keeps the muscles from forgetting. I don't know why that matters though."

Martin didn't hear what the neighbor said in response because, on every side of him, the theater began to disappear. The lights went out; the ceiling faded. In the dark, the audience held its breath and tried to make itself invisible while the curtain rose, a wall of brocade vanishing into the hush, and far, far away, the dancers began their dance.

If he squinted, Martin could see vague shapes wandering across the dark space. They looked like men. They looked like women. They were so far away that they might have been anything, jellyfish or swans, a constellation of dim stars on a clouded night.

He lifted the telescope, moving slowly and drawing the extra weight close by increments. It had three simple dials on one side, and when he looked through the eyepiece, it crushed the dancers up beneath the glass, so close that they looked like nothing at all, just smears of color and light.

He twisted the dials. They worked slowly: too far, not far enough, twist right, twist left. He almost dropped it.

On the stage, the dancers folded their limbs in, then exploded them out, stamping and pounding and sinking into the floor. Martin's fingers marked the rhythm on the side of the telescope. He kept perfect time; and his fingers remembered how it felt to land, how feet were light, then heavy, how he had melted across the ankles, pushing down through his toes and falling off his heels.

Under the telescope, the dancers lifted their hands and sliced the air. They carved invisible palaces, tore them down and crushed the ruins to dust, then blew the dust out into the dark. They sweated with the work. It shined their backs and flicked off their hair, dotting the stage with little spots of slippery wet.

Martin's arms hurt. Once, he would have bent up his knees and rested his elbows across them; but now he set the telescope back in his lap. The doctor always said not to take risks. The telescope pressed into his thighs and he curled his wrist around the heavy brass to keep it safe. He closed his eyes and wondered what the other people had seen, and what they were watching now.

"**Caution** is always best," is what the doctor said. His office was white and clean. It made Martin think of a bed covered only with sheets.

He had come in because his leg felt cold on the way to work. He took morning class, warmed up his muscles, jumping and turning, until his body felt hot all over. He was ready to leap a building, to run forever, or, at the very least, to dance; but when he sat down on the edge of the stage, his leg was cold again. It crept up a little at a time, as if he were falling in slow motion into a pool that had almost turned to ice.

He pulled off his sock and saw his skin going pale. For a little while, it looked thicker than normal, harder and smoother than it should. Then the color left, and then everything else, and in less than an hour, his leg was as clear as a window pane. When he moved, it slid along the floor.

The hospital never kept new cases waiting. A nurse in grey scrubs brought him a wheelchair, a special model fitted with a box of cotton batting to protect the afflicted limb. She brought him straight into the doctor's office, even though the doctor wasn't there. She helped him onto an examination table by the window and asked him questions while she filled out a clipboard of forms.

"Can I have your name?"

"Martin."

"And, Martin, may I ask what your occupation is?"

"I'm a dancer." It felt like a silly thing to say.

The nurse bit the corner of her bottom lip. She arranged her pen and the papers on the table, then put her hand flat against the ridge of his shin.

"Can you feel this?"

Her hand was cupped a little and the edges of it were slightly paler from the pressure.

"No."

"Can you feel this?" She used two fingers to press the top of his toes, then the bottom of them. She ran her knuckles under the hollow of his arch, traced the ankle bone with her thumb. She slid her hand across his calf, pinched his Achilles' tendon, and tapped his knee with her palm. Martin watched her hand, leaning close to follow its route on his unresponsive limb. He felt nothing and if he didn't watch, if he closed his eyes, he might have thought he was alone. His heart beat very fast even though he was sitting still.

"Can you feel this?" she asked, over and over.

"No," he had to say. "No." and "No." and "Nothing."

The nurse didn't smile at him, but she put her hand on his back and rubbed circles between his shoulders as if he were a small child who couldn't stop crying. Then she left and the doctor came in.

He read the nurse's notes. He opened a drawer and pulled out

instruments with lenses that he put against Martin's leg and looked through. The room was quiet, except for the little clicks of glass against glass.

"There isn't much to be done," the doctor said at last. "The glass is quite thick and such good quality, really, but the nature of glass is its fragility. Even the strongest pieces can fracture from the unexpected. It can take certain stresses. You might even be able to walk on it if you were very lucky. But if it comes at just the wrong angle, something as small as a soup spoon is enough to cause an irreparable break."

The doctor was missing a finger, and Martin stared at the stump of knuckle. It had a perfectly flat, smooth edge, and Martin wondered if the doctor had broken it off on purpose.

"I'm afraid that amputation is not an option," the doctor said. He rubbed the smooth place at the end of his knuckle while he spoke. "We have had some success with smaller extremities, but entire limbs are still impossible for us. It can be done, but the glass will come back eventually, and then it tends to spread. It's unfortunate, because a prosthetic leg would be much more practical."

Martin looked through his leg and studied the tissue paper that covered the examination table. The crisp, white surface was distorted, cut up by the reflections on his transparent skin and all the thin, breakable ghosts of bones, ligaments, and veins underneath. He put his hand on his shin and slid his fingers up and down the cool glass. He refused to think.

"I'm very sorry," the doctor said. His voice sounded like it had been worn flat. "You're lucky, in some ways. We're such accommodating creatures. We adapt, we change, the shock of it fades, and everything feels the same again. There are organizations to help you. They do marvelous work. You'll find your new life so quickly that you'll almost forget the old one. Ask for the brochures at the front desk."

Martin nodded. He could not stop looking at his leg. If he spoke, he would fall apart, split into too many pieces to remember how to put them back together.

"Don't you have any questions?" The doctor took a pen from his pocket and wrote on Martin's forms.

Martin shook his head. The doctor waited, and when Martin said nothing, he shook his own head and called for the nurse to relieve him.

The nurse put Martin back in his chair. She spread a blanket across his lap, so that he might have been a man with a broken leg or a patient working off the chill of anesthesia. She wheeled him out to the lobby and on to the parking lot where she called him a car. He didn't stop her when they passed the racks of glossy brochures at the front desk.

When the car arrived, the driver helped the nurse strap Martin's chair into the waiting space.

"He'll take you right home," she told him. "Just try to rest, and if you need anything, even just someone to talk to, please call us. We can send someone anywhere in the city within thirty minutes."

"Will he take me anywhere I like?"

The nurse bit her lip again. "Of course he will. And he'll make sure you get up any stairs or curbs safely. But you must take care of yourself. It's very easy to forget that you have a new kind of limb, and that you can't use it the same way you used the old one."

"It is?" Martin said. The nurse closed the door so softly that he didn't feel the car shake.

The driver already knew the way. He had a black earpiece that murmured directions in a discreet whisper. Martin stared at the little piece of equipment and tried not to think about the cool, scraped out feeling that began at the bottom of his right knee.

"I could turn on the music," the driver said.

Martin shook his head. The driver watched him in the rearview mirror for a moment. He had a wide forehead that bunched up when he studied Martin's reflection.

"There's not much you can do about it," he said. "But things turn out." He returned his attention to the road and started humming a short snatch of tune. Martin was glad it was nothing he could recognize.

The driver took Martin home and left him on the sofa with his glass leg elevated on a flattened cushion. Martin could see out the window, could see the people on the other side of it walking past, oblivious to their good fortune. They stood on street corners and ran to catch up with children. They let their feet hit the pavement without looking and jostled together, knocking shoulders, bumping each other with bags, and barely noticed enough to apologize.

Martin watched them for hours. The streetlights went on and he kept watching while his eyes dried out and he sank into the sofa. All of his muscles forgot the precise weight of their limbs, but the glass leg rested on the cushions like a sculpture, or like something in a museum. He could see the streetlights reflected in it, dots of white making a line from his knee to his ankle.

Martin shouted at the world. He had nothing to say because his voice was lost, distributed by years of careful training throughout a body that no longer seemed to exist. The only thing that came out of his mouth was noise; and he swung his arms to beat away the yelping, moaning, unrecognizable

sound, but when he punched the air, a tremor rode down through his glass leg and Martin froze.

He never saw a glass person in the crowd. He supposed they were all inside, like he was, carried to and fro by competent drivers in cars with straps and fixtures and miniature elevators.

Martin's new job was answering telephones in an office above a park. He sat in his chair, brought up by elevator, and waited for someone to call. He kept meticulous notes. His window overlooked a stand of trees and he couldn't see the people walking on the street below because they were hidden by a thick umbrella of glossy leaves

At the end of the day, a driver rang the doorbell and Martin took the elevator down to the car. His body was quite soft now, and he often thought that it wouldn't remember how to dance, even if he asked it to. It was almost unintelligible if he was careful not to remind it. He didn't think about how his finger pressed the plastic cover of the elevator button, or how his arms flung the wheels of his chair into a spinning roll. If there had been music, he was almost sure that his body wouldn't be able to hear it.

One day, Martin forgot to ask the driver to please not turn on the radio. The car pulled away from under the trees and music flooded its insides. It was something Baroque and it was played excellently, and it made Martin want to roll down the window and scream out into the evening. His body tried to wake up. It muttered, dragged its ignored edges together, urged Martin to get out of his chair.

"I'd like to go to the theater, please," he said instead.

They drove through the city. Martin watched the lights blur past. He drew circles on the window with his finger.

When they got to the theater, Martin told the driver how to go around to the stage door. He looked at the bored security guard sitting at the top of the stairs and at the familiar ramp where trolleys carried the flats, the cycloramas and scrimms, the heavy lights, and all the dancers' trunks crammed full of shoes and warm clothing, up to the theater. The driver let the music play on while the car idled. The muscles in Martin's chest tightened around the sounds and tried to press his heart flat between them.

"I'm sorry," he said at last. "Could we go through the front?"

The driver nodded and drove to the front of the theater, pulling in at a white curb behind a line of taxis and black sedans.

Stairs went up from the pavement to the theater's three double doors. The doors were glass, solid and plain with nothing inside. Light spilled from them in long rectangles over the stairs; and when people got out of their cars

to walk up through the light, their shadows grew thin behind them.

The driver wheeled Martin up the ramp that ran alongside the stairs, and found an attendant in a pale green suit.

There are three dials on the side of the telescope. The first brings things closer. The third takes them further away. The one in the middle is a cheat, a shortcut to that place where nothing exists outside the rectangular world of the stage and where people have forgotten to be afraid of ordinary things, like glass and breaking.

Under the telescope, the dancers dance. They peel off their skins and step out of the wrappings, so heavy and damp with salt that they crumple in small piles at the edge of the stage. They dance — red, vermilion, and scarlet — thick rivers shot through and tied by lashings of white. They are hot and wet, and when their hearts beat, they feel so hollow that it shakes their whole bodies and makes their eyelashes shiver.

They race across the stage; and when they have run past everything so that even the tick of minutes slows down, they stop. There in the quiet, in the dark, they crack themselves apart and dance on in the silence of bone.

In the dance, a heart catches on an edge. A tiny piece tears away, leaving a hole that is shaped like a drop of cold water. The heart is full of holes. It is a thousand leaves pressed against each other, each of them punched and carved into a lace so full of space that it is a wonder it even holds together.

THERE IN THE QUIET, THEY CRACK THEMSELVES APART AND DANCE ON IN THE SILENCE OF BONE

Martin pressed the eyepiece of the telescope so hard against his face that the lens fogged. He couldn't see anything, so he put it down and closed his eyes. All around him, people leaned forward with their telescopes, forgetting the caution that steadied their glass necks, glass ears, glass wrists and hips and noses. They pressed their hands against their chests and shut their eyes as if they were trying to look backwards through their skulls and see something going on inside. A whole theater of brass telescopes fell to the floor and rolled away.

The chair had no straps to hold a patient in place. There were straps for fastening the chair to floors, for holding it in cars, for securing the special box filled with mounds of soft cotton. There were no straps to stop Martin when he dropped his telescope. It rolled away under the seats until it wedged itself beneath a purse tucked away for safe keeping.

Martin sunk his hands into the soft flesh of his thighs and leaned forward, hunching over until his butt slid to the end of his padded and contoured seat. His muscles shook, but they remembered now what they were supposed to do, and they lifted him free from the chair. He stood, panting as if he had somehow transported himself from the stage that he could barely see.

His leg shattered, a sharp and glittering burst, and scattered across the floor. Glass dusted the seats of blue velveteen; it got caught on a man's neck and inside a woman's ear. It filled Martin's shoes and spilled over their edges.

For one moment, Martin stood on his only leg. He stood as straight as if, on the other side, he were standing on air. He could have fallen, or he could have launched himself by one leg and flown through the theater, brushing the ceiling, eluding the attendants in their green suits and the people who rushed towards him with either worry or awe, and bursting out the doors to chase his shadow over the stairs.

Then his leg slipped and he fell. He crashed to the ground and had to catch his breath before he could half-crawl and half-drag himself along the floor. His leg didn't hurt, but shards of glass stuck into the stump of his knee. It was bleeding a little. He wiped it off on his shirt and began to gather the pieces of glass. He picked them up, but they kept spilling out again and again between his fingers and he realized it was a hopeless activity because, even if he found them all, there would be no way of putting them back together. He brushed the sharp dust from his hands, feeling strangely unencumbered without the weight of his glass leg. When his hands were clean, he lay on the floor with his face turned up to the light of the ceiling, and waited for the performance to end. ¶

You once asked, "Would everything make more sense to me if I knew the history of the world, or would I just lose my mind?" I'm sorry you had to suffer, but look at what you turned that suffering into.

You lit a candle for me. Do you understand what I'm trying to say, Jeff?

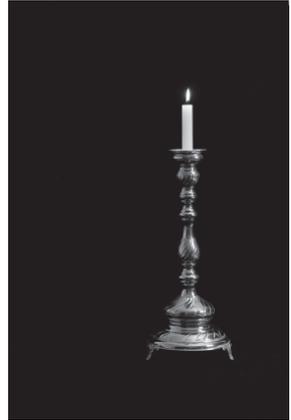
I never thought it possible, but you got me dancing again.

Candle for the Tetragrammaton

Sonya Taaffe

to the sound of Mipney Ma by The Klezmatics...

WE ARE NOT grass, but tinder,
not shadow, but spark. Names
flick like thumbstruck matches
on the page the recording angel
never ceases from inscription,
fade in slow embers to atrament,
ash-fixed; not for relighting,
nor to be erased: the flame
in the ink, the blood runs on ahead.
And beating between word
and word, the wings of Samael
reverse from Gabriel's book:
burning black as space, peacock-eyed
with lives opening, closing
endlessly, small as stars in the dusk—
We are not clay, but kiln,
our hearts the firing.
Write in the ashes,
we let there be light, and read on. ❖



The tulips are in bloom. Such popping reds and yellows!
My God, they're so beautiful, so fleeting.

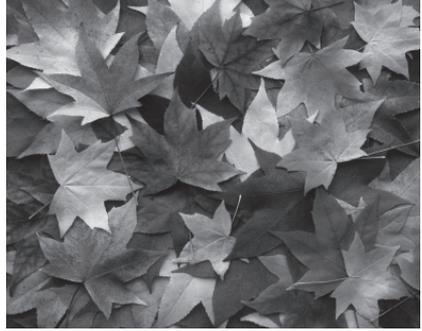
You sing, "Far away from here, there is sun and spring
and green forever." I wonder, were you speaking of the
fields outside my window? I dreamt of tulips when they
took me to that awful place.

Under the Leaves

A.C. Wise

to the sound of Dead Things by Emiliana Torrini...

AFTER SHE DIED, Grandma liked to go down to the leaf pile at the end of the driveway and wait for the neighborhood kids to pass by, so she could jump out and scare them. I tried to dissuade her, but Grandma remained as stubborn in death as she'd been in life. No one else in the family seemed to care. My older brother, John, had moved to Portland before Grandma died and my parents — especially my mother — simply did their best to pretend Grandma wasn't there.



My mother has a thing about death. She resented the fact that Grandma didn't behave the way she thought dead people should, rotting quietly in the ground. Death ought to be neat, easily compartmentalized and put aside. It had no business mixing with life; the line had no right to blur.

She coped with Grandma's return the same way she coped with the year I spent in the hospital, when she wanted to put as much distance between herself and the possibility of outliving her teenage son as she could. My sickness, like Grandma's return, was impolite, inconvenient, and best held at arm's length. My mother ignored both, and my father followed her lead.

I like to think that's where it all began with Grandma. She saw how her daughter behaved towards her own son, and made a conscious decision to throw death back in her face. Whether or not that's true, the public consensus in our household — my mother's unspoken final word on the matter — is that Grandma was simply being difficult, deliberately flaunting social conventions. She wasn't at peace with Grandpa, or resting in a better place. She lingered, without explanation or excuse, unapologetic in her reversal of the natural order, just to vex us.

Grandma came back at the end of summer, with the leaves and weather just starting to turn. She'd died in July, with the heat at its sticky worst. At that point, I'd already made my decision to take a year off instead of going

straight to college, but I hadn't told anyone yet. As far as my parents knew, I was still waiting to hear back from the schools whose applications I'd studiously filled out, then thrown in the trash.

On the day Grandma returned, I was painting the porch — unasked — a retroactive softening of the blow I'd delivered by announcing I was sticking around. Mom and Dad sat inside, and I could hear the faint murmur of the TV through the open windows. Something made me stop and look up, letting the paint run in long drips to pool on the stained wood under the railing.

Grandma walked around the bend in our road. At first I didn't recognize her; I only saw a distorted black shape cut out of the bright afternoon. The air around her shimmered like a heat-mirage despite the autumn chill. My heart kicked, understanding before my brain caught up.

Grandma stopped at the end of the driveway, staring up at the house she'd died in. It looked as though she was waiting for something. I called in through the window, and eventually convinced my parents to come outside.

My mother's first reaction was fear. Her anger came later, a repressed and quiet seething that manifested in pointedly avoiding Grandma whenever she could. Like my dad, I took my cue on how to deal with death, and un-death, from my mother. I invited Grandma inside.

That simple act launched a quiet war within the family. My parents withdrew, and I grew closer to my grandmother — closer than we'd ever been when she was alive. By mid-October, my favorite chore was raking leaves to build up Grandma's pile at the end of the drive.

The yard smelled of leaf mold and the memory of lingering rain — a perfect day. I listened to the rhythmic swish the rake made through the dying grass. Above the trees, an achingly blue sky whispered with wind. Half the wide lawn still stretched ahead of me, scattered with fallen leaves. Though the light was already deepening to a thick gold, I wasn't in any rush to finish.

In fact, I wasn't in much of a rush to do anything. A year ago, I'd been given a clean bill of health, but my body still felt like a bruise underneath the skin, just waiting to turn. Under the circumstances, I should have been trying to cram a lifetime into every day, kissing girls, partying, and getting into trouble. Instead, I merely reflected on the fact I wasn't doing those things as I piled up the leaves.

At the far end of our road, the school bus squeaked to a stop and its doors hissed open. I paused, leaning on the rake. Many of the kids didn't pass by our house anymore, taking longer routes home just to avoid my grandmother. But three figures were rounding the bend now, and as they

drew closer, I recognized the Parker boys. Their sister, Lisa, graduated with me, but left for Stanford at the beginning of the term. An older man walked between the boys, who I guessed to be their grandfather.

I felt Grandma coiled under the leaves, waiting. As the Parker boys passed the leaf pile, the older one grinned and nudged his brother. Their grandfather paused, cocking his head as if listening to something. Before I could warn him, Grandma popped up and yelled, "Boo!"

The old man's eyes went wide; his mouth worked, he clutched his chest. He tumbled to the ground. I dropped the rake and grabbed my phone. As I rushed forward, I swore I heard Grandma chuckling low in her cold throat.

"Oh, shit!" The younger Parker boy ran back to his grandfather, looking wide-eyed at his brother, who had gone very pale. I remembered the way my mind worked around their ages; consequences didn't enter into it.

I hung up with the dispatcher. "An ambulance is on the way."

"Is he going to be okay?" the older boy asked. He was on the verge of tears.

"It's not your fault." I knelt beside them and took Mr. Parker's chilled hand and held it while we waited for the ambulance to come.

"**You** shouldn't have done that," I said. "You could have killed him."

"Hmph," Grandma answered. I think she took exception to my implication that one state of being — living or dead — was preferable to the other.

She stood by the sideboard, arms crossed, watching me set the table. Through the door leading into the kitchen, I could see my father putting the finishing touches on dinner. My mother stood with her back to us. I could tell by the rigid line of her shoulders and the occasional low murmur that drifted my way that she was exhorting my father with the vague imperative that *something* had to be done.

Dad stepped around her, bearing a steaming casserole dish towards the table. I glanced at Grandma, tilting my head to indicate the place I had set for her. Grandma smirked and sat down. My mother's lips formed a thin, flat line, but she said nothing as she followed my father.

Grandma didn't take a portion of the salad or lasagna as they were passed around. Her plate remained empty and she stared fixedly at the salt and pepper shakers while the rest of us ate in awkward silence. It amazed me — the things that absorbed Grandma's attention now.

Whatever her original intent was in coming back, I think her mind went a little soft in the process. Even so, I'd seen occasional moments when the core of who she was seemed to be struggling to come through.

She reached out and tipped the saltshaker over. A few grains spilled onto the table. My mother pointedly looked away.

"Could you please pass the dressing?" she asked my father, though the bottle sat closer to my hand.

"Did you give any more thought to that job I mentioned at Rick's? I know he could really use the help at this time of year." My father handed over the dressing, but his eyes remained on me. His smile looked like it hurt. My mother rolled her eyes.

As I opened my mouth to answer, my grandmother reached for the fall-themed arrangement Mom had placed in the center of the table. Grandma plucked a single rust-colored chrysanthemum and put it in her mouth.

"For God's sake, mother!" Mom threw down her napkin, glaring.

"Ha!" Grandma answered. The sound peeled her lips back to show petal-stained teeth.

Grandma shoved her chair back, scraping it in such a way that it would cause the maximum amount of damage to the carpet. Despite the fact that I had pushed to keep her room exactly as it was when she was alive, Grandma turned the other way and shuffled through the kitchen door. A moment later, we heard her clomping down the basement stairs, retreating into the gloom and dust-filled silence beneath the house.

Three days later I answered the door to find Mr. Parker standing on our porch in a suit. The jacket hung loosely from his stooped shoulders and gaped a little where it had once buttoned over a larger stomach. The fabric had the faint sheen of something stretched beyond its lifetime, but it was impeccably clean.

Mr. Parker had combed his hair neatly, and his face looked freshly shaved. He smiled, not at all like a man who'd been driven away in an ambulance three days ago. In one hand he held a bouquet of daisies. Below the flowers, his skinny wrist still bore a hospital admittance band.

"Hello. It's Richard, isn't it?"

I nodded dumbly.

"I'm Walter, Walter Parker. Is your grandmother at home?"

His smile never faltered. The woman had nearly killed him, and he looked like a man come courting. His lips stretched back, showing more teeth, as if to banish my doubt.

"Thank you for taking such good care of me the other day," he added.

"Sure. Why don't you sit down? I'll go see if I can find Grandma." I waved in the direction of the couch to hide my confusion then hurried away.

I found Grandma in the basement, staring at rows of preserves she'd

put up years ago. The jars shone in the half-light, eerie fruit drifting inside prisons of glass. Grandma mumbled to herself, words I couldn't quite hear, and before I could stop myself, I said, "What?"

She turned and gave me a nasty smile. Her eyes caught the light the way a cat's do — finding illumination in a room that is utterly dark to the human eye. I sucked in a sharp breath.

"There's someone here to see you." I turned and hurried up the stairs. Despite everything, you couldn't have paid me enough to keep standing there with her in the dark.

Walter hovered near the piano that no one ever played, examining the framed family photographs sitting on its dusty lid. He looked around as I entered the room, and his face lit up as his gaze shifted past my shoulder. I stepped out of the way.

"Thank you." Walter thrust the bouquet of flowers towards Grandma.

He looked like a man meeting a bona fide saint. When my grandmother didn't move, Walter pushed the daisies into her hand. Their fingers brushed, and I suppressed a shudder, knowing how cold her skin could be. Grandma sniffed the bouquet, her eyes narrowing. For a moment I was afraid she would eat them. After a moment though, she simply let them fall on the piano bench.

Was it tactless to bring flowers to a dead woman, one who had refused the grave and all its trappings? It struck me as a bit like bringing pork chops to a Bat Mitzvah.

The silence stretched — Walter stared at my grandmother in reverent awe; Grandma looked at a spot on the wall just beyond Walter's shoulder. I couldn't stand it anymore.

"Why are you thanking her? She almost killed you."

"Exactly." Walter spread his hands, a beatific gesture that seemed to indicate the answer lay shining between them. "She opened my eyes. I had a near-death experience at the end of your driveway, and for the first time in my life, I *saw*. Your grandmother is an angel."

"Not," Grandma grumbled.

"But you are," Walter insisted, turning ardent eyes on her. "I can see it right now. You glow."

"Don't," Grandma replied.

She still wasn't looking at him. Her eyes remained fixed on a worn patch of carpet. She shifted from foot to foot — embarrassed, or simply anxious to be away.

Over the past few months, I had thought of Grandma by turns as inconvenient (when she blocked the stairs and forgot — or refused — to

move), embarrassing (when she first started jumping out of the leaf pile), and at her worst, terrible (as she had been in the basement). Looking at her now though, I caught a glimpse of what Walter saw.

Grandma shimmered. Luminosity clung to her skin, like those mushrooms that shine only in the dark. A thought struck me — everything Grandma did, her terrible smiles, her embarrassing and stubborn behavior, was an attempt to turn my gaze away. Was she afraid of what I would see?

If she shone for those who had been close to death, which side of the equation was I on? What did she see when she looked at my skin? Did I glow, or were there shadows, and were they merely an echo, or a precursor of more to come?

I blinked and the light vanished.

“Maybe you should come back another time, Mr. Parker.” I stepped forward, ushering him towards the door with my body. His gaze lingered on Grandma, but I got him onto the porch and closed the door behind him.

I turned to find my grandmother staring at me. Even though sunlight filtered through the windows, making the dust motes sparkle, I nearly jumped at the intensity of her gaze. It occurred to me that this was the longest I'd seen her maintain eye contact with anyone since she returned. I stared back.

Her gaze had lost its cat-brightness, filling instead with a different, sadder light. I got the impression she looked through me, behind my bones and under my skin.

“What do you see?” I asked.

Grandma shook herself, like a dog shedding water. She stepped around me, reaching for the door to go outside and take up her post under the leaves. I wouldn't get my answer, at least not today.

I lay on my back, staring at the ceiling and twirling the hospital admittance bracelet, which had been sitting tucked in my dresser drawer for the past year. With my free hand, I flipped open my cell phone and scrolled through the numbers. There were pathetically few — the former members of my track team, none of whom I'd kept up with since graduation; Tara Lynch, my lab partner in freshman year; and Lisa Parker.

Lisa's number was the most incongruous, but when I'd returned to school after the hospital, she'd insisted on giving it to me. I don't know if it was pity, or whether she felt it was her duty as senior class president to reach out to me. In either case, I'd never called her. But I hit dial now.

I wanted someone to talk to, someone far away who had nothing to do with my family. I listened to the phone ring, hoping she wouldn't answer.

“Hello?”

“Hi. It's Richard...Rich, from Parkview.”

I tried to picture her dorm room. I imagined it as messy, but not too messy, with thrown clothes and books, not half-empty pizza boxes left to rot on the floor. I imagined lit candles, too, despite the fire hazard, warming the room and making everything smell nice. There would be pictures, tacked up on the walls, framed and sitting on her desk or bookshelf or nightstand.

My gaze traveled over my own bare walls, the plain white curtains, the dark blue bedspread. If I died and came back like Grandma, there would be nothing here to preserve, nothing to remind me of who I was. I wondered if I appeared somewhere in Lisa's room, lost in the background of a group shot snapped during graduation. I hoped I did, so there would be at least one place in the world where I was seen, remembered, known.

“Hi, Richard, how are you?” I could hear the confusion in Lisa's voice.

“I'm good. I met your grandfather today.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. I think he has a crush on my grandmother.” Alone in the dark, I tried on a smile. It made my cheeks hurt. Silence stretched on the other end of the line.

“Isn't your grandmother dead?”

“Yeah. She is.” I didn't know what else to say. I had the feeling Lisa really wanted to ask why I'd called, but she was too polite.

Finally she said, “Are you drunk?”

“No.” I wondered what Lisa's thoughts on death were — whether she had trouble accepting that my grandmother was still around, or that her grandfather could be interested in a dead woman. I wondered what she would think if I was dead and I called her up just to say hi. I realized I knew more or less nothing about Lisa Parker. I couldn't even picture her face. I gripped the phone until my hand hurt.

“I guess I just wanted someone to talk to.” The honesty made my throat hurt.

I twirled the hospital bracelet and mentally put the questions buzzing inside my skull into Lisa's mouth — if I was so damned lonely, why had I stayed behind? My grades had been good, so why hadn't I gone to college? Why had I dropped track, instead of pursuing the scholarship my coach had been pushing me towards? Why did I let my friends and everything else move ahead of me, just to stay home doing odd jobs that no one asked me to do? Besides the obvious, what the hell was wrong with me?

The questions sang in the silence. Lisa didn't ask any of them.

“How's college?” I tried.

"It's okay, I guess." She paused. After a moment she said, "I should go. I have a lot of work to do."

"Sorry. It was good talking to you." It wasn't, though, and I wasn't sure if I was relieved that she wanted to hang up, or whether I wanted to beg her to stay on the line. I settled on, "Have a good night." We hung up.

Mom and Dad were out at their weekly gourmet club, which lay sandwiched in the sequence of days between their book club meeting and their ballroom dancing class. I wondered if they actually enjoyed any of the activities or whether they used them as an excuse to avoid me and my grandmother. I wouldn't be surprised if they took up league bowling and high-stakes poker next, cutting the nights of forced family dinners down to two.

Around me, the house filled with silence. It piled like Grandma's leaves, forming drifts in the corners. It had an almost tangible smell, heralding the first frost and winter's cold.

I got up and walked outside. A nearly full moon hung in the cloudless sky. Silver light picked details from the leaf pile, flattening shadows and making the edges of everything sharp. I tilted my head back and shoved my hands in my pockets, looking up until I became aware I wasn't alone.

Turning, I saw Grandma sitting on the roof, perched on its peak with her knees drawn up to her chest and her arms wrapped around them. Her face tilted upwards, too, and everything about her glowed — her skin, her hair, her nightgown. They were all the same color as the moon. From where I stood, I couldn't quite tell — it might have been a trick of the light — but it looked like she was crying.

**IF I DIED AND CAME BACK LIKE GRANDMA,
THERE WOULD BE NOTHING HERE TO PRESERVE,
NOTHING TO REMIND ME OF WHO I WAS**

Walter came back the next day. No kids had passed by the drive, and Grandma had just climbed out of the leaf pile. A few leaves still clung to her clothes and hair. She smelled like cold earth and the deepening fall.

I didn't want to be a third wheel, so I left Walter and Grandma and went up to my room. Curiosity got the better of me though, and I opened the window. Their voices drifted up from below — mostly Walter's voice. He rambled on and didn't seem to mind that my grandmother only punctuated the conversation with occasional grunts.

Why was it so easy for Walter? Why could he say to himself that he was tired of being lonely, and reach out without getting all tangled up in doubt, without the fear of leaving things half done?

I leaned on the sill. The rhythm of their talk was comforting. They sat side by side, not quite touching. Walter's hands rested on his knees; I wondered if he would try to hold Grandma's hand.

Grandma sat ramrod straight, staring ahead at the horizon. Even though her lips moved from time to time, she hardly seemed aware of Walter at her side. Maybe it wasn't so easy after all. Maybe the gulf between people is always too big, living, dead, or otherwise. I lay back on my bed.

Instead of Walter and my grandmother, I pictured myself and Lisa Parker. We sat side by side, enjoying the fading day and not saying anything. It didn't matter that I couldn't exactly remember what Lisa looked like. She was there, and I was there, and the sunset made everything beautiful.

Long after the sun went down I dragged the ladder out of the back shed and climbed up on the roof. As I suspected, Grandma sat there, waiting. Preserves, it seemed, had lost their fascination.

I didn't look at her, and she didn't look at me. Every now and then a distant night bird called. We watched the moon creep across the sky, and I imagined that in the stillness I could see the imperceptible movement of the stars, turning in their great wheel. I didn't mind the cold, and Grandma didn't even feel it.

"Did I make a mistake, not going to college?" I asked finally. I wasn't sure whether I really wanted an answer. Like Lisa not asking me why I called last night, there was something else I wanted to know.

I wanted to ask Grandma about the shine that Walter and I saw beneath her skin. I wanted to know what she saw when she looked at me.

I scooted down a bit so I could lie with my hands behind my head and look up at the stars. I thought about Grandma and Walter, and myself and school and Lisa. I thought about lying under the leaf pile and how much simpler things must be when you didn't have to worry about the future anymore.

"Shadows," my grandmother said, answering my unspoken question.

"What?" I jumped a bit, bracing myself so I wouldn't slide off the roof. I sat up.

"There." Her hand traced a vague outline, the shape of my body in the dark. Her eyes shone, moon-silver, star-bright. Her cheeks might have been damp, but I couldn't tell for sure.

"What are you talking about?"

“Smudged,” she said, and shook her head. A note of strain sounded in her voice as she battled with a rare coherent thought. For once it seemed she wasn’t being obscure on purpose; she simply couldn’t communicate what she knew anymore.

I thought of the incredible force of will it must have taken to come back from the grave. Then somewhere along the way, her plans got muddled. Love and spite, the desire to protect those she cared about — I had a feeling they were all indistinguishable to her now.

It held true for the whole family, really. We’d all spent so much time pretending we could bend the world to our will. Now none of us could tell truth from lie. None of us knew what we wanted anymore.

Grandma bit her lip in frustration. If anything, the glow around her skin had grown stronger.

“What should I do?” I asked.

I wanted her to provide the answers, to point me in a direction and tell me where to go. I wanted her to tell me it was safe to love something, without worrying it would be snatched away too soon. I knew it wasn’t going to happen.

Grandma gritted her teeth, staring at the horizon. Did she see the lights in the sky, the black in-between, or something else all together? Could she see the future, or just a blur of possibilities?

“What do I do, Grandma?” I repeated.

She seemed to be struggling to speak a word, and when she finally did, it fell like a frost-rimed stone from her tongue.

“Live.”

Live — just that, nothing more. I guess it was the best she had to offer. She’d clawed her way back from the grave, she’d fought tooth and nail for more of what was precious to her, and things didn’t seem any clearer to her now than they had before she died. There were no easy answers, on either side of the grave.

All she could tell me to do was *live*, and not worry about whether the bruise would start to show under my skin, whether my body would turn on me again. Not everyone gets to come back, and even when they do, second chances aren’t guaranteed.

I stood and looked down at Grandma.

“I think Walter really likes you,” I said. “You should go out with him. I mean, if you’re going to stick around here, you should make the best of it, right? Do you want to spend the rest of your death jumping out of leaf piles?”

It seemed only fair that if I had to take a chance, she did too.

“Huh.” It wasn’t an answer, but it was as much as I had expected from her.

She stood and shuffled away to the edge of the roof. I heard her climb down, and watched her shadow cross the lawn. At the end of the drive, the leaves rustled and fell still.

I stretched, standing at the apex of the roof and looking at the distant stars. Maybe tomorrow I would apply to some colleges for the winter semester. Maybe I would look for a job, or give Lisa another call. And maybe I would lie down under the leaves and wait for some kids to pass by, just to try it once. If anything did, it seemed to make Grandma happy, after all. ¶

"Catching signals that sound in the dark..."

*"Indentions in the sheets where their bodies once moved
but don't move anymore."*

"And when her spirit left her body, how it split the sun..."

Was I really the only girl you've ever loved?

I hope that's not true.

Emigrant

Linsley Duncan

to the sound of Across the Universe of Time by Hayley Westenra...

HAVE I

Spoken too loud
Of familiar earthly
Stars; and overstayed my welcome
In grief?

Perhaps
I remember
Too keenly the warbling
Of finches — genomes unworthy
To save

Maybe
I imagine
City rhythms singing
The patter of a million thoughts
In time

Somehow
I recreate
Past journeys with my hands
On contour maps of hills and vales
From Earth

Would you
Shut me away
So memories fall not
So sweetly on listening ears?
Dare you?

My voice
Is not silenced
But whispers in the blood
Of those unborn; ancestral dreams
From home 🍷



When the house is dark and quiet and everyone has gone home, I put on your record, Jeff, and I sing and dance and tap on the floor and make all the noise I couldn't make when I lived here, and it is grand and joyous and impossibly beautiful, like a flower gone to seed.

The Ferryman's Toll

Sam Ferree

to the sound of Synecdoche by Simon Schneider...

WHEN THE END came, the Ferryman hadn't expected there to be so many dead children. He didn't mind, really. When he asked them for the toll, "something precious," children and infants always told him stories. The Ferryman thought they were the only ones who really understood what he was asking for.

Along with the infants came all the elderly. This too did not bother the Ferryman since they were very business-like about death. The hard part was over, namely, dying. Acceptance had set in and all that remained was getting to the other side. The elderly always brought things like jewelry, books and photos, all rich with years of memory.

When all the elderly and all the babies had passed over, only the young remained. Most of the souls who asked to cross the River were teenagers, twenty, thirty and forty year-old professionals, revolutionaries, the new "righteous" and the heartbreakers — or so they liked to think of themselves.

The world was slowly emptying out.

One day, the Ferryman was sitting on the edge of his ash-wood boat, whittling a chess piece knight, when he saw a young man. He appeared in the grey fog confused, acquiescent and silent. He knew he was dead, just like all the others.

The young man was very thin and pale — no one went out into the sun anymore. He couldn't have been more than twenty. His hair was dyed white and his forearms were covered in tattoos of moving texts that scrolled through poems, inked in illuminated green, blue and red. The Ferryman had to admit that he liked the new fad.

Setting aside his knife and the half-finished chess piece, the Ferryman folded his hands and waited. Neither spoke; the only sound was the soft,



barely audible drifting of the River.

The Ferryman said, "There's nothing to be afraid of."

A moment passed and the young man took a step forward. "I can't see the far side."

It was never day or night on the River. The same ethereal ashen light seemed to come from every direction through the nearly opaque mist. The Ferryman nodded. "It's there."

"Shit." The boy narrowed his eyes. "You remind me of someone."

The Ferryman picked up his pole from the rocky shore. "Do you wish to cross?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Yes."

The boy's eyes widened with mild surprise. He looked down at the white pebbles beneath his feet. "What's on the other side?"

"It's a private matter," said the Ferryman. "I just take you there."

"So...you don't know?"

"No. You have to pay to cross. Something precious."

After a moment's hesitation, the young man took off the silver ring from his middle finger and handed it to the Ferryman. "My father's," he explained. "It's been in the family for a while. It's a lucky charm, I guess."

The boy got on the boat and the Ferryman pushed off into the silent waters. "You like Yeats?" the Ferryman asked when they were a quarter of the way across.

The boy touched his left forearm. "Yeah. 'The Second Coming'...it was a joke when I got it."

"Oh?"

"Nobody thought it was funny — the whole apocalypse thing." When they reached the deepest part of the River he said, "I'm...terrified."

"Of what?"

"I don't know. That I'll go to hell, or there won't be a Heaven or there won't be anything at all."

The Ferryman stopped rowing. "You could stay. There is a place here for Waiting."

"Purgatory?"

"No. Just a place. A City."

"There a lot of people there?"

"Yes."

The young man stayed quiet. Then he murmured, "I'm afraid..."

The Ferryman nodded, gave him back the ring and turned the boat around.

The City went by no other name. It was bigger than any metropolis in history, largely because it included them all. Mud-brick homes from Babylon stood down the way from two-story homes from Minneapolis. The ancient and the very new stood in the shadows of steel skyscrapers and stone palaces.

The seasons in the City were irregular and no one bothered to keep track of them. Day faded into night at constant intervals with a sun and a moon that looked a great deal like their twins from the world above. The stars, on the other hand, never stayed in the same place for long. The astronomers tended to be slightly more sour than the rest of the Waiting.

There was only one road to the City, a narrow dirt path that led into a grey, rocky valley that ended at the River's bank. Few except the Ferryman used the road regularly; most of the Waiting only used the road twice: once to go to the City and once to leave.

After he had taken the boy across the River, the Ferryman found Janusz sitting on the pebbled shore tossing bread into the almost-still current and singing an old Polish folk song. He was dressed in his favorite brown, pin-striped suit that hid his young-man's paunch quite well. His silver-rimmed glasses gleamed in the unchanging light.

"There are no ducks," the Ferryman told him and sat down on the bank.

"It never hurts," Janusz said. "You've been spending a lot more time in your garden lately."

"There aren't as many passengers."

"Bad omens? Or is it just the natural effect of the Revelations? It's the end of time, I suppose."

The Ferryman grunted and started to whittle the knight again. "I guess that's what they're calling it."

"They say a lot of things. Such superstitious people, the dead." He tossed the last of the bread into the River.

"I do miss the ducks," Janusz said, then, "I'm thinking that this place is getting old."

"I'm not surprised," said the Ferryman and he finished his knight. "Want to play a game of chess?"

"Certainly. You win."

"Quiet."

The Ferryman saw the sewing woman sitting calmly on the bank. She was working on a brilliantly decorated, tattered, sky blue and sea-salt white kimono. Perhaps thirty, she wore jeans and a T-shirt. Before he interrupted

her she was muttering to herself in old-late Japanese.

“Do you wish to cross the River?” he asked.

She stood and spoke in modern slang from Tokyo, “You remind me of someone.” When he did not reply, she said, “I’ll cross.”

“Payment?”

“In what?”

“Something precious.”

She thought for a moment, then looked down at the kimono, shook her head and then handed it to him. “I... was a costume designer — old Noh theatre.”

“Did you have an apprentice?” he asked.

“No. It was sort of a family tradition, and there are no kids anymore.”

When they were both on the boat and pushing across the River she asked him, “Are there any more of you? Ferryman?”

“No. Not anymore.”

“There were more?”

“A long time ago.”

“And now it’s just you?”

The Ferryman chose not to reply. After a while she asked, “How did you get this job?”

“My gambling addiction got the best of me. It’s not wise to lose to the gods.”

“Really?”

“No.”

She laughed for a moment longer than he thought the joke deserved. When she was finished he said, “I used to be afraid that when the end came I would run out of jokes. I try to come up with a new story every time someone asks me. Thank you, for laughing.”

“So, it’s the end?”

“Yes. I believe so.”

“What’ll you do next?”

“Gamble.”

She shifted in her seat and reached out to touch the River but stopped short of the still, dark water. “What’s waiting for me on the other side?”

“What do you think?”

The woman shrugged. “Something grand. A big party, or a place in the mountains with a good view. There should be a lot of old friends waiting for me...there aren’t really many left; back there, I mean.”

“Yes,” the Ferryman said. “The party should be nice. Try to think of it as...a homecoming.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

They were quiet until the boat touched the far shore. She stepped out onto the pebbled bank. “One retiring professional to another...” She smirked. “Hope I’ll see you again.”

The Ferryman was about to head back to the City, after the seamstress had disappeared into the mist, when he saw someone standing on the far bank. No one ever went to this shore except him and his passengers. But there he was, a man wearing a business suit and a very convincing salesman’s grin, walking toward the boat and carrying a cane.

Nothing about his outward appearance was unique. Just another grey-suited professional type, middle aged, middle build, grey-eyed and smelling like reasonably expensive cologne. He was a man who looked vaguely like every man in an uncanny way.

The Ferryman was too astonished to say anything when the grey-suited man stood before him. Eventually, the businessman said, “I’m back,” then thrust out his hand holding two oboloi. “Payment. Is my money good here?”

“What? But...you can’t.” The Ferryman tried not to stammer. “You’re on the wrong shore.”

“So? If I leave something precious behind, I can cross. That’s the deal.”

“No one has ever phrased it quite like that,” the Ferryman told him, eyeing the coins suspiciously. He easily recognized the ancient, dull gleam of silver and Athena’s proud profile.

The businessman reached out, took the Ferryman’s hand, then placed the silver carefully onto his palm. “Let’s go.”

Not knowing what else to do, the Ferryman let the businessman onto his boat and slowly pushed off, heading back to the City. For the first part of the journey the businessman hummed tunelessly to himself, brushing the glassy water with his fingertips as if he were on a pleasure cruise.

“So,” said the Ferryman, “what brings you...back?”

“Boredom. And a commitment to worldliness.” The grey-suited man laughed at his own joke. Eventually he shook his head and said, “You really don’t remember me, do you?”

“Should I?”

The businessman looked troubled for a moment, then murmured, “Do you still whittle while you’re waiting?”

The Ferryman stopped rowing and turned to look at him. He was older, yes, or maybe just changed, but the Ferryman could see the former boatman behind his grey suit. The Ferryman nodded, “Yes, I remember you,

Ahmed.”

The businessman rested his chin on his fist, no longer smiling. “Does it seem colder to you? I feel like this place has changed. Or maybe it’s just in comparison to where I’ve been.”

“It’s colder.” The Ferryman pushed on toward the City. “You’ve been gone a long time.”

“Time flies in Paradise.” The businessman pulled another obolus from his pocket and flipped it in the air in absent-minded repetition. “So...you’re the last then.”

“Yes. I’m the last.”

“But it’s not long now, is it?” the businessman said quietly. “Until the whole job is done?”

“You know as well as I do.” The Ferryman thought for a moment before asking, “How did you come back?”

“It’s pretty straight-forward.” There was a splash and the businessman cursed. “It’s sort of like leaving here. You decide to go and then leave everything behind.”

“That sounds remarkably easy.”

“*Sounds* that way doesn’t it? But you know as well as I do.” The businessman stared into the dark River at the ripples from the coin, expanding and disappearing.

“So why are you coming back?” the Ferryman said.

“Because I wanted to see the world one last time before it’s gone.”

“Aren’t you afraid?”

“As hell,” the grey-suited man replied, unashamed.

**THERE HE WAS, A MAN WEARING A BUSINESS
SUIT AND A SALESMAN’S GRIN, WALKING TOWARD
THE BOAT CARRYING A CANE**

On rainy evenings, the Ferryman and Janusz would go to their favorite coffee shop, the East. The Ferryman would usually play a game of chess with one of the regulars and quietly drink his chai while Janusz would heckle the poets.

Janusz, wearing the fedora Sartre had given him as a gag-gift, would shout at the stage, “A full life’s experience should have taught you style!”

Whenever someone asked the Ferryman for his opinion he would shrug and say “I knew Shakespeare and Basho.” Janusz rarely read his own work,

but when he did the other patrons would cry and shuffle off to the bar across the street.

The East was a small stone affair, sitting at the very edge of the Ancient Damascus district of the City. A constant haze of shisha smoke filled the air, the coffee was blacker than oil and spiced, and there was always a barely audible murmur of half-hearted conversations over games of chess and backgammon.

“What’s your earliest memory?” the Ferryman asked, feeling drowsy from the peach and rose hookah smoke.

Janusz was staring angrily into his coffee after losing a game of chess with an old painter, his “great rival.”

He looked up. “What?”

The Ferryman repeated, “What’s your earliest memory?”

Janusz raised an eyebrow, in a calculated and dramatic fashion familiar to the Ferryman. “You’re asking me?”

“Yes. Who else?”

He snorted. “Apples. No.... Nearly drowning.” He nodded, taking a drag from the hookah pipe and his words came out foggy. “In a little stream near the house I grew up in.”

“Is that why you didn’t cross over?” the Ferryman asked and sipped his honey-and-cinnamon tea.

“No. I didn’t cross over because I’m just like all the other Waiting, disgruntled and doubtful. But you knew that.”

“Yes,” said the Ferryman.

Outside, a freezing wind rattled the glass windows.

“Do you regret not crossing? At the beginning?” Janusz asked.

“No.”

“We could rot here forever,” Janusz said kindly. “If it weren’t all about to end.”

“**What** the hell do you call that?” the doctor demanded and pounded his fist on the edge of the boat. “Everyone else is dying of cancer and sleeping pills and I get run over by a goddamn *truck*?”

“You’re angry. It’s understandable,” the Ferryman told him, pushing steadily on across the River.

“*Angry*? What are you talking about? I’m *ecstatic*! It’s all over and I don’t have to see the end. Do you have a cigarette?”

“I don’t smoke.”

The doctor lounged sullenly against the hull of the ash wood boat. “I haven’t smoked since I got into med school. Fuck. You know, I really wasn’t

ready to die.”

“I get that impression.” The Ferryman glanced back at the seething doctor who now drummed his fingers on the railing. “Calm down. It’s not far.”

The doctor didn’t seem to hear him. “Cancer! You know what that is? Justice. Our own bodies are too polluted to live. *Christ.*” The doctor fell silent for a moment. “Smells like oak floors,” he said finally.

Close to the far shore now, the doctor sobbed. The Ferryman sat his pole down, and knelt behind the exhausted young man. Placing a hand on his shoulder, the Ferryman said nothing and waited for the doctor to quiet.

“You never said what was so important about this,” the Ferryman said, and held out the silver key the doctor had given him.

The doctor shook his head and muttered, “It’s the key to my house. My fiancée designed it. She’s....” The doctor stopped. “Well, I guess she’s over there.”

He took a deep breath. “No going back now. Let’s go.”

There were few empty buildings in the City. When one of the Waiting crossed the River all that was left behind disappeared. Some days whole blocks and streets would cease to be. The City was much smaller than it had been.

The Ferryman carried a small box as he walked side-by-side with Janusz late at night down the deserted cobblestone roads of Exeter. The nights were noticeably darker and colder than before and there were far fewer stars.

“What’s your earliest memory?” Janusz asked.

The Ferryman thought for a moment, paying careful attention to which streets he turned on, not trusting the City’s ever-changing geography. “I remember being lonely. There wasn’t much else to remember, I suppose. I remember being afraid, too...and deciding not to cross. No one was there to ask me; I was just there, at the water, with my boat and pole.”

“You don’t remember anything before the afterlife?”

“No.” The Ferryman shook his head. “I remember the smell of the River. Everyone tells me that the River’s scent reminds them of something: the mountains, or a lover, or the smell of varnish or a book. For me, everything smells like the River.”

Janusz nodded. “It smells like ink to me. Pretty foul, actually.”

They walked down the silent streets, watching through illuminated windows as the last inhabitants of the City walked sullenly on their way to nowhere.

Janusz said, “I used to dream that if I were the last person on earth

I'd go from house to house stealing everything I could carry. I'd read all my friends' letters and journals and finally know who they really were. Now everyone is gone and I have no desire to follow through. Not that there's much to take now, anyway."

"Not that you had any friends," the Ferryman added.

"Oh clever."

"You would've made a good Ferryman."

They kept walking quietly until they reached the last few buildings of the City and there was only darkness beyond. "Where are we going?" Janusz asked, glancing nervously at the black landscape at the edge of the road.

"Here." The Ferryman stopped at the end and handed Janusz the box. "I...made it. For you."

Janusz ran his fingers along the edge of the chess box; all the wooden pieces rattled inside when he turned it. After a moment he looked up at the Ferryman and smiled slightly. "At the end of the world, no less.... Thank you, for the going-away gift."

"**The** fog is very beautiful today, don't you think?" The businessman grinned at the Ferryman wearily, sitting on the shore, holding only a cane.

"Payment," the Ferryman told him.

"Ceremony." The businessman handed the Ferryman his cane. "From paradise. I made it from my pole that I used there. I broke it in two when I left."

The cane was made from the same smooth wood as the Ferryman's pole. It smelled like the water. "There's a River on the other side?"

"There's everything on the other side." The businessman sat down in the boat and sighed slowly. "Shall we?"

A little way from the bank the businessman said softly, "I went back to the world above. It's a wasteland. The skies are lovely, though. All bright purples, reds, oranges, like everything was on fire. It was because of the pollution, the ash. You just don't see skies like that, even in paradise."

When they were just passing into the deepest part of the River the Ferryman asked hesitantly, "What's on the other side? In paradise."

The businessman tapped the boat with his fingers. "It's a lot like the City: a plethora of confusion and waiting for something to happen...always wondering what you'll do now that you've left everything precious behind."

The businessman pulled an obolus from his pocket and twirled it between his fingers. "Did you ever wonder why we only asked for the precious things? Did it ever mean anything to any of us that the dead cared about how they paid?"

"I cared," the Ferryman said.

"We're cabbies."

"I am the Ferryman, Ahmed."

The businessman flipped his obolus into the air and caught it. "You never told any of us your name, you know."

"I never had one."

The businessman laughed. "What do you mean? We all had..." Then he stopped, cleared his throat and muttered, "You were the first."

The Ferryman shrugged. "I was the first to decide not to cross."

"Oh."

The boat touched shore, the businessman got off, stretched his legs and turned back. "Maybe I'll get it right this time. Maybe I won't be back."

"How will you know what's right?"

"When I stop wanting to leave." He waved. "So I'll probably be seeing you again soon."

No one else came from the world above. When the truth dawned on the City, the last of the Waiting shuffled into a line and grumbled as the Ferryman took them one by one across the River.

Janusz was the last. He stood on the bank in his brown pinstriped suit and fedora, holding a basket with a thermos of tea and a few sandwiches. He handed the Ferryman his hat and stepped onto the boat. When they reached the middle of the River they ate lunch, and played a game of chess.

"So," Janusz asked after he'd lost the game, "why did you let us all stay?"

"I couldn't get rid of all of you. That would have just been cruel."

Janusz laughed. "You can tell me, you know. We are just two old men with secrets no one cares about anymore."

The Ferryman folded his hands and looked toward the City they had left behind. "I didn't want to get lonely."

Janusz nodded. He said, "Is this your last trip?"

"I suppose so."

"Are you going back?"

When the Ferryman said nothing Janusz continued. "I never actually believed in an afterlife. So when I arrived here and had a choice I did what any prudent atheist would do and didn't take the risk. I had a good second life."

"So why are you going?"

Janusz shrugged. "Because everyone else is doing it, of course. And because I'm bored."

The Ferryman nodded and finished his tea. He stared at his hands that were calloused from taking the better part of humanity to the afterlife. "So," he began, without looking at Janusz. "What do you think is on the other side? For you?"

"I don't know. A poetry reading with no hecklers, I suppose."

The Ferryman looked up and saw Janusz smiling at him. "But, if all is good," Janusz said, "there will be wine, opium, stars and ducks. I'm a simple hedonist, you know."

They reached the far shore and Janusz got off the boat. He waited for the Ferryman to pull away from the bank, sitting down on the pebbled shore. Of course the old poet believed walking into the other world was something to be done in private.

On the Ferryman's return to the City's bank, the River's current suddenly picked up. A freezing wind blew. Small waves carried over the ink-black water so that the Ferryman had to fight to cross back. By the time he arrived at the far bank, he was exhausted and could barely pull his boat up onto the rocky shore.

The City was gone. All that remained was a vast expanse of darkness stretching out into infinity. Only his garden and his small stone house remained near the shore. He stood for a moment, looking out at the emptiness.

He dropped his pole on the black soil and returned to his boat.

The waters had calmed again. The Ferryman wasn't sure if he was just being foolish or just seeing if he could drift on the River forever. Instead, when he pushed off from the shore a current seemed to pull him to the far side. He knew what he would find there beyond the fog. There would be another River waiting for him, and another boat and another home with a garden.

They would come back, eventually. All those who crossed over would grow bored, or restless or just curious. They would return and bring their stories and treasures from paradise. The jaded would make their City and the Ferryman would let them stay. When they came, he would be there waiting to carry them across. ¶

You're right, Jeff, time isn't linear. The world is an incredibly blurry, crazy dream we're all sort of stumbling through. I'm both alive and dead and you've already saved me a thousand million times, the number of times I've listened to you sing.

Do you understand, yet? When I listen to you, I'm neither here nor there, and yesterday is the same as tomorrow. When I dance to your music I become eternal.

You granted your own wish. Your music is the time machine.

The Tale of the Six Monkeys' Tails

Hal Duncan

to the sound of TV Eye by The Stooges...

ONCE FAR AGO and long away, in the Valley of the Rift there were six monkeys who each thought himself the best. Each struggled to be better than his brothers, to gather more fruit and nuts, to catch more insects and spiders, to win more attention from the females so that, in the end, they'd have more children as the *proof* that they were best. Each day, in trying to outdo each other, they'd travel far and wide across the land, exploring every inch of it, as far even as the mountains that bounded their territory, each brother seeking to be the first to find whatever tasty prize might be out there, waiting to be found. Each night, when they returned, they'd argue loudly amongst themselves over who had done the best. One brought back fruit and nuts, while another brought back insects and spiders. One brought back spiders and fruit, while another brought back nuts and insects. One brought back nuts and spiders, while another brought back insects and fruit. And each one howled and shrieked and gibbered that he had done by far the best.

The noise of their argument grew louder every night until eventually it became so loud the other animals could not sleep. They clawed at the earth and heaped it over their heads to muffle the intolerable sound. Still they could hear it; they just couldn't escape it. All that they could do was complain, "Somebody shut those bloody monkeys up! We cannot sleep!" The complaints of all the animals were carried into the rock by the soil, and it woke the earth god up. He began to grumble, "Somebody shut those bloody animals up! I cannot sleep!" The grumbling of the earth god was carried into the ocean by the rivers, and it woke the water goddess up. She began to roar, "Somebody shut the bloody earth god up! I cannot sleep!" The roaring of the water goddess was carried into the sky by the waterfalls, and it woke the air god up. He began to moan, "Somebody shut the bloody water goddess up! I cannot sleep!" The moaning of the air god was carried up to the stars by the winds, and it woke the fire goddess up. And the fire goddess came down, in the cloak of flickering stars that are her sparks.



“What is going on here?” she demanded. “Why are you bloody monkeys keeping everyone awake?”

The monkeys fell silent for a moment then began to blame each other; quickly, the blame became an argument over who made the most noise, which became an argument over who had the right to make most noise, which became an argument over who was best.

“Enough!” cried the fire goddess, flashing with a fury that scorched the fur from each of the six monkeys’ bodies, leaving only a little on the top of their heads. “It is clear to me that you are each no better than your brothers, and have no basis for your foolish pride. Each day you travel far and wide, as far even as the mountains that bound your territory, in search of whatever tasty prize might be out there, waiting to be found. But each of you is as likely as the other to win that prize. You’re all equally rubbish!”

The monkeys fell silent again as they all thought about this, then all at the same time, as they all had the same thought, they all began howling and shrieking and gibbering.

“Then make me the best, great fire goddess. Grant me a boon that I may be the best of all! Grant me a boon, great fire goddess! Please! Please!”

“Silence!” said the fire goddess. “If I give one of you a boon, I must give you all a boon. And I must have something in exchange, the most precious thing that you possess — your tails. Give me your tails and I will grant you each one wish.”

The six monkeys considered this for a good long time, none of them wanting to give up their tails. But each of them knew that if they did not do so, well, one of their brothers might and, with his wish, become the best. As they all decided that they couldn’t let this be, and opened their mouth to make their wish, the fire goddess silenced them with a blast of flames from her open palm.

“Wait,” she said. “One at a time. And remember that you only have one tail, so you will never gain a wish from me again. You’d best make this wish count, monkeys. You’d best think big.”

And she looked at the first monkey.

The first monkey thought: Each day we travel far and wide, as far even as the mountains that bound our territory. And the words of the fire goddess came back to him: Think big. Surely, he thought, if I can travel farther I can find the greater prize beyond that territory. So he said:

“I want to be the greatest, to stride over the mountains in my path, to blow away the clouds around me with my breath.”

“Very well then,” said the fire goddess.

And she picked him up by the tail and flew off into the air. She took him out of the Valley of the Rift, over the mountains that bounded it, and over a sea to the East. When they were over land again she turned North, and carried on until they were at the Veil of Clouds, where the highest mountain in the world is. There she nipped off his tail so that he fell to the snowy ground. As he lay there she gathered the clouds, and drew from them the water and the air. She blew the air into his body to stretch him, poured water into the hollows of his bones, and froze it, did this again and again until he was as tall as a tree and broad in limbs, his skin silvery-white as the moon.

“Now you may stride over the mountains in your path,” she said. “And now you have the secrets of water and air within you, so the clouds are yours to command. Learn how a butterfly’s wing can cause a storm and you will blow them away with your breath. You are no monkey now, but a jötunn, first of the jötnar.”

And she flew off into the air, returning to the Valley of the Rift, where she looked at the second monkey.

The second monkey thought: To stride over the mountains is to go up and along and down again, three journeys in place of one. And the words of the fire goddess came back to him: Think big. Surely, he thought, if I can go straight to the prize no matter what, then I can beat my brother to it. And so he said:

“I want to be the strongest, to smash through the mountains in my path, to bend the rocks around me with my hands.”

“Very well then,” said the fire goddess.

And she picked him up by the tail and flew off into the air. She took him out of the Valley of the Rift, over the mountains that bounded it, and along a river to the North. When they were out over the sea she turned West, and carried on until they were at the Island of Smoke, where the hottest volcano in the world is. There she nipped off his tail so that he fell to the smouldering stone. As he lay there she gathered the lava, and drew from it the earth and fire. She ripped the bones out of him and set them on fire, made a crucible of the earth and scorched him in it so he shrivelled and shrunk. Then she poured lava in where his bones had been, and let it set, and then filled his veins with fire. When she had finished he was half the size he had been, but a hundred times as strong, his skin blue-gray as ash, granite or iron.

“Now you may smash through the mountains in your path,” she said. “And now you have the secrets of earth and fire within you, so the rocks are yours to command. Learn how to draw on the power in their veins and you will bend them with your hands. You are no monkey now, but a kobald, first

of the kobalds.”

And she flew off into the air, returning to the Valley of the Rift, where she looked at the third monkey.

**SHE RIPPED THE BONES OUT OF HIM AND SET
THEM ON FIRE, MADE A CRUCIBLE OF THE EARTH
AND SCORCHED HIM IN IT**

The third monkey thought: To smash through the mountains is to toil against the rock, work that can only be as slow as wading. And the words of the fire goddess came back to him: Think big. Surely, he thought, if I need not toil but am simply free to pass, then I can beat my brothers to the prize. And so he said:

“I want to be the fiercest, to scour all obstacles in my path, to make the world itself shrink from my gaze.”

“Very well then,” said the fire goddess.

And she picked him up by the tail and flew off into the air. She took him out of the Valley of the Rift, over the mountains that bounded it, and over a jungle to the West. When they reached the coast she turned North, and carried on until they were at the Sands of the Sun, where the most scorched waste in the world is. There she nipped off his tail so that he fell to the desert dunes. As he lay there she gathered the siroc, and drew from it the fire and air. She poured fire in his mouth and fed it with air until it burned away all fat in his flesh, all marrow in his bones. She ripped out his heart and put a flame in its place, so that his breath was scorching hot. She put flames into his eyes so that his gaze was terrible to behold. When she was finished he seemed to float in the air, as if the earth itself feared the touch of his skin, flashing gold as sunlight or flame on sand scorched to glass.

“Now you may scour all obstacles in your path,” she said. “Now you have the secrets of fire and air within you, so the world is yours to burn. Learn how to unlock the energy in those atoms of matter smaller even than a grain of sand, and it will shrink from your gaze. You are no monkey now, but an afrit, first of the afritim.”

And she flew off into the air, returning to the Valley of the Rift, where she looked at the fourth monkey.

The fourth monkey thought: To make the world shrink from you is to make an enemy, an enemy who may work against you in ways you cannot know.

And the words of the fire goddess came back to him: Think big. Surely, he thought, if the world is my friend, a longer route may be made much easier, and I can beat my brothers to the prize. And so he said:

“I want to be the fastest, to reach the prize before all others, to find the secret paths of the world.”

“Very well then,” said the fire goddess.

And she picked him up by the tail and flew off into the air. She took him out of the Valley of the Rift, over the mountains that bounded it, over a strait, a desert and a gulf to the North. When they reached land again she turned East, and carried on until they were at the Tree of Life, where the banyan whose roots run round the world is. There she nipped off his tail so that he fell into its wild branches. As he lay there, she gathered leaves and branches, and drew from them the earth and water. She flensed him of his flesh, packed earth around his bones and watered it till vines sprouted and grew in place of muscle and sinew, thinner and tighter as they wove themselves together, until his form was smooth as green wood stripped of its bark, leaking sap that she smoothed into his body like linseed oil. When she was finished he was lithe as a cat, so light he could perch on the weakest branch, and yet so sleek the strongest wind could not get a grip on him, his skin the golden green of an apple.

“Now you may reach the prize before all others,” she said. “And now you have the secrets of earth and water within you, you may know them as you know yourself. Learn how to sense the streams of life running through you, and you will know all secret paths. You are no monkey now, but an aelver, first of the aelven.”

And she flew off into the air, returning to the Valley of the Rift, where she looked at the fifth monkey.

The fifth monkey thought: To reach the prize is not to win it, not if one who arrives late can take it from you. And the words of the fire goddess came back to him: Think big. Surely, he thought, if I cannot beat my brothers to the prize, I can still cheat them of it after, take it from them. And so he said:

“I want to be the craftiest, to outwit all opponents, to win all challenges.”

“Very well then,” said the fire goddess.

And she picked him up by the tail and flew off into the air. She took him out of the Valley of the Rift, over the mountains that bounded it, along a river to the North and out over the sea. When they reached land again she turned West, crossed a sea littered with islands, and swooped down into a

forest, down into a cave, down and down, until she came to the deep cavern of the great stalagmite which is the Pillar of Time, its mountainous height built up over aeons counted in an echoing drip... drip... drip... drip. There she nipped off his tail so that he fell into the cold darkness. This time she did not separate the elements, for it is the cavern itself that is the mixture, a hollow of air within the earth, a form in space and time defined in the meeting of the two. Instead she gathered the dust of dead aeons that filled the cave and the echoes of lives that danced them as motes, the earth and the air already separate. The first she mixed with his blood and, using it as ink, wrote the words of his desires into his heart. The second she mixed with his breath to make a song that whispered the words of his thoughts into his head. When she was finished he stood there, a bald monkey without a tail, his ochre-hued skin patched pink and brown in the flicker of firelight.

“Now you may outwit all opponents,” she said. “And now you have the secrets of earth and air within you, you have the secrets of all forms in space and time. Learn how to describe the space and time that fits each form and you have the answer that fits each challenge. You are no monkey now, but a human, first of the humans.”

And she flew off into the air, returning to the Valley of the Rift, where she looked at the sixth monkey.

The sixth monkey thought: To win the prize is to win the prize. How can I best my brother who has wished to always win by craft? I cannot take it from him as the great take from the small. I cannot take it from him as the strong take from the weak. I cannot take it from him as the fierce take from the timid. I cannot take it from him as the fast take from the slow. I cannot take it from him as the crafty take from the dim. If ever I take it from him, it will be his prize to win back, and by his craft he will. What else is left for me?

But then he thought: To win the prize is nothing if the prize is but a bauble. And so he said:

“I want to be the most persuasive, to charm my opponents, to convince them what is prized and what is not.”

“Very well then,” said the fire goddess.

And she picked him up by the tail and flew off into the air. She took him out of the Valley of the Rift, over the mountains that bounded it, to a place that no one knows now how to reach, to the Serpent Isle, which may be in a lake or river, sea or ocean, where the coils of the sleeping dragon that exists beneath all things break the surface of reality. There she snipped off his tail so that he fell, landing on one of its great scales. This time she did not separate the elements but joined them. She squeezed fire from her hands

into the six monkeys' tails and threw them down into the water where, when the fire and the water mixed, they were transformed to snakes. The snakes swam up onto the dragon's back, to where the sixth monkey lay. They coiled round him, tighter and tighter, shedding their skin as they did so until their skin was his. They bit him, again and again, pumping their venom into his veins until it filled his blood, the burning fluid, fire and water coursing through his body, filling his head with the delirium of the poisoned, visions and voices. When they had finished there was no more of them, for they had used themselves up in remaking him. When they had finished he stood there, a bald monkey without a tail, his form patterned in snakeskin, red and green. Before the fire goddess's eyes he shed that skin for one coloured like ochre, then for one like apple, then for one like flame, then for one like granite, then for one like whitest silver. And with each shedding of the skin his form changed too, growing larger or smaller, more squat or more lithe. And with each transformation he spoke quietly, as if practising:

"Trust me. We are the craftiest, are we not? Then this is what we're meant to do."

"Trust me. We are the fastest, are we not? Then this is what we're meant to do."

"Trust me. We are the fiercest, are we not? Then this is what we're meant to do."

"Trust me. We are the strongest, are we not? Then this is what we're meant to do."

"Trust me. We are the greatest, are we not? Then this is what we're meant to do."

The fire goddess waited till he had shed a final time so that his form was once again patterned in snakeskin.

"Now you may charm any opponent," she said. "Now you have the secrets of fire and water within you, so all their powers of illusion are yours. Learn how the water twists the light and fools the eye, and you may fool all of your brothers into thinking that the prize is *there* instead of *here*. You are no monkey now, but a naga, first of the naga."

And she flew off into the air, returning to her home among the stars.

And that, little one, is how the Six Peoples came to be, from the six monkeys that lost their tails. It is why, to this day, the jötnar live in the mountains and control the skies from their vast airships. It is why the kobalds live in their mine-warren manufactories building trinkets and technologies. It is why the afitrim come howling from the deserts, razing any settlements on their domain down to scorched earth. It is why the aelven know the jungles

and the forests they live in so well that they can trade their medicines for oil one day and trade that oil for silk halfway across the world the next. It is why the humans, through the steady drip-drip-drip-drip of centuries, of millennia, have slowly built their villages into towns, towns into cities, cities into kingdoms, kingdoms into empires.

And it is why we, little one, the naga, live among them — all of them — quietly making sure, with a suggestion here, a question there, for their own good, that they do all of this *exactly* as we want them to. It's what my father did before me, and what I did when I was young. It's what your father does right now, and what you, little one, will do when you're grown up. Trust me. We are the most persuasive, are we not? Then this is what we're meant to do. ¶

Schehirrazade

Amal El-Mohtar

to the sound of Taqasim on Violin by Simon Shaheen...

For Cat Valente

YOU BRING THE East to me
 in a palmful of rice,
 a scattering of doves,
 a burning temple,
 the green smell of tea. You smile,
 hold the sun plucked from a Grecian sky
 between your teeth, laugh
 shake gods and poets from your belly
 into my waiting hands, pile them there
 like coins and jewels and jasmine petals,
 seashells with the sea still in them,
 the desert's weight in sand.

You knew Virgil when he was young, you tell me,
 and sitting beneath a willow, whisper
 that his bee-loving hands were soft in bed,
 that you saw yourself when he spoke of Dido,
 her clever fingers on the ox's hide,
 her smoky hair, her tragic eyes,
 her fabled skin backlit by fire,
 smelling of cardamom and myrrh. I see you, too,
 and long, and long
 to unfold a treasure from my tongue,
 to take your hand in mine and hide there
 a stone, a seed, a key,
 any small thing
 suggestive of mystery.

But my mouth is dry and full of echoes, hoards
 your syllables like savory
 I dare not chew, much less dare swallow



for fear of scraping my throat red-raw
with tiger claws, iron hooks,
the teeth of wide-jawed women
screaming laments into my chest,
stealing my shallow breath.

So I go, instead. I flee
to ocean, forest, ancient streets,
mountains and the tops of towers
to gather stories like wool from rocks,
dew-wet in the morning, to wring
from them a cup's worth of augury,
season them with dry air and dust,
bottle them, wrap them 'round rings and combs,
polish glass, silver, hematite,
and lay them at your feet. I would
sheathe you to the knees in gifts, saying,
"I am not subtle, I am not
a siren with the world for wings,
not Alissar by any name, but look, look,
in these hands,
on these feet,
with the wind in my eyes and the moon on my back,
I've brought the East to you,"
hoping you will find in them
even the smallest piece
of something you did not already have. ❧

The Poincaré Sutra

Anil Menon

to the sound of Yaarodu Yaaro by Yuwan Shankar Raja & Ustad Sultan Khan...

I, ZULAIKHA, MUTANT, inconvenient and sixteen-point-two miraculous years old, declare myself Eve of a bold and brilliant species. I am Singular. Protoplast. Odd. In short, fucked. I am besieged by fallen apes, hairy and quarrelsome. I am besmirched on the neighborhood's limestone walls. I am virginal, insolvent and oppressed. Says Zulaikha: bring it!



Note On Rejecting Modesty: Should a comet apologize for its blaze? I will bellow my existence, even though I'm motherless, solitary and desolate beyond human imagining. Unnatural Zulaikha, doomed to be a thinking angel amongst quarreling beasts. Unnatural Zulaikha, doomed with ocular excess in the Country of the Blind. Unnatural Zulaikha, doomed to love YUSUF!

I am the only child of a Coptic Christian man in Heliopolis, Egypt. Technically, that makes me Christian and an Egyptian. But that's merely an accident of geography and biology. To what country does the Opposable Thumb belong? Under what species' haunches does an America crouch? I imagine myself free. I must imagine myself free.

Imagination is the name of a river in Egypt. All things exist, absolute and immutable, in its incarnadine waters. Did I not fish my world from its sunless depths? Through imagination have I achieved freedom, escape velocity, solace. I imagine I am not Copt. I imagine I am not Egyptian. I imagine, therefore I deny.

Father says imagination is a form of denial. If so, there are many who would imagine a world without Copts. The Pharaoh denies them political representation. The Pharaoh denies the Copts permits to build their

churches. The Pharaoh denies them licenses to start businesses. My father's God kept a close tab on the Pharaoh's denials.

There are all kinds of Gods. Gods who begat. Gods with thunder-throats. Gods lost in desert lands. Gods who court frightened swans. Gods who turn grief into pearls. Gods who giggle at funerals. Gods who pooh-pooh and Gods who march ahead. Gods with winter-faces and Gods not quite dead. There are all kinds of fathers.

I once asked Yusuf whom his God preferred more: the chaste or the virtuous. He thought about it, a smile playing about his shy lips.

“The virtuous seek to slay themselves, Zulaikha, but the chaste seek to slay the lover. Yahweh certainly prefers the virtuous.”

Hai Allah, how do I get Yusuf to plough me!

Additional Note on Rejecting Modesty, Sexual: I was born without webbed thighs, and so I infer I'm intended to spread, with a modicum of the infinite benevolence and generosity, that which Allah, praised be his name, hath left so delightfully hinged. Why won't my Suleyaman grant this Hurrem a shoulder to rest her henna'd foot!

I have battled Life these sixteen-point-two miraculous years, and though the exterior of my corpus is without blemish, the interior — alas! My interior is Guernica. My interior is Soft Construction With Boiled Beans. My interior is engaged in two ruinous wars:

Enemy #2: Yusuf.

Enemy #1: Father and Arch-Villain: the Moody Djinn.

There are all kinds of fathers. Fathers who wilt in the sun. Fathers who cry in the rain. Fathers with desolate beds. Fathers with forbidden wings. Fathers lost in Egypt. Fathers who plot dreadful things. Fathers who are Moody Djinns. Fathers who will soon be dead. Fathers beloved beyond measure. My father is many fathers.

Yusuf, being of Adam-kind, has both a father and a navel. He's a tall, loose, rumpled fellow. Such long fingers! I like the way he eats tomatoes. I like his gray eyes that once saw me naked; gray eyes that looked once and then twice. I like his smile when I make our eyes meet.

Yusuf, being of the tribe of Manasseh, has no foreskin. No, I have not

verified the absence of the fact directly. The sense of an absence, I have read, can often substitute for the absent. Phantom limbs, phantom roots. I wonder if Yusuf has a phantom foreskin. I can't get it out of my mind.

Dear Yusuf,

How's it hanging, bro? Check this out:

"In conclusion, circumcision removes the most sensitive parts of the penis and decreases the fine-touch pressure sensitivity of glans penis. The most sensitive regions in the uncircumcised penis are those parts ablated by circumcision." (Sorrells et. al., *British J. Urology*, 99, pp. 864-869, 2007)

Hugs,

Foreskin

The removal of the foreskin is an optional maneuver for Coptic Christians. I asked the Moody Djinn if he had exercised that option.

"No," he replied, with unnecessary irritation.

Good, good. But my relief was temporary. The Moody Djinn turned melancholy, even remorseful.

"Not everyone is as righteous as Yusuf. He's a true tzaddik, Zulaikha."

Yusuf, a tzaddik! A teacher to those black-hatted, forelocked, Talmud-toting, Yiddish-speaking, Zulaikha-ignoring Hasidic Jews? Impossible! I hurried to query the Righteous One.

"No, I'm not a tzaddik," says Yusuf. "I'm a Bnei Menashe. And I'm far from righteous."

Exactly! Besides, what would a righteous soul be doing with the Moody Djinn? Some fathers are liars.

Tidbit: In the land of Hindustan, where the plausible is a malnourished sibling of the actual, Jews have long been welcome. There's the Cochin Jews of Kerala, the Telugu-speaking Bene Ephraim, the Bene Israel of Maharashtra, the Kolkata Baghdadi and the Bnei Menashe of Mizoram. Bnei Menashe imagine they're descendents of Manasseh, son of Joseph.

About Joseph: Abraham begat Isaac begat Jacob begat Joseph begat Manasseh, whose name tombstones all that Joseph has had to forget, namely: sold to Midianite traders by his own brothers, the decade of salt and slavery, the brush of Potiphar's nipples on his back, the screams in Pharaoh's prison, the rat-nibbles of other people's dreams .

Manasseh's mother is Asenath, mute daughter of Potiphar and Zulaikha. Asenath is clever, slender, and full of orgasms. When Asenath smiles, Potiphar imagines strange things: that she's not his daughter, but a foundling, a secret given flesh. Othertimes, he imagines parenthood: his daughter, an hour-old, nestled in Zulaikha's arms. Fatherhood is compatible with both explanations.

Old Potiphar has a wife. Zulaikha is her name. She perches on his shoulder, nibbles his ear. When she is bored, he opens windows and lets her out. She returns in minutes, days, sometimes weeks. She returns; bruised lips, folded wings. Then he buys her gifts: pearls, perfumes, salves and slaves. Let's imagine him happy.

When Joseph's lips meet Asenath's mute lips, he forgets things. He forgets a desert God perched on his shoulder, whispering in his ear. He forgets a boy in a well, a boy in a splendiferous coat, a boy in a slaver's grasp. These Josephs, Joseph is certain, differ from the Joseph kissing Asenath's soft lips.

When Joseph's lips meet Asenath's lips, he imagines strange things. He imagine a little house with yellow slats on a cypress-scented hill. He imagines not being righteous, not being chosen, not being an exemplar, not knowing the meaning of dreams. He imagines being Egyptian. These Josephs, Joseph thinks, are also the immigrant kissing Asenath's lips.

Joseph is an immigrant. An immigrant is ninety-percent imagination and ten-percent trace minerals. They are one solution to Kafka's psychograms: the waiting-list, the penal colony, the courtroom, the burrow, the absurd metamorphosis. These moral instruments are categories of containment and cannot hold immigrants, for imagination devours all categories. Thus did Joseph ben Jacob become Zaphnath-paaneah.

What Asenath said: When my lips meet his, mother, and when my dust mingles with his, mother, and when I make him forget, mother, and when I seize what father seized, mother, and when I demand what you demanded, mother, why does Zaphnath-paaneah say: "It's not you I love, beloved, it's what you are not."

On some cold and braziered nights, as the slave Amen plays the flute, opium entranced, and Asenath dances naked in front of Zaphnath, her upraised

arms fluttering like the flame's forked tongue, Zaphnath unlocks his burdened chest, shrugs on his imagination, luxuriates in the coat's whorls, colors, and pockets, and then joins Asenath, dancing, dancing.

When Zaphnath, rich and powerful, brought Joseph's family to Egypt, they dare not comment on his splendiferous coat. The guards wait, hands on swords.

"I use it to imagine," says Zaphnath, smiling. "I imagine justice. I imagine forgiveness. I imagine happiness, family. I can imagine anything."

Smiling, he insists they try his coat; smiling, smiling.

Their wedding is a noisy affair. Such laughter!

"Quiet, quiet," mutters Zaphnath. "If I could but quiet the lord's mouth as the lord silenced yours, Asenath."

"Then let's rename our first-born," signs Asenath. "We'll call him Manasseh: made for forgetting."

It's cold in the desert. Zaphnath dons his splendiferous coat, but the infernal cold endures .

Of Manasseh, son of Egypt and Israel, son of Zaphnath and Asenath: loyal, strong, married to a Syrian concubine, serene, responsible, and by tradition, a role-model for future Jewish kids. His tribal banner has a prancing unicorn against a black background. Over time his tribe spreads out of Canaan, perhaps into Asia or even: Mizoram.

Tidbit: Mizoram is a mountainous North-Eastern state of Hindustan. It has bamboo forests and bandicoot rats. The bamboo flowers every forty-eight years, the rats gorge on the seeds and multiply, the bamboo seeds run out, the rats turn to the food grains, people starve, the rats retreat, the bamboo flowers over and over and over.

In this land of bamboo forests, bandicoot rats and famines, nineteenth century British explorers came across a small Mizo tribe who had a harvest song about a divided red sea, a terrible desert exodus, pillars of cloud and fire, and about water that sprang from a rock. It's true. Yusuf has sung me this song.

The people of Mizoram are short, stocky, nut-brown and have almond-shaped eyes. Yusuf is tall, slender, fair and has no epicanthic folds. He believes nonetheless that his ancestors were chased out of Canaan, two-thousand

and seven-hundred years ago, by short, stocky, nut-brown Assyrians. The Moody Djinn agrees. He says Yusuf is as Jewish as Manasseh.

When the Moody Djinn and I had gone to pick up a tall, slender, fair, boy with no epicanthic folds in Neveh Dekalim, I caught my first glimpse of Yusuf's people, the Bnei Menashe. They beat their palms against the tinted windows of our Mercedes. Chanting. Cursing. Spitting. Weeping. Wrinkled faces like old leather slippers.

Neveh Dekalim is one of the nineteen Jewish settlements in Gush Katif, a pretty-postcard place wedged between the blue Mediterranean in the northeast and the Negev. The settlement was being demolished, and the Jews forced out. This time, there were no plagues or pillars of cloud and fire. Just brother against brother. Just politics.

Moody Djinn greeted Yusuf with the warmth he reserved for the trusted. Yusuf was not much older than me, a few miraculous years at most, but Moody Djinn talked to him as an adult. Plotics. Giraffography. Horrorstory. Atrocity Theory. The car's interior was very cold, but as the Moody Djinn talked, the desert crept in.

How to make Copts feel Somewhat Unwanted: Why do they take public safety for granted? Abduct their women while they're shopping (Ingy Helmy Labibe, 01/04/2004), while enroute to work (Marianna Attallah, 05/2005), or just like that (Ingy Nagy Edwar, 09/27/03). Launch futile investigations. Insist they must have been asking for it. Deny the events happened.

How to make Copts feel Strongly Unwanted: Torture converts (Yousef and Mariam Suliman, 10/20/2003, Alexandria). Set them on fire (06/17/81, El-Zawia El-Hamra, Cairo). Murder Coptic monks (04/11/94, St. Mary's Monastery, Asyut). A tender act of randomness (the slaughter of a dozen Sunday School students, 02/12/97, Abu Quorcas). The possibilities, as the advertisements say, are endless.

How I miss my mother. There are two types of mothers: Takiti and Maluma. Takiti is jagged, ragged, raven-beaked, the splint in Oedipus' eye. Maluma is milk-heavy, curvy, cuddly, the feel of a soft thigh. Takiti mothers make good altars. Maluma mothers excel at making altar boys. These two X chromosomes are found in all women.

Yusuf: What's the matter? You look sad.

Zulaikha: I'm trying to imagine my mothers.

Yusuf: Mothers? How strange. You have a child's imagination.

Zulaikha: Yes, I'm a child. Leave me to my childishness.

Yusuf: No, no, dear Zulaikha. I envy your imagination.

Zulaikha: It's contagious. Beware. Don't sit so close.

(Space & Time)

Close. Kissing-close.

Isaac Newton on Space & Time: "Absolute, true, and mathematical time, of itself, and from its own nature flows equably without regard to anything external, and by another name is called duration. Absolute space, in its own nature, without regard to anything external, remains always similar and immovable."

Zulaikha on Space & Time: What bunk.

I've discovered why Yusuf wouldn't kiss me this afternoon. I'm HIDEOUS!! A pimple the size of the Bedou crater adorns the tip of my proboscis. Any further out, and it could issue Visas, print currency, compose national anthems. How can he ever sleep again! Burnt into his synapses is this... pimple. I've slapped myself twice.

"We have come to think of the actual as one among many possible worlds. We need to repaint that picture. All possible worlds lie within the actual one." Nelson Goodman, 'Fact, Fiction & Forecast,' 1983.

This is Djinn's favorite quote. I've never understood it, until now. Pimples and princesses are not mutually exclusive. Fucking universe.

The Moody Djinn has not stepped out of his office for days. Yusuf rarely leaves his side now. Strange men come and go. So it is going to happen again. Linear time, encircled. This time I must stop it. This time I must act. This time I must teach Yusuf to imagine a different ending.

I begin with an easy question. Time: Lunch; Venue: dish-washing; Situation: elbows touching, hips touching.

"Can robots kiss, Yusuf?"

"Let's talk about something else. What colleges do you intend to apply—"

"If you were a robot tzaddik, is that what you'd counsel?"

"A robot tzaddik..." Yusuf smiles. "Theologically, I suppose robots could

kiss.”

Wrong.

Question: Can robots kiss?

Answer: No. Though robots have identity, they lack individuality. Without individuality, robots might as well kiss the mirror. It is why robots can't do jokes, hold conversations, or imagine a world where choice, not necessity, brings lips and hips, thighs and sighs together.

Conclusion: Student has misunderstood the question, perhaps willfully.

Time: Lunch; **Task:** dish-washing. It is very soothing: water, suds, the simple sounds of making things clean. Yusuf hums quietly, looking cow-happy. We could do this forever.

“Yusuf! Yusuf!”

“Pretend you don't hear him,” I say. “Just pretend.”

He hesitates. Only for a second, true, but against a God, a whole second! O frabjous day!

I'VE DISCOVERED WHY YUSUF WOULDN'T KISS ME THIS AFTERNOON — I'M HIDEOUS!

Yusuf has offered to read the Bible with me, but there are such difficulties. Such parallels. Such brutalities. Time's loom has folded and re-folded us, but here we are again, revenant, immutable: Joseph and Asenath.

“I remember a cold night,” I say, “when the fires fell low, and you showed me a coat. Remember, Joseph?”

Then spake Yusuf, the Righteous One: You blasphemy, dear Zulaikha. The gift our Lord God offers is *linear* time. We are crooked, true, and the past doubles back upon us, mottled and serpentine. But accept my God, your God, your father's God, and we partake of his gift, for our Father's world is our world.

“**So** this world is just a fantasy,” I say. “Incest, child sacrifice, genocide, murder... all shadows on our Father's eternal face? Eternity allows everything to be imagined away?”

He considered my question as if it mattered. As if I mattered.

“Not everything,” says Yusuf, slowly. “There are unimaginable things. Some things even the imagination resists.”

Imaginative resistance. I looked it up. Professor Gendler defines it as the unwillingness of people to imagine morally deviant fictional worlds. I was in the bathroom, post-shower, so lost in wondering if readers could be so perverse, somehow I accidentally flashed Yusuf, who happened to be passing by. Damn unknotted bathrobe!

I hope he saw me.

Dinner consisted of roasted red-pepper strips, golden focaccia, lemon wedges, and filleted slices of white haddock seasoned with Moroccan spice. I told them about Dr. Gendler's paper.

“Gendler merely named one of Hume's puzzles,” growled the Moody Djinn. “Hume claimed that moral imagination had its limits. Rubbish. People can be made to imagine anything.”

It's his tone. It's the tone that bothers me. It makes me nothing. It flicks me away like lint. Yusuf smiles and compliments me about the food; he's playing umpire, as always.

“I don't know, father. Dr. Gendler's stories are convincing.”

“Naturally.”

“How about an example, Zulaikha?” asks Yusuf.

Such a knight, my dear Jew.

“**Okay**, here's one: In killing her baby, Giselle did the right thing. After all, it was a girl.”

The Moody Djinn frowns. “And?”

“Make that story morally acceptable!”

“Please. Let's say Giselle has some terrible disease, peculiar to women. Alas, it's transmissible and incurable. Why shouldn't she kill her baby? After all, it's a girl.”

“**Imagination** is not a choice,” says the Moody Djinn. He has the air of a man nursing a personal sorrow. “Necessity is God's confessor. What must be done may always be forgiven, Zulaikha. Must be forgiven. Who will not forgive a robot?”

“Truly,” said Yusuf, in a quiet voice. “Truly, truly.”

False. False. False.

I found Yusuf in the garden, between dusk and a cypress tree. "So you're leaving."

"Aren't we all? Sit, Zulaikha. Let's sit here forever. Just you and I in this little house with yellow slats on a cypress-scented hill. So small a dream should be imaginable. Even for me. Show me how, Zulaikha. Come closer."

The first kiss: With Yusuf, in the cypress-scented garden. I remember our teeth clickety-clicking as we kissed. We were so eager we kissed air a couple of times. I remember the flickering thrust of his tongue. Such wet urgency. His gray eyes *ate* me. God bless Yusuf, bless his dirty, pure soul. I am so Maluma.

We broke off, breathless (as I'd often read happened). Stupid, grinning, happy mammals. I was ready to sprout placenta then and there. I began to open my blouse, but he stopped me.

"Why not?"

Because.

I placed his trembling hands on my breasts. He suggested instead that we try kisses from the Kamasutra. Some Jew.

Moody Djinn had been teaching me statistical physics, and I'd never seen the point, but now an experiment occurs to me.

"What experiment?" Yusuf sounded cautious.

An equilibrium experiment, my dear mammal. If X = number of times I kiss you, then for what X would kissing you become as uninteresting as kissing myself? (Five points)

Tidbit: Vatsyayana's Kamasutra, like all Hindu grammars, conquers by dividing. Kisses are classified into two main groups. The first set is recommended for virgins, the second for experienced sluts. For virgins, there are three recommended types: the Casual, the Throbbing, and the Insinuation. All require a complete lower-lip. Upper-lip kisses are not recommended for beginners.

Tidbit: For the experienced, the lower-lip types include the Equal kiss, the Sideways kiss, the Turned-around kiss, and the Impressing. The cynical may attempt the Hard Pressing. The perverted upper-lip kisses are treated separately. There are sleepy kisses, armpit kisses, navel kisses, kissing games. In each, the tongue plays the role of a verb modifier.

Conclusion: X is undefined. I could kiss Yusuf till the end of time, and it would always beat self-osculation.

“We’ll leave the Creeping Vine for later,” says my Vatsyayana, smiling. He finger-tests his lower lip, where I had bitten him.

“I wonder if kissing is ergodic,” said I, sighing. “So many boys. So little time.”

Ergodicity: it’s one of Moody Djinn’s dark passions. He’d been trained as a physicist, and the damage showed. He saw timepieces everywhere. He’d say “random” but he meant “covered timepiece.” When he says “statistical,” it’s short hand for “lots of timepieces.” When he says “ergodic,” perhaps he means “melting clock.” Absolute time for absolute fathers.

Ergodicity equates sequences and ensembles. One coin tossed a thousand times. A thousand coins tossed all at once. Statistically, there’s no difference! Coin tossing is ergodic. Moody Djinn claims no one really knows why. A single boy kissed a thousand times. A thousand boys kissed all at once. Kissing isn’t ergodic. That’s for sure.

Poincaré’s Theorem: Take a dough ball and add a blot of ink. Start kneading. Soon, the blot will stretch and spread throughout the dough. But keep kneading, and Poincaré proved that for such ergodic transformations, the original inkblot will recur. Maybe in a different spot, maybe after a long, long time, but reappear it will.

My lips are still sweetly sore from kissing. I’m sprawled out in the living room, lying my way through a college application. Yusuf is lost in deep thought. Or perhaps its guilt and remorse.

“It’s asking here for my strongest quality,” I say, looking up. “Virtue? Or is it Chastity? Whom does your God prefer?”

Poincaré’s Theorem (the formal version): Let T be a measure preserving transformation on a probability space $(\Omega, \mathbf{F}, \mathbf{P})$. If $\mathbf{B} \subseteq \mathbf{F}$, then for almost every point $x \in \mathbf{B}$ (with respect to \mathbf{P}), $\exists k: T^k(x) \in \mathbf{B}$. Roughly, almost every point x in \mathbf{B} is recurrent.

Yusuf: That was wrong.

Zulaikha: Yes, so perverted. I thought I’d faint.

Yusuf: It’s wrong. I can’t — mustn’t — fall in love.

Zulaikha: Hai Allah.

Yusuf: I betrayed your father's trust.

Zulaikha: Well, he's got an even greater shock coming.

(Silence)

Zulaikha: You'll tell him, won't you? That you can't go through with it. Not anymore.

I think I am going mad. The kiss transformed me. Even now, I feel the weaving magic, sparking along my exhausted nerves, caressing me with the camel-brush of memory. The thighs' wetness, the bristle's brute scrape, lips wounded red — How could it not have made him anew? Cave animal. How can he still contemplate murder?

It has begun to happen. I overhear the Moody Djinn test-reading Yusuf's note: "Do not mourn my death. Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet. It is my time to be strong, to yield something sweet. I, Yusuf, am not afraid. I tread the road walked by my ancestors..."

The Moody Djinn is cleaning out the powder residue from the barrel, slide and magazine of his Kahr MK40. He'll test-fire a round and then holster it in the De Santis, now cracked with age. Soon he'll come to say goodbye. He will be very parental, even tender: "Nothing will happen to me, Zulaikha."

Correct.

My father thinks: We Copts are a brutalized people. God, I love this weapon. We've been beaten, robbed, humiliated, raped, murdered and desecrated. Wonder if Yusuf checked his vest straps? We've kept our peace, our Word. Our patience has been misinterpreted. The situation cannot continue. Zulaikha loves tilapia; I'll get some on the way home.

Yusuf thinks: I remember the jib of her thigh. A whorl of lime and haddock. O God, I'm so frightened. I need Galilee's sands between my toes. We didn't try the Creeping Vine. I must change my underwear. Did Gideon worry about underwear? I wish Zulaikha were here. Why do I panic? All things pass.

Moody Djinn: Let's get you ready.

Yusuf: I'd like to say goodbye first.

Moody Djinn: Better not. It'll only upset you.

Yusuf: Does it matter now what I feel? I'm a robot.

Moody Djinn: Rubbish. This is necessary. You've to avenge our innocents. The Lord will strengthen your arm.

Yusuf: She's here! Kiss me, Zulaikha.

I wanted to dissolve in Yusuf, and he in me. I wound my right leg around my lover's waist, threw my right hand around his neck, lowered his head to my upturned face — two statues around a temple pillar — and kissed Yusuf as if I would suck out his life. Ours was the world and time.

The Moody Djinn was so angry, his eyes mottled a urine red. Some fathers are demons. Some fathers are bone gardens. Some fathers must be sprung in bear traps and some fathers must be put to bed.

“Go to your fucking room,” he says. “Now.”

“Kiss me, father.” I throw my arms around his neck.

The filet knife is sharp. Sharper than a razor, sharper than my hate, sharper than the circumcision of Zipporah. Someone is trying to kill father. He stands so still, my bridegroom of blood. I slice everything in the quarter-traversal around the jib of father's neck. It's nothing like filleting fish. I'll never be clean again.

The blot won't stop spreading. My hands, the fallen knife, the fallen souls. It bleeds out of the little house with the yellow slats on a cypress-scented hill, over the green glad Earth, blotting out the sun.

Yusuf: It was necessary, beloved.

I shiver. What a chilly day.

Yusuf: I love you.

I shiver again.

What is necessary may be forgiven. Must be forgiven. The choice of love and the necessity of death. I have chosen love, so death shall have no forgiveness. All those stories in the Good Book. Why isn't patricide one of them? Imagine a God of Choice. Imagine a God who dares imagine His own death.

I, Zulaikha, a few seconds old, sixteen-point-two miraculous years old, ten-thousand years old, deathless and ageless, unborn and perennial, a smudge in Time's dough. I gaze at my father, squinting to blind the light crowning his head. He is smiling. He cradles me. We are going to be friends, I can tell.

In some world, there's a Yusuf; burnt offering, spattered flesh. In some world, there's a Moody Djinn, tribal and vengeful. In some world, there's a

Zulaikha, forever complicit and mute. Many worlds, many strange things. But all these worlds are guilty, and so cannot be this world, womb of all possible worlds, this blessed, bloodstained world.

Old Yusuf has a wife. Zulaikha is her name. She perches on his shoulder, nibbles his ear. When she's bored, he opens windows and lets her out. She returns in minutes, days, sometimes weeks. But return she does; bruised lips, folded wings. Then he buys her gifts: pearls, perfumes, salves and stories. Imagine them happy. ¶

The Hyacinth Girl

Adrienne J. Odasso

to the sound of '81, by Joanna Newsom...

FORGET FEAR IN a handful of dust,
forget your shadow at evening rising
to meet you. If it's fear that you want,
I'll show you fear that slips in, surreptitious,
while you're sleeping. I'll show you trust
that betrays your every unconscious breath,
threads terrors through your heart unsuspecting
of death. And the shades you will face there can't
be held accountable for what will rise around us
in the gloom: no blossoms, no scent of royal purple
will bloom for you here. No laughter will lead you,
blinking, back into daylight, for in dreaming
you have crossed the river of all regrets
for good. Girl, leave your flowers behind you.



I love to sit before the open window, enjoying nature, listening to the birds sing, feeling the sun on my cheeks, holding Peter's hand. Sometimes he smiles at me before he disappears. I know the place he goes to, but I never follow. I'm still needed here.

Peter never stays long, and who can blame him? This place is full of tears. I know he doesn't count them. One tear is as good as a thousand. But they seldom call his name. They seldom cry for him.

It's not fair. He suffered just as much as anyone.

Kid Despair in Love

M.K. Hobson

to the sound of Electric City by Firewater...

300 MARKET IS a cube of black fritted glass, a monster in the ring. Its CEO is a wily old bantam, his sixty-one-year-old body hard and wiry, his iron-banded legs clenched with muscle beneath gabardine wool slacks. He sucks down a half-dozen raw eggs every lunchtime and inseminates supplicant secretaries every afternoon at four. The majority shareholders have given him the name *To Mega Therion*, The Great Beast. On the golf course he is known (to a very select few) as Tom. To his subordinates (which are legion), he is The Beast.



When the callout comes from the CEO of Atrium West, The Beast is scornful. He's got twice two dozen such fights under his slim ostrich-leather belt. He pounded Pacific Place into rubble fifteen years ago — a better fight, the railbirds say, than when the Seagram took on the Lever House and left hunks of bolt-sprung wreckage scattered all over midtown.

Atrium West doesn't stand a chance.

The callout comes from the CEO of Atrium West, as it should, on a Friday. The UPS brownsuit carries it to the desk of The Beast's executive assistant, a slim efficient young man who graduated at the top of his class at Harvard and carries a pearl-handled straight razor in his back pocket. The XA scans the printed PowerPoint pages, noting the insulting headers, the lurid charts and graphs, the obscene use of fonts. He carries the package in to the penthouse corner office, tosses it on The Beast's desk. It lands on top of pages of lovingly-detailed schematics; crosses with agony-amplification microphones engineered into their transverse beams.

"Kid Despair," he says, "is in love."

The Beast has been contemplating crucifixion for a week now, since a hundred anarchists stormed the lobby of 300 Market and filled the decorative fountain (titled “Hope”) with oxblood. Flies everywhere. Pumps gummed and clotted. Tens of thousands of dollars of discomfiture and inconvenience.

On The Beast’s computer screen, a video loops. It is an internal resource uploaded to the company Intranet by the VP of Corporate Security. Over and over, in grainy high-angle low-resolution, salaried shock-troops in black carbonfiber gas the anarchists, round them up at assault-riflepoint. Berets fly. Employees huddle behind square concrete plinths planted with Japanese peace lilies. Employees do not like to feel insecure at lunchtime. But the VP of Corporate Security has an MBA in Public Relations and he knows how to calm them. The Beast watches out of the corner of his eye as, for the hundredth time, the VP of Corporate Security shoots an anarchist in the head, throws him into the clot-sputtering fountain, pisses on the twitching corpse. (It is his favorite part of the video.) The video closes with a perfectly produced studio shot, the VP of Corporate Security dressed in a black carbonfiber vest with multiple ammo pockets, cradling an AR-15. He soberly offers the moral of the story into a Sennheiser microphone:

Challenges create opportunities to reinvent in ways impossible in good times.

The remaining anarchists have been imprisoned in a cube of cyclone fencing on the lowest level of the parking structure. No food or water, the stink of ozone and exhaust, dim fluorescents flickering around the clock. It is reported that many of them have already died or gone mad. But madness isn’t a solution and death isn’t punishment enough.

The Beast looks at the envelope his XA has brought him. He notes that the name of the sender — Atrium West’s CEO, Kid Despair — has been written in some disgusting combination of blood and feces. The Beast draws out the contents. His brow furrows.

It is a standard callout proposal, hundreds of pages of officious profanity, single spaced. He’ll send this on to legal and let them sacrifice whatever goats are necessary. But it is one of the document’s attachments that catches his gaze — a photograph of a gaunt, unsmiling young woman. Her hair is slick and straight, cut across the brow with razor-slash accuracy. Her eyes seethe with anarchy.

The XA licks his lower lip.

“Love makes men do stupid things,” he says.

Heaving a sigh, The Beast lifts the handset of his black desk phone. It has precisely 144 buttons. His fingertips dance an arcane combination. His

voice resounds through 300 Market, making lifers tremble, the non-vested clutch at their chests, temps lapse into amnesiac unconsciousness.

Monday, he says. Everyone at their desk a half-hour early.

The XA will follow up with an Outlook invite, flagged with three red exclamation points.

**IT IS A STANDARD CALLOUT PROPOSAL,
HUNDREDS OF PAGES OF OFFICIOUS PROFANITY,
SINGLE SPACED**

Atrium West is tall — three dozen floors — with a long reach. Gamey. Entrepreneurial. Lots of Harvard B-school tricks. Its CEO is too big for his britches, the railbirds say; a forty-five-year-old wunderkind, soft around the middle, a high-tech refugee who swallows quad espressos like skim milk and chews handfuls of Adderall like conversation hearts. His eyes move like he's trying to catch something with them. He giggles at inappropriate times. His heart races and his blood presses hard against the weak places in his brain.

He's been known to lick blood from the nail-scratched backs of crackhead prostitutes, take six-figure bets on how many days he can go without sleeping, weave 120-mph pathways through standstill rush-hours on his MV-Augusta F4CC (without a helmet), jog until even innocent bystanders can hear his heart thrashing in irregular panic.

He calls himself Kid Despair. He's had the name embroidered on a long silk robe with flames on the hem. He wears it every day, over a wrinkled Paul Stewart buttondown that he never washes.

He's taken other buildings, big mean old bastards like the Woolworth Building, that slow nineteenth-century behemoth of brownstone and quicklime cement. Old buildings like that don't go down easy, you have to pound and pound. And he did, he busted the Woolworth, brought it down, though he had to sacrifice a whole corner of the eleventh floor and the entire data archiving department to do it.

"He's either unbelievably incompetent at dying or unbelievably lucky at living," is the XA's assessment to The Beast. It is an assessment largely unnecessary; The Beast is interested only in the photo, which he stares at through narrowed eyes.

"Her name is Marianne," the XA says, and presents a PowerPoint deck (hastily compiled, but impeccable nonetheless) bulletpointing her entire ontological framework:

- SHE IS AN ANARCHIST. SHE WORKS AT WAL-MART. HER FAVORITE PIE IS CHERRY.

- SHE IS THE TARGET OF A HOPELESS, AFTER-MIDNIGHT PASSION, CONCEIVED BY KID DESPAIR OVER A TWO-WEEK PERIOD WHEN HE WAS TROLLING SUBVERSIVE CHATROOMS LOOKING FOR NEW WAYS TO GET HIGH OR KILL HIMSELF OR BOTH AT ONCE.

- HE SPILLED THOUSANDS OF WORDS AT HER FEET IN THE WEE HOURS OF A DOZEN MORNINGS, PIXEL-SINGING THE SAVAGERY OF HER RAZOR-SHARP BANGS, HER PENKNIFE-SLICED ANTISMILE, HER NARROW SUSPICIOUS EYES.

- *YOU'VE GIVEN ME THE WILL TO LIVE AGAIN*, WAS HIS LAST MESSAGE TO HER.

“Her last post was not to him,” supplements the XA. “It was a general message to the entire group, posted three days ago.”

He reads it from the screen of his BlackBerry.

The buildings are the modern-day undead. Every night, they become corpses. Every weekday, they rejuvenate, like a vampire rising from its coffin. They are abominations. They mutilate the souls of their victims, keep them alive with meagre paychecks and promises of promotion, keep them in mortal terror of freedom. Their victims do not know how to be free, any more than a cell knows how to be free of a fingernail. They do not know how to be free any more than a bloodcell knows how to be free.

The buildings torment their victims, and their victims torment the world, consuming sugar and butter and salt and ugly images and confusing propoganda and vomiting it out as filth for the less fortunate to pick through.

We must stake each one of them through its bloody diseased heart.

We will start with 300 Market.

We will take the battle to The Beast.

The Beast thinks of cyclone fencing, flickering fluorescents, the smell of exhaust. He thinks of blood-gummed Hope and flies buzzing around it. He glances at the doomed action that is still looping on his computer screen.

“We still have her?”

“If she hasn’t cut her wrists on the razorwire,” the XA says.

“See that she doesn’t,” The Beast says. “She is a critical resource in these uncertain times.”

Over the weekend, there are quiet family barbecues and hours of intense meditation. Department heads sharpen ceremonial pencils and bow their heads before photos of The Beast shaking hands with an Argentinian soccer superstar at last quarter’s shareholder meeting. Administrative assistants

whisper that the callout from Atrium West is all because of *love* and steel themselves against the devastating romance of it. Junior project managers roam the quiet Sunday streets in packs, pulling strangers into alleys and beating them until they stink of blood and piss. But the pencils and romance and strangers are only an *aperitif*. The employees want to taste the blood of Atrium West, oil black and mirror reflective, smelling of white-out and toner and carpet glue.

Deep in the basement of the parking structure, anarchists thread fingers through cyclone fencing. The XA approaches, polished wingtips snapping crisp menace against oil-spotted concrete. Behind him is the VP of Corporate Security, keys jangling at his belt, his AR-15 slung across his back.

The XA scans the cage. Anarchists, weak with hunger and thirst, glare at him from behind sunken, purple-shadowed eyes. They spit and scowl and swear with hesitant malice. The air smells of infection, of thirst, of resignation.

The XA looks at them all, from face to bruised face. It's like he's picking out a tie or a new Mercedes; each option is considered, weighed, dismissed. Finally, his eyes light on an unsmiling girl with razor slice bangs.

He points. "That one."

"**Kid** Despair is coming for you," the XA tells her, as they walk toward the elevator bank.

"He's coming because he believes that's what I want." The XA cannot see her sneer, for he is walking well ahead of her. She sees the outline of the straight razor in his back pocket. It is only the rifle pressed between her shoulder blades that keeps her from lunging for it.

"You want to see The Beast ground to rubble," the XA says.

"I want to see you all ground to rubble," she says. "This is a good way to start."

Monday morning. Nine a.m.

Coffee is brewed, fresh boxes of donuts sit open but untouched. On every floor of 300 Market, employees are shaking out their limbs for the conflict to come. Threat is postured and telegraphed in 10,000 wireless communications, email messages, telephone calls. From level to level, 300 Market secretaries call Atrium West secretaries (with whom they may have gone for a mani-pedi earlier in the week) and cuss them out; 300 Market project managers call Atrium West project managers (with whom they may have shared a salad earlier in the week) and berate them with foulness.

300 Market VPs call Atrium West VPs (with whom they may have played golf earlier in the week) and heap threats on them, describing in detail the manner in which they will eviscerate their sons and daughters and eat their livers raw.

The air sings with violence.

On the twenty-eighth floor, The Beast supplicates his mentor-Gods: Jack Welsh and Andrew Carnegie, William Randolph Hearst. He kneels before an altar, arms outstretched and bleeding, wads of hundred-dollar bills burning as incense.

“Did you know,” he says to his XA, “that the Treasury Department uses narcotic ink to print the hundreds?”

The XA files the information for future use. He also notes that his cock is diamond-hard and he could stick a pair of scissors in his arm and would not feel it.

The Beast has been a CEO since the time when one man could be CEO, when one brain could comprehend the complex workings of all a company's moving parts — the capital, the cash flow, the stockholders, investor relations, debt covenants, union agreements, tax liabilities. But times change, and it became impossible to follow or understand. The complexities were like the heart of a fractal; understand one part and there was another deeper part, yet unseen. Contract reports. Profit-loss statements. ROI calculations, one-year, five-year, ten-year marketing strategies ...

His role changed from tactical to abstract, from operational to notional. He became an elder God, a superterranean Godhead. He became a Battle CEO, and his job became one of corporate prizefighter, institutional matador in a suit embroidered with curlicues of gold braid, a grand old man of great potency.

“Stakeholder analysis is complete,” the XA murmurs from behind him, gently breaking his solemn reverie. “4% negative, 23% neutral, 73% positive. How would you like to proceed?”

“We need to change the minds of the bottom 27%,” The Beast says. “Change their minds from solid and functioning to scrambled and bleeding.”

He crumples another hundred, stuffs it in the corner of his mouth, chews it like a wad of tobacco.

“Let's get it done.” He drools slightly, his eyes heavy-lidded.

He steps into a special elevator which travels only one floor. From the twenty-eighth floor, where The Beast has his suite of offices, to the twenty-ninth floor, the penthouse. Usually empty and silent, today the twenty-ninth floor buzzes with activity. Support staff inhale awe as The Beast arrives like

a thundering colossus, wraps fingers around the instruments of control, and gives the command.

300 Market tears free from its mooring in an explosion of steam and water and sparks. Sewage pipes burst, gushing raw human waste, leaving behind a trail of scent by which the building may eventually find its way home. If it survives.

Buildings up and down the street whisper between themselves as The Beast thunders and stomps and dents his way down the broad street, tearing up decorative trees from their roots, decimating urban orchards and little paved pedestrian squares.

Workers in their cubicles steady plants and water bottles and stuffed animals while typing furiously on plastic keyboards. The building's network hums a lover's song. This is no time for a coffee break, no time to gather around the water cooler. This is a top-priority, mission-critical, short-term tactical initiative. This is the definition of overtime. This is what they come to work for.

The Beast's testosterone is sweet and stinging. It flows down, a spermy balm bathing those on the floors below him. It drips from sprinkler-heads, falling sweetly on upturned supplicant faces. Their yearly bonus. Coffee and donuts. Breaktime and minesweeper and department potlucks with the warmed-over low-fat tuna casseroles the administrative assistants made the night before.

Victory is assured.

For The Beast and Kid Despair there is no such solace, no such assurance. They are the ones that will feel everything when the collision finally comes. They will feel every blow, every loss, every smash. Every employee that's lost, they will feel in their guts and groins. It is dreadful anticipation. On bluetooth earpieces, they talk loving trash to each other to steel themselves for the pain that is to come.

"Your Christmas party was lame," mutters Kid Despair, as if he's talking to himself. "The only good part was sneaking upstairs and fucking your twelve-year old niece. I wiped myself on your Egyptian cotton sheets afterward."

The Beast doesn't take the bait, concentrating instead on his movements. He is not interested in prolonging this, as he might once have been. He is not interested in the art of torture, the exacting of painful revenge for this upstart's hubris. He just wants to get this over with and get home. He is, he realizes suddenly, a little bit tired and could use an early night in.

Behind him, his VP of Investor Relations is on the phone with six analysts at once, her voice a ringing silver trill.

Success is a marathon, not a hundred-yard dash.

The most important asset you can't buy is reputation.

"She's cute," Kid Despair says. "You should eat her eyeballs."

"Maybe I will," says The Beast, but his heart isn't really in it.

And then, suddenly, there he is, Kid Despair. Atrium West looms before The Beast, thirty-six stories of glass and steel and concrete, elevators and carpets and curtainwall, swaying in place, loosening up.

The Beast doesn't warm up. He launches in fast and sneaky like a fleabag drunk in a knife fight, sending glass flying in a shimmering cloud. Curtainwall shears, rebar twists and frays like fingers reaching to close the suddenly gaping hole. Employees scramble away from the wound; they must not allow themselves to flow out. They scramble up shuddering floors; they grasp desperately onto the bolted cubicle walls.

The power of focus should not be underestimated. The VP of Investor Relations blurbles on cheerfully amid the din, probably doped to the teeth. *Focus on short-term goals.*

Short-term goals? The next ninety days, the next quarter? No, make that micro-term goals. The next thirty seconds. The time it takes a man to bleed to death. The time it takes concrete to crumble in freefall.

It's in the abyss that the person develops the skills to get out.

All around The Beast, lieutenants grunt and strain. They scream furiously into cellphones and pound on their PDAs with tiny fingertapping drumbeats. Personal assistants run between them like cutmen, thrusting cups of coffee at them, cups of green tea. And pills. Whatever pills are handy; advil, tagamet, vicodin, oxycodone. Painkillers and acid reducers.

The fight lasts for hours. Or perhaps days or months, time behaves strangely in such circumstances. It speeds up and slows down. The arcing swing of a reinforced concrete berm toward a weak spot decoratively clad in brushed aluminum is glacial in its restrained elegance; then there is the apocalyptic crash and time becomes panic's heartbeat, pushing screams through the smoke-filled air.

The Beast aches. Every sinew, every bone, every nerve screams with exhaustion and fury. Sweat pours down the insides of his legs, pools in his Italian loafers. His pain becomes hatred. Hatred becomes focus. Focus becomes new holes in Atrium West, one after another after another.

The Beast's strength has always been tenacity; the ability to keep pounding even after the need for pounding is done. But Kid Despair's strength is different. He depends on the weakness of others.

His face flashes on the bank of computer screens that previously depicted falling debris at various angles. His eyes are like paste diamonds thumb-pressed into tar. His face is waxen, cadaverous. Behind him, flames leap up and subordinates scream. And yet he smiles, his teeth ghastly pearls. It's clear he has one last trick up his sleeve. Or at least he thinks he does.

"Piggy pig. Piggy piggy pig." His eyes are mad-bright as he speaks to the XA, and only the XA. "You were Porcellian at Harvard, yes? *Dum vivimus vivamus*, yes? The Old Barn, the Boar's Head. I was too, piggy pig. I am your *brother*. Will you see your brother served thus?"

The XA's lips twist, but he does not speak. He knows that The Beast can hear everything. The Beast is a Yale man, Skull and Bones, but between them they've always had the good manners never to discuss such differences. But now manners seem far away, and the differences seem desperate. And the old man says nothing, just continues to punch away. Another hole. Another hole.

"They say that if a Porc doesn't earn his first million before he turns 40, the club will give it to them. How old are you now, piggy-pig? How's your legacy fixed? How's *he* let you fix it?" There's a stutter in Kid Despair's voice as The Beast punches another hole in his curtainwall. "You're not old money, you're not even new money. You're *no*-money, a scholarship climber. I *know* climbers, piggy-pig. And I know that men like The Beast exist only to keep men like you from climbing too high."

The XA, staring straight forward, blinks slowly.

"They tell me you keep a razor in your back pocket." A strained gasp. A waterfall of steel. A long pause, then a strangled command: "Use it."

The XA reaches into his back pocket, flashes open the scrolled steel. "I will," he whispers into air that is thick with powdered glass. Kid Despair makes a small hopeful inhalation, until he sees the XA grab the back of a high-backed leather executive rolling chair. The XA spins it to face the cameras, revealing an unsmiling woman lashed with Cat-6 cable.

Marianne ...

"You knew we had her." The sparks from tearing electrical cables shine along his razor like comet-trails. "You just didn't know how much it would hurt to watch."

Kid Despair stumbles only a second, but it is enough. In that moment The Beast finds a vulnerable spot, a structurally-weakened floor in Atrium West's midsection, around the fourteenth floor. The Beast sweeps through

it, slashing supports and struts. There is a horrific creaking crushing sound. Atrium West doubles over, sloppy as a controlled demolition gone wrong. Wreckage rains down over a fifteen-block area.

Kid Despair goes down screaming.

The Beast collapses to the funhouse-tilted floor, his suit powdered with finely pulverized concrete. He hasn't an ounce of strength left. His mouth opens and closes silently, like a landed trout. His XA kneels beside him, lays a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"You didn't betray me." The Beast's rasp does not mask his astonishment.

"I did not, sir," says the XA.

"Call me..." says The Beast softly, drifting on waves of pain, "...Call me Tom."

The XA perhaps snickers, perhaps chokes. Whatever emotion he displays is lost as Marianne leaps up from the chair, restraining cables slashed cleanly by someone's razor. She jerks a Phrygian cap down over greasy brown curls. She tears her open her shirt, bears her breasts like a college girl in Daytona Beach.

"No Gods," she yells, jabbing a fist into the air. "No masters!"

Anarchists swarm from hidden places in the woodwork panelling. They no longer look near death or madness. Rather they are plump and well-hydrated from a weekend of time-and-a-half catering and bottles of chilled spring water, which the XA ordered in for them. He is pleased that food service executed his command so efficiently, without any bothersome need to question or verify. The anarchists are well-armed, a condition ensured by a key to the corporate weapons locker smuggled in via a turkey and havarti on wheat; the XA imagines the surprised look on the VP of Corporate Security's face when they put him up against the wall. He wishes he had a video of it to play for The Beast. For *Tom*.

The Beast, aching and old, feels steel at his throat.

The XA holds him by the hair, grasping it hard at the roots. The Beast will not give him the honor of asking why, but the XA hisses the reason into the old man's clean shell-shaped ear nonetheless.

"Of course I hate you, you know I hate you, as all young men hate old men," he says. "But more than you, I hate the structures that have allowed you to retain a position you no longer deserve. I hate the men you play golf with, men who call you Tom, men whose strength is only the strength of inertia and mindless friction. You are all dinosaurs, but your bones are

tough, and I will use them to beat all of you to death.”

Then the XA pulls the straight razor across The Beast's throat. Blood fountains over both of them. The old man gurgles and sputters and dies. The XA smears decorative patterns in the blood that soaks him, and slides the razor back into his pocket.

Anarchists leak flaccidly out of the damaged doors and windows of 300 Market, pus and exudate, black bile running in the gutters, looking for other buildings to infect and destroy. The streets roil with them; they seem to multiply as they hit the pavement.

The XA goes to his desk. He draws out a silk robe, new and freshly embroidered. The name on the back is Virus.

“We will change the world,” Marianne says, leaning on a tilt-keeled windowsill, looking down at her turbid armies blackening the streets. She looks sidelong from beneath razor-slash bangs. “You didn't betray me.”

“Love makes men do stupid things,” Virus offers, pulling her into a rough embrace.

Marianne kisses him, bare breasts pressed against his bloody shirtfront. As she does, her fingers creep over his waist, slide down below his beltline, feeling for the bloody straight razor in his back pocket. But he's already moved it, and it's not there. ❧

*I will remember you, Jeff, fifty, a hundred years later.
I will sing you praises forever and ever, as you've sung
holy praises for me.*

-For me.

My Father's Eyes

E.C. Myers

to the sound of Kamera by Wilco...

MY

MY HANDS TREMBLE as I swirl developer solution over the photographic paper. I've never been more anxious to see one of my pictures before. My classmates would say this is another drawback to traditional photography over digital: delayed gratification. I'll never make that technological leap; I still shoot in black and white. My father never dabbled with digital photography either, and it's because of him that I decided to become a photojournalist in the first place.



A cloudy scene emerges on the paper floating in the tray. Shapes and shadows magically replace the blank white surface, gradually forming trees and rocks. I've had this image burned into my mind ever since I glimpsed it through my lens and my finger instinctively clicked the shutter. It's a bad photo, the subject slightly unfocused and too far away, though I've blown it up as much as I can. It won't help my thesis project or launch a career, but it's the single most important picture of my life.

As I squint at it in the dim red glow of the safelight, a crouching figure fades into the scene like a ghost. His face is blurred, captured in motion just as he'd turned and darted away. Despite the blurring, and the fact that I haven't seen him in fifteen years except in other pictures, I know he's my father. I knew it even before I unloaded the film from my camera.

In my haste to fish the page out of the developer, I fumble the metal tongs into the tray with a splash. I lift the photo out, but I don't bother to let the chemicals run off completely before dunking it in the stop bath and submerging it in the fixer.

I study the damp photograph at the kitchen table, with an old family photo beside it for comparison. My father's hair has grown long, falling below his waist and draping his broad shoulders in mangy tangles. He's bigger than he used to be, his large muscles taut and defined as he springs

into motion. A bushy beard obscures much of his face, and his naked body is patched with dried mud. He seems feral, more animal than man, except for his eyes. I remember those eyes: clear, brown and sharp, like mine. When I looked into those eyes, I knew.

By the time my mother comes home from her late shift at the hospital I've made multiple prints of that photo, enlarging it over and over. I cropped many of the prints around his eyes, his most human feature. I've also scanned the image into my computer, trying to enhance it into something more recognizable as my father. He's in there, somewhere. Alive.

"What's all this?" my mother asks as she enters the kitchen and drops a bucket of fried chicken onto the table with a hollow thump. She looks around at the drying photos I have suspended on wires across the room, the warped and curling prints scattered on the table, the family portrait that was taken a little after my fifth birthday. A little before my father disappeared.

She never told me what happened to him. He was just gone; that's what my mother said whenever I asked, until I stopped asking. "Gone," she would say, which could mean anything. He left, he died, he was killed. Whatever I wanted it to mean, really. In my favorite fantasy I made him a secret government agent on an important mission. Kids want their dad to be someone they can be proud of, someone they can brag about — especially if he can't be someone they can come home to. Who thinks that his dad might be running around naked in the wilderness?

"When were you going to tell me, Mom?" I ask.

"Tell you what?" she says distractedly. She looks at the pictures, but doesn't see them. I toss her a printout of one of my best efforts and she picks it up. She drops it a moment later.

"Why didn't you tell me my father's a devol?" I ask.

"Don't use that word," she says. She sounds tired. She suddenly looks old and weary, like life has defeated her at last. Like she's given up. Maybe she has — or maybe she gave up fifteen years ago.

She sits down at the table across from me, the evidence spread between us. She covers her face with her hands, then removes them, like a game of peek-a-boo. She does it again, and now her face and palms are wet.

"What's a better word? Is this what you call 'gone'? When people go, they usually end up somewhere."

"It's all the same, Ambrose. This —" She picks up the printout and crinkles it up. "This isn't your father."

"It sure looks like him," I say.

"Your father was go — He stopped being Randall Welling a long time ago."

"Did you ever visit him at the reservation?"

“There was no reason to.”

“He would’ve liked to see you. Us.”

She shakes her head.

“Well, I’d have liked to see him,” I say.

“I hoped you’d never see him like this.” She bows her head, eyes shut and tears falling. “I wanted you to remember him as he was, before.”

The sound of her tears dripping onto the photograph fills the silence.

“I barely remember him at all. I had a right to know!” I tell her. I stand up and leave her alone. Her sobs follow me all the way to the basement until I close the darkroom door and shut them out.

Devols, Neo-anderthals, or, to be politically correct, regressives — whatever you want to call them — have been around for almost sixty years. They all suffer from a rare form of dementia called Hollander’s disease, named for Dr. David Hollander, who diagnosed it in 2017. Or maybe it was named for the first case he studied: his teenage daughter, Alessandra.

Most victims of this degenerative disease, unable to function in society, end up in one of three national reservations. Some are sent to smaller asylums that specialize in managed care for devols. Dr. Hollander contributed millions to the development of the reservations; he wanted to secure a place for his daughter to live out her life as happily and *naturally* as she could. Years later he joined her when he finally succumbed to the disease himself, or at least appeared to. Since he died, his biographers have speculated that he wasn’t a regressive at all, suggesting that he just wanted to be close to his daughter.

When my advisor proposed that I study and photograph regressives for my undergrad thesis, I was excited because there aren’t many pictures or videos of them — not nearly as many as you might expect. The main reason they are kept out of the public eye is because of accusations that the reservations are a *violation* of human rights. Most who argue this don’t have family or friends that are affected by the disease, but the fiercest opponents include families that don’t want to be reminded of the loved ones they’ve lost to the disease. I can understand that. Seeing my father in that primitive state was painful, but I was surprised more than anything else. Even though I barely had a chance to know him, I felt his absence every day of my life — even more so because it had never been explained.

When I get home from school later that day, the house is dark. My mother has the night off, and when I pass her room upstairs I see the light of her bedside lamp shining around the cracks of her door. I stand outside,

listening. I consider knocking, apologizing for my accusations, but I slink off to my room instead. Our family has always left things unsaid.

On my bed I find a stack of the photographs I had left in the kitchen — face down — and an old cardboard box marked “Christmas ornaments,” spotted with mold and water stains, one corner crushed in. I sit beside the box and pull at the folded flaps, feeling grime stick to my fingertips as I open it.

My father's old camera is here, a manual Canon 35mm SLR, identical to mine. The lens is scratched and the film compartment is jammed shut; something rattles inside when I shake it. My mother had his backup camera repaired and gave it to me for my sixteenth birthday, the summer before I left for college. The gesture meant a lot: it was the first time she had openly acknowledged my father, long after we had stopped discussing him. Whenever other students — and often my teachers — try to persuade me to switch to a digital camera, I cling to that small fragment of my father, a relic of the past, and ignore them.

I rummage in the box and pull out two handfuls of plastic black and white film cartridges. A number of them have been exposed, the film leader rewound into the magazine, but they haven't been developed. I set them aside, wondering if I'll be able to coax photographs from the aged emulsions.

At the bottom of the box are several small, red leather photo albums. I open the top one and see my face, wide-eyed and pudgy, about three years old. I turn the thick plastic pages and see photo after photo of a younger me. The next book is filled with pictures of my mother, pregnant. There are images of her later, in the hospital, carrying her newborn son.

There are a lot of close-ups of my mother as a young woman, happier than I can recall ever seeing her. One picture in particular shows her posing for my father — it makes me wish that a woman will look at me that way someday. The next photo shows a complete transformation: she's crying, mascara streaks lining her cheeks. Was this when he gave her the bad news? When she realized she was going to lose him? I imagine having that same conversation with my mother one day. I don't ever want to cause someone that much pain.

I know why my father decided to capture that heartbreaking moment. My mother's face is open, her defenses are down — you can see right to the core of her. As frightened and vulnerable as she appears, I think it's the prettiest I've ever seen her.

The third album is incomplete. There's a picture of my mother and me in the park and some photos from my fifth birthday, including a close-up of me with cake smeared all over my face. And there's one picture of my father.

This last photo, only a third of the way through the mostly empty book,

is taken at a skewed angle, badly out of focus and underexposed. Despite the amateurish quality, I see that he is kneeling on a boulder at the park, the beginnings of a beard growing in. It looks surreally similar to the photograph I took yesterday. I realize that this is probably my first photograph.

"I haven't seen those in years," my mother says softly.

I look up and wipe tears from my face. She's standing in the door with her bathrobe wrapped around her, her arms wrapped around that. She's been crying too.

"I've never seen them," I say. I sound harsher than I intend. This box is a time capsule, a memorial, dedicated to my father. It's also a peace offering. "Thank you."

"You're so much like him," my mother says.

"Is that why you didn't tell me?" I ask.

She nodded. "I didn't want to know...if I were going to lose you too."

I hold up the book and show her the picture of my father as a young man.

"Did I take this?"

She comes closer to study the picture then nods. "You were only five. He wanted to teach you photography, couldn't wait until you were old enough. He was planning to get you a training camera, but he was already slipping away. After that day he went quickly."

When I scoot over she sits on the edge of the bed. She rests a hand on the broken camera on the bedspread.

"I went for a blood test today," I say.

She nods. "I thought you might."

"I have to know." The thought of losing my mind like my father did is terrifying. What kind of life is left after forgetting your wife and your son, living like a savage?

"I didn't want him to go," she says. "But he decided he wanted to go to a reservation, once he found out what was going to happen to him. He made me promise. And even then I didn't let him leave until I was absolutely sure..." Her voice quavers and she looks at me, then away and closes her eyes. "Until I was sure there was nothing left."

"Are you sure?"

She flips over one of the pictures I printed, a blow-up of my father's face. "I thought I was. Until I saw this." She lays the picture in her lap. "What if I made a mistake?"

"You did what he asked, Mom." I put my hand over hers, over the picture in her lap. "There was nothing else you could do."

"When do you get the results?"

“Not for a few days.” I put the photo albums back into the box, in the order that I found them. “Do you want to know what I find out?”

“I don’t know.”

She nods to the film rolls scattered on my bedspread. “I almost developed those, a few times, before I put them away. Your father was too confused to do them himself. He gave up after ruining a couple. But he kept shooting that camera, until the very end. Until he could barely remember how a camera worked.”

I scoop the rolls up and cradle them against my chest.

“Do you think there are still pictures on them?” she asks.

“I don’t know. I don’t know how much is left. But I’m going to find out.”

WHAT KIND OF LIFE IS LEFT AFTER FORGETTING YOUR WIFE AND YOUR SON, LIVING LIKE A SAVAGE?

Hollander’s disease has a very slow onset, resembling Alzheimer’s disease at first, then progressing very rapidly.

Early symptoms include short-term memory loss, irritability, and mood swings. Long-term memory gaps and personality shifts develop, followed by disorientation and confusion. Eventually the higher faculties deteriorate — most noticeably reasoning and communication. There’s an accompanying loss of inhibition and an increased sex drive, a strengthening of what are considered primal urges.

In the final stages, victims are reduced to simple speech and behavior; basically, they become evolutionary throwbacks. *Cavemen*.

As I stand in complete darkness, blindly guiding the film from the cartridges onto spiral holders, I think about what my father must have gone through. When I stand in the darkroom — *his* darkroom — I always feel close to him, closer now that I know I might suffer the same fate. He knew what was happening to him, but did he lie to himself that it was all just a phase, that he would be all right — the way my mother did? When he could no longer believe his own lies, how did he keep himself going, taking pictures and making plans for his future instead of giving in to despair? I hope his photographs will give me some of the answers.

There are eleven rolls of film in total, but only eight of them yield what could be called pictures. The rest are a waste, not because of the age of the film, but because they reveal only blurry photos of nothing in particular:

impressions of grass, a cloudless sky. A full reel that looked like it was taken with the lens cap on. These are the photos of a man who is losing his mind.

I make contact sheets from the negatives and examine the miniature images, organizing them in my best estimate of chronological order based on the deterioration in quality of composition and technique. I select the best of them and develop my dad's photographs one by one, growing more despondent with each new photo I pin to the line to dry. I had imagined that I could put together a collection of his last work, but the pictures are almost too painful to look at.

The first roll is closest to my father at the height of his talent — pictures of the neighborhood, places he had been. Some of them were long drives away, back in his hometown two states away. It was like he was revisiting his life, one last time. There were also pictures of people, a lot of children in the playground, a few more pictures of me.

My father was an urban photographer, documenting the city and the people that live there, but I noticed a trend towards emptiness — a large abandoned parking lot, an overgrown field behind a chain-linked fence, and then pictures of the open country just outside the city limits.

Later, rolls seem almost random, little better than the careless snapshots of a tourist. An entire roll follows a woman walking down the streets who becomes overtly frightened of the photographer stalking her. Another shows a series of pictures of sidewalks, garbage bags, abandoned cars, piles of dog shit on the street.

The rest are simply confused. Pictures of his hand, his feet, a leg, his penis, his back reflected in a mirror. Maybe he was cataloging the parts of himself, trying to stop himself from changing in the only way he knew how, by preserving himself forever in a photograph. There is one startling shot of his eyes, as though he had held the camera the wrong way around and peered into the lens.

When I finish, exhausted from spending the whole day developing and nauseous from the chemical fumes, I leave the pictures hanging in the darkroom. My mother will find them there, though I'm not sure if she should see them or not. I finally know exactly what she meant when she said my father was gone.

There is no cure for Hollander's. There is no treatment.

Many doctors continue to study and question what caused the disease in the first place, even as the number of new cases has dropped to the hundreds each year instead of the thousands. It's a hereditary disease, but the trigger for the genes has yet to be discovered.

Some people blame the government, terrorists, or God. Others blame pollution, radiation, even cell phones. One popular belief is that it is a result of human tampering with nature; that there is no cure for Hollander's because Hollander's is the cure for *us*.

Most people simply pretend that it doesn't exist.

I'm nervous as I approach the security station. I slide the university pass my advisor arranged for me through the slot in the glass. The pass has expired, but I couldn't wait for the paperwork to be renewed. I suppose I can tell the security guard that I'm visiting my father, but that would seem suspicious if he remembers me from my visit last week, and I want to bring my camera inside with me.

"You're back!" the guard says. "You ran off in such a hurry last time. People don't know what to expect when they come here. Not everyone can handle it."

"I just realized I was late for a class." I give him a foolish smile.

The guard frowns over his glasses as he examines the pass. "This is a week old."

"I know, but..." I lean closer to the window. "This is kind of embarrassing, but I botched the entire roll of pictures I took. It was a completely amateurish thing to do, but the film never threaded into the camera."

"You're not using digital?"

"I wanted a nostalgic touch," I say. "Listen, I *really* need photos for my senior thesis..."

The guard studies me. "Well, you've already been in there once, so I guess there's no harm." He slides the pass back to me and taps the touchscreen embedded in the desk. "Check in here."

When I check in I also check out, logging a time still several hours away. If I'm lucky no one will notice that I haven't left after this guard ends his shift.

When I get inside the tall, electrified gates I walk a distance from the guardhouse before ducking into the trees. I couldn't take many photos last time because the regressives had run from me, or hidden in the forest, though one curious woman had actually edged up to me. She plucked at my loose tee shirt and sniffed at me, her body close and smelling earthy and sun-warmed. As soon as I spoke to her she bolted like a scared rabbit.

Under the cover of thick foliage I strip, folding my shirt, jeans, and boxer shorts and placing them in a shallow hole with my sneakers and a plastic bag containing my watch, keys, cell phone, and wallet. I cover them with dirt and place a rotting log across the spot. I walk a little farther to the stream, which is man-made like all the other "natural" features on this expansive

tract of land.

I slap on thick handfuls of mud from the banks of the stream, shivering at the cold sliminess as I cake it over my bare skin. In preparation for this I've also grown my beard for the last three days, but my hair is still short. It's not much of a disguise, but I'm trying to pass myself off as a new arrival at the reservation; at the very least, I hope I won't spook the regressives as soon as they catch sight of me.

The only modern luxuries I allow are my camera and my camera bag, which has enough film and some provisions to last me for a week or so. After that I'll need to find food, though I doubt I'm up to hunting the wildlife they truck in here for the regressives.

I trudge through the forest making far too much noise and feeling every stone and twig dig into the soft soles of my feet. I sense eyes on me, but I don't spot anyone. Eventually I emerge into a clearing. There's a half-circle of regressives facing me, waiting.

My eyes scan their faces, glancing over their bronzed bodies and then sliding away. Their nakedness makes me self-conscious. The group is made up mostly of men, burly like the muscle-heads at my gym. The five women there are smaller, less muscled, and lean.

I stare at their sagging breasts and react in spite of myself. I'm surprised to see that two of the women are only a little older than me, reminding me that the disease targets without regard for age or sex. I recognize one of them — a pretty girl with a wild mane of reddish-brown hair, large breasts, and wide hips — as the woman who approached me before. I think she smiles a little, her head high and her nose flaring as she scents the air.

I lift my camera very slowly and peer through the viewfinder. I focus on the gathering, carefully framing the composition. When I press the shutter the click resounds in the silent forest and sends them scattering.

A rock hits a tree beside me, just missing my head. I duck, sheltering the camera with my body. I dodge behind the tree, trying to see who is attacking me and from where, and another rock glances off my right ankle. I stumble to my knees and feel a sharp stone cut into my leg.

"No!" a voice grunts. A male voice. I crawl out and see my father crouching in the clearing, his back to me. I gasp, stunned that I've found him this easily. Or has he found me?

This is the nearest I've been to him since he left. An older woman hovers beside him, one arm cast across his shoulders. I approach slowly and he turns and grunts when he catches sight of me. He stands, hunching his shoulders, then backs up towards me. I freeze as he leans close and sniffs. I haven't bathed in two days, because everything I've studied indicates that

regressives rely heavily on smell for recognition, along with body language. He touches my face, rubs long-nailed fingers against my sparse beard, and I try not to flinch away. He places his hand on the camera around my neck before turning back to the group.

“Me,” he grunts loudly, his arms extended with the palms facing out. He sweeps a hand behind him in my direction. “Me.”

“Dad,” I whisper, the word catching in my throat. He looks around and sniffs again. His eyes shine at me, identical to the eyes that I am used to seeing in the mirror.

“Me,” he says.

Because I was so young, I can't tell which memories of my father really happened and which I have constructed over the years from stories, half-forgotten dreams, and my own imagination. I remember him lurking with his camera around the house. I remember him laughing with my mother, curling up with her on the couch. I imagine him in his darkroom, bent over the counter studying a photograph with a dissatisfied frown. We played catch as fathers and sons do, or maybe I just wish that we had. I only remember these moments as snatches of images — photographs developed in my mind, never committed to film and faded with time.

I have been living with my father on the reservation, in the cave he shares with three women: the older one I saw him with before, another who fusses over me like a concerned mother, and the attractive young redhead. He sleeps with the first two, without caring that I'm around, but the youngest has taken an obvious interest in me, and my father doesn't touch her.

One day I caught the girl looking at me the way my mother looked at my father in that photo. I hesitated, trying to decide whether to photograph her or kiss her, but the moment was lost and she stalked off. I am tempted to give into more primal urges, which feel more and more natural the longer I stay here. No one here will judge me, but I'll know better.

I have a full beard now and my hair is growing out, but it's only a matter of time before someone notices that my RFID signature doesn't belong here, if anyone's even paying attention.

I wonder how long my mother will wait for me to come home, whether she will come looking for me — for us. I left a copy of the results of my blood test with a note telling her where I planned to go. I didn't think she would understand my need to come here, especially when I barely understand it myself.

I had to experience this even though I won't get Hollander's. I won't go through the same transformations that took my father; of course that's

a relief — I don't want to forget who I am—but I'm discovering that I *could* survive here. This life is as good as any other, maybe better. Life here is peaceful; the people seem happy the way they are. I want my mother to see that, too.

In the dirt at the back of the cave I discovered crude drawings my father made — just stick figures — of three people that could be a man, woman, and child. Since then I've been trying to re-teach him to use a camera. We've been taking pictures together again.

As I live among the regressives I study them, learn about our past and what might be our future. I hope my photos and experiences will show everyone a forgotten part of themselves. I want to honor those who were forced into this existence whether by divine will, evolutionary checks and balances, or simply luck. Maybe they aren't victims after all, maybe they've just been chosen.

I use my thesis to rationalize my decision to stay a little longer, but the truth is I'm finally getting to know my dad. 🍷

"God is a place where some holy spectacle lies."

Pathways Marked in Silver

Marcie Lynn Tentchoff

to the sound of Mythical Kings and Iguanas by Dory Previn...

HOW LONG AGO

were you lost?

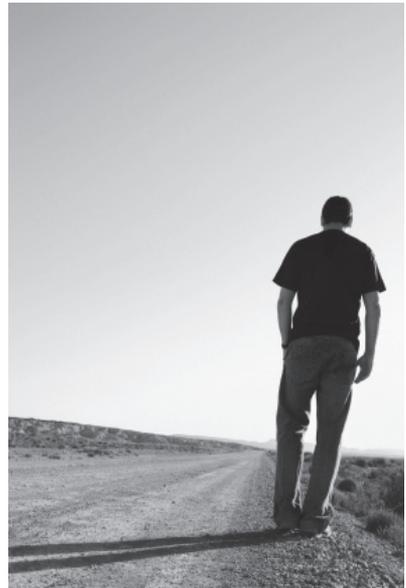
What pathways,
marked in silver
patterned pavements
did you tread,
and when did you know,
for full and sure,
that no trail would lead
you backwards,
to the life
you used to live?

Were you guided
by wings as delicate
as daffodils?

By glimpses, here
and there amid the
gilded trees,
of twisted, bright-lit
horns and hooves?

Or did the simple
promise that,
around some bend,
there might be
something more,
some higher, wilder thing
than mundane life,
coax you to wander?

Did you ever,
at any time,
think to regret
things left behind,
your spouse, your child,
the dreams they thought
that you might share?
And do you care,
whatever roads
you travel now,
how very long ago
you were lost? 🍷



"Up through the doorway as the sideboards creak, with them ever proclaiming me... I will shout until they know what I mean."

An Orange Tree Framed Your Body

Alex Dally MacFarlane

to the sound of Bolte & Dunstan Talk Youth by Augie March...

THE BOY AND the road talk youth

I'm sitting on the side of a dusty road, thinking of oranges. Thinking of my father and of death — his and mine. The Emperor's assemblage of cars comes past, shining and identical, but today I do not care about him and the fighting for the city.



I am surprised — every hour today, this moment of not understanding — that I have reached this birthday.

the loud city dawn

I walk into Tolté, where the orange trees bloom. From every window-box and narrow strip of garden, every central reservation and pavement basket, grows a wax-leaved tree: a Tolté orange, capable of blossoming and fruiting at the same time. Early sunlight catches the petals, making bright white patches across the city. I blink glare-filled eyes but don't look down.

The Emperor's cars have left day-old indentations in the dusty road. The jumbled treads run towards parts of the city where buildings climb tall and the roads are paved.

I follow them until I'm walking on stone slabs as broad as my shoulders.

A centimetres-high plant grows between two slabs: an orange, aphid-infested like so many this year. I sigh at it and lift my head, searching the shop names painted above doors and glass fronts for *Duram*. Between a shoe shop and a rotisserie I find it. Underneath is a peeling green door.

The hinges creak like my father's bedroom door, in the house we had before he left.

Long before that, our doors slid open with a quiet whirr — but I don't remember my first three years very well.

I climb a flight of silent stairs, lined on either side with bare, whitewashed walls, until I reach the second floor and knock. A brass '1B' hangs near its top; further down is a mail slot. It looks like an apartment door. And inside, after Farné opens the doors, I see a sofa, a dining table, a glass screen that serves as both computer and television. "Would you like a drink?" Farné asks, and I wonder if I'm standing in her home. Unlikely.

"Orange juice?"

"Of course."

The other two members of our group wait on the furniture or green-carpeted floor, talking. I take an armrest and listen to them.

"Here." Farné holds out a glass to me.

The juice is sweet and tart, with a hint of cloves like all good Tolté oranges.

Farné sits on the sofa and, after a few sips of juice, begins. "The Emperor's third-oldest nephew, Andé, has been seen recently in the Museum of Glass. He is not our target," she says before anyone can ask, "though I wish he could be. But like the rest of his family, Andé follows no discernable pattern in his movements. And he is always accompanied by four of his family's Guard, with trusted plain-clothes police most likely nearby. None of the Guard usually assigned to him are sympathetic to our cause. If we are able to harm Andé, it will be out of luck. It is the museum we are targeting."

"One of the grandest collections of Tolté's art," says Yva, the other woman in the room. Like me she is blonde and fair-skinned; the other two are darker.

"Yes," says Farné.

"That's four centuries of art." Mattu, whose hands make his glass look miniature, meets Farné's gaze across the tessellating shades of the carpet.

All our aliases are taken from newspaper articles about the most common names, or from places or inanimate objects. Among the group I am Dis, for a canal-side street I like to walk along. My real name — Au Mairon — is a signpost to my origins. If I displayed it openly, I would fall to the ground with bullets between my ribs like grout — placed there by the group out of mistrust or by the elite for my betrayal.

"That's going to hurt a man who reportedly finds his only peace-of-mind among the sculptures," says Farné. "And we are not going to destroy the whole museum."

Yva inclines her head towards Farné. "Only a *small* piece of our history, then."

"The Garich Exhibit."

I think of Dis Street torn to pieces by bombs — hunks of concrete and

wire in the canal, bobbing among the shattered limbs of the orange trees, among the fallen fruits and shards of glass, singed scraps of curtain and waxy leaves.

I think of the gutters and water pipes lying lifeless against the city's new, concrete walls. I think of blue fabric moving only with the wind.

"Garich's work is some of the most inventive in several decades," Yva says. "You would have that destroyed, have the only pieces of his work remain in the private collections of those copied bastards. This is all we do: lash out, again and again. For what purpose?"

My fingers tighten around my glass.

"I would have Andé shown that he can't run from his sleepless nights," Farné says. "That he can't forget the deaths in the Ichar District."

Yva and Mattu say nothing.

"It will be reported as an attempt on Andé's life. We had intelligence that he would visit on the evening of the explosion. Unfortunately, he was elsewhere." When the silence continues, Farné says, "Do you want to know your roles?"

One after the other, like orange trees sprouting along a roadside, Yva and Mattu say, "Yes." I — sitting on the edge of the meeting, only listening — look up at Farné. She knows my answer.

the dust and the fruit had maps for me

My father at the table, thirty-five years old, saying, "My father went at eighteen, my brother at nineteen, my uncle at twenty-one, my other uncle at nineteen. We are not a family well suited to life." Later he told me how: jumping, a handful of stolen medicine, the pistol that my uncle almost swallowed before squeezing the trigger.

A week later, he didn't return.

You could be happy, I thought, locking our door for the last time — as if I remembered what happiness felt like. *I hope you are.*

we stay in the place we have stood for so long

I'm standing in front of the walls and terraces that rise in the centre of Tolté like a yolk — that house the elite. The copied bastards. Each structure is one of six designs, repeated throughout the city-centre, made of a smoother concrete than in the rest of the city and painted in un-patterned bright colours.

They are still too frightened, so long after the disaster, to allow natural change. The steady decrease in premature deaths among the people of the city does not tear their anxiety down.

They give to the city, but they will not take from it.

Did they carry you in there, to the lower levels, and make you die slowly, I think, or did you die in the dust, alone?

Inside, the rooms are a different finite number of designs. I'd prefer the dust.

Will I follow you, eventually?

I almost laugh. Have I ever done anything but follow him?

can't grow good

"I shouldn't have created you," he said raspy-voiced across the kitchen table that flickered in alarm lights. I watched the shadows of our soup tins shift rhythmically across a cluster of dark brown knots. "I'm..."

The emergency passed.

His ellipsis hung in the kitchen with the sachets of spice and the garlic bulbs on multicoloured strings.

all these senses are borrowed

I look so like him.

If I'd grown up in the city-centre, with a carefully ordered life and a corrective surgeon's tool-kit, I would look nearly identical. Some little things, environmental things, always tell members of an elite family apart. I'm glad that my differences are greater: smaller from not eating well as a child in road-side villages, tangle-haired and bitten-nailed, scarred on one cheek, shoulder and arm from being too near an explosion.

The men with guns at the entrance to the Museum of Glass don't look twice at me. I'm searched — every third person is — but they don't look hard, they don't find the explosives tucked in my boots like trouser hems.

Glass women rise from a pedestal in the centre of the entrance hall, green-hued from copper in the sand. They wear glass tortoiseshells on their backs. The whorl-engraved shells are as large as wardrobes. I linger in front of them, watching people pass on the other side of the women's hollow bodies. I see Yva leaving. Her fingers toy at the metal in her left ear: the signal for safety.

Up the main stairs I find the toilets, where I transfer the explosives from my boots to my pockets. Then I walk through the corridors that bend like drainpipes to the Garich Exhibition: a room of sculptures made from thin, long glass woven like cotton, from glass beads joined curve-to-curve while still glowing, from glass with wire shapes held inside like amber-caught

insects.

I crouch to examine the translucent blue stilt-legs of a house that coils serpentine under its rigid roof and, when the two other people in the room are not looking, I attach the first strip of explosives to the metal cube supporting the stilts.

It is not uncommon to crouch at a Garich piece. He put some of the finest details on his sculptures' feet.

I repeat my actions at six more sculptures, leaving explosives at two of them. They are tiny, like viscous cooling glass, and connected by a hair-thin wire. I look at them and think of the world inside the city's centre, from which they were stolen. They are the closest I have come to touching it in over a decade and a half.

I've never thought seriously of returning. My father only spoke ill of it — and besides, I like dust on my skin and orange trees growing unregulated in the pavements.

As I examine a pair of lizards with no two scales alike, crossing a shoe, I remember fire: orange and flickering against blue skies. I remember watching how my father packed explosives into his pockets and boots, and wondering if he would remember to remove them before pressing the button for detonation.

How he looked at every tin's jagged lid, every rock-shattered piece of glass — as if they were comfort, answers, doors. How he told me on my sixteenth birthday that he was the first of our family in several generations to live for so long.

How I followed his path along the dusty roads, village to village, placing explosives for his group.

Ten minutes, I think.

I imagine fire: orange and flickering, tearing Dis Street apart.

I think of the city's old walls, the blue fabric that moved where it chose, changing the map of the city every day; the drain pipes that curled around and over the walls, echoing their patterns; the windows and doors that never opened onto the same view twice; the careful movements around the orange trees. Now the walls are concrete and immobile, except for a few tattered, dirty walls down narrow streets, but they can barely twitch with so many of their number torn down.

And now the orange trees are the only structures moving in the city, by seeds on the wind, underfoot, borne in sewage drains.

The elite changed the city when they opened their gates and let their technology out, and assumed the city's families would smile neatly like theirs. Some saw the advantages, some accepted the reality of change. Others saw

death in the concrete.

Eight minutes, I think. Leave.

As I look one last time at the feet of the statue in front of me — small orange trees are etched into delicate ankles — I suddenly imagine removing the explosives. Does the city need them? It won't return the walls to life.

I don't know what the city needs.

I stare at the oranges.

I don't know what to decide, so I follow as I've always done. I leave the room and walk along the corridors of the Museum towards the exit.

Two members of an elite family's Guard step out from the shadows of pillars and seize my arms.

**NOW THE ORANGE TREES ARE THE ONLY
STRUCTURES MOVING IN THE CITY, BY SEEDS ON
THE WIND, UNDERFOOT, BORNE IN SEWAGE DRAINS**

engaged in exchanges

Young men together: my father and the Emperor, who learnt the world in the same plain-walled classroom. The same glass screens showed them the way of the elite.

The way that my uncle and my father's uncles could not follow in the city-centre, in its uniformed architectures and structured days. The way that my father fled.

He did what my uncle and his uncles could not: he fled alive. But he never left the shadows of their deaths, he never truly fled following them.

it's sunless in these thick walls

“What was the explosion intended to achieve?”

In a small voice I say, “Andé's death.”

Wires crawl and twist from my shoulders, my forehead, red and blue and hair-thin, across the air and the table where a control box rests. Electricity — rare still in the dusty villages, as old as clean water in the centre of Tolté — will run across those wires. On the other side of the table, a man sits with the Emperor's tri-star sigil on his uniform and a finger near one of the switches.

The walls are bare and pale.

“Why did you choose that time for your attack?”

“We had intelligence,” I say, and immediately cringe.

His finger touches the switch. “Tell me who your accomplices were.”

“I d-don't know their real names.”

I don't want it — the pain, the windowless walls, the questions, the small cell — I don't want it and I don't know how I will escape it.

Even though the man only presses the switch for seconds, I scream.

“Where do they live?” he asks when I have quietened enough to hear his flatly spoken words.

I don't answer. Do I tell him about Farné's apartment — if it was hers, after all — or do I lie, do I pretend?

The man presses the switch again and it hurts, it hurts, and I tell him about the sign that says *Duram*, I tell him about the ‘1B’ on the door. I tell him about the cafés where we often meet. I tell him about the glass tables, the cups of hot coffee, the canal-side streets, the orange trees in the windows.

“Do you have regular meeting times?”

Surely I am not the first to be caught, the first to open my mouth at the pain and tell the truth.

“No. Our group coordinator tells us, by hand-written, hand-delivered notes. I only meet her, not the other coordinators. I don't know how they meet each other.” My words taste of blood: I bit my tongue.

“Do you communicate with the other members of your group in-between meetings?”

I shake my head. Sweat-damp hair falls in my face and I want to reach up and brush it aside.

“Are you aware of the movements and intents of other groups?”

“No.”

“If another group intended to blow up a building, you wouldn't know until you heard it, until you saw the smoke on the horizon?” He sounds disbelieving.

Until we're scorched limbs for the investigative team to stack into boxes. I remember the man who coordinated our group before Farné. I remember the day Farné said that another coordinator had contacted her, had told her about his death and asked her to assume his position.

I nod.

I think, when the man steps outside for a refreshment, about how the guards at the museum knew to take me aside from the corridors full of people. I think about Yva giving me the signal for safety.

Though the betrayal is a persistent sting, I cannot stop remembering Yva's words: *This is all we do: lash out, again and again.*

Sitting once again at the table, orange juice by his elbow, the man says,

“We don’t have the name Dis Lapous in the city’s census records, birth records, criminal records or medical records. I’m going to assume that it’s not your real name.”

“Village-born,” I say quickly. “And I move around a lot.”

“I see.”

He stares across the table at me but he doesn’t see the truth.

Strapped to a chair, sweat-wet and urine-wet, of course I do not look like one of the elite.

He asks for my real name — and I manage, barely, to keep that hidden behind my tongue. I lapse into dreams of orange trees. I am woken and asked again. It almost spills out like cinnamon from an overturned jar. “Au M-Morinne,” I stammer.

He decides, eventually, to stop.

“That’s all for today,” he says. “You will be escorted back to your cell.”

As two guards enter the room and take the wires off me, I ask if I will be released.

They do not reply.

In my cell, I dream of orange trees again.

an orange tree framed your body

Orange trees lined our kitchen like wainscoting. I stared at them in meal-time silences, warm afternoon silences; I watched their leaves wave in the wind and I counted their fruits, thinking of sweet, tart juice on my tongue.

I watched my father stare at the knives in their block of dark-ringed wood.

“We are all the same,” he said, so many times in our dusty house. “You, me, your grandfather, your uncle, your great-uncles. We are all copies.”

oh father, I know your lying lines

I’m dreaming of oranges and in my dream I’m thinking, *But you never stared at the oranges. You put them in pots beside our bare brick wall because you said they reminded you of Tolté, but you never stared at them and I did, I did.*

biting down on the great grown world

I miss the oranges.

I miss walking into Tolté, seeing them green and bright in every part of the city.

My cell is barely wider than my father was tall and there is nothing, nothing at all on the white walls. A bed, thin-mattressed and with blue sheets, takes up almost half of the floor. A square toilet rests near the door.

I lie on the bed and try to recall the taste of oranges — Tolté oranges or village oranges, I don't care. Sweet and tart and eaten under a clear sky with dust on the wind.

My tongue knows only the bland food I'm given, the metallic taste of blood.

My body hurts from yesterday's questioning.

Orange trees grow everywhere in Tolté. Why haven't they pushed waxy-leaved branches and thin brown stems through the dirty white floor? I want to touch their fruits, just once, and maybe it will make the fear go away. I want to walk on dusty roads with the sun on my arms, I want to sip cool water in a café, I want to sit on Dis Street and watch leaves bob on the canal like miniature green boats. I want to never see white walls again, to never see wires curling between me and a table, to never scream until my throat hurts and my cheeks are salt-sticky and I can't think anything except how much I want the man to never return.

I manage to think, *You never quite fled the shadows of their deaths, but you did not follow their copied paths.* I curl into my thin blanket and I do not want to follow *him*.

It makes me shake, knowing that. I am adrift, I am lost. For the first time I don't know what awaits me.

A slight whirr: the door opens. "Lapous."

I sit up, trembling, unable to bear the thought of even a second day in that other room. I risk what I've hidden for so long.

I am not following his path.

"I'm not Dis Lapous."

"Oh?" the man laughs. "You've another name for us today?"

"I'm Au Mairon."

His laughter tapers at my utter lack of humour, at my still-perfect pose: the one all elite children are drilled in from such a small age.

it's like eating air and there's nothing in

I am kept inside a room as large as the house I lived in for only a day after my father left.

As I sit on chairs that mould to my shape, as I stand on a balcony that invisibly shields me from dust and insects and pollen caught on a high breeze, as I wash in water that is always clear, I remember that house.

Most of all, I remember the kitchen.

The less-used spice jars gathering dust on a shelf with splinters along one side like the hairs on my legs. The terrible painting that he bought from a scrawny child and hung above the fridge. The pale yellow paint that covered the walls, except for above the table where the pot ran empty just before we finished.

The orange trees growing disorderly on shelves, on the fridge, on the end of the table.

I wish I had stayed there after he left.

For the first two days I am left alone. I spend a lot of that time on the balcony, watching the city, eating food from the fridge.

On the third day, I am woken by Tre Hervé: one of my father's contemporaries. She is tall and lean, almost as fair-skinned as me, and on the shoulder of her green shirt is a crescent symbol that marks her as one of the Emperor's most trusted. The sound of her boots on the floor tug me from another dream, and I sit up before she reaches the partitioned sleeping part of the room.

"Why did you choose to keep fighting us after Nov Mairon's last mission?" she asks from the foot of my bed.

The tone of her question makes me clench the bed sheets, remembering the cell and the wires at the bottom of the city. But she only stands, waiting. I relax enough, eventually, to say, "I didn't really choose. I followed my father."

She looks faintly amused — probably at my use of the word 'father'. Among the rest of the elite, no one pretends to be descendants of anyone but the original man or woman, the progenitor, who was copied into a family. My father explained this, just as he explained that we must use words differently to blend in.

"Well," she says, "you are here now." Then she pauses. "Your family is flawed."

I think she expects me to be upset. The way she handled the phrase, balancing it delicately on her tongue like a single peppercorn, indicated her distaste.

"I've noticed," I say.

"Your family might be fixed." Again that balancing. "It has not been decided yet. The Emperor has briefly returned to the countryside. In a week he will be here and decide."

"I think it's probably a bad idea to make more of us."

She doesn't know what to say, then.

I do not want to stay.

I do not want to break through the barrier around the balcony, hurl myself to the ground — like my two great-uncles, like my father in some of his dreams.

For most of my life I have thought of dying. Expected it — but not wanted it, I realise.

In the evening after Tre Hervé's second visit, I stand on the balcony and watch the city, and I want to live in it.

who scaled the walls by the light of the sun

“Getting out is easy if you're not underground,” he said. “If they trust you enough, still, to let you wander the city-centre, they don't expect you to leave. They don't understand why any of us would want to live beyond our walls.”

who exited a gate into orange bloom

It is not quite that easy.

Several Guards chase me, through the corridors of the city-centre and through one of its gates. But in the city I lose them. They fear it too much, I think, to follow me into narrow, winding passages between peeling pale walls, the ground strewn with blossom and discarded orange peel, household litter and loose roof tiles.

I keep walking long after they've stopped following. I count orange trees and inhale the dusty, fruity, dirty smell of the city.

who walked a life into wreck and ruin

“The first thing I did when I got out was buy bread and salted meat from a vendor, and eat it by the side of a dusty, uneven road. Or was it bread and olive oil? I can't remember.”

The rarity of his smiles made them look strange.

a life which will callous and last

I'm crouching by a canal-side orange tree on Dis Street, cleaning aphids from waxy green leaves. Grey water laps at the stones. Two oranges bob in the small waves, like discarded bells. I follow their westerly direction, although they go ahead and slip out of sight while I'm still halfway along the street.

The orange leaves behind me are green and bright.

I am not smiling.

My father was nearly right: we are not a family well suited to joy.

I'm not sitting in a kitchen, looking at knives and jagged tin-lids.

Wipe, wipe: aphids flicked into the canal.

I'm looking at the city. I'm seeing the oranges grow everywhere their roots can eke nourishment, I'm seeing the infestation on their leaves that needs cleaning. I'm crouched between concrete walls and motionless drainpipes, and I mourn for the city that moved — but I'm looking at the city *now*. I'm cleaning it.

The city is not perfect, in so many ways. Its edges are far poorer than its centre. Its canals are dirty. Only a fixed number of non-elite men and women, chosen by a lottery every five years, can vote for the ministers. Its past is filled with deaths, humans and other.

I think: maybe the new city can grow into something good, piece by piece.

I run my fingers over an orange and my smile is a small, delicate thing. I hope it grows.

this strange-wrought road

In the hazy afternoons I lie on my bed and I'm surprised — but it's fading, slowly, like a mirage as the sun sets. ¶

The Watcher Thorn

Cheryl Barkauskas

to the sound of Mortal Ground by Rhea's Obsession...

WALTER VISITED DINAH'S garden in the first June of his marriage. She felt his shadow chill her as she weeded around the whispering columbines. For anyone else the watcher thorn would have rustled a warning, but it had known Walter for years and seemed to trust him. Usually it was a keener judge of character. The columbines were more sensitive — they drew in their leaves and hissed softly. She gave the row a final pat and straightened against the ache in her back, smoothing her gray cotton skirt.



It had been nearly eight years since she'd seen Walter up-close. Though they were the same age, he looked ten years younger. He had trimmed his whiskers, and his clothes had grown more luxuriant, but his self-confident expression hadn't changed, nor had his hands, tanned and sleek, the nails clean and even. Dinah's own, flexing cautiously against cramps, were weathered and cracked: her grandmother's hands.

"You're looking well," Walter said, as if conversational preliminaries were unimportant — a trick he'd employed since they were children.

Dinah raised her chin. "All things considered?"

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. What do you want?"

"I came to see how you are."

After eight years? Dinah's brow crinkled, and she smiled contemptuously. If he were so concerned, he could have helped her with her planting. She turned her back on him, letting the silence stretch, and returned to her columbines. They were newly in full sun, for last night the beans that had shaded them had uprooted themselves, stakes and all, and replanted themselves next to the strawberries. She passed her hand over one of the columbines, casting it in shadow, and it cooed. She'd have to replace the beans with something shady and less inclined to wander.

"Can we talk?" Walter said.

“All you want to talk to me about is stealing what’s left of my land.” She irritably yanked a weed from its shelter under the drooping columbines. They hissed approval. “You wish to boast that you own all the best farmland in the county. Tell me, where shall I be dumped?”

Walter’s property, grown bloated and huge over the years, surrounded hers in a near-full circle, like pincers. Doubtless Walter was irked by the hole in his maps, and he had coveted her plot’s extraordinary fertility for years. She had no doubt he would plow her garden under and try to raise some sort of special enhanced tobacco, God help him.

Across five feet of air she sensed Walter grit his teeth, but his voice remained level. “You will not be dumped. I had in mind a cottage just a quarter-mile from my house. It’s secluded, set back in a little grove of trees, so you will have privacy. And it’s close enough to my house that help would be nearby if something happened to you. I’ll pay a fair price.”

“My, my, all this effort for one old woman. On the simple condition that I abandon my home.”

“Dinah, I’m no cheat. The cottage is just as big as yours, or bigger. Some of my men will help you move. You can have a garden there too—”

“Do you think my plants will survive being moved?”

Walter shifted his weight. “Not all of them, perhaps, but enough should—”

“If one of the unique plants dies during the move — say, the watcher thorn — how can you possibly compensate me?”

“I’m a wealthy man— ”

“Money.” She shook her head. “In eight years you ought to have learned new arguments. No, you won’t evict me, short of my death.”

Walter sighed. “It’s a losing fight. Sooner or later I’ll get this land. You can’t stop it.”

“Perhaps not,” said Dinah, “but I can delay it.” She fell silent, and after a few minutes she heard Walter’s footsteps retreating toward his estate, two miles distant.

She sat back on her heels and considered.

Dinah’s property consisted of her cottage and half an acre of farmland. To the west, as the ground rose into the tumbled rocks of the Blue Ridge, it bordered a densely tangled forest of oak and hickory. It was rumored that devils resided in the forest, twisting the souls of those who strayed. Dinah had traveled inside the woods for years, and she’d never yet found anything that would harm someone who was sensible and well-prepared.

She could do nothing about Walter’s drive to clear the forest. It hurt her to think of her cottage’s destruction, but after all, she wouldn’t need it when

she was gone. The greatest crime would be the murder of her plants.

Dinah surveyed her garden. Neat rows of vegetables, separated by cobblestoned paths, stretched away from her weathered gray house, though the geometry was marred by some of the more willful plants' decisions to grow elsewhere than where she'd put them. Against the greenery, flowers splashed bright color: gold, scarlet, violet, indigo. White wickets overgrown with tomato vines and Dutchman's pipe ran lengthwise down the garden to shade the more delicate plants, like a leafy church nave. Towering hedges of jasmine formed the plot's border, white-flowered at this season and emitting subtle scent.

It was more than a beautiful garden; it was an extraordinary one. Some of her plants were excellent specimens, like her strawberries that produced abundant and oversized fruit. Others, like the wandering beans and the whispering columbines, had acquired astonishing traits that superstitious fools considered signs of evil. A few, like the tiny golden senbold flower, she had never found anywhere else. And winding against the house grew her two favorites: a gigantic sweet pea, and the watcher thorn.

Sweet peas were common in the Carolinas, of course, but hers was unique. It never died off in the winter, but flowered year after year. It loved human company, leaning toward the sound of voices. Its color was unusual and its size and aroma was unparalleled. The vines that curled around her bedroom window carried perfume into her dreams. Walter might plow under the rest of her garden to make room for his crops, but Dinah had no doubt he would transplant the sweet pea to his wife's garden.

Next to the sweet pea, the watcher thorn seemed merely ordinary. It was a woody shrub standing about seven feet high with clusters of dark green oval leaves, smaller than her thumbnail. The spines on its branches were formidable, sharp as nails and up to three inches long. It had never grown larger in all the years she'd tended it, despite all her pruning and pinching. Then again, neither had the sweet pea, whose vines were densely snarled with the watcher thorn's branches. The roots of the thorn probably kept it from spreading. Both plants were in excellent health nonetheless — neither was ever troubled by ants, aphids, caterpillars, or other creeping garden menaces. That alone was enough to make any plant remarkable.

Dinah sniffed at a crimson sweet pea flower. The aroma was indescribable, soothing and stimulating all at once. The lingering tension from Walter's visit drained from her neck and shoulders, and she found herself smiling. She stroked a vine with one finger, and the vine curled affectionately around her finger. Sometimes the plant seemed almost human. She pulled her finger away with some difficulty, as the plant stretched toward her, hoping

for more attention. "Not now," she told it.

Even if Walter destroyed the sweet pea with the rest of her garden, there were other sweet peas in the world. It was the watcher thorn that worried Dinah. It had never seeded nor borne fruit, and she'd never seen another. She knew nothing about its history; her grandmother had only told her its name. Dinah believed that it, more than any other plant in the garden, had a mind of its own.

"Shall I defend you?" Dinah asked the watcher thorn idly. "Shall I speak for you, since you don't speak for yourself?" The watcher thorn rustled a branch in the motionless air.

The next day, Dinah planned to gather leaves for compost from the forest, and the propagation of the thorn was a natural companion task. With her old thin-bladed knife, she pared several leafy stems from the watcher thorn. The thorn quivered at the knife's touch but did not otherwise protest. She tossed the cuttings into her wheelbarrow and set off into the forest. She attributed her garden's extraordinary powers (though not publicly) to her proximity to the forest, and her practice of using compost and soil gathered from deep within. On her way through the woods, in different areas, she stopped to plant the cuttings. She returned home after sunset, pushing the laden wheelbarrow, and settled herself to wait. One couldn't hurry a plant.

As summer progressed, the cuttings were forgotten. Even in the best years, with all her careful harvesting, she had difficulty lasting through the winter. She spent the long daylight hours tending the garden. Even special plants required caretaking, especially ones with minds of their own. The beans had taken to sulking under the jasmine hedges, and she had great difficulty coaxing them into better growing areas. Her roses of Sharon bloomed in defiant pink polka dots. Despite lavish devotion, the honeysuckle failed to bloom for the second straight year, and she spent several hot and furious afternoons ripping out vines to consign the treacherous plant to the compost. At this display of ferocity, the watcher thorn pressed itself back against the house in what she'd decided was a sign of disapproval. "I didn't ask you, did I?" Dinah said, wiping the sweat from her forehead. "It's my garden."

One morning she came out her door and found a dead cottonmouth in her path. Dinah squatted and poked it. The snake was pinned by a branch of the watcher thorn, and one of the vicious spines had driven from the base of the snake's skull through to the stoop. The sweet pea's vines stretched in curiosity toward the thing lying just out of reach.

Dinah regarded the watcher thorn with new respect. "Looking out for me, are you?" she said. "Good job. This fellow might have caused some

trouble if I'd stepped on him." The watcher thorn curled the tips of its branches inward. Dinah carried the snake inside, cut off its head, and left it simmering in a stewpot for lunch.

Walter's recent visit recurred to her from time to time. His wife had nagged him to it, Dinah was sure — Walter disliked confrontations. She'd met the girl once, plump and artificial; her shrill voice had reminded Dinah of nettles. His wife would never let her rest.

Walter returned on a clear, cold December day while she was eating her meager supper. "The answer is still no," she told him.

"You're not being reasonable."

"Reasonable? You're trying to steal my grandmother's house. There's no question of reason."

"I'm not a thief, I'm..." Walter took a breath. "Look, let's...I want to talk about something else."

"I didn't think it possible." She searched his face in the thin light that made it through the dirty window. He looked tired and strained. "How is your wife?"

He flinched, Dinah saw with satisfaction. "Maureen? She's fine, fine. She's due in the spring."

"Congratulations."

"Thank you." He turned his head to look out the window. "You know... I dream about coming here as a child, still. Us lying in the garden, talking to the watcher thorn, trying to figure out how much it understood. Your grandmother's sugar cookies in the oven."

"Mmm." Dinah sipped coffee, trying to appear unmoved, but her hand shook with sudden memory.

"I always had a welcome here, no matter what..." He looked straight at her. "It's odd how things change, isn't it?"

Dinah blew her breath between her front teeth in a surge of anger, shattering the mood. She was grateful for it. "That you want to destroy my garden in spite of your memories is unforgivable. Tending my garden is what I was meant for. I consider it a sacred charge."

He slammed his fist on the table, rattling the dishes. "Sacred? Everyone thinks your garden is the devil's work. You encourage the uncanniness, you *breed* for it. You say it's the hand of God, and that no one understands it, but Dinah, neither do you! Don't you see?"

Dinah stared back at him, unfazed. "All I see is a greedy man grasping at something he can't value and doesn't understand. *I* don't enter into it."

Walter's face contorted and slackened. Without a word he got up and

left, without slamming the door.

Dinah stared at his empty chair long afterward, her smile twisting. Odd, indeed, how things changed. Walter and she had been close friends when they had played together as children. Once she had thought she might marry him. He'd promised her that she would, and then... What had she ever seen in him, the fumbling, dapper coward? She thanked God for the lessons of time. She was better off as she was.

When the weather softened early in March, she decided to visit the watcher thorn cuttings and see how they were coming along. She cut through her garden with a cheerful wave to the thorn. "Going to see your daughters!" she called.

After visiting the first few sites, she became worried. None of the cuttings had taken hold, and there was no sign of a new thorn. As she hiked up the cliffside toward Sharp Ravine, where she had planted a cutting at a fork in the path, she began to suspect her effort had been a waste of time.

She came to the fork and drew in a breath in puzzlement. Finally, here was a new watcher thorn, but...Dinah knelt and lifted a branch, drawing her hand along its length. Her watcher thorn was bushy; this new plant spread three feet across, low and limp from a central growth, like a fern. The thorn covered the entire left fork, and the branches aligned themselves precisely with the borders of the path, giving the thorn an unnatural squared-off look. Had someone been tending it? The right fork led to the ravine. She didn't know what lay down this one.

Dinah stepped off the path, carefully circling around the thorny branches, and proceeded up the left fork. A branch of the watcher thorn rose to block her path, undulating like a snake. She frowned and pushed it aside. "Let me pass. I know what I'm doing," she said. The branch drew back, then poked its tip against her chest. "Leave me *alone*," she snapped, and she shoved the branch toward the ground. It slowly returned to rest.

The area bordering the path was clear of trees up to a dropoff into a rocky gorge about ten feet away. It was an easy walk even off the trail. She was twenty yards along when the soil shifted under her foot. Caught off guard, Dinah lurched sideways, and an entire section of the trail broke away and slid down the cliff face. She felt something tear in her arm.

Fool, Dinah thought grimly. She clawed toward a tree root protruding from the cliff and clasped it with her good hand. Her feet scrabbled for purchase in the sliding stones and found it; she pushed herself upward and managed to drag herself back over the edge. She crawled to the far side of the path and knelt there, panting. When she had her breath back, she rose

and walked down the path to the junction where the watcher thorn waited.

“Are you a warning, then?” Dinah asked it. “Do you defend people? Is that what you’re watching for?”

The watcher thorn did not answer. Dinah made her way home slowly, wondering.

EVEN SPECIAL PLANTS REQUIRED CARETAKING, ESPECIALLY ONES WITH MINDS OF THEIR OWN

Getting by was harder after that. Dinah never regained full use of her arm. She could move her fingers slowly, and the strength wasn’t there, but she had no regrets; she knew what her life was worth. She now treated her garden watcher thorn with some reverence.

Day by day and season by season, her fortunes declined. The weeds grew thicker and taller, and she never seemed to make headway against them. Aphids invaded more often, and to more devastating effect. The leak in the kitchen roof got worse every spring, no matter how carefully she patched it. She moved slower, her joints stiffened, she was tired all the time.

“You can’t keep living alone, Dinah. You’re wearing yourself out.” Walter again. He was there more often than ever, laughing at her, mocking her slowness and pain behind those sad dark eyes. She lacked the strength to fend him off. “Come back with me. We’ll look after you.”

“Will you preserve my garden?”

“I’ve told you, it wouldn’t be economical. I might be able to transplant some of the—”

“Then I have nothing to say to you.”

“Dinah, it’s impossible! I can’t do anything more!”

“You can,” she said, barely audible. “But you won’t.”

She laboriously lifted her jars of strawberry preserves to the shelf, one by one, and pushed them to the back. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Walter step to the counter and shelve two jars, then another two, effortlessly, without stretching. Dinah stopped her work and gazed steadily at him. Walter held her gaze for a minute, but finally sighed and set down the jars.

“Let me make you some tea,” he offered. Without waiting for an answer, he took the kettle and swung it over the fire.

He was getting too familiar. He fondled her land before her eyes, gloating, insensitive. He with his hothouse wife and his perfect son, his lands, his wealth, everything, *everything*. And after her house, the garden

and the woods too, all destroyed for his pleasure? No, she couldn't give it up. She needed time. Time.

"I'm going to step out to the garden for a minute," Dinah said. "Fresh herbs for the tea."

"All right." Walter stirred the fire.

Dinah hurried to the bed of golden senvoid flowers and knelt to harvest the petals. Steeped in boiling water, they would be a dangerous and slow-acting narcotic. Her hands trembled as she plucked a handful.

She returned to the cottage and reached out to open the door, but a thorny branch shot out and wrapped itself around her wrist. Dinah frowned. "Stop that," she said, and unwound the branch. She took another step, and a larger branch twined around her ankle, piercing her skin with its spines.

"Stop it, I said!" Dinah tugged her foot, but the watcher thorn refused to release her. In a fury, she jerked her knife from her belt and severed the branch with one blow. The watcher thorn recoiled, all its branches writhing.

"What do you think you're doing?" Dinah said, kicking the severed branch away. "Don't be a fool. I have to go — I'm going to save us."

A branch tentatively touched the hand closed around the senvoid petals.

"Yes, this is going to save us. Now leave me be. I don't want to damage you further, but if I have to..." Dinah waggled the knife.

The watcher thorn drew back its branch and folded in on itself, as if for protection, or in disapproval. Dinah stared at it, then sniffed. "Sulk all you want. You'll see."

She reentered the house. Walter was just pouring the water into mugs. "What was the commotion?"

Dinah shrugged. "The watcher thorn was nervous about something." She sprinkled the senvoid petals in his mug, then pretended to do the same for her own. The petals in his tea wilted and sank out of sight.

Walter sat across from her and sipped from his mug. "This is excellent. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Dinah drank her tea in silence, wishing him far away. Walter seemed to appreciate her mood and said nothing.

Eventually he rose and said he must be returning. "And, Dinah? It's no shame to accept help. Remember that."

"I'll think about it," she said.

Dinah found occasion to pass by the estate the next day, and so heard of Walter's death. He had died peacefully the previous evening, drifting off to

sleep after dinner. She exchanged condolences with the old farmhand who gave her the news, a childhood acquaintance of both Walter and herself, and was about to return home when she saw Walter's widow Maureen emerge from the house and walk toward her. Maureen did not look grief-stricken.

"Good morning, Dinah. Will you come inside for a moment?"

Curious, Dinah followed her. To her surprise, Maureen led her into Walter's study. Maureen took Walter's chair and waved at a seat near the desk for Dinah. Ridiculously, Dinah was irritated.

Maureen folded her hands on the desk. "I am informing you that you have thirty days to vacate your cottage."

Dinah snorted. "Vacate my land? Walter tried that for years."

"He didn't use all the resources at his disposal. I intend to. Either vacate your cottage, or I shall send the law to evict you."

"The law is on my side."

"Actually, it's not. It isn't your land, you see. It's mine."

Dinah froze. Finally her mouth moved, and words came out. "You're lying. That land came to me from my grandmother."

Maureen shook her head. One corner of her mouth lifted. "I'm afraid not. This deed," she said, pushing a paper toward Dinah, "clearly states that your grandmother sold the land to Walter's father. Upon his father's death it passed to him, and now it's come to me. Well, to my son, but..." Maureen leaned back and smirked. "You mustn't blame your grandmother. I understand there were some very difficult harvest years at the time. It's not surprising that she needed the money. The point is that you lived on that land all these years by Walter's sufferance — and against my wishes, I might add. Walter refused to relocate you without your consent. Now that Walter is dead, I no longer choose to...suffer you."

As if in a dream, Dinah picked up the deed with both hands. She read it without understanding a word.

"Do you understand me, Dinah?" Maureen asked.

"Yes," Dinah said, her voice sounding distant. "Yes, I understand you perfectly." She rose, letting the deed drift back to the desk. "Excuse me. I have work to do."

Two steps into her garden, she stopped short. The watcher thorn was gone.

It had left a pile of churned soil in its place by the cottage wall, and a trail of earth clods leading toward the woods. Dinah touched one and found it dry. It must have been gone a while. She pictured it with gut-twisting vividness: the watcher thorn waddling awkwardly on balled roots toward

the woods, away from her.

Dinah strode toward the forest, then stopped. Even if she caught it, she couldn't force it to return. In its own way, it was as stubborn as she.

"I didn't know," Dinah said to the empty spaces between the trees. "How could I have known?"

She heard nothing but silence. It infuriated her.

"What did you want of me?" Dinah demanded. "I had to protect my garden. You believed in that too. This was the only way I had. It's not my fault it went wrong."

There was an unnatural hush, as if every plant in her garden were eavesdropping. Even the whispering columbines had stilled.

Dinah crossed her wrists and whipped her hands downward. "This is not my fault!" she raged. "None of this has ever been my fault!"

The absent watcher thorn did not speak — it never had — but her bones felt the answer in the silence.

Dinah turned slowly around. The garden looked just as it always had. The sweet pea had uncurled, as if it breathed freer relieved of its twisted neighbor, and it stretched its vines toward her.

Suddenly, she was cold. She stumbled into the cottage and gently closed the door behind her.

That night Dinah dreamed of the garden and of Walter, time and space and darkness sliding back to reveal a childhood haven. She woke to a heavenly aroma and to green leaves and strictures binding her arms to her sides. She tried to scream, but green leaves tenderly covered her mouth as the vines of the sweet pea snaked up the posts of the bed and wound around her throat. She gasped for air that would not come as the sweet pea slowly, lovingly, strangled her. ❧

Other Things

Terence Kuch

*to the sound of String Quartet No. 2, second movement by Bela Bartok,
marked Allegro Molto Capriccioso...*

“I say this not to wound; to wound, I say other things.”

— Henri Michaux

IN THE DUTIFUL Republic, each child is taught from a very early age that words can wound, even kill. Little things they say, even if innocently, can severely damage parents, or even strangers in the grocery store, passing by in aisles of lettuce or grapes or chops, animal hearts still pulsing from the butcher's hand.



The child obeys this injunction because its parents say so (it is years before it disobeys out of duty). But it is not too many months until the child realizes that it is a source of significant power. At the checkout, the child may decide that it wants a candy bar. It points. The mother shakes her head. The child points more urgently. The mother shakes her head so hard the checkout clerk thinks it may fly off, land on the scales, be weighed as just another piece of meat, hairy and not especially choice. The child ponders: “If there were no mother, things may go hard for me.” The mother ponders: “If I do not give in, the child will wound me.” This impasse is resolved only when the clerk himself hands the child a candy bar, in order to keep the line moving.

Afterwards, the clerk relates this event to the store manager, who praises him. The manager could have chastised the clerk, which would have resulted in some wound, perhaps a punctured vestibulum. He always praises his clerks because they are not easy to replace; many have retired on disability with punctured vestibuli.

The child grows older. We can call him ‘Gawl,’ now, a name neither his father nor mother especially like.

Gawl is in school. He practices his wounding skills on other children. He

learns magic words supposed to ward off wounds directed at him by others. These words are often ineffective. Gawl administers wounds and receives them. In the fourth grade he is awarded three battle-commendations, the last of which is severe and puts him out of action for several weeks.

In school, Gawl discovers sex. He reads a forbidden and well-thumbed book containing crudely drawn pictures concerning how to wound with sex. He becomes expert, is very popular with both boys and girls. Eventually he meets a boy who is better at wounding than he, and falls in love. But they part.

Gawl graduates with a degree in business, and joins a firm providing cruel and unusual services. They have customers. The ones they wound the most severely, they call 'clients.' Gawl accumulates a great deal of wealth, which he invests in profitable enterprises. His favorite is the firm devoted to perpetuating poverty in other countries. The coup for which this organization is best known involves helping the government plan how to drown many farms in the backwaters of a new dam. The waters rise higher as the farmers sleep in their beds.

Gawl can afford the best in medical care and so his wounds, which by now are many, do not greatly interfere with his ability to wound others. His renown spreads. His picture appears in both the sporting and business sections of the newspaper, with the same caption in each. He is mentioned for the Governorship.

But then something happens.

He meets a woman who seems uninterested in wounding, and who tries to avoid being wounded. He has never met anyone like this before. He is fascinated. He falls in love. At least, he firmly believes he has fallen in love. At least, he feels something he cannot explain, and since his friends have told him that love is something they can't explain, he concludes that what he's feeling must be love.

The woman is drawn to him, too. We can call her 'Fedora,' now, a name her mother picked out of a hat. Fedora ponders: "He wounds, which I hate to see. But others do, also. At least Gawl does it effectively. And he is rich." She talks herself into falling in love.

There is a wedding at which Gawl's parents ritually stare with hatred at the parents of his beloved. Fedora's mother and father present the happy couple with a set of self-brandishing hunting knives. Gawl's parents give them tickets to a program of participative sporting events including wind-surfing in violent weather, leaping from a high bridge with low-bidder bungee cords, and taking the Métro to join rioters in the Paris *banlieues*, airfare included.

Gawl and Fedora buy a large house in the suburbs. Fedora consigns her parents' gift to the attic of the new home, where the knives practice *seppuku* among themselves. She gives the sporting-event tickets to charity.

Gawl progresses in his career. Fedora stays home and knits, does volunteer work. He chairs his firm's Ethics Committee, which disgraces and humiliates many of Gawl's rivals. She attends gallery openings. They have children, who are given a superb classical education, including gladiatorial training where they practice on the children of the poor.

Gawl is elected Governor. On the evening of election day he celebrates, drinks too much. He comes home, and in a stupor wounds his wife very severely, by telling her things she does not wish to know. He realizes his shame and asks her to wound him, as a way of making up. She refuses. She weeps. He is in despair. She stops eating. He tries to force her to eat, unsuccessfully.

She dies. There is a somber funeral where much wounding occurs.

Gawl goes home and casts himself on the bed. He weeps, for the first time, and copiously. He contemplates his life, for the first time. He plans to wound himself to death, is about to do so, but then realizes that the most severe wound he could administer to himself would be to continue living with the memory of what he has done.

He lives. He has a successful career as Governor, later becomes President of the Dutiful Republic. Why he ever felt sad over Fedora, he can't remember. She was very sweet. Yes, that was the problem. And the children — he wonders where they are now. He still has his bank send money to some address.

He ages. He loses his edge. He lies on what he knows will be his deathbed. He sleeps. The waters rise higher. ❧

When you sing to me, Jeff, for a moment - just for a moment - I can forget the past.

What a precious gift, life is. Do you know it while you live? Do you, right now, in this moment, know it?

Or this moment?

Or this?

Hold onto this feeling. That's the simple, holy secret.

The Dead Boy's Last Poem

Kelly Barnhill

to the sound of Little Ghost by the White Stripes...

AS A YOUNG girl, she loved a poet. *Loved* him. She loved the graphite stains on his fingers, the thick cowlick that covered his left eye, the hand-rolled cigarette dangling from his open mouth. She loved the way he pressed himself against her in the dark, scratched poems into the soft skin of her long, bare back.



“Don’t date poets,” her mother said. “More trouble than they’re worth. Open them up and there’s nothing more than a wad of torn up paper at their heart.”

And to the poet she said, “Why settle down yet? You’re young, she’s young. A broken heart will burn you alive. You hear me?”

But the girl didn’t listen and the boy didn’t care. She came home with sonnets scribbled on her arms, first draft villanelles veining their way up her liliated thighs. At night her mother heard the off-pitch wail of love songs through an open window, a bed creaking to lines that did not scan.

But he was a poet, his fate sealed: Seventeen; cigarette spewing ash into his eyes; a launch of metal; gasoline blooming like roses at the side of the road. A screaming boy, flung into the darkening sky.

He left her his poems. He had already promised that he would, and the girl waited by the window, expecting. Boxes arrived filled with smudged notebooks, stacks of torn paper, inked sections of box tops and envelopes marred with off-kilter metaphors and mostly-apt allusions.

“We don’t want them,” her mother said when the estate executor arrived at the door with a truck. But the girl insisted, and the men delivered the poems into her room. The poems lined the walls and blocked the light from the window; they assembled into chairs and chaises; they wafted like curtains; they hung from the ceiling like lamps.

“Well,” her mother said. “I hope you’re happy.”

And she was. At first. She slept on a bed of poetry, felt the click of and beat of internal rhythms moving up her legs as she slept, the slick of rhyme

in her mouth she breathed and breathed. She let the color and heft of his words rest against her eyes as she dreamed. Each night she saw a boy made of paper - scribbled eyes, lettered mouth. She saw a body that formed and unformed as the wind blew, and a mind that disassociated again and again to rewrite itself. And somewhere inside that paper boy, a flesh heart quivered, pumped and beat.

She woke each morning stained with graphite and cut by paper. She stopped eating. Love satisfied her. She stopped wearing shoes. Handwritten letters cushioned the space between her soft toes and the hard ground. She wore a dress made from notebook paper. Stanzas bound her hair. Her mother shook her head. Worried.

"It isn't right," her mother said as the girl drifted to the breakfast table, followed by a flurry of unbound papers. "Girl your age shouldn't be tied down." The poems shivered in horror, but the girl gathered them in her arms, curled her pink lips and crooned as though hushing a child.

"She didn't mean it," the girl soothed. Her mother handed her coffee, juice, plates heaped with food, but the girl refused. She stood, the poems standing with her, and walked away. "You're just jealous," she said, and her mother humphed. In the doorway, the poems crinkled their edges in disgust.

Time passed though, and at last the girl ate. Her mother wept in relief.

The next day, she bought a red dress. The notebook pages fluttered sadly to the ground. The girl skipped to the door as a horn blasted outside. The girl's mother watched from the window as the car shuddered and spurted before rumbling into the street. The pages tumbled towards her, assembled themselves into stack and peered over the sill.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," the mother said, giving the pages a sympathetic pat. "Nothing lasts forever anymore."

The next day, the girl bought shoes. The words were heartbroken.

"You should do something about that boy," the mother said.

"What are you talking about," the girl said, shoveling eggs and sausage into her mouth. Sinking her teeth into bread and butter and sugared fruit. "He's wonderful."

"Not *that* boy," the mother said, impatiently. She jerked her head towards the doorway. "*That* one." A thousand bits of torn paper - each one bearing a tiny love poem, so smudged as to be illegible - gathered themselves into the silhouette of the dead boy, wavering hopefully in the shadows. A paper cowlick draped over a handwritten and hopeful eye.

"Oh. Him." The girl shrugged. "He'll take the hint eventually." She gulped her juice. "Right?"

But he didn't. He made himself cardboard shoes with haiku on the toes. He unraveled the spiral spines of his notebooks to make fingers, and at night he etched his name on the insides of her arms, the soles of her feet, and once, on the pulsing curve of her throat.

"Knock it off," she said firmly one night, hurling her pillow into his papery middle. He scattered and sobbed. Tear-soaked couplets landed on her bed. Sonnets drenched in misery and snot wadded up and hurled themselves onto the ground.

That morning when she showered, he fingered words through the steam. "Ode to Things Unfair," said the bathroom mirror as she slipped her nakedness from stall to mat. "The Beautiful and the Cruel" proclaimed the sink with letters made of toothpaste. She threw her towel on the ground, ran her fingers through her long, wet hair.

Paper hands curled around the edge of the door. Paper eyes peeked in. They ogled.

"That's *it*," she said. And she meant it.

A bonfire was scheduled. She invited her girlfriends. They drank wine coolers and cranberry juice spiked with vodka. They drank to sisterhood. They traded stories of past lovers. They were brutal and specific and more than true. In the box next to the fire, the poems winced.

The girls promised to never date poets again. They pinkie swore. They sat close together, bare shoulders touching bare shoulders; they cocked their glossy heads and sighed as, one by one, they tossed the poems into the fire. Their young skin glowed in the firelight; their pearl teeth glinted through the smoke.

Inside the flames, the poet composed in their honor. The words burned. He sang of shiver along skin, the taste of breath in the ear, the treachery of buttons that won't undo, the agony of a finger's brush against a lonely hand. He sang of breasts and throats and mouths in mouths on mouths. He sang of a girl, mostly true, and loved forever. He sang of a boy, his smudged, smoky scream: a poem flung out, pinned onto the cruel, dawning sky. 🍷

I once wondered what I could be if there were no other people in the world. In this busy house, where people come and go and stare at my face, but never see me, I have my answer daily.

But when I hear you sing, Jeff, it's like you are holding my hand through the worst, the most awful moments of them all.

When you sing, I am no longer alone.

Rain

Juliet Gillies

to the sound of Music of the Night from Phantom of the Opera...

SOFTLY, GENTLY, DRIP-drip-dripping
Down from the heavens, close and near
It cools, it calms, it clears the air
It soothes, it softens, it speaks to me

There.

Swelt'ring days washed clean away
The air pure, breathable again
Dry parchéd skin, desperate lungs
Sucking in the rain, down, down to

There. ♪

Contributors

to the sound of guns raining down on everyone...



KATHRYN E. BAKER can finally change the word “aspiring” to “published” in all her forthcoming bios. *Sybil's Garage* marks her first sale and most hopefully, not her last. When not submerging herself in writing, she can be heard as Podcast Director for *Clarkesworld Magazine*. She lives in North Central Connecticut with her three beautiful kids, father and Chloe the cat.

CHERYL BARKAUSKAS is an IT professional in the New York City area. She enjoys playing music, particularly French horn, but her neighbors would probably prefer that she spend more time writing. “The Watcher Thorn” is her first published story.

KELLY BARNHILL is a teacher, writer and mom. Her first novel, *The Mostly True Story of Jack* - a lyrical fantasy for Middle Grade readers - is set for a Spring 2011 release by Little, Brown. She's ridiculously excited about it. She also writes short stories, which have appeared in *Fantasy*, *Weird Tales*, *The Sun*, *Clockwork Phoenix*, and a bunch of other places. She lives deep in the frozen heart of North America with her husband and their three evil-genius children who are halfway towards their goal of one day ruling the world.

TOM CROSSHILL lives in Brooklyn, New York, though he was born and raised in Latvia. A physicist by training and a generalist by inclination, he has in the past operated a nuclear reactor, directed a play and worked in a zinc mine, among other things. He has fiction appearing this year in *Writers of the Future Vol. XXVI*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* and *Flash Fiction Online*.

HAL DUNCAN is a sodomite, a smoker, a member of the Glasgow SF Writer's Circle, and a monthly columnist at *BSC Review*. He has published: two novels, *Vellum* (which won the Spectrum and Tähtivaeltaja awards

and was nominated for several others) and *Ink*; a stand-alone novella, "Escape from Hell!"; various short stories in magazines and anthologies; and a poetry collection, *Sonnets for Orpheus*. His work also includes the lyrics for Aereogramme's "If You Love Me, You'd Destroy Me," on the Ballads of the Book album, and the musical, *Nowhere Town*, which recently premiered in Chicago.

LINDSEY DUNCAN is a life-long writer and professional Celtic harp performer, with short fiction and poetry in numerous speculative fiction publications. She feels that music and language are inextricably linked. She lives, performs and teaches harp in Cincinnati, Ohio. She can be found on the web at <http://www.LindseyDuncan.com/writing.htm>

AMAL EL-MOHTAR is a first-generation Lebanese-Canadian, currently pursuing a PhD in English literature at the Cornwall campus of the University of Exeter. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in a range of publications both online and in print, including *Strange Horizons*, *Shimmer*, *Cabinet des Fées*, *Sybil's Garage*, *Mythic Delirium*, and *Ideomancer*; her work has been broadcast on *Podcastle*, and *The Honey Month*, a collection of poetry and prose written to the taste of twenty-eight different honeys, is available from Papaveria Press. She won the 2009 Rhysling Award with her poem "Song for an Ancient City," and co-edits *Goblin Fruit*, an online quarterly dedicated to fantastical poetry, with Jessica P. Wick. Find her online at <http://tithenai.livejournal.com>.

SAM FERREE is a student currently living in Germany, dreading his impending graduation. He wears sports coats for the pockets and has a habit of ending his sentences with "so..." He is estranged from reality and divorced from practicality. This is his first publication.

LYN C. A. GARDNER is a catalog librarian by day and coedits the journal *Virginia Libraries*. She's had over two hundred poems, stories, and articles published in *Strange Horizons*, the Green Knight Press anthologies *Legends of the Pendragon* and *The Doom of Camelot*, *Challenging Destiny*, *Talebones*, *The Leading Edge*, and more. Two stories and a poem earned honorable mention in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* (Ellen Datlow & Terri Windling); four poems have been nominated for the Rhysling Award (SFPA). Gardner is an associate member of SFWA and MWA and a graduate of the Clarion West Writers Workshop.

JULIET GILLIES was born in Durban, South Africa, in 1959. She has a number of qualifications, including diplomas in Journalism and Public Relations, an extended degree with three majors (English, Communication

and Psychology), a post-graduate diploma in Marketing and a post-graduate Honours Degree in English Literature. She spent 20 years as a Public Relations Manager, Communications Manager and Marketing Manager and now works independently as a copywriter, editor, developer of adult training courses and as an adult training facilitator. Juliet has a great passion for English and is an avid reader, having read thousands of books over the last 50 years. Her particular passions are science fiction, fantasy, poetry and the English classics (everything from Chaucer to the Brontes). With her business now stabilising, she will spend more time writing poetry, short stories and a few novels that have been dancing a jig in her head for 20 years or so.

M.K. HOBSON's debut novel, *The Native Star*, will be available from fine retailers nationwide in September 2010. She blogs, twitters, and just generally indulges in all manner of internet tomfoolery. You can find out more at her website, www.demimonde.com

SWAPNA KISHORE lives in Bangalore, India, and writes both fiction and non-fiction. Her speculative fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Nature* (Futures), *Ideomancer*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, and other publications. For more about her, please visit her website: <http://swapnawrites.com>

AVI KOTZER, when he is not writing and editing for work, enjoys writing and editing for fun. His fiction has appeared online in *Writer's Weekly*. Forsaking popular artistic hotspots such as Park Slope, in Brooklyn, and the East Village, in Manhattan, Avi and his wife live in Queens, NY, with their dog and cat (who get along just fine).

TERENCE KUCH is a consultant, avid hiker, and world traveler. His publications and acceptances include *Clockwise Cat*, *Colored Chalk*, *Creature Features* anthology, *Dead Bells* anthology, *Encounters*, *From the Asylum* anthology, *The Next Time* anthology, *Marginalia*, *Noctober*, *North American Review*, *Northwest Review*, *qarrtsiluni*, *Sonar-4*, *Timber Creek Review*, and others. His science-fiction novel *The Seventh Effect* is scheduled for publication in March, 2011. He has studied at the Writers Center, Bethesda, Maryland, and is a member of the Dark Fiction Guild.

MEGAN KURASHIGE is a dancer living in the San Francisco Bay Area. She attended the Clarion Workshop at UC San Diego in 2008. This is her very first publication.

RICHARD LARSON grew up in St. Louis, MO, but he now lives in New York City. He is currently a graduate student at NYU, and his short stories have appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *ChiZine*, *Electric Velocipede*, and many other places. He loves zombies, but he isn't one. At least not yet. For updates on Richard's zombie status, as well as other useful information, visit <http://www.rlarson.net>

ALEX DALLY MACFARLANE is a writer and traveller, often found in markets. Since arriving in Southeast Asia, she's seen more small, green-skinned oranges than the familiar ones. Her short fiction and poetry have recently appeared in *Clarke'sworld*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *DayBreak Magazine*, *Jabberwocky 4*, *Cabinet des Fées* and the 2010 Rhysling Award anthology. A limited edition handbound copy of her story "Two Coins" is forthcoming from Papaveria Press. To find out more, visit her website: <http://www.alexdailymacfarlane.com>

ANIL MENON's short fiction has appeared in magazines such as *Albedo One*, *Apex Digest*, *Chiaroscuro*, *Internova*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *New Genre* and *Strange Horizons*, as well as a variety of anthologies. His YA/SF novel *The Beast With Nine Billion Feet* (Zubaan Books) was released in November 2009. He can be reached at iam@anilmenon.com.

E.C. MYERS is a young adult novelist, Tor.com blogger, print and video editor, and media junkie. His short stories have appeared in publications such as *Farrago's Wainscot*, *Andromeda Spaceways*, and *Shimmer Magazine*, among others. He graduated from Clarion West in 2005 and is a member of the Altered Fluid writing group in NYC. His website is ecmyers.com.

ADRIENNE J. ODASSO's poetry has appeared in a variety of strange and wonderful publications, including *Sybil's Garage*, *Farrago's Wainscot*, *Fear and Trembling*, *Mythic Delirium*, *Jabberwocky*, *Cabinet des Fées*, *Midnight Echo*, *Not One of Us*, *Dreams & Nightmares*, *Goblin Fruit*, and *Illumen* (just to name a few). Her short fiction has appeared in *Behind the Wainscot* and *Expanded Horizons*, as well as in the *Ruins Terra* anthology from Hadley Rille Books and the *Needles & Bones* anthology from Drollerie Press. Her first print chapbook, *Devil's Road Down*, is currently available from Maverick Duck Press. Her first full collection, *Lost Books*, was released by Flipped Eye Publishing in April 2010.

ERIC SCHALLER's fiction has recently appeared in *The Pedestal Magazine*, *Postscripts*, and *A cappella Zoo* and is forthcoming in *Polyphony*. His stories have been reprinted in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, *Best of the Rest*, and *Fantasy: Best of the Year*.

ALEXANDRA SEIDEL has about as many obsessions as can be considered healthy (but barely, give or take), writing being one of them. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Scheherezade's Bequest*, *Star*Line*, *Enchanted Conversation* and others. There are also some mainstream journals out there who took the chance, *decomp*, *Word Riot* and *Apparatus Magazine* among them. Alexandra blogs about nothing in particular, as behaves any author of occasional weirdness: www.tigerinthematchstickbox.blogspot.com

AMELIA SHACKELFORD is a graduate of the Georgia Institute of Technology with a degree in Science, Technology and Culture. Her work has been featured in print in the Edge Science Fiction and Fantasy anthology *Opus 3* and *The North Avenue Review*. She's also been published online in *Monkey Bicycle* (<http://www.monkeybicycle.net/archive/Shackelford/dictator.html>) and *Rumble Magazine* (http://rumble.sy2.com/stories/night_time.html). Amelia currently splits her time between writing, serving coffee to the masses and answering the question, "So why did you get an English degree from a technical institute?"

AMY SISSON is a writer, librarian, book reviewer, and rescuer of cats, although not necessarily in that order. Her *Star Trek* fiction has appeared in three anthologies from Pocket Books, and stories in her *Unlikely Patron Saints* series have appeared in *Strange Horizons* and *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*. Her website can be found at <http://www.amyissson.com>.

SONYA TAAFFE has a confirmed addiction to myth, folklore, and dead languages. Poems and short stories of hers have won the Rhysling Award, been shortlisted for the SLF Fountain Award and the Dwarf Stars Award, and been reprinted in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, *The Alchemy of Stars: Rhysling Award Winners Showcase*, *The Best of Not One of Us*, and *Trochu divné kusy 3*. A selection of her work can be found in *Postcards from the Province of Hyphens* and *Singing Innocence and Experience* (Prime Books). She holds master's degrees in Classics from Brandeis and Yale. Last year she named a Kuiper belt object.

MARCIE LYNN TENTCHOFF is an Aurora Award winning poet/writer from the west coast of Canada, where she lives surrounded by greenery and various animals, both semi-domesticated, and entirely wild. Her work has appeared in *Weird Tales*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Mythic Delirium*, as well as in other magazines and anthologies. Marcie's fantasy poetry collection, *Through the Window: A Journey to the Borderlands of Faerie*, is available through Amazon.

JACQUELINE WEST is the author of *The Books of Elsewhere*, a series for young readers that debuted from Dial/Penguin in June 2010. Her poetry has appeared in journals including *Mythic Delirium*, *Goblin Fruit*, *Strange Horizons*, *ChiZine*, and *Illumen*. She currently lives amid the bluffs of eastern Minnesota, surrounded by large piles of books and small piles of dog hair. More about her work can be found at www.jacquelinewest.com.

A.C. WISE was born and raised in Montreal and currently lives in the Philadelphia area with one husband, two cats, and a very short dog. Her work has appeared in publications such as *ChiZine*, *Fantasy Magazine*, and *Strange Horizons*, among others. For more information, or just to drop by and say hi, visit the author at www.acwise.net or <http://acwise.livejournal.com/>

I wanted to keep white roses in their eyes too. I wanted to run and dance and ride my bike down a hill. I wanted to sing at the top of my lungs and I wanted to make love to a boy. Can you make me a promise, Jeff?

*Keep plucking your silly strings.
Keep bending your notes for me.
On and on and on and on and on...*

Acknowledgements

As always, many talented people are responsible for putting Sybil's Garage together, and it wouldn't be possible without their generous help. Many thanks to Matilda Prevost-Hart for her administrative help. Thanks to Paul Berger for his text message from the bathroom at Worldcon. Alaya Dawn Johnson for her 1920s-themed party; it was the bee's knees. Rajan Khanna for his knowledge of—and thirst for—beer. Devin Poore for his one-liners at Woodstock. Mercurio Rivera for leading me to Alan Moore. Greer Woodward for supporting Altered Fluid all the way from sunny Hawaii. All the members of Altered Fluid for keeping me humble and (in)sane. Ellen Datlow for making KGB a joy. N.K. Jemisin for her advice on agents. Jim Freund for being the friendliest person in SFdom. Christine Tokash for supporting me through thick and thin, for San Francisco, for trolleys and lemons and limes and you. My cousin, Gary Silberman, for always being there when I need you, and for allowing me to be a movie star for a day. My father, Stephen Kressel, for being the best goddamned dad anyone could ask for. My mother, Judith Kressel, for being a great mom, always stocking the fridge and making sure I have a fresh toothbrush when I visit. My sisters, Liz and Sondra, who are beautiful and talented and full of life. Everyone who's read and everyone who's ever visited KGB; thanks for keeping it real. Dan the bartender at KGB for your end-of-night vodka shots. Jeff Mangum and Neutral Milk Hotel for writing the most moving album ever made; Anne dances to it in her attic every night. There are so many more people I wish to thank, but I feel like the music is playing (The Fool) and they're signaling me to get off stage. So I'll leave you with this: a huge thank you to all those who submitted their work to *Sybil's Garage*, to the contributors, but most of all, to you, the reader, who makes it all possible.

Until next time...

Sincerely,



Matthew Kressel
Brooklyn, New York
June 2010

נר הי נשמת אדם

You are right, Jeff...

How strange it is to be anything at all.

But don't ever forget that it's wonderful too.

*With Love Forever,
Anne*



