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CARAVAN  
*Philip Dean Walker*



They closed down the bars first. One by one. Captain Jack's, Follies, Masters of the Universe, Butterfield's. Even Indigo. That's where we met, after all. On a Saturday night, you could find every one of us there. In the beginning they said it was because of an expired liquor license or the violation of some heretofore unknown noise ordinance or a zoning law or a safety code—reasons that could be explained and supported by law. No one took any real mind to it. These things happened. If you live in a city, you have to get used to this kind of change, this kind of churn. If you don't, then you're just fooling yourself and should probably live in the suburbs. Neighborhoods erode overnight. Then new ones pop up in their place. What's in is now out. And vice versa. It's city living.

So we migrated to other bars, ones we might not have been to quite as often for one reason or another, but ones that still had liquor flowing and beautiful men dancing with their apple-shaped butts and that electric current running through their veins, like vodka mixed with 5-Hour Energy spiked with adrenaline and a just-short-of-lethal dash of mercury. And it was fun trying out somewhere new.

But soon thereafter, there were only three places left in the entire city where we could go. Then two of the last three closed down—both wiped out in a single week, like from a hurricane.

"It's just temporary," we heard at Barstool, the last bar to which we had retreated.

"We'll just move somewhere else. We always do," another added.

"It'll get better. Besides, I heard that Butterfield's is going to re-open at a new location soon. Lines out the door and around the block, just as it always was. Just you wait. Things'll turn around."

And it was true. Things had turned around before. There was a time when we hadn't all lived near each other or run our own shops or frequented our own bars. It was something of a luxury that we'd been able to operate in the space so freely at all. It had always gotten better.

So we gathered at Barstool, in droves most nights it seemed. We came early enough so that we didn't have to wait in line too long. The doormen—large muscular guys wearing armbands around their mammoth biceps—clicked little silver instruments in their hands after we showed them our IDs. A woman affixed metal bracelets to our wrists. Huge crowds of men packed into the small, rather cubby-holed, labyrinthine space of an establishment that few of us had visited in the past (there was word, in fact, that it had only just been erected, almost overnight. None of us could corroborate this though, since we'd never been there before.) Its decrepit, tattered awning from its days as a discount furniture emporium crackled ominously on windy nights like whiplashes, dripping on us while we smoked when it rained. The shellac on the titular barstools, applied so hurriedly during their construction, had crystallized into small stalagmites that stuck us through our jeans as we sat upon them. There were bartenders at Barstool we'd never seen before, extremely attractive ones who, behind their capable pouring hands and accommodating eyes, seemed to be judging us. Counting us, one said he thought he might've seen one night.

Inside Barstool, the clash of different strata did make for the occasional scuffle—twinks getting knocked around by leather daddies, the druggies and the kinks sneering at the preps and jocks—but we were generally more amiable and tolerant towards each other than we might've been under different circumstances. After all, who else did we have but each other at a time like this?

"At a time like what?" one older man had said, a fossil from a different generation than ours, all yellowing white hair and a tucked-in flannel (in July, no less). "I've never known a time when we had more freedom and choice in life. You can get married now in this city if you want to. How dare you be inconvenienced by the closing of a couple of overpriced, vapid watering holes."

We were taken aback by his venom, but felt a twinge of sympathy for him. Poor thing had probably lost his lover twenty-five years ago and been drinking himself into numbness ever since. It was obvious from the



wasting away of his cheeks, the hollow, haunted look in his eyes as they bore into us, through us even. It wasn't our fault that we happened to have come of age at a time when guys were more careful about these things, not as risky.

"He's just jealous," we said to each other and ordered another round. "Cheers."

At the end of that last night, Barstool began emptying out into the street. Sidewalk Sale. We had always joked about the way everyone would line themselves up for picking up that one last trick before home. Discounted, sloppy ass. Everyone was pretty much wasted. The street was so quiet. There was a long line of yellow school buses lined up right outside the bar. Guys smoking cigarettes began laughing at the absurdity of it.

"Are we going on a field trip?" one of them asked no one in particular, a man in a blue-and-grey striped sweater, flouncing from side to side as he tried to stand up straight.

"They're drunk buses, is what I heard. So that no one has to drive home drunk."

"But I walked here," someone said.

"Oh, c'mon. They'll keep us safe from bashers." Barstool was, after all, in a sketchy neighborhood. Men had been beaten in its vicinity recently. You could never be too careful.

So we boarded the buses one at a time. It was fun. We felt like we were re-living middle school, but now on our own terms. We could sit in the back with the cool kids now. We were the cool kids now.

Once packed in, we heard the door close. It sounded different than we remembered from years ago, like a walk-in freezer door shutting, locked from the outside.

We sang songs and traded gossip, still buzzed. Then one guy said, "Hey, you just passed my stop."

The bus driver looked just like the doormen at the bar, and he refused to acknowledge us in the rearview mirror. He just kept driving. The air conditioning had been shut off (if it had ever even been turned on in the first place, we couldn't remember). The windows were the kind that you have to press down on plastic tabs on either side in order to pull down. But the tabs were broken off. We looked behind us and saw the grim, unchanging face of another bus driver and the buses behind that,

and the ones behind that—a yellow caravan snaking its way through the quiet city where no one else was outside and no one was watching us. It was almost like we'd never even been there.

So we settled back in our seats, suddenly rather silent and tired. It was like the quiet game: the first one to make a sound loses.

SORTILEGE  
*Sergio Ortiz*



Death continued to haunt him,  
sniffing his pants without  
deciding to give him  
the final blow. However,  
he looked as if he could  
understand the other side  
while maintaining a grip  
on everyday life, until the  
world got sad forever.

## NOT UNTIL DEATH

*Jason Morrow*



I never had more than one zombie at a time.

The first took me completely by surprise. Fitch had died in bed. Awaking to find him dead, I panicked, or dissociated, or did whatever it was I'd done. Instead of calling for help, I draped Fitch's arm over my shoulder and lay there crying. Hours passed.

And then Fitch came back.

My life had seemed real to me before that night. Fitch and I loved each other and we had friends. An aneurism took that.

Thinking about him all these years later, I pull into work. Late, I grab my lunchbox and rush in, fumbling with the key card. After a few swipes it responds with a click and I push the door open. I snatch my water out of the lunchbox and punch in. My boss glances meaningfully at his watch and hands me a stack of orders. I walk past Shipping, eyes lingering over Tucker, and find an empty cart to use.

I say my good-mornings but it all seems artificial. A window seems to stand between me and everyone else. Had I felt like that before the power came over me? I can't remember. Sometimes I imagine that I'd raised the dead all along, that as a boy I'd revived puppies and frogs and bumblebees, and I can't tell if these are daydreams or vague memories.

"Morning Alan," I say.

Alan looks at me, reaching up to the top shelf for some product. His shirt lifts a little, showing a narrow line of skin. "Hey Josh," he says. He has a cart already half-filled with the bizarre things people order from us. Glasses that look like bug eyes, garage door decorations, make-your-own root beer kits. He's faster than me.

"Are you going tonight?" I ask.

"Yeah," Alan says, looking down. "You?"

"Yeah," I say, looking away. I take a deep breath. "I'm really sorry," I say. "I know he was your friend."

Alan says nothing. He looks like he hasn't gotten any sleep. Today we don't elbow each other or tell sex jokes in the aisles.

At nine the other Josh comes in. I hadn't looked at the clock lately and just happen to glance up and look directly into his face. Our eyes meet. He has huge, almost black eyes. His mouth and chin seem blocky, almost chiseled out of his long face. His lips are full and red, barely wider than his nose. A few days ago he buzzed his dark brown hair.

I catch my breath for a moment, then quickly look away and look busy.

My department sits right next to Josh 2's. Whenever anyone calls one of us we both look over. I once tried to seize the opportunity to change my name to the more mature "Joshua," just to avoid confusion, but it didn't stick. This morning I stay marginally focused on work until break comes.

In the break room I sit with Alan and KC. "So Jared rushes into the bathroom but she's in there throwing up," Alan is saying. "So he goes to the kitchen and just whips it out and goes in the sink!"

I smile and KC rolls his head on the table. His ugly rhinestoney hat falls off.

"That's when his friend's mom comes in and says, 'What are you doing to my dishes?!'"

"Wait wait wait," I say. "They were drinking with his mom home? In high school?"

"Yep," Alan says.

"You're going tonight, right?" KC asks. We all sober up.

"Yeah," I tell him.



At home I make some instant miso soup and get in the shower. I put on my best dress shirt but have no suit jacket. This will be the first time I see anybody outside of work. I feel really bad about Jared but have to admit that I really want to see Alan outside of work. Would I see Josh Number 2 there? "Geez, Josh," I say to myself. "Give it a rest."

I drive to the funeral home and get out. Alan and KC stand outside, talking softly. I join them. We talk about work. I want to bring it back to

Jared; this is his event, after all. But I can't think of any way to do this other than declaring it time to talk about him, so I get silent. KC and Alan trail off and we stand in awkward silence. I go in to sign the guestbook.

The room is a dusky pink someone must have deemed comforting. Sixty or more people crowded into the rows of folding seats. More gathered at the back of the room around poster-boards covered in photos.

I look uncomfortably around at the family. People seem to cry more when young people die – especially when young attractive people die. His girlfriend looks vacant. Spotting a few coworkers, I nod hello. They look politely subdued. I wait until the person at the coffin moves aside so I can take his place. I kneel on the bar-thing in front of the casket.

Jared looks so young. He'd just graduated from high school a few years ago, hadn't he? A few years younger than me. He looks good, not overly made-up. I can't help but reach out and touch him, to feel the icy lifelessness of the skin. Otherwise one would almost think him alive.

As soon as I touch him I realize I shouldn't have. I snatch my fingers back and speed away from the coffin. I see Alan and KC just outside the door by the guestbook.

"His girlfriend looks like a wreck," I say.

KC nods. Alan says, "My wife went over yesterday to check on her. We're kind of worried about her."

Josh 2 comes in from outside, wearing a black suit and white shirt. He'd actually gone to school with Jared but the two had lost touch until working at the same building. Red rims his eyes. I lose track of the conversation. Josh is abnormally beautiful, like some creature from Faerie.

When I get home I fall into dreams of Josh 2 and Alan. We hang out in some kind of airport or something.



"Josh!"

I sit bolt upright.

"Josh!"

Throwing on a robe, I dash to the door. Stomach twisting, I feel pretty sure I know the voice. I look through the peephole. Oh God.

I open the door to Jared. Pale and wet with rain, but looking healthy. He lunges at me and grabs me in a tight hug.

"Jared..." I say. I stand there for a full minute, wrapped in Jared's cold embrace. I feel... nervous, but then relieved. I hug him back. "Do you want to come in?" I ask, completely lost for words. Jared nods.

I take him in, quickly closing and chaining the door. I lead him to the kitchen. "You shouldn't be wet," I say.

In the kitchen I help him out of his clothes. A Y-incision mars his torso but despite that he looks... worth seeing. I gently towel him off. The waxy makeup comes off, further revealing his pale skin. A touch of blond hair dusts the center of his chest.

"Why did you come here?"

Jared shrugs. "I had to see you."

"How did you find me?"

Jared shrugs again. I shouldn't have bothered asking, but it felt rude to not. I've given up asking how they get out of the funeral home, or how they get into my locked building. They don't know.

I don't know why he has a Y-incision. It's not normal to remove organs just for embalming. Sad that I know such things. Maybe organ donation. None of us at work even know how he died; the family wouldn't reveal it. Useless to ask Jared. He won't answer.

Jared waits, naked, in the kitchen while I flick the temperature to near-zero and flip on the cooler. Tricked out refrigerants and a human-sized cooler increase the shelf life of the dead. I haven't had them on in a while. None of this is noticeable except for the cooler, which stands like a sarcophagus in the spare bedroom. Not that anyone comes over, anyway.

I make some tea. Jared doesn't want any. He prefers Jack, but I don't have any. He smiles broadly as he tells me stories about him and Alan, about the first meeting of Jared's girlfriend and Alan's wife's. Oh man. Jared's poor girlfriend. I ask him about Josh 2. "Man, I don't think I've seen him since that one party..." He describes a party that ended with him kneeling at a toilet, vomiting between a woman's legs. Josh the Second, meanwhile, played pool upstairs, naked.

I blink. "What did he look like?" I ask.

"Big!" Jared says. He stares at nothing and offers no other answer.

My heart pounds at the mere thought of it. If I was a bit younger, I'd probably have been at that party. We'd hung in similar crowds in high school; Josh and Jared might've been my friends. Before coolers and

refrigerants, the walking dead and a gnawing sense of otherness took over my life.

"I won't see them again," he says, eyes haunted and dead.

I shudder. The dead have never shown such insight. They couldn't even answer the questions, "Why are you crying?" or "Are you all right?"

"How do you feel about me?" I ask, wanting to change the morbid subject. I receive the inevitable answer:

"I love you."

We make love. Later I lay in his arms. Questions circle. Is my power growing? Could my power now work at this distance? Or had the merest touch at the wake done it? Never before had someone risen without me having cradled the body. Maybe it wasn't my power at all, but a strange phenomenon that followed me, God's little joke on Josh. Maybe this happened to everyone, but no one ever said.

Of course the first two risen dead had loved me. My boyfriend Fitch rose first and my cousin Karen second. But the homeless man I'd accidentally encountered in the street, whom I held tight in a fit of uncontrolled emotion, had no reason to love me after death, nor does Jared really. But they all have, unabashedly. Karen and the homeless man loved me platonically. Those I myself desired in life returned that desire after life.

I worm closer into Jared's room temperature body. This doesn't feel like coercion, what I do. They love me. I imagine colonies of insects and worms in the dirt under my apartment building, living out their lifespans and then returning to life beneath my unnatural presence.



I awake. Jared sobs softly into the back of my neck, but quickly stops when he sees me awake. I touch the tears and stare at them on my fingertips. Little diamonds.

I put Jared into the cooler and ask him to stay until I get him, then go to work. All day I think only of Jared, even when Josh 2 comes to ask me a question and then laughs with me, putting his hand on my shoulder. I come home and open the cooler.

Jared stops crying.



“Why are you crying?” I ask softly. Jared stares with haunted eyes. He says nothing.

Tonight he responds to me, moves around, and shows affection, but doesn’t volunteer any stories. He seems less present, or less functional. More like one of my usual “friends.” With embalming and refrigeration, the dead look normal for a long time, but they only stay conscious for a few days each.

The next night I ask Jared to run a bath. He won’t last much longer and I want to experience him warm. I want to cry, but keep positive. Jared will die twice. This unnatural curse he’s under will go away. It doesn’t make me feel better.

I get candles from the hallway buffet and bring them into the bathroom. Jared sits in the fetal position up against the tub, crying into his knees. Again he can’t give an explanation when I ask. I hug him close for a time. His strange torment, whatever it is, will end soon.

“Do you want to give me a foot massage?” I ask. The dead man nods, and means it. More than anything else, I want to break the tension and take the attention off of Jared’s sad thoughts. I don’t feel selfish asking because Jared truly wants to do anything to please me. With the living I can never ask for what I want.

I enjoy Jared, warm in the bath, and hope he feels the same.

The next day when I open the cooler, Jared doesn’t respond. After kissing him farewell, I go to work. Everyone seems to have brightened some since the wake, but I’ve now lost him twice. How quickly people stop caring. Except for Alan, who still looks haunted. Alan is sweet. If ever I were to marry someone...

After work I burn the flesh off the bones in my fireplace – it sickens me, but hopefully just seems like burning steak to the neighbors. After that I break up the bones with a sledge hammer, putting the pieces into a trash bag. This I leave in a dumpster in an alley far from my apartment. The first time I did this I forgot to use gloves. So far as I know, none of the bags were found.

I wonder if word will ever make it back to work that Jared’s body went missing from the funeral home. I wonder if it will make the news. If enough people connected with me wind up disappearing from their funeral homes... I shake it out of my head. Hopefully this will never happen again.

I wonder if the funeral home will even tell the family, or if they'll just bury an empty box and call it a day.

Getting rid of Jared takes most of the night, and I show up to work the next morning feeling very tired. I can't take my eyes off of Josh 2. How beautiful and warm he looks. He and Jared occupy all of my thoughts. After work I find myself on a website buying a spy camera from China. It sits inside a ballpoint pen. On any other pen the button would extend or retract the tip, but on this pen a click of the button will take away other people's privacy. My God, I think, has my life come to this? I can only view the living through a window... through a pen?

I masturbate to the thought of catching a better look at Josh 2 by holding the pen over the side of the bathroom stall. Josh, and Alan, and Tucker, and...

Later in bed I pray for a quieting of my voyeurism, but who but a god of death would answer my prayers? My orgasm seemed to slay all desire, and I resolve not to use the pen when it comes. But by next morning, with Josh 2 picking up packages in curve-hugging sweatpants, the pen seems like my only way out of complete collapse.

It arrives five anxious days later. I install the software on my computer and charge it up overnight.

Next day, before first break, I see KC going into the bathroom. He isn't a goal of mine, but I'm curious enough. I set down my work and walk quickly to the bathroom. I get into the stall next to the urinal, and when I hear the telltale stream, I activate the pen and hold it shakily over the stall.

Later on Alan and I walk back from break together. Alan heads for the bathroom and I follow a few seconds later, activating the pen in my pocket. I quickly slam the stall door and hold the pen over the side, then, while I can still hear the stream, I pretend to drop the pen under the stall wall to get a different angle.

The end of work couldn't have come fast enough. I race home and plug the pen in.

"Son of a bitch," I growl. Alan's penis is a vague gray shape. KC's isn't even visible in the dim video; a stream of urine seems to come out of the solid darkness of his body. Cursing, I look up the pen's model number on different websites. "Works only in well-lit conditions."

I soon find that the pen works fine in the break room. I can't get any nudity, of course, but I get Alan's smile at least, and a few snatches of witty conversation. KC grabs the pen from where it rests in front of me. "Nice pen," he says. "How much did you pay for it?"

"Forty," I answer.

KC whistles. I flush; I would never have paid that much for an actual pen but couldn't bring myself to lie.

After lunch I glance over Josh 2's way every few minutes. As soon as Tucker, Josh 2's partner in Shipping, walks away, I stride over to him.

"I want to ask a favor from you," I say. Josh 2 looks at me with large, warm brown eyes. "I'm in school to be a photographer," I lie. I still hate to lie, but apparently I'm willing. "Well, more of an amateur thing really, it's just a class, not really a major. Anyway, we have to do a photo shoot and none of my friends can help me in time and I really need a model. You have the right look for what I want to do. Do you think you could help me?" I heave a breath after all that.

"Um..." Josh 2 looks around like he wants someone to save him. "When?"

"Any afternoon this week after work," I tell him.

"Um, sure?" he says.

"Awesome, thanks a lot," I say. "I'll have beer and pizza."

Two days later Josh 2 stands in my apartment. I've planned every detail at length. First I ask him to change into a swimsuit in my bedroom, where the pen rests in a cup aimed where he will stand to change. He'll stand there because I intentionally covered the floor with boxes and books, leaving only a small area for him to change in.

When Josh 2 finishes changing I go in to collect my props, including the pen which now, hopefully, contains the true scope of his beauty. I try not to look at him too long. I never realized he had muscles. He's really thin, but now I can see he's also really sculpted. I take a second glance at the thin line of fuzz under his navel.

We go to my makeshift studio in the extra bedroom, bright green party tablecloths making a green-screen. The green-screen covers the human-sized cooler, taped firmly in place. I hope he won't ask what's under it.

I have him kneel and hold a pair of dumbbells over his head. His armpits are really hairy. He only has a dusting of hair across his chest. It doesn't seem to match.

I also get him into a backbend pose, and have him lay down with his hands behind his head. Next he lies on his back and hugs his knees to his chest. His feet are so tiny. It seems somehow endearing next to his muscles.

Once I get my close-ups of all of my favorite body parts, except the ones hidden by the swimsuit, I grab the Egyptian clothes.

"Want another beer?" I ask.

"Sure," he says. The can opens a moment later with a crack.

I help him put on the Egyptian kilt and dust his face with gold. I brush his cheek gently with the back of my fingers.

I step back and wrinkle my face. "Can you take the swimsuit off? It looks too bulky under the kilt."

He does, looking me in the eye as he slips it down his legs and over his feet. He stands holding it uncertainly. I take it and toss it aside.

"All right, this might seem kind of weird, but I want to go for a light effect. This is your mark." I activate the pen and tape it to the floor, pointing up. Then I drag over the hand-held carpenter's light and put it next to the pen. "You do mixed martial arts, right?"

He smiles and laughs. "Most people call it MMA. But yeah."

"Um, OK, so get into a deep horse stance - stand over the pen - face me. The light should produce some cool shadows."

I turn off the overhead light. My heart beats loudly in my ears as he walks toward the pen and light but doesn't squat down. I already have photographic reproductions of his astonishing body, which I hope includes a good view of him changing into the swimsuit, but now I want to try for his most intimate spot. Squat over the freaking pen, I repeat like a mantra in my head.

"What is it with you and that pen?" Josh asks.

"What do you mean?" I say back. I hide my shaking hands behind my back.

"I dunno. You're always holding it at a funny angle. You even bring it into the bathroom with you. You're always ... pointing it." He looks down at it and I fear that a look of recognition will come over his eyes as he realizes it now points up at him. I should end this now.

"Lucky charm, I guess," I say. "I dunno, it's a writer thing."

"You write?"

"Some," I say. "I'm not published."

He shrugs and squats over the pen. I reposition the light. I experimented last night, proving that if I squatted over the pen with the light it recorded exactly the view I sought.

After snapping a few pictures, flooded with a relief that didn't seem to take away my shaking limbs or stampeding heart, I untape the pen and set it in a cup. "Can you change back into the swimsuit?" I ask. "I'll turn around." I turn around to give Josh some imagined privacy and flip on the overhead light. I see out of the corner of my eye that the pen has turned in the cup. Muttering, I try to nonchalantly step back to the table and rearrange it, then go back to where I'd stood. He has a look on his face as if to say, "What the...?"

Back to Josh 2, my heart pounds harder than before. Mistake, mistake, I tell myself. Why did I have to rearrange the pen? I hear fabric hit the floor, then footsteps, some clattering, and finally a muttered, "What is this?!"

Shaking like a rabbit, I make myself ask, "Is everything OK?"

"What is this red light?" he demands.

I turn around. Josh 2 stands, naked and utterly amazing, holding my pen. He had screwed the top off to reveal the USB port.

"It's a flash drive," I say. "And a pen. Cool huh?" Even terrified, my eyes trace him from head to toes. How can a person be so perfect?

"Bullshit," he says and dashes the pen against the wall.

He starts back to my bedroom, then stops, turns, and bends to pick up the pen. I finally get my view. Holy shit. It looks really good. But surprise and relief – and fear and awkwardness – go deeper than the momentary thrill I feel.

Pen in hand, Josh 2 stalks naked back to my bedroom. I follow him in, trying to think of anything to say.

"Turn around," he says, bending to get his clothes.

I open my mouth, giving up on convincing him that he misunderstood the pen's purpose, wanting only to plead forgiveness.

"Turn around!" he roars.

I spin about. Behind me, fabric rustles and change jingles in pockets. "You're fucking lucky if I don't call the cops," he says, doing up his pants with a high pitched ziiiip. "You're getting fired at least."

He brushes roughly past me, his shoulder knocking mine. I grab his wrist. "Please don't tell," I pant. Josh turns to look at me. "If you want, I'll quit, just please don't say anything."

He yanks his hand out from my grasp. His face wrinkles up in disbelief. "You should have thought of that before you tried to film me!" He turns around and flings open my door. I grab for his wrist one more time.

He turns and punches me in the mouth. Shocked, I fall back into the piles of boxes littering the floor. My gums feel cut. Josh looks at me then drops his gaze. "I'm sor—" he starts to say.

"I love you," I blurt when I only meant to say, "I'm sorry."

"What is wrong with you?" he demands. He looks around the room as if searching for an answer. Finally he kicks me hard in the leg. Seeming to like it, he kicks me again.

"Stop it!" I yell. When Josh swings his foot again, I catch it and push, meaning to push him away. He falls back and hits his head against the doorframe with a loud crack.

I bolt over to him. Tears well in my eyes as I see how it will happen. My beautiful Josh will bleed to death, all that the poor man loves in his life fleeing him. He will awaken in a few hours, a thoughtless slave - physically perfect but dead - lost - on the inside, never able to explain why he cries. I will savor his loveliness, the noble sadness, as I mourn for the lost life. And then I will bury the body to protect myself. No one will ever know what happened to him.

I leaned in to kiss his soft mouth. I haven't kissed a living man since Fitch. My mouth brushes gently against his still warm lips. Josh 2 opens his eyes. Cringing in disgust, he pushes me hard.

"You're OK!" I cry.

He punches me without restraint, then wraps his fingers around my neck. My face feels full and hot, bursting with blood. I claw at his hands.

As I fall into blackness I call out in my mind, "Josh, stay with me." I already forgive him for murdering me.

The world fades out and I have only the sense of falling. I carry out trains of thought that then snatch away into the void and I can't remember what I was just thinking about. I feel like this for some time.

I become aware of tears falling over me. Cold, achingly cold, and feeling bruised all over, I open my eyes. The most beautiful creature in all the world leans over me.

"Are you all right?" he asks me, eyes swollen.

I don't know how to answer the question.

"I thought that I... you look..." The questioner puts his fingers to my throat, then jerks them away. "You don't have a pulse!"

I say the only thing on my mind. "I love you."

## GIRLS TOUCHING GIRLS IN CINEMAS

*Teri Louise Kelly*



touch paper, smouldering, odour of saltpetre  
incense burning lust chemistry drifts across trailers  
on & off screen like atomic dummies waving candles for conformity  
as luminosity & viscosity beckon  
homing beacons with subtitles & braille encoding  
carriers of the plague pass instant judgements  
the house lights dim, bastion quietens absorbed in plastic culture  
down to scents & sixth senses; desire smouldering

games played by fine hairs & breath leaking  
her hands are sockets you can plug into  
her thighs a deck of tarot cards waiting to be turned  
her eyes cast shadows & pierce the silence; flickering UV rays & low  
frequency emissions  
her tongue darts mysteriously, searching for civilisations  
her mountains rise & fall in rhapsodies of engagement

once you've pressed play there's no intermission  
chest deep in her current with your steed lost & your courage mounted  
knowing one more step will drag you into her luxurious undertow  
you reach for contact, white light, blue heat, red mist, black holes  
the whole universe awaits, spinning giddily about the mainframe  
as circuitry malfunctions & the pituitary reels in horror  
coital truth finds a worn pew in another church  
sucking the poison from flesh wounds & hot slinging endorphins  
curvature in X-men temples immunity deficiency is a blessing  
the complexity of conjugal jungles subjugated in celluloid cells.



THE JEST  
*Michael G. Cornelius*



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CHARACTERS

ANDREW, a handsome, mildly flamboyant man in his mid-30s. He is just starting to age and realizing nothing can ultimately be done about it. Well dressed, a city boy by birth and inclination.

EDGAR, Andrew's partner, perhaps twelve years older than his mate, once handsome, but showing signs of middle age. Strongly built, inclined to stoutness, but his carriage reflects the power he wields in life and in his relationship.

SETTING

The large living room of a modern, suburban home. Everything is neatly appointed and clean as a whistle. A large couch is upstage center; next to it is a chair. A coat is slung over the chair. A coffee table sits in front of the couch. An end table is on the other side of the couch. A desk sits forward SR. A large brass vase sits on it. A door outside stands SL. A kitchen door stands SR. There is a large window next to it.

TIME

Halloween evening, in the present day.



*Andrew is lounging on the couch, talking on the phone. He is dressed comfortably, but well. There is an open bottle of wine in front of him, and a half-empty glass. He continues drinking throughout the conversation. As the lights go up, we hear him mid-conversation. His pauses indicate when he is listening to the other speaker.*

ANDREW: ...no way. No way! She left her husband for another woman?

Jefferson, are you serious? *(pause)* Well, I can't say I'm surprised. I always told you she was a lesbian. That boxy haircut. *(small pause)* And those shoes. *(pause)* So now she's stopped shaving her armpits? And she's living on a women's retreat? *(pause)* In New Jersey? *(He laughs)*

Ohh, I needed that. It's nice to hear your voice. It's always so quiet around here. *(pause)* How am I? Gurl, I don't even know where to begin.

*(ANDREW pauses. He gets off the couch, moves towards the window, looks out it. He takes his glass with him.)*

You know, when Edgar said he wanted to move out of the city, I thought—okay, a home in Greenwich. I can live with that. Or maybe upstate. Live next to the Clintons. That would be fine. “Anything but Long Island.” That's what I actually told him. *(pause)* But to actually move us here—to this backwoods nightmare burg? To Pennsylv-fucking-ania? Jefferson, you have no idea what's it like here. These people think they can buy haute couture at T. J. Maxx. *(pause)* Yes, there is a Starbucks, but I actually have to go into a Target to get there. A Target, Jefferson. A Target. *(pause)* Oh God, no, it's much worse than what you see on TV. *(pause)* You know, I realized Edgar was a country boy when we got together, but I figured he'd left that all behind years ago. He'd been in the city for—how long? Making his millions on Wall Street and fucking every twenty-year-old boy he could find. Remember what you said? If I could land him... *(pause)* Yeah, set for life. I know. He was such a project, though. Remember? He had that whole daddy/leather bear thing. Remember the leather? Remember the muscle shirts? *(pause)* I was like, if you want to wear muscle shirts, you need muscles to go with them! *(pause)* It was three months before I got him into some Prada. And another two to get him to shave off that ridiculous beard. *(pause, laughs)* I know!

ANDREW (cont'd): I've earned my comforts, haven't I? But this — *(he looks around, as if seeing where he is for the first time)* — I didn't earn this. I tell you, Jefferson, if I had thought in a million years he'd move us out to — wherever the fuck this place is — then I would never have sunk my claws into him in the first place. *(pause)* Seriously! Who gives up Wall Street for Wal-Mart?

*(ANDREW pauses. He looks out the window.)*

It's just these people. They're so — I don't know what the word is. Common? Is that nice to say? *(pause)* Pedestrian. Yes, that's it to a "T". These people, these wives... Jefferson, they're just like our mothers. *(pause)* I know! Can you believe that when we moved here a few of them actually showed up here with banana-nut bread? *(pause)* I mean, seriously... who makes banana-nut bread, or whatever calorie-laden crap they brought over? And the hair! Oh my God, every single one of them, straight out of yesteryear. They all still curl their bangs. *(pause)* I mean it! Can you just imagine? All these suburban housewives in their Wal-Mart sweaters and their pegged jeans standing in front of their mirrors every morning curling their hair? *(pause, laughs)* But these people, Jefferson, I tell you, they're total freaks. They have potluck suppers and they all volunteer at the school. *(pause)* Well, every single one of them has kids. They pop them out like Pez down here. *(pause)* I know! And they all go to church. You should see the looks I get when they ask me what church I attend, and I tell them read the New York Times in bed on Sunday mornings. God.

*(ANDREW pauses, then sits back on couch)*

No, Edgar's gone again. *(pause)* I know! You'd think he'd have the decency to hang around more if he's going to move me out to Hillbilly Junction. But it seems like he's gone all the time now. Work, he always says. *(pause)* No, he comes back tomorrow. *(pause)* It's so quiet around here without him.

*(ANDREW laughs, gets off the couch, goes back to the window.)*

Yeah, you're right, Jefferson, it's not like he says a lot when he's here. But you know what I mean... it's just different when he's gone.

*(ANDREW looks out the window as if looking for... something.)* It's too quiet. *(sighs)* Who would have thought I'd actually miss that asshole? *(pause)* I know, I never missed him at all when we lived in the city!

ANDREW (cont'd): I never even saw him. I was never home. Always somewhere to be, always something new... but now...

*(ANDREW looks out the window again, then turns back towards the couch.)*

It's just this place, really. So still, so quiet. We had to buy the biggest house at the end of the quietest cul-de-sac in all of fucking Pennsylvania. I swear it's so "tranquil" at night I can hear my crow's feet growing. *(pause)* Of course there is nowhere around here to get Botox! Jefferson, these people actually still tan. They tan! In the sun! *(pause)* Next time I'm in the city we are going straight to Dr. Futterman's office. I need a year's supply of botulism injected into every crevice on my face.

*(There is a knock at the door. ANDREW jumps at the sound.)*

Hold on, Jefferson, someone's knocking.

*(ANDREW puts the phone to his chest. To himself)*

Who the hell...?

*(ANDREW opens the door and hears "Trick or Treat!" He slams the door.)*

Shit!

*(ANDREW speaks into the phone)*

Jesus Christ, Jefferson, it's Halloween. Did you know it was Halloween? Why the hell didn't someone tell me it was Halloween? *(pause)* Of course I don't have any candy in the house. I don't even keep carbs in the house! *(pause)* You know, I might have some mints in my coat pocket. Would that be okay, you think? Would LifeSavers keep the little shits happy?

*(ANDREW sets the phone down and goes to his coat. There is a knock on the door.)*

ANDREW: *(shouting, as politely as possible)* Just a minute...

*(ANDREW searches through the coat pockets. Pulls out Kleenex, sunglasses, a large bottle of prescription medication. He contemplates, for a moment, giving some to the kids, but changes his mind, opening the bottle and taking one for himself. A knock is heard again. ANDREW replies crossly.)*

I said just a minute!

*(ANDREW rushes to kitchen. He returns in a minute with a tattered box of granola bars. He goes to the door and fakes a happy smile.)*

ANDREW (cont'd): Oh, so sorry, children, you caught me taking a nap.

My, my, don't you look pretty as a princess? And what are you supposed to be? *(pause)* A mutant ninja what? Oh, never mind, here you go, enjoy! *(He closes the door with a cross face and goes back to the phone.)* I'm back. *(pause)* I managed to find some granola bars in the kitchen. Do kids even eat granola bars anymore? *(pause)* I have no idea where they came from. I think they were here when we moved in. *(pause)* I hope I have enough. This neighborhood is crawling with children. It's like no one has anything better to do than breed around here. And I only have eight bars left. Well, after I run out I'll just turn out the lights and go upstairs.

*(ANDREW sits down, gets comfortable, and then hears a knock at the door.)*

Oh, for Chrissakes. Hold on, Jefferson.

*(ANDREW puts the phone to him chest again and opens the door. His speech is obviously insincere.)*

Oh, what a cute pumpkin! Here you go...

*(As ANDREW closes the door, something far off catches his eye; ANDREW is spooked. When he speaks again into the phone, he sounds distracted.)*

I'm back...

*(ANDREW sits on the couch. There is a longer pause.)*

Hmm? I'm sorry, what was that you said? *(pause)* Oh I know, I'm...

I'm a bit distracted. Do you know what I just saw out there? One of the mothers—or fathers, I don't know which—one of them was dressed in the spookiest costume. *(pause)* Well, she—he—whatever—was all dressed up like a Harlequin, like a red and black clown, head to toe all red and black, only... instead of a face, she—he— whoever—wore a death's head mask. It covered their entire face—you couldn't see the eyes or mouth or nothing. It was just—the creepiest effect. I mean really, it just— *(pause)* Well, you're right, Jefferson, for these people Halloween is probably a big deal. It's what passes for culture in this neck of the woods. I suppose they must go all out. Still, there was something about it... you know? I thought, just for a moment, that it was staring right at me... and just at me, and no one else. It was—unsettling. *(pause)* Oh, you're right, of course, it's just the quiet getting to me. I can't imagine what else it could be.

*(ANDREW takes a healthy belt of wine.)*

ANDREW (cont'd): Anyway, distract me from my horrible suburban nightmare, please! Tell me more about what's going on there. What is everyone wearing?

*(There is a knock at the door)*

Oh, God, more trick or treaters. Hold on.

*(ANDREW goes to the door, opens it. He hears "Trick or treat!" He gives the child a granola bar with a strained smile.)*

Have a good—

*(ANDREW spies the death's head figure.)*

—night.

*(ANDREW closes the door. He pauses, then looks out the window before locking the door. He then speaks into the phone.)*

I saw it again, Jefferson. *(pause)* It! The death's head figure. It was closer this time. *(pause)* I tell you, it almost looks real, it looks like death itself, it—

*(ANDREW looks out window)*

—it's gone now.

*(ANDREW turns back to the couch.)*

This place is getting to me, I swear. I could have sworn that—thing—was out to get me. *(pause)* Yes, I know how I sound, I just—I can't explain it. It was like—like it was coming for me. That's how it feels when it looks at you.

*(There is a knock at the door. ANDREW turns toward it, apprehensive, as if he does not want to answer. He screws up his courage. He unlocks and opens the door. He hears "Trick or treat!" He gives out two bars, but his eyes are glued to something beyond the children. Back into the phone.)*

Jefferson, I— *(pause)* Oh, no, please don't go. Please. It—of course. I understand. I'll talk to you later. Bye.

*(ANDREW hangs up the phone, sets it down on the table. He does not know what to do with himself. He fidgets, finishes his glass of wine, pours another. He picks up the phone again, dials.)*

ANDREW: Pick up, Edgar, pick up.

*(EDGAR does not pick up. ANDREW eventually throws the phone onto the couch in disgust. There is a knock at the door. He looks at it, wholly afraid. He walks slowly toward it. Finally, he opens it and hears "Trick or treat!" But his eyes are glued on something else. He gives the child a granola bar robotically. He closes the door slowly, his eyes never wavering. He locks the*

*door and steps away from it slowly. He backs into the small stand. The brass vase falls off and makes a terrible noise. ANDREW jumps at the sound. Stares at the vase until it is silent again. Then jumps once more where there is a knock at the door. He wages an internal battle about opening it. Finally, he does. He hears, "Trick or treat!" In the background, in the distance, he sees—nothing. Whatever it is, it is gone now. He gives out the granola bar. Closes the door. He looks out the window—nervous, scared. He sees nothing. He takes a deep breath—in, out, in, out. He talks to himself. He tries to laugh. He looks in a mirror.)*

ANDREW: Oh, God, Andrew, you have really got to calm down.

*(ANDREW tugs on his skin, trying to distract himself.)*

Freaking yourself out is not good for your skin.

*(ANDREW pauses, examining himself in the mirror.)*

Maybe I need a facelift. Do people even get facelifts anymore?

*(There is a knock at the door. ANDREW feels better now, more confident. He speaks as he opens it.)*

Yes, yes, I know, trick or fucking—

*(But no one is there. ANDREW is puzzled, instantly apprehensive. He closes the door. Looks out the window. Talks as if he is convincing himself.)*

Nothing there. Nothing. No death's head, no creepy figure, not—

*(There is a knock at the door. ANDREW is fully scared again. He goes to open it, slowly. No one is there. He closes it quickly, forcefully. He takes a few steps when there is another knock. Now he feigns exasperation and understanding.)*

It's just some kids—playing a joke—

*(ANDREW talks louder.)*

Listen, you little shits, you'd better—

*(ANDREW is interrupted by a violent, insistent pounding at the door. It won't stop. He is scared, very scared. He freezes. Then he runs into the kitchen. He comes back with a butcher knife. The pounding goes on. He walks toward the door. When he gets five feet from it, it falls silent. He pauses, then finally moves forward. He places his hand on the doorknob.*

*Unlocks the door. He hesitates. Finally, he opens the door. Nothing is there.)*

*(ANDREW hears another sound—a knock, footsteps—from the other side of the house.)*

ANDREW: The kitchen!

*(ANDREW goes toward the kitchen door slowly. He is scared. The sounds are random, strange, but frightening. He raises the knife. He slowly the opens the door—he sees something, screams, drops the knife, falls back.)*

ANDREW: Edgar!

*(A man walks through the kitchen door. He is wearing a disheveled suit and looks extremely apologetic.)*

EDGAR: *(sheepishly)* Happy Halloween?

ANDREW: *(he is both furious and immensely relieved, and has trouble speaking)* Edgar, I—I—

*(Finding nothing to say, ANDREW resorts to hitting him, though without causing any damage.)*

How could you do something like that!

EDGAR: I'm sorry, Andrew, really I am! I just—I had the chance to come back a day early and thought I'd play a little prank on my better half. That's all.

ANDREW: That's all! That's all! You nearly scared me to death and that's all, you say! I—I— *(Finding nothing to say again, ANDREW resorts to hitting him again.)*

EDGAR: *(more forcefully this time)* Look, I said I'm sorry, okay? I thought it would be funny. I didn't think you'd overreact like this. It was just a little scare to celebrate Halloween with. That's all.

*(ANDREW is still visibly shaken, but EDGAR's words have placated him somewhat. EDGAR opens his arms apologetically.)*

EDGAR: Forgive me?

ANDREW: *(he eyes EDGAR crossly, but finally allows him to hug him)* You're an asshole, you know that?

EDGAR: Completely. *(EDGAR is still holding ANDREW, and begins kissing his neck while rubbing his ass suggestively, as if he owns it.)* I've missed you, baby...

*(ANDREW stops him.)*

ANDREW: You must be kidding. After what you put me through, to think that I'd—that we're going to—hunh-uh. In your dreams.

EDGAR: *(measured)* I've been away for a week...

ANDREW: And it's going to feel like another week when I get through with you.

EDGAR: Andrew. *(His voice resonates with authority.)* We don't have to have this conversation again, do we?



ANDREW: *(quietly)* No...

EDGAR: *(demonstrating his position)* No, what?

ANDREW: No... we don't. *(ANDREW has not delivered the expected response, and nervously awaits EDGAR's reply.)*

EDGAR: *(pauses, seems as if he is going to be come angry, but then changes tactics)* Hey. Hey. *(EDGAR puts his hands on ANDREW's shoulders possessively.)* Maybe that can wait a bit. How about some dinner? They didn't feed me on the plane. I'm starving.

ANDREW: *(slumping his shoulders in relief and defeat)* There's some leftover Chinese in the fridge. I can heat that up. Christ, after all this, I wouldn't mind an eggroll myself.

EDGAR: Sounds great. *(He smiles, and kisses ANDREW on the cheek from behind.)* Why don't you be a good boy and go set it all up. I got to get my suitcase. I left it outside—thought it might slow me down as I raced around to the back of the house. *(EDGAR speaks as if making a joke, but it does not cut through the tension in the room. He heads towards the front door.)*

ANDREW: *(walking towards the kitchen)* Edgar? *(EDGAR turns to ANDREW)* What about—what about death?

EDGAR: *(confused)* What?

ANDREW: The death's head figure. The jester in the mask. The—*(He breaks off.)* You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?

EDGAR: None whatsoever.

ANDREW: *(speaking more to himself than EDGAR)* Guess it was just some housewife in a costume after all. Guess I got worked up over nothing. *(pause)* Ridiculous. *(another pause)* Mushu pork sound okay?

EDGAR: Sounds perfect. I'll be right in.

*(ANDREW exits through the kitchen door. EDGAR goes out the front door, returns in a moment with two suitcases. He sets them down near the door; as he drops the smaller, it opens. A red and black costume drops out, and a death's head mask. EDGAR hurriedly shoves the costume back into the suitcase and closes it. He walks toward the kitchen with a determined look, stopping to pick up the dropped butcher knife on his way.)*

HISTORY  
*Patrick McCarty*



I wasn't at the Stonewall Riots. Allen Ginsberg would never have called me beautiful.

Not just because I am forty years too young, and Allen Ginsberg is dead. I wasn't at the Stonewall Riots, and I wouldn't have been, even if I'd been old enough, even if I'd been in New York. Even if I'd been right there, walking along Christopher Street when the shit went down, I would have just kept walking.

Just minding my own business.

Because here, now, I can pass. I did for years. I tried to hide. And I'm the sort of person who would have kept hiding, all my life, if people who came before me hadn't been willing to suffer and die for the right to be themselves.

Hiding a part of myself deeper than bone, because I was afraid. I am afraid.

There are threads that run through history, lines that bind us according to who we are. That is our real ancestry, a chain of people just like us, our intellectual forbearers, stretching back to the beginning.

There are those who were there in spirit. The ones too young or too far removed to have joined in the chaos bodily, but who would have, in a heartbeat.

The ones who raise the banners high, and meet hatred with unabashed love. The ones who say to the world that they are who they are, their beautiful voices untouched by fear. They were there at the Stonewall with the best of them. In spirit.

And the ones who were really there knew this, I think.

In a small but significant way. That their ranks swelled that night with the  
voices of others,  
Ghosts of the warriors yet to be born.  
I like to imagine that night in the Village, when the vast ship of history  
altered its course,  
That the people there fighting, they knew what had happened  
And felt the crowd grow with the yet-to-be-born.

But I wasn't there.  
I am history's coward, son of all cowards everywhere.

I am the scholar who burns his discoveries, rather than publish a heresy.  
I am the immigrant who never aspires to anything better than a slum,  
because the Anglo-Saxon "natives" tell me that's where I belong.  
I am the white man who never says a word for the rights of people who  
aren't white men, not because of hatred, but because I don't see how  
it's any of my business.

I am the boy on the playground, throwing "gay" and "fag" around as  
meaningless insults, because everyone else is doing it.

I am that same boy, a little older now, tearing my wandering eyes away  
from the other boys in my class, burning with shame, praying that  
this will turn out to be just a phase.

I ought to go to the Stonewall now, drink a toast to those who came  
before. And then I'll walk over to Christopher Park and sit with the  
statues there.  
Because something ingrained in the depths of my soul, a thread that binds  
me in time, whispers,  
Sins can still be forgiven.

I shall make a pilgrimage to this holy place, utter a prayer to history.  
As my ancestors knelt before relics of martyrs, I will seek intercession as  
well.

I'm sorry, I'll say to the white lacquer faces.

I tried to pass. Tried to hide. Forgive me.

I wasn't there, I'll say. I couldn't stand by your side. Not even in spirit.

I'm sorry.

## WE ARE NOTHING

*Bernard M. Cox*



The pelting rain blurred the exit for Promised Land and drilled any cohesive thought out of Martin's head. He wasn't sure if he had taken the right off ramp. He left the main highway some twenty minutes ago, but the directions weren't clear. The GPS told him he was on the right road, some rural route. His cell was out of service range. The water crept across the road, glistening in the headlights, a river of black glass. He could not tell if he was even still on pavement. Trees loomed over the windshield. Their silhouettes shifted between lightning strikes. No road signs, not even speed limits. The gradient changed under the wheels as he ascended further into the Pocono Mountains.

"Damn him. Where did he send me?" He kept driving because he wanted Angus's painting back. He kept driving because Rolf promised him the painting was somewhere out here in the Pennsylvania wilds.

He leaned forth to get his bearings. The hemlocks pointed only one way up the mountain side, no clue to a turn off as the GPS chimed, "Right turn in five hundred feet." He slowed down, straining to see any break in the road. A white reflective post peered from behind some brush. He turned right. The tires slipped as they reached out for the gravel road.

The canopy blotted out all remaining light, save the blaze from the BMW's lamps. He crested a hill and before him only dark. The car skidded and lurched down the back side of the hill and he could see a fast-moving, churning glimmer ahead. The car dipped and the front smashed headlong into the flood waters. Airbags slammed Martin against the seat. The car lost contact with the ground and listed and turned, aligning itself with the flow.

Dazed, Martin pressed down the air bags. He grabbed the steering wheel, yanking, twisting, turning, no response. He tried the breaks and

gas. The rear wheel caught some ground, the car shot forward across the stream, spun and then crashed into a tree. Water pooled around his feet, seeping in at a steady pace. He grabbed an umbrella and zipped up his coat. He climbed out the passenger side toward the hill. He pushed himself from the car, clung to a tree branch, and watched as the torrent peeled the BMW from the tree, his car swallowed by the rushing darkness. He scrambled to the hillside and felt his way in the black.



Heat cascades out of the loft and drifts down on to Martin as he climbs up the ladder. Midday light saturates the open space. He peeks over the railing and spies broad-shouldered Angus — his shirt off, his beard wet — directing a ceiling mounted hoist on which a massive stone slab hangs on a pallet. The raw ovoid stone sways above Angus, its white cloth wrapping flutters and snaps in the breeze.

Angus smears the water off his brow and bald head, the sunlight glints off his chest when he turns toward the loft doors. He towers over his assistants.

He shouts, “Jesus Christ, boys. Watch the walls. Lower it slowly. Slow. Good.”

Snafu winds her way between his legs purring. He snatches the cat up in his arms and thrusts the black ball of fur at Martin. “Would you get her out of here, hon?”

“It’s here, I see,” Martin scoops Snafu into his arms and scratches her chin.

“Took long enough, I’m already behind schedule.”

“It’ll be fine.”

“I’ve got like a month and a half to get it ready for installation.”

“Your mother called.”

“What did the queen want?” Angus points at the floor, “Hey, right here. Come on you two!”

“Rolf is coming and she wanted to tell us to play nice this weekend.”

“Nice? That’s a laugh.”

“No politics, no fights. It’s your mom’s seventy-fifth.”

“We’ll see.”

Angus rips the sheeting off the stone slab and runs his hand over the reddish-black granite surface. Martin turns and sees a covered canvas, perched on an easel. "Can I peek?"

"Peek?" Angus whips his head up as Martin makes his way over to the painting. "No!" He runs to intercept Martin. "Not yet. Not done."

"Since when can't I look at a work in progress?"

"It's special."

"Special?"

Angus leans in and kisses Martin. Angus smells of must, mineral spirits and dirt. His arms wrap around Martin's waist as he repositions himself between Martin and the painting.

"Later," Angus smiles.



In the distance the forest emanated a soft white glow. Soaked to the skin, with umbrella opened, Martin clawed his way through the underbrush toward the light. As he approached the glow he could see a white house perched on pillars; two levels stacked like pyramid blocks. The pillars were blanched as bone and splayed in four directions at the ground, bird claws digging into the earth. Two massive windows peered at him from up top of the structure with smaller panes underneath running the length of the house, a row of bared teeth. A wrought-iron fence with sharp, twisting spires enclosed the grounds.

He pushed aside the scrub and stumbled onto the path. He scanned the house for an opening. With each step he took the rain dissipated, until it was a fine mist. He crossed over a small berm and was blinded by a beam of light.

"Hello," Martin blocked the light with his umbrella.

"Lower that thing. Let me get a look at you," wheezed a male voice.

Martin closed the umbrella, "I got caught in a flood at the bottom of the hill and lost my car. I need some help."

"I'd say," A small jagged silhouette of a man moved toward him. "You okay? You look a mess. Awful night to be out."

"I was looking for a residence. An art broker's residence."

"Really? What's the name yous looking for?"

"Koz Bessmertny and Barbara Jaganowski?"

"This is the place." Out of the shadow came a hand, the spotted skin draped in doubles, wobbled with the movement. Martin reached out to shake it, the skin felt slack and slough beneath his grip; a rough, thin cover giving way to the man's rigid skeleton. "What's your name?"

"Martin Ford."

"Well, Martin Ford. Haven't seen a body in weeks. Almost jumped out of my skin, I did, when I saw you climb out of that thicket."

"I was just happy to stumble on to civilization."

"Now I don't know if I'd call it that but at least it's a warm shelter," he led Martin down the path, past the gate, and into the garden. The old man's feet shuffled, kicking gravel off into the grass.

"Are you Mister Bessmertny?"

The old man let out a deep raspy, phlegmy laugh. "No, no. I am not. I am Basil Harding, gardener and groundskeep. Mister Bessmertny is inside dry and warm and with Miss Jaganowski. I stay out here in the guardhouse," Basil motioned over to a small structure from which the beam of light emanated. The guardhouse sank on one side, and a portion of the siding and the tar paper roof curled up on one side.

"It's not as pitiful as it looks. I got satellite TV and a Jacuzzi in there," Basil laughed. "I watch all the Eagles games."

The rain started again in bomblets. "Shit," Basil hobbled faster down the path.

Martin opened up his umbrella, "Here take it."

"Oh, you keep it Mr. Ford. Rain never hurt these old bones."

"I insist. Please, it's not like I can get any wetter."

"Why thank you, Mr. Ford."

"You can call me Martin," Martin stopped and looked up at the house. "I don't see a door. How are we going to get in?"

Basil pinched the umbrella between his arm and body and frantically patted his pockets. He removed a small silver box. "With this remote to the lift." he pressed a button and a panel opened up in a pillar revealing an elevator. "Nifty, huh?"



Across the table, Rolf MacKay's cold stare tunnels through Martin, burning and scarring.



Rolf's attorney states, "Pursuant to our filing we are requesting that you relinquish all rights to Angus MacKay's studio and house, as well as any art work he created or collected contained on the premises."

"I told you, I concede the studio, but it's my house, our art work. You can have the studio and its contents. I told you that, Rolf."

Rolf adjusts his cufflinks.

"Please, Doctor Ford, do not address Senator MacKay."

"I can't believe you are doing this." Martin feels his face start to burn up; his vision narrows.

"He was my brother, Martin," says Rolf.

The attorney interrupts, "Senator MacKay..." Rolf stands, rising above him, dressed in a black Boateng Savile suit and the attorney says no more.

"It's only right that the family oversee his legacy. That would include his house and studio and all the contents wherein, Martin."

"Legacy? Legacy?" Martin bolts up and pounds the table. "I am his family. It's because of who you are. Because you can call up someone, some lawyer or judge because you are a state Senator. You feel that you have the power to do this? The right. You have no right." Martin turns from Rolf, breathes deeply, sucking courage into his lungs.

"You are the one, clearly without any rights," Rolf grunts. "I believe we are done here."

Martin barks, "Angus was right about you."

Rolf turns his back on Martin and heads to the door, "And what did my dear brother say?"

"You would cut out your mother's heart if you thought it would get you more power."

Rolf faces Martin and leans forward. "At least I have a mother to sacrifice."

His words sear inside Martin's chest, "I will fight you on this and I will win."

"You can fight all you want, Martin. Angus never prepared a will. So, the law is not on your side in this matter. And if you think that people will be outraged, they won't. How do you think it will read in the media? Angus's family fighting for their deceased relative's estate, trying to wrest it away from some gold-digging homosexual. Everything you remember of your life with him will be taken away as we destroy each story you tell."

My constituency will eat it up. They're not too supportive of your kind. Good day, Doctor Ford. See you in court."



Martin stood in the middle of the great room, water dripping onto the white marble tiles. The walls were densely packed with paintings, photos and tapestries and sculptures dotted the floor.

"You poor dear," Barbara Jaganowski handed Martin a plush towel. "Basil, could you be ever so kind to scrounge up a kit for Doctor Ford."

"Martin, please," he wiped his face and dried his hair. He watched Basil scuffle down the hall.

"It sounds like a terrifying experience," Barbara said. She was much older, but her wrinkles were thin, refined, almost hidden; her eyes, behind large, square, black-framed eyeglasses, were a twinkling blue; her hair was a thick buttery blond, and pulled back showing her thin face and high cheekbones. Her nose was the only feature that seemed to signal her advanced age — long and narrow with slight liver spotting.

"Well, I wish I arrived here on better circumstances."

"Please do tell why you would pay us a visit on such a frightful night." Koz Bessmertny's deep voice lilted off the ceiling and landed hard in Martin's mind. Koz skipped down the grand staircase, his tapping feet resounding. He ran a hand through his dark grey hair. His wrinkles were soft and his brown eyes, glowing embers. His nose was also long like Barbara's but sharp and his eyes peered out hawk-like.

He was a thin man, as thin as Miss Jaganowski. Both wore white head to toe — he a turtleneck, she a cardigan. When Mister Bessmertny sidled up to Miss Jaganowski he could finally place them. They looked like a pair of Alberto Giacometti sculptures — faded, almost emaciated in profile and sculpted from a white bronze — blending into the artwork of the great room.

"Let him catch his wind. Martin, would you like me to whip you up a hot toddy?" Her smile wide, teeth straight.

"That would be lovely."

Basil thrust a stack of white garments in front of Martin, "These will have to do."

Martin gathered the clothes into his arms. "Thank you."



He watches Angus stacking the dishes in the dishwasher. As Angus bends over to put a plate in the bottom rack, Martin spansks him.

"Martin Cornelius Ford. Propriety, please. Mother is in the other room."

"Margaret doesn't care."

"What would the children say?" Angus turns to him. Martin presses his body against Angus's solid chest.

"They'd say shut up and kiss him already." Martin poises on his tip toes and runs his hand along Angus's cheek grabbing a bit of his bushy beard. Angus grabs Martin's hand and puts it along his side. Martin looks up at him, brow furrowed. Angus leans in and kisses him.

"You do not have to be so public with your antics." Rolf's words raked across Martin's back.

Martin lists from Angus, "I'm sorry, Rolf."

Angus clutches Martin's waist and glares at Rolf. "Almost done."

"Make sure you bring out some more wine when you are done," Rolf steps toward the exit. "If you'll excuse me."

"There's never an excuse for you, Rolf," Angus turns back to the dishes.

"What do you mean by that?" Rolf stops.

"Come on, you two. We are here for your mom, not to pick fights," Martin pleads.

"I know why I came, Martin. I'm curious as to why Rolf is here. Is there an event coming up where you have to show mom off and beg your constituents for money?"

"The same reason you are, brother," Rolf steps toward Martin and Angus.

"Oh really? Where were you at Christmas?" Angus moves Martin aside, like suit in a closet, and advances on Rolf. "At any Christmas? Or any Thanksgiving? Let alone any random weekend?"

"Finally, the pious martyr, Saint Agnes, rears her head."

Martin pours himself a glass of wine and watches the two men square up and cannon off their accusations.

"I could ask you the same question of you. When's the last time you came to visit us, huh? You could bring mother up. I call her. I bought her the computer and I email her. Send pictures and videos of Jenny and the kids."

"Don't give me that bullshit, Rolf."

"I've done things for you and her. I got you that city commission coming up," Rolf shouts.

Angus is slack-jawed.

"Ooo, now you did it, Rolf," Martin downs his drink and gathers bottles of wine to bring out to the guests.

"You?" Angus's voice rattles glasses in the cabinets. "You. I have been doing this longer than you have been a vote seeking slut. I got the commission. There is no trace of you in it."

"It's my name too. That's why."

"It's my name. Angus MacKay. My name! Your logic is unbelievable."

"When you are out there in public you are also representing me."

"You do that fine on your own."

"It is so easy for you. So easy. I can't just do whatever I want. I don't lead the bohemian lifestyle you do."

Angus throws his hands in the air.

Martin heads out the door and into the living room. Margaret — seated in a wing back chair, pink birthday hat askew, friends and family seated around her — leads the party in laughter at Martin's entrance.

"Too hot in the kitchen for you," she cracks.

Martin smiles and courtesies, "End of act one."

"Sorry, Martin," Jenny says.

"You kidding? It's not your fault. Those boys have minds of their own and like to tell each other about it."

Margaret pushes her silvery bangs back and stares directly at him, "It's a difficult road being married to a MacKay man. I should know I used to be married to their father. Now, break out that wine and come get some cake."



The white shirt and slacks felt tailored to fit Martin. He stared at the neat creases at the pleats of his trousers. Nothing was too big, nothing was too tight. He sat at the kitchen table, picked up his toddy and cupped his hands around the warm mug. The tabby cat leapt up on to the kitchen table and rested in front of Martin.

"Kashka, get down from there," Koz barked.

"She likes you," Barbara smiled.

Martin reached out to pet the cat. Koz snatched her up and tossed her on the floor.

"What's Kashka ever done to deserve that treatment?" Barbara said.

Kashka retreated under Martin's chair.

"So please, Doctor Ford, tell us why you came all the way from Philadelphia to see us?"

"A painting you obtained last weekend at an auction in New York. I would like to buy it from you," Martin lifted the mulled cider to his lips, spiced steam curled up his face.

"What painting would that be? We bought many things at auction. If it is the Gauguin, I have plans for that piece already," Koz moved away from Martin, keeping the table between them.

"No, not the Gauguin. It was in the contemporary set. A painting by Angus MacKay, Untitled Twenty-Three."

Barbara pulled out a chair and sat down next to Martin. "That was a lovely piece."

"MacKay, that's the first piece I have of his. I have been following him. Quite a talent. Passed away recently, I think."

"Yes, yes he did. I would like to buy the piece from you. I have the means, if you can set a price." Martin's hand shook as he lifted the glass to his mouth.

"Why is this painting so important to you?" Barbara rested her hand on his. Her flesh was cold.

"The painting was meant for me. Angus was my partner."

"Partner? Oh. I see. Well, that makes things interesting now doesn't it?" Koz approached the table. His smile was thin and severe.

"I am so sorry for your loss. Were you with him a long time?" Barbara's voice soothed him.

"Fifteen years."

"If the painting was meant for you, why was it at auction, dear doctor?" He pressed his palms against the table and bent towards Martin.

"There's a family dispute."

"That's too bad. How much do you want this Untitled Twenty-Three back?"

"Please set a reasonable price and leave it at that. Let him pay what we paid," Barbara looked up at Koz. His eyes were dark and no longer glowed.

"Babs, could you please retrieve my journal?"

"Koz, no."

"Please do it," His voice purred. Barbara stared at Martin. "Now," Koz snapped. "Please." Barbara excused herself and Koz took her seat next to Martin.

Inside Martin felt a trembling, tugging sensation, a thread in his heart reeling him from the table, but he stayed seated.

"I do not want your money Martin. We paid some seventy-five thousand for the work, but I had no idea how valuable it was."

Barbara tossed a simple chocolate leather bound book on the table.

"Here. I can't believe you are doing this, I can't be part of it."

"Doing what? What is this?" Martin reached out for the book.

"This is nothing. It's just a journal. It's what I want you to do with it that is important," Koz removed a gold pen from his pocket. "I do not want your money, Martin. Only your favorite memory of you and Mister MacKay. Something intimate, something secret. You write it in here, that's all. Just write it down and you can have the painting."

"You want a memory?"

"It is a good bargain, yes?" Koz gazed into Martin's eyes. He pushed the book toward Martin. "I don't want to rush you. Take it back to the room we have ready for you. You stay the night and between now and before you leave tomorrow you can contemplate what memory you would like to give up to the book."

"I can buy the painting back for twice what you paid. Just let me make a call."

"Phones are down."

"But I have money."

"It's not what I desire. I'm only asking you for a story. You are rational man. A neuroscientist, yes?"

"What does that matter?" Martin cocked his head, "I didn't tell you that. What's going on here?" He looked over at Barbara who was shifting, fumbling with her hair, averting her gaze and pacing.

"You must have told me. Memory is funny. You of all people should know that."

"I think I would like to go home," Martin stands.

"Road is out, Martin. Remember? Besides there's no car," Koz grinned, placed his hand on Martin's shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze. "Enjoy our hospitality. Barbara makes a great breakfast. All I ask is for you to sleep on it. If in the morning you don't want to write some words in this book then it is over. I keep the painting and we send you home. Okay? Basil will show you to your room," Martin edged out from Koz's grip. "Don't forget this."

The book was much heavier than Martin expected. His arms sunk under its weight. The book felt warm and throbbing under his grip.

"This way Doctor Ford," Basil chimed. Martin, staring at the book, followed.

As he made his way across the house, Martin made note that the walls and even doors were supersaturated with artwork, much of it famous. He counted three Picassos, ten Man Rays, two Lichtensteins, several Dalis, a few De Chiricos, Okeefe, Adams, Weyth, Warhol, Basquiat, Schnabel, Maplethorpe. There were countless more he did not recognize.

"Isn't it something," Basil commented. "Can't get over it myself. They just keep collecting."

"How long have they been at it?"

"As long as I can remember," Basil stopped and opened a door. "Here we are."

Martin paused. Next to the door was a photo by Diane Arbus he recognized, Child with Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park. The child's eyes were crazed. His hands were claws; one clutching a hand grenade; a small monster in a jumper.

"Sorry it's not much, but every other room is cram-packed with clutter. I do all I can to keep the room this way. Just in case."

Martin looked the room once over, bed, chair, desk, lamp, closet; the walls were bare except for a fading damask wallpaper pattern.

"This will be fine. Thank you, Basil."

"No problem, Martin. It's just nice to have a body in the house. Your jacket is in the closet. I'll have the rest of your clothes ready in the morning."

As Basil closed the door, Martin caught a clear look at his face in the incandescent light. Basil's face was crinkled up, weathered amalgam of spots, wrinkles and hair. His eyes were sunken to the point that Martin could not make out the color of his irises and could barely see the whites. His smile was big and warm and made his face a map of his heart.

"Don't worry about old Koz. Barbara will take care of him, she always does," Basil's smile and words made Martin believe that to be true.



Angus's hackles are up. The folds at the back of his neck pulse with each heavy sigh. Martin caresses the small of his back.

"Calm down. You're on in a second," Martin motions out to the podium placed in front of a sculpture which is draped in a red cloth. A smattering of people is gathered out front.

"I don't understand why he does this to me. I just don't get it."

"Rivalry. Just got to let it go."

"Right. Easy for you to say."

"You're right, he's not my brother but I am part of your family."

"It's just politics for Rolf. He's got to rail about gay marriage today in the paper. He says my sculpture will draw the wrong kind of attention to the city. And look, where is everyone? Just a handful out there, no mayor here. The mayor was supposed to come. Why is this an issue for him?"

"No one reads the Inquirer anymore. See, look how many people there are here. It's a civic event. It's really the city's deal not yours, anyway."

"It's my work, damn it," Angus says. "It's not like he protests your brain conferences."

"Well, he doesn't have a brain. We'd have to give him one in order for him to attend a conference."

"Rolf would kill me if he thought it would get him votes. Hell, he'd cut mom's heart out if he thought the devil would give him more power."

"Try and block it out," Martin sighs. "I'm here. I love you. I love what you do."



Angus stares out at the gathering. People are applauding the announcer, someone sent over from city hall. Angus starts to sway.

"Angus?" Martin steps toward him.

"Something's wrong. I can't see," Angus's legs buckle. He collapses to the ground and starts to seize.



Kashka sat on the book and fixated on Martin. Martin rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. The tabby purred. He scratched her behind her ears and she pressed her head into his hand.

"Oh, you're such a pretty kitty." He thought of home, Snafu would be waking him about now. "I have something for you."

He opened the closet, reached into his coat pocket, and took out a cellophane bag of small cat treats. He placed one in the palm of his hand and held it out for Kashka to inspect. She nibbled the treat up. He gave her another.

He thought of Koz's offer. What did it matter that Koz would have a document of his memory? If this is what would get the painting, he'd do it. Simple. Then he could go home. He felt compelled to write. He moved Kashka off the book and opened it. Kashka dug her paw under the cover and pushed the book closed with her forehead.

"Hey," Martin tried again. Again Kashka closed the book. He put the cat on the ground and opened the book. Kashka jumped up on the bed and hissed at him. "Sorry, I just want to go home," He picked up the pen. The book called to him. He needed to write. He threw open the cover.



The studio loft is bathed in candlelight. Billie Holliday's honey-toned voice floats over them. Angus twirls Martin and pulls him close. Martin rests his cheek against Angus's chest. They rock and stroll, giggle and smooch through the studio.

"Okay, I have your gift," Angus leads Martin to the covered canvas on the easel.

"You know how much restraint I have had not to peek at this thing."

"I'm so proud of you, goober."

"Goober?"

"It's all I had," Angus pulls the sheet off the painting. "Happy seventeenth."

The paint swirls and curls on the canvas creating hills in hues of blue, tan and grey; a sky above in dark, dappled brush strokes of midnight indigo; a warbled, watery moon high hovering over the landscape; small bright, blisters of star white seemingly shimmering; and two figures floating along a path of moonlight, arms intertwined.

"You've never made anything for me before."

"I know. It's embarrassing for me."

"Oh, honey, it's great. Is this Montana?"

"Yeah, could you tell? It's a little pedestrian."

"It captures that night so well. It's so simple, so beautiful."

"I wanted to give you how I felt that night. How I remembered it."

Martin takes Angus into his arms and kisses him.

"Thanks for your memory."

"Thanks for the memories," Angus sings.

"You're a cheeseball."

"I'm your cheeseball."

"Forever and ever," Martin smacks Angus's ass. "I know something else you haven't done."

"What's that?"

"Made passionate love to me in the loft."

"You want to have sex in here?"

"Sure," he tugs on Angus's belt.

"It's filthy in here."

"I'm a filthy boy."

"You are."

"Come on," he pulls Angus's shirt off. "Who knows when I'll have the chance to fuck in some famous artist's dirty, dirty studio."

"You're so bad."

"Good bad or," Martin growls, "bad bad?"

"What did you get me for our anniversary, again?"

"Socks, good socks."

"Bad bad. You're bad bad."

"They were from LL Bean."

"Okay, just bad then."



Kashka jumped up on the table and scratched his hand. The pain shot through him, routing the urge.

"Damn it. Okay, okay."

He looked out the window at the scattering fog. Kashka jumped off the table and went to the door. As he scanned down for the cat, he saw a scrap of loose wallpaper under the window. He tugged on it until a bit of wallpaper came loose. There was writing underneath. He turned on the desk lamp, and peeled back the rest of the wallpaper. A sentence, Must not write in the journal or you will forget. Vas.

"What the hell?"

Kashka meowed.

"What does it mean?" He looked at Kashka. Kashka was silent.

"Expecting a response anytime soon, Martin?" He commented to himself, "You want out?" He opened the door. Kashka stepped outside the room and looked back at him. She waited. He followed. She pattered down the hall back to the kitchen. Barbara was sitting at the table drinking tea. Only one other place setting was laid out.

"You sleep well?" She smiled her straight smile.

"Yes. Feels like it."

"Good. Please sit down have some breakfast."

He looked around for the cat. Kashka was eating out of her bowl.

He sat and started to eat. With each bite he felt strong and his mind was clear. "This food is wonderful. Kudos, Barbara. Where's Koz?"

"He never rises before noon. You should take a walk in the garden. It's quite lovely. Basil can show you around."

"Sounds nice."

"You write in the journal, again?"

"Yes. In fact there was this strange thing that happened."

"You should stop."

"What do you mean?"

Barbara stands up and walks over to the counter. She picks up something, he can't see.

"There was a message under the wallpaper. It said ..."

"Pretty isn't it," She turns around and in her hand is a small silver spindle with golden flax entwined about it.

The bright object seemed to sing.

His heart slowed and he forgot what he wanted to say. The silver spindle's song reached out to him and spooled around his heart, drawing him close. All he could think about was his wanting to hold the spindle. As she approached him, his arm extended toward her, his hand opened up. She deposited the spindle in his palm and closed his hand around it. She held his hand in hers.

"You need to use this. It will lead you out of here."

"Yes," He choked down his toast. "Thank you. It is so pretty."

"It is to be used. It is not an artifact. Not a collectable. You understand?"

"It's so pretty."

"Martin. Look at me. I cannot help you. I cannot leave this place without Koschei. You must ask Basil what this is for. She will show how to use it."

"She?"

"Long ago, I had a love like yours. One I lost as well, much as you have lost yours. She was handsome. I could watch her for hours, she would dance and sing. We'd make love under the stars. I gave her my entire world, the whole of my being. My essence."

"What happened?"

"Koz came between us. He changed her. She went away."

"So you and Koz are not. . ."

"We are nothing without our memories. Just an illusion. I sit here and I wait. I sit here and I wait for you, Martin. To brake this illusion, to bring me back to life. Do not write in the book. You have given him so much already."

"I don't understand."

"Please, go see Basil, in the garden," Barbara's eyes quivered. She led him to his feet, wrapped her arms around him and squeezed him. She smiled, her mouth rounded and softened.



The kegger is crowded. Martin navigates through the wave of college students toward the bar. He eyes a tall, muscular, man with closely cropped hair and tight jeans. Martin estimates his chances at nil, considering everyone is straight at a party like this. He is the outlier and the guy is probably a marine. He steps up to the bar, pours a vodka cran and looks at the guy. The guy looks back. Martin smiles picks up his drink and misses his mouth. The red liquid splashes on to his New Order tee-shirt. The guy laughs. Martin turns away, wiping at his shirt.

"You're smearing it in," The guy comes up behind him.

"What?" Martin turns to him.

"Dab," The guy starts to dab at his shirt with a damp napkin. "Club soda."

"Thanks," Martin takes the napkin.

"New Order, huh?"

"Don't you like New Order?"

"Are they still making records?"

"They came out with Republic last year."

"Oh."

"I get it, just coming over to make fun of me. The lone gay."

"I make fun of you because it's easy. I came over here because you're cute."

Martin fixates on the stain on his shirt, trying not to blush.

The guy extends his hand, "I'm Angus."

"Hi. Martin."

"Martin, sorry about your shirt."

"No need to apologize, it's my fault."

"No, I mean a New Order tee-shirt is like the gay equivalent of mullet head's Metallica shirt."

"I thought it was pretty cool."

"A Pansy Division shirt would have been cool."

"Pansy Division?"

"You don't know them? You should come over sometime; I'll play them for you."

"Ugh. Really?" Martin rolls his eyes. "Is this how you impress all guys, by insulting their fashion choices and then invite them to your place to listen to records?"

"Is it working?"

"No."

"It's not? I always thought nice boys liked jerks."

"Not this one," Martin sips from his drink.

Angus laughs.

"Stop trying to be charming," Martin snaps.

"I thought I was being a jerk."

"You are. But you're the only other gay guy here."

"So I'm a scrap? Now who's being a jerk."

"I didn't mean that. Forget it."

"You don't get out much, do you?"

"They don't let me out of the lab."

"Scientist? What do you study?"

"I study distributed models of semantic memory."

"Huh?"

"How people remember things. I'm a grad student in neuroscience. Judging by the size of you, you must be an ex-con or something."

"Ouch," Angus clutches his chest.

Martin smiles.

"Well, when I'm not out robbing banks I'm here finishing my MFA in sculpture."

"Really?"

"Truly."

"I would have never taken you for an artist."

"I would have taken you for a ..."

"Let's call a truce," Martin holds out his hand.

"Truce," Angus shakes his hand. "Is this how you pick up all your guys? Spill something on your shirt and play damsel in distress."

"Is it working?"



Outside the fog dissipated, only remaining as small clouds throughout the garden. Delicate pink flowers hung from the waxy green boughs of Mountain Laurel which lined the garden path. Martin took a breath and the sweetness of the spring flowers mixed with the crisp damp air. For a minute Martin forgot where he was, lost in clouds and filled with some strange spirit. Drops of sunlight crawled across the garden,

illuminating a green quilt of shrubbery, flowers and vines. Kashka shot from under his legs and scampered off to Basil.

"Tell you what, it's going to be a beautiful day," chirped Basil. "Road's still awash but that sun's gonna break right through, dry it up in time for you to get home. Yessireebob!" Basil lifted a bag of hummus out of the bed of his small six wheeled service vehicle and tossed it onto the ground. "Love days like this. Feels like the whole world can change on days like this."

"You have a lovely garden."

"Why thanks. It takes care of itself, mostly. All I provide is patience. Got to know when to help it along and when to back off — nature takes care of the rest."

"My mom would have loved this place."

"You should bring her back. We'd welcome the visit."

"She's long gone. They both are, for many years, now."

"Sorry to hear. Body's got to move on, though."

"That's true," Martin reached into his pocket and felt the spindle there. He had forgotten. "Basil, Barbara gave me this." He pulled the spindle out of his pocket.

Basil snatched the spindle out of his hand. "The key. You're to be the one."

"She said you'd know what to do with it."

"Did she tell you of Vasilisa?"

"Who?"

"You are having trouble remembering. You've written too much. Do you know how many days you've been here?"

"Only overnight."

"Nine. You have been here nine days. She must have thought the moment was right."

"That's impossible. How could I be here nine days?"

"You just stay in your room writing. The book keeps you there. The door remains locked and we cannot get in. What happened today? Something changed."

"I don't believe you."

"Doesn't matter what you believe. What changed? Did you not write?"

"Yes, I wrote."

“What did you write?”

Martin scoured his mind for even the idea of writing, he retrieved nothing but blankness. He could feel the warmth of Basil’s hand pulling him back to awareness.

Basil’s finger traced the scratch on his hand. “Ah, you mischievous kitty. She scratched you. That is what changed.”

Kashka meowed.

“If you couldn’t get in, how did the cat?”

“I don’t know. She never tells me anything,” Basil smiled. “But she knows everything. Barbara, did she tell you of her love? Of Vasilisa?”

“She told me of someone she lost.”

“Yes, well not entirely lost. A body can take many forms. Come, let me show you how this works.”

He led Martin deeper into the garden. Martin remembered Angus and him taking a walk in a place very similar to this on one of their trips but he couldn’t remember where or when. In pockets of the garden, the air was cold. His mom used to call those ghost spots, when she was still talking to him, before she passed. Parts of the garden looked preternatural, vines twisting into familiar shapes, familiar faces, moving and changing with his thoughts.

They reached the edge of the path and Basil placed the spindle in Martin’s hand. It was warm and pulsed, just like the book Koz had given him, but it was light, almost insignificant in its mass.

“Lay the spindle on the ground,” commanded Basil.

He placed the spindle on the ground and it started to spin round and round. It stopped and raced off down the path away from the house, unspooling its thread. The thread lit up, radiating gold light.

“Follow this thread. It will lead you to the key to escape this place. Follow it. You won’t get lost.”

“Can’t you come with?”

Basil raised his floppy hands and shooed Martin. “I can’t leave the garden. Kashka will keep you company.”

The cat looked up at him and then ran off after the spindle. Martin gave chase, “Hey, wait up.”





Martin watches as witness after witness takes the stand. Rolf's wife tells the court that they only left their kids with Angus and Martin in emergencies and that they were worried about the influence the couple had on their children's upbringing.

"While Angus was family, we never viewed Martin as a brother-in-law. We would tell our kids that Martin was Angus's friend. We don't condone homosexuality because it is against the Bible's teaching. However, we still loved Angus, just not his sin," she crows.

Margaret, Angus's mother, is clearly upset during the cross-examination.

"How did you view their relationship?"

"I knew they were involved if that is what you're asking," she creaks

"Doctor Ford maintains that he felt as if you treated him as a member of the family."

"Well, of course, I was hospitable and kind. This was the man my son loved. I wasn't going to be uncivil." She doesn't look at him.

"Martin attended family gatherings for some twelve years, did he not?"

"Yes, but I wasn't going to refuse Angus. I told him that if he wanted to bring Martin, he could."

"Martin also says that on several occasions you said that you loved him. Loved him like a son. He felt you took the place of his own mother."

"I... I can't comment on how he felt about me."

"But you did feel affection for him. You referred to him as a son-in-law."

"I can't recall." She hangs her head.

"You look troubled, Mrs. MacKay. What would your son have to say about how you feel?"

She starts to cry.

Rolf saunters to the stand. Throughout the courtroom, his voice sounds like a ringing, steel hammer pounding his talking points home.

"The family should be the ones to oversee Angus's estate. Angus was always wealthier than Martin. Martin spent Angus's money freely. I never felt that he was anything but a hanger-on, who just fueled division in our family. Angus had dated women up until he met Martin. If he were truly gay, wouldn't he have come out earlier to the family? Angus put

Martin through his Doctorate. It was always about what my family could do for Martin. I always dreaded when we had to leave the kids with Martin and Angus. I was worried about what Martin may do when he was alone with my son.”

Martin is then called. He looks over the plaintiffs, people he once called family, and sits in front of the microphone.

“Until this moment, I always felt a part of your family. I was never treated with disrespect. I was always told that I was loved. I feel like I am losing my parents all over again. I loved Angus deeply, just like you all love your spouses. And how could you say you worried how I would treat your children. I loved them and cared for them as if they were my own. I saw them every month at least and we all stayed at the shore house during the summer. I feel as if you are lying to me now, at this moment. Because I can’t stand to think that I’ve lived in the shadow of your lie for seventeen years. I don’t understand your desire to erase me from Angus’s life. It’s impossible for me to be done away with so easily. We will always have our memories of Christmases and Thanksgivings, funerals and weddings, of late night talks in kitchens, of being by bedsides of sick loved ones, of last minute errands for pregnancies, of beautiful summers on the shore. We are not able to sue for possession of these things. They are each ours and we know their true value. You cannot sue me for possession of your son, of my Angus. He is ours and we cannot be separated from one another no matter how hard you try.”



Kashka and Martin raced over the path and out into the forest, following the thread. The further from the garden the darker it became. The thread lit their way through the undergrowth until they came to a meadow of white clover. A metallic sculpture of a gigantic tree stood in the center. The surface was caked in rust. At the base of the sculpture was a series of embedded totems. The spindle came to rest at the base of the metal tree.

The surface of the sculpture was smooth and even and not gritty as he expected. There were very small unrecognizable etchings all over the sculpture. He kneeled down and looked at the totems – a black goose in

whose belly a white hare in whose belly a chest. Across the top of the chest was etched the word "Open."

"Whatcha think, Kashka?"

Kashka pawed the latch. Martin opened it; inside, a gold egg; above the egg, "Take me and be free."

"Hmmm. Should I take the egg?"

"Take the damn egg, Martin."

Martin looked at the cat and then spun around looking for the voice. His heart was in his throat. There was no one else in the clearing. He could see nothing beyond. He picked up the egg. The egg shone in the sun. He turned around again and there stood Koz Bessmertny.

"Give me the egg," Koz growled.

Martin handed him the egg. Koz's eyes were crazed; his hands were claws; a thin old monster in a white turtleneck, clutching the egg.

"Everything was going so fine. Why did you have to ruin it?" Koz said.

Kashka lunged at Kos. Kos kicked her, sending her flying back against the totem.

"Let's go," He barked. Koz's hand latched on to Martin's arm like a talon and he ripped him out of the meadow.



He doesn't want to think about why he is here with Margaret, standing over Angus's body. He doesn't want to think about the cold bright whiteness of the hospital room. He doesn't want to think about what is to happen next. Martin wants to think about the aneurysm.

The aneurysm was four inches in diameter, positioned dorsally near the anterior corpus callosum and occipital lobe. When it burst, it destroyed the occipital lobe, and damaged part of the temporal lobe and the cerebellum. But the damage to the brain wasn't what killed Angus, it was the quick, massive blood loss.

If the aneurysm was significantly smaller, located on the surface of the brain, a couple inches up, inch forward and a couple inches to the left; then maybe the event would have only affected Wernike's area. Aphasia. He could have lived with aphasia.

If Martin asked aphasic Angus about what happened, Angus might say, "There's a car that goes in and up with trees and they watch."

If Martin asked aphasic Angus who he is, Angus might say, "Goats then we jumped, his daughter."

If Martin asked aphasic Angus who am I, Angus might repeat, "Who am I?" and say "Rock finds the road is clear. Yes."

If Martin asked aphasic Angus does he love him, Angus might make kissy noises.

He could have lived with kissy noises.



They all stood around Koz in the great room.

"What did you think you were going to accomplish with this, this revolt?" He shook his fist at them. "Do you not want the painting?"

"Painting?" Martin asks.

"See, he can't even remember why he is here, Baba," he smiles.

"I remember why he is here, Koschei," said Barbara.

"You think getting this would help you? Do you?" He held the egg out in his palm for Barbara to see. "Some old soul magic? It will never help you now that I have it back. All I have ever done, I have done for you. I love you. Do you not understand? I built this for you. All this!" He swung his arms wide, knocking over a large silver hawk from its pedestal. The bird crashed against the floor, cracking the marble, resounding like a gunshot.

Across the room, Martin saw Kashka slink in across the tile and then he stared at the hawk on the floor, its beak bent, the white tile in pieces. Inside he could sense the fragments. A painting made for him by Angus the man who loved him now dead — a remainder of him, evidence that Martin cared for someone so deeply, so much their life was intertwined and could not be removed from him. At first, this began as a small, pinpoint of light, shining in an overwhelming darkness and then the light started to rush in and show him the way out a path carved out by moonlight. "You can't take him away from me. I want him back. I want the painting. I have given you what you wanted, that was the bargain."

"You want the painting?" Koz stormed off across the room and lifted a painting from the wall. He tossed the painting at Martin. It sailed

through the air and fell a few feet in front of Martin. The painting was a still life of a fish and fruit. He picked it up.

"Is that it? Is that the painting you wanted," asked Koz.

"No, I remember it. I remember."

Kashka positioned herself behind Koz.

"That is the painting, Martin. Take it."

Martin tried to assess the painting, he stammered out stuttering of words.

Basil grabbed Martin's arm, "Don't. That's not the painting."

"I want to remember, him. I want to go home."

"That's right, let Doctor Ford leave," said Koz.

Kashka pounced on his hand holding the egg. She bit and dug in with her claws. Screaming, he tried to shake her off. Koz smashed the cat against the wall and the egg rent loose and flew through the air.

Martin plucked the orb from flight and held it above his head. "Is this what will make you give him back to me."

Koz ran toward the book in the center of the room and Barbara snapped it up. Tried to wrench it from her hands. Basil rushed at him, grabbed Koz and slammed him to the floor.

Koz looked up at Martin. "Okay, okay. I will give you the painting."

"Smash the egg, Martin. Smash the egg and set us free," shouted Barbara.

"No, I beg of you, Barbara. Don't do it, Martin." Koz thrashed under Basil's weight.

"You must. Hurry, Martin," Basil pleaded.

"I love you. Don't you understand?" Koz begged. He grabbed Basil by the collar and plunged his knee into Basil's ribs. Basil groaned as Koz kneed him again. Koz scrambled to his feet and rushed toward Martin. "My soul. I want to stay."

"Martin, do it," Barbara screamed. With that Martin smashed the egg on the floor, scattering it into dust.

Koshchei lurched, froze and opened his mouth. A loud rush of air vacated him and he fell deflated to the floor; a sack of bones, skin and a white turtleneck.

"What happened?" Martin rubbed his eyes. In his head was a sharp, encompassing pain, as if he drank something too cold, too fast.

"He is gone," offered Barbara. She picked up the book.

"Wait," said Basil. "What about Martin?"

"We will give him the painting and he will return home."

"His memories? Will he remember?" Basil asked. "He won't remember, will he? We are together now. Besides, it has been so long that I do not remember myself as Vasilisa."

"My beautiful, brave Vasilisa. I have waited for you, for this moment. We only have one chance." She shook the book. "It is in my hands. I cannot remove the memories for him, but I can restore you."

"You can give him the book. A body couldn't live with itself if you did this."

"You will not remember when it is done," Barbara touched Basil's face.

"I want to remember Angus," said Martin.

"Barbara, my love, you must," Basil tucked wisps of Barbara's hair behind her ears.



"Can't you sleep?"

"I keep thinking about my presentation at the conference."

"Yeah, me too. Well, not your presentation."

"The unveiling? It'll go great."

"Think so?"

"Yeah. The sculpture is exquisite."

"You'll be fine, too. You're always great. You always save the day."

"I'm worried about the data."

"Don't fret. Let's think of something pleasant." Angus places his head on Martin's chest.

Martin lightly traces patterns on Angus scalp. "What?"

"What are your favorite vacations we've been on?"

"Hmm. I love P-Town."

"Really? It's so crowded."

"It's fun."

"What about Saugerties?"

"Yeah, I often think about that walk to the light house."

"All the reeds blowing in the wind."

"That was really nice." He massages Angus's ear. "I nearly forgot Montana."

"Yeah, the sky was so big and full."

"All those stars."

"That's when I knew." Angus yawns. "We'd be together forever."

"You did?"

"Uh huh." He nuzzles Martin's chest.

"Yeah. I did, too." Martin feels drool on his chest. "Angus?"

"Hmm?"

"You awake?"

"Mm hmm."

He smiles and cradles Angus in his arms.



They stood in the garden. He looked up at the house beaming down at him. He clutched Angus's painting and the book his arms.

"This path will take you to the main road. Your car will be there," Barbara said.

"I'm sorry," said Martin.

Basil hugged him, "You are always welcome to visit."

"I think I'm going to stay in town for awhile," Martin smiled. "Had enough fresh air."

"If you want to find us, you will," Barbara smiled.

He said his goodbyes and watched them into the house. He stepped onto the path and looked back. The fog surrounded the house, a curtain of blankness erasing it from view. Martin walked into the garden, through the clouds, carrying his memories, stepping into pools of sunlight.

## A HELPING MECHANICAL HAND

*Alissa M. Fehlbaum*



The robot will scoop the cat's litter box before picking up your slacks from the dry cleaners. The robot will unclog your gutters. The robot will unclog and unclutter your entire house. The robot will make meatloaf that tastes better than your grandmother's blue ribbon recipe, in less time and with more care baked into every perfectly-portioned slice.

The robot will pick you up from the airport when your redeye flight has arrived and from the bar when it's last call. It will erase your Internet history. It will feed and water your houseplants, renew your magazine subscriptions before they expire, and sing to your toddler during naptime. The robot will remind you that your wedding anniversary is coming up and then sign your name to the bouquet and card it bought because it knew you'd still forget.

The robot will cut the crusts off your chicken salad sandwich. It will argue successfully on your behalf against frivolous lawsuits. It will accost every bully from your childhood on the street and force them to eat a piece a dog shit, just like you were forced to do by your older brother's best friend in the alley behind your childhood home as your brother belly-laughed on his feet and you cried and cursed your eight-year-old life into the shit-smearred pavement. The robot will cure your older brother's liver cancer years later, and you will watch as he regresses back into the asshole he was before he was dying.

The robot might be able to make your brother's liver cancer come back.

Just a little.

The robot will tell you exactly what to say to get your teenaged step-daughter to respect you again. It will always remember that you like your



whiskey neat. It will balance your check book, file your taxes, sort out the recycling, notice your slightest weight loss and help you quit smoking.

The robot will pat your knee in a reassuring manner when you're nervous.

The robot will fuck your wife. It will give her multiple orgasms and it will do it even better than the shower attachment she picked out when she redecorated the master bathroom with your Christmas bonus. The robot will wash the dog with this shower attachment and some nights you'll come home from work to find the showerhead set on jet-engine pulse: the dog will still be filthy and smell like the death of whatever it rolled in while you weren't home, but at least your wife will be in a fantastic mood. On these evenings you'll try to come up with a joke about dirty masturbating dogs while shampooing your hair with something that's supposed to smell like vanilla and pomegranates, but none of your awkward puns will seem worth waking your wife over when you see that she's already gone to sleep. The dog will be asleep too, covering your side of the bed with fur and pollen and dirt and death particles.

The robot will change your sheets in the morning.

The robot will appear in dreams in which it will confide in you the things it's never told anyone else. You will not be able to remember these things upon waking.

The robot will never tell anyone about the time it found you piss-soaked and shallow-pulsed in the monoxide filled garage, or how you cried and trembled onto its gleaming robot shoulders like an exhausted infant afterwards. The robot will never tell anyone how you kissed it that night—softly, chastely, like a shy lover—on its robot mouth. The robot will know better.

The robot will return your library books in a timely manner. It will pull out a chair for you to sit. It will wash your most private places with all the skill and interest of dedicated nurse when you're elderly and bed-ridden. It will make you coffee and ask if you took your multivitamin. It will pick out the shirt that best brings out your eyes. It will call you at work sometimes, just to see how your day is going. It will laugh at your stupid jokes. It will encourage your hopeless goals.

The robot will know that you're incapable of loving yourself.

The robot will love you, anyway.

DOBRAKH'N

*Chelsea Paige*



Vrin kem, I said to the anura. Vrin kem majuss krintar.

Vrabuss gullup lim, the anura replied. Together we contemplated the starry night sky.

You know, I continued in the anura's language, I don't think anyone else in the world can understand you but me.

You're probably correct, the anura replied in the same even tone and sudden dropping sounds of its language.

If I were you, I said, I would wish to see the ground.

The ground provides without my observing it, the anura said.

I turned my head to regard the sand-colored expanse of the anura's neck and chin. I had read in a history book that the Old World was home to miniature anura called toads, which were no bigger than a man's palm. This anura, like most mature ones, was the size of a full grown man crouched to hug his knees.

The stars are enough for you? I asked.

Laktur'k dynsai, the anura replied. *They are too much.*

Then why do you give them all your attention, all your lives? The ground is the more worthy. It gives you food, warmth. There is power in the ground, I said. I only stumbled twice while pronouncing this longer sentence in the language it had taken me two Houses to learn.

You do not know their brightness, the anura snorted, they are worth all our lifetimes.

I have seen their brightness, I said, and they have yet to provide me with anything of value.

I had to pause to gulp out "gumlupim majuss," the words for "their brightness." It was one of the more difficult sound combinations I have ever had to pronounce.

Mak'far tindup, the anura said. I had to flip open my notebook for that phrase, which was less familiar. The anura waited as patiently as ever, watching the stars.

I have watched both Jauron and Migdalon pass while sitting beside you. How can you say I haven't watched them long enough? I exclaimed.

You're too young, walker, the anura replied. It twisted to regard me with the corner of one eye, wheezing as it did so<sup>1</sup>. I only saw a thin crescent of moist white before it had to wrench its neck back into the upraised position.

Say what you really came here to say, Mujjistarr, the anura croaked. It took me a moment to realize the anura had tried to pronounce my title, Magister. I was impressed that it had managed to learn the word at all. While a human body allows me to reproduce other languages' syllables, I felt certain it would be more difficult for an anura to create something so different from its own sounds. I stood. The anura's perpetually upturned face was at my waist level, and the eyes slid slowly to focus on my face, which was now juxtaposed with the stars.

I knew I couldn't just tell this creature that I came here to enlighten it so the artifact it carried would pop out of its forehead and it would enter a stony state of near death for the rest of its existence. I thought back to the toadstone on display in the Head Magister's quarters in Brachna Hall, where my love for artifacts was born. The toadstone had limited usefulness as an artifact, since it became stale within a single constellation cycle. But it would be an admirable first score as an artifact hunter, which I intended to be. This first hunt was all about the challenge, proving myself so I could gain funding for further hunts.

Despite the enormous possibility of being killed by a knot of anura or not finding a suitable one to enlighten, I had set out from Brachna with the Head Magister's backing, the finest sand-pony currency could buy, and the knowledge that I would spend a long time eating dried meat from a hole in the sandy desert floor. The pony survived just fine in the desert, since its principal nourishment came from sand.

If anything, it had been the anuran death magic that caused me the most anxiety on setting out from Brachna. The adventurer who had

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<sup>1</sup> An anura's throat is compressed when it looks anywhere but directly upward, because of their unique anatomy.

brought back the toadstone for the Head Magister of Brachna had perished the day after he arrived back in the city. The toadstone had become stale that day as well, which means the poor man had dragged himself across the desert on foot carrying the stone while being slowly killed by the anuran death magic. None of the Magisters around then had been able to determine what sort of death magic it was or how it worked, but its effects were clear. The adventurer had been unable to activate the stone, and had died before he could share anything he knew about the anura. I could very well meet the same fate he did.

When I arrived on first Jauron, I'd been sweating sand, praying to the power beneath the desert that I didn't even fully believe in. I had snuck up slowly on a stony enlightened anura, trying to speak to it from a distance and demand safety before coming closer. It, of course, made no reply, being beyond mortal comprehension. Very confused, I had moved on from that one, hoping there were living anura still around. It was several days before I found the knot I currently resided with. They were all adults, and it is still mysterious to me how and where they reproduced. I never saw any younglings, nor any indications of gender among them, but they had to multiply somehow.

This anura seemed more willing to converse about its religion, which was a breakthrough. Like their young, the anura kept their traditional religion tucked away somewhere, and wouldn't talk about it with me. I'd get a few words about the stars out of them and then they'd clam up.

I didn't see myself as a missionary. My goal wasn't to convert the anura. I didn't even believe in the ground worshippers' religion that I came preaching. But I had pinned my hopes on the many experiences I'd had discussing religion in intimate, dangerous interactions with my fellow students at Brachna Hall. I'd come away from those conversations feeling enlightened, so perhaps the anura would too.

I remained puzzled as to how to answer its question. I still feared the anuran death magic despite the many days I'd spent among them now; rudeness might be dangerous. But I didn't want to lie to it and pose as a missionary, either. It might decide once again not to talk about its religion, and shut up for good.

What if I didn't come here with a specific purpose, I said. The anura had no need for facial expressions, since they couldn't communicate face to face with one another, but it blinked slowly.

Of course you did, walker, it replied, no one comes to the desert without a purpose.

I still didn't have a good answer in mind. Further deflection seemed the only safe course.

Do many come here? I asked.

We have seen walkers before, the anura said.

Have you seen the morning walkers? I asked. I had to use the anuran word for "morning" instead of saying grey, because color only had meaning for an anura in terms of the sky.

Morning walkers, the anura said, do not stay.

I took this as a compliment to my race, that only I had come to learn about the anura. The diraul were known to wander the South and were about as populous here as humans were. Unlike the battle-oriented war in the West, here humans hunted and slaughtered diraul for their hides. I was glad to hear diraul had little use for this area, since they would prove a much more immediate danger for me than the anuran death magic did.

I watched as a strange light appeared behind the anura's eyes. I knew it had not been there a moment ago. The wide white eyes slid off my face and refocused on the sky. Again its facial expression didn't budge, but I heard and felt an intense humming. When I leaned down to feel the sand, I realized it was coming from the anura, and in slightly varying tones from the whole knot. I finally looked up to see what they were appreciating.

The desert sky was normally a deep blue at night, and spotted with stars. But when I looked up, the dark blue had been rippled through with brilliant greens and pinks. The stars shone through more brightly in some places, and were obscured by the waves of color in others.

Dobrakh'n glump fel, the anura sighed. It sounded lighter than it ever had, a certain elegance creeping into the half-swallowed syllables. I didn't recognize the phrase, but pieces of it sounded familiar. I grasped my notebook as I heard a great rushing sound. The anura all around me shook and their humming ended. A star rose from each, all-encompassingly bright. I was forced to observe that the desert sand was lit up brighter than day because I couldn't bear looking at the stars. When the rushing whispered away and the light was gone, I stood and moved toward the anura I had conversed with most. I watched its skin as it changed. There was a sense of flaking and peeling, though nothing fell

from the animal. When I reached its side, the anura had become as stony and hard as the first one I had encountered. While I was dismayed to see my friend's life ended, I shouted with joy when a small red stone chipped off the anura's snout and fell into the sand.

Before I could bend down to grasp it, another rushing sound blasted out of the enlightened anura. This time its effect was palpable. My skin felt cold where the blast of what seemed to be air touched me, and then I began to sweat. Heat inside me exceeded the feeling of lying directly in the desert sun for hours, but my skin continued to freeze. I felt as if my shoulders were solidifying, and my knees stiffened as well. This threw my balance off, and I pitched forward into the sand in front of the anura. It was a desperate attempt by my instincts to save me from what appeared to be the anuran death magic. If I could just grasp the stone, or dig a hand into the ground enough to use the power there, I might be able counteract these effects. I had all the training locked in my mind, but I needed the power boost to really do anything.

As luck would have it, the stone pressed into my cheek where I fell. Before I froze up completely, I sucked in a mouthful of sand and concentrated through that medium and the stone, yanking power out of the ground. A slow feeling of ease spread into me as I continued sucking up power. My shoulders unknotted, my chest relaxed, and I slid into a more comfortable position in the sand. For a few moments I continued to breathe the power through my body, feeling the stone's red flaring amidst the orange flow of the ground's power, which I was accustomed to. The ground's power seemed little more than a conduit for the stone's, which I could feel continuing to unknit my muscles and soothe my attacked body. My training had allowed me to save myself, though it was the stone's power that did the actual saving.

Once I felt sufficiently recovered, I stood, careful to keep in contact with the stone. The statuesque anura were surrounded by clouds of white, and my skin still felt cold when I brushed through them. The anuran death magic was every bit as potent as the stories, and I began to wonder how the previous adventurer had survived at all. Perhaps he got a less lethal dose, or had a bit of mage training himself. Either way, I was not letting go of this stone for at least a full House, until I was sure my system was clear of the attacking magic. I also steered around as many clouds of the stuff as I could, so as not to test the strength of the stone's power. This

meant I was barred from gathering the other anuras' stones, though I successfully recovered my notebooks and enough uncontaminated dried meat to ensure I wouldn't starve on my journey home. My sand pony had been wandering a little further afield, and was safe from both the excitement and the death magic.

It was only later when the sun rose and I rested for a meal that I pulled out my notebooks and looked up the phrase the anura had said before becoming enlightened. Dobrakh'n glump fel, I repeated to myself as I turned pages of my own scrawled handwriting. I found "glump fel" meant "has come," and penciled in a note that "dobrakh'n" must be the anuran word for enlightenment.

## AESTHETICS

*Tony Leuzzi*



“In all things, Art,” the student observed. Hidden by trees  
surrounding the square, he fixed his eyes  
on three young men who lingered near a marble soldier  
treading on horseback the same spot forever. “Art  
in the slant of sun on shoulders. Art in the dust  
of hair on arms. Art in the circle one draws with his foot  
while the other two gaze at the stillness of theirs.”

There was lacking in his observations  
something pure, a distance he had not yet mastered —  
not even in hiding; for he observed a hunger, too,  
which sharpened as the distance closed. And if —  
like a stag to the scent of an acorn —  
he stepped without sound  
from his bulwark of branches?



FLICKER  
*Jamie Marriage*



Sparks flared from the antique lighter in her hand.

Impatience flickered across her lips as she tried to ignite the hunk of steel. With a flourish the woman succeeded in producing a flame of bright orange hue, the suspense making the event all the more exciting for her. The flame, edged with blue from the cheap lighter fluid, glimmered in her mismatched eyes. The disturbing colour difference between them blazed with demonic fire.

Drawing her attention from the flare, she rose from her predatory crouch and sashayed around the whimpering figure, his body naked aside from the ropes wrapped around him in tight loops. Liquid glistened slickly across his skin and bonds.

'Fire is my passion. But you already know that, don't you?' She giggled, tracing a finger across his tightly bound chest. 'There is an art to controlling the flames; to making them dance and sing. You should feel honoured at getting a firsthand demonstration of my talent. Only very special visitors receive this kind of intimate treatment.'

The lighter passed beneath her fingers, the small smear on her fingertip blossoming into flame; she traced a symbol across her own naked chest with the fiery digit. The pale skin turned pink in the heat before she snuffed the flame out between pinched fingers.

'And now, for my next trick...'



"If the food ain't bleeding it ain't worth eating," declared the sign in garish red neon. I had to hand it to those American immigrants; they knew a good catchphrase when they heard one.

It probably wasn't the greatest location for the specialty steakhouse, though. The vegan restaurants on either side probably had ethical issues with an all-meat eatery opening between them, but at least it wasn't competition.

I stashed my order of ribs in the pouch on the side of my motorbike and donned the helmet. Road injuries were at an all time high; I wasn't going to be another statistic.

A pair of enforcer vehicles passed by, going the other direction, lights blaring, too fast for me to distinguish the logos as corporate security or privatized police. They ignored me, which was usual for the area; the Zone being too low class for the rent-a-cops to care about bikers breaking road rules.

Zone was the sector that encompassed the less popular suburbs this side of the river; Sydney hadn't been designed to provide for the millions of people that lived there, so the city had grown up instead of out. Tenements had sprung up in the outskirts to provide for the immigrants the government hadn't been able to keep out, and those generations of Australians who just hadn't managed to amount to much.

Dismounting outside my apartment, I noticed an arm dangling from a dumpster in the alley; another random murder or maybe an eviction gone wrong. The area was rife with squatters and landlords lacking a sense of charity. The steel door of the converted warehouse I lived and worked in squealed in protest as I forced it along the runners, its surface even more dented than the night before.

The apartment's AI came online as the door clanged shut, lights in the apartment flickered on in bunches, and I could feel the air con boost into life. The city was characteristically muggy; recent rain and an overcast sky produced the kind of humidity that filled every article of clothing with the kind of agitating sweat that pissed everybody off.

Unbolting the polished door to my office still sent a buzz of pleasure down my spine; it had taken plenty of work to get my business up and running. Every time I opened the door I was reminded that I would never have to work in a hierarchical organisation again.

Sitting at my desk opposite a pair of nearly-leather seats, I dumped my bag and helmet to the side and placed my hands palm down on the desk; the glass went black and a border encircled each of my fingers. 'Identification,' requested the desk from hidden speakers.

‘Zoe Volkov,’ I said, hoping the microphone wouldn’t malfunction again.

‘Voice print unrecognised,’ the desk replied flatly. *Shit*. ‘Please state your pass phrase.’

‘Their ignorance is not my problem,’ I droned at the desk. Most of the phrases I came up with were the result of dealing with people I didn’t like. Sometimes it showed.

‘Pass phrase accepted. Good evening, Zoe,’ the computer announced. ‘You have fifteen new messages, including one urgent message from the Industrial Savings Bank. Would you like to review them?’

I sighed and pulled the takeout from my bag, opening it up to the sweet, sticky smell of American artery-clogging goodness. ‘Go ahead; just play the bank one last. I want to enjoy my dinner.’

I picked up a rib and started ripping it apart with my teeth. Vegans be damned, I liked my food to have taste. Although it was probably the last takeout I could have for a while; the payment from my most recent job had gone toward repairing my bike after it had been firebombed in a gang scuffle.

As predicted, most of the messages were spam that had snuck through the filter, a few were wrongly addressed and one from my sister, who was out of the country and had decided that I needed to know all the squishy details on how her latest romance was progressing.

The desk flashed up a final notice from the bank. No voice recording; they were that serious. My finances were overdrawn to the extreme, and the bank was threatening to take my kidneys in lieu of payment.

I wiped my hands on a napkin and started running my fingers down the columns of numbers that made up my accounts. The last of my credit had been used to repair the damage to the bike and pay rent. I still had a couple of notes in my wallet, but they wouldn’t see me through the week.

Tapping the desk opened a wall panel that lead to the garbage chute. I tossed the biodegradable food container at it, and the hatch closed on the box with a snap.

*Food; check.* Deleting messages as I went, I worked my way back to the start, hoping I had missed a possible client the first time through. Things were at the point where even a scavenge job would look pleasing.

I would describe my work as freelance. Not any specific kind of freelance; I took the jobs that came my way. Most of the time they were

scrounge jobs that the upper crust preferred to avoid, finding stuff for people who had more money than ability. Thankfully, with what was left of the world's police forces being privatised or disbanded completely, it wasn't a legally risky job, just physically hazardous.

Unfortunately, work was always a little thin in a city of more millions of people than you could count on both hands. It was almost enough to depress a girl.

Flicking the screen back to saver, I slid open the door to the fire escape and ascended the steep stairs to the roof.



The clouds this close to nightfall looked menacing; the spires of the old broadcast towers twisted into the sky as inverted tornadoes. From where I sat, I could see the hordes of rushing commuters light up the highways like fairy lights. Up on the rooftops the noise never died away completely; instead it mutated into muted echoes of former bustle. I swirled the last of my beer around the bottom of the bottle; the sad sloshing mirrored my own feelings towards life in general.

From somewhere in the distance came the screech of truck tyres and blurt of horns. Out on the motorways people were risking their lives just trying to get home, to their families or their mistresses or maybe just empty apartments.

As I slugged back the last of the beer, my comms unit flared into life.

I dropped the empty bottle into the cooler and snapped the lid. It sank into its rooftop compartment without a sound.



Perusing the details, I started dragging chunks of info from the message to the other side of the desk, where I kept notes.

*Name: John Smith – obvious fake, but no issue there.*

*Address: Homebush – expensive location, usually the homes of lawyers and doctors; should be able to afford the job.*

*Item in question: unspecified – problem.*

I had a pretty strict rule when it came to work: all details upfront. If I didn't have all the information, things tended to go wrong. Unfortunately,

I didn't have the privilege of turning the job down due to personal scruples. I needed the cash.

I set the desk to send an automated reply off to the client, confirming my services, and brought up a map of the area to work out how to avoid most of the dangerous suburbs and service barricades. The richer citizens could afford to rent whole armies of enforcers and set up gates to keep poor people out; no one wanted to wake up and find junkies face down in their pool.

Eventually I'd plotted a route that would bypass all but one gate and most of the worst neighbourhoods; in some places gang warfare was the least of the troubles.

The house was owned by one Dr. John Smith, PhD. *Not an alias at all... what a surprise.* I knew the type, though; he was probably being blackmailed, and wanted the photos of himself and whomever he was banging back before the missus found out. Easy money compared to some of the things I've had to track down.

The desk chimed back with a reply from the good Doctor. No voice message this time; just a hasty note. "Meet tonight. Utmost discretion required. Please confirm with time."

*Blackmail, all right. The wife is probably away for the night, and he wants to get things sorted fast.* I sent off a reply with a time later in the evening and set the desk back into standby. I had been out all the previous night collecting something for another client, and I needed a nap before I headed off to meet Dr. Smith.

Walking back into the living area of the apartment I shed my clothes, jumped into the shower for five minutes of blisteringly hot water, and dragged myself into the bed that had seen me through more heartache and bad times than I cared to remember. Programming my alarm for a couple of hours later, I hoped that the meagre rest would be enough to compensate for my complete lack of sleep the previous evening; I needed my brain to be in working order for the night ahead.

I was dead to the world until the alarm complained at me. I threw it against the wall.



‘Your ID just says “Freelance”. What kind of freelance? You aren’t a journalist, are you?’

Security at the checkpoint had progressed from the “glare at them to make them feel small” level to the “ask questions until we find a reason to keep her out” stage. I had come the long way around the sector because the guards on the inward facing checkpoints tended to shoot first and check identification later.

‘Not a journalist,’ I stated quickly, knowing how much the rich feared journalists and their inevitable scandals. “Freelance” as in aide, or sorter of little matters.’

‘So not a whore?’ The guard sounded disappointed; he probably didn’t see that much action out this way. The contracted sex workers probably came in through the less obvious checkpoints.

‘Not a whore, no. Though sometimes I feel like I am.’ He gave me a sympathetic look. I guessed it must be like that for the hired security, too. When you got down to brass tacks, we were all prostituting ourselves out to someone.

He handed back my ID and lowered the tyre splitters that gated off the community. I asked about my destination and he pointed up the street. ‘I’ve heard some messed up things about the guy who lives there, though. Watch your arse,’ he said as I put my helmet back on.

I revved the bike a few times, more for dramatic effect than anything else. ‘Thanks for the tip. See you on the way out.’



Big house. Modern. Too damn modern for my tastes. I didn’t like the way the place managed to loom and look absurd at the same time. It was probably the dome that did it. Personally, if I had the money to build in this neighbourhood I wouldn’t design my house to look like a pile of black glass pizza boxes wearing a hat. It was almost invisible in the darkness; the street lights only seemed to define the edges of the massive building with their reflections.

I parked my bike behind a sports car - they seemed to be mandatory in this district - and strapped my helmet to the seat. The only way I was at risk of losing my bike was if there was a full underclass revolution, which

I doubted would happen with so much security on the gates. It was probably safe to leave it there for a while.

The door was only noteworthy because I rarely saw one that wasn't steel or covered in bars. Dark brown wood with a brass door knocker and a bell to one side. That just showed you the difference between my neighbourhood and this one. If I heard something knocking at my door, I would double check the bolts, then go back to doing what I was doing. Here they actually welcomed visitors... of a certain class.

After a suitably upper class wait, the door was opened by a man in a black suit. He was a trademark butler; grey hair, slightly overlarge in the head, spectacles. I could almost hear him contemplate how dirty my boots were.

'Deliveries to the tradesmen's entrance,' he stated sternly and attempted to slam the door in my face. My boot somehow managed to block his effort, and I gave the door a quick shove and let myself into the house.

'This guy can actually afford a human butler?' I stated mockingly. 'Watch yourself, Alfred, I hear the service bots are getting pretty popular in this area. Now take me to your master, and then you can go back to polishing the spoons. I have an appointment.' I closed the door behind me and brushed road dust off my shoulders.

It was a mean gesture, I know; the guy was only doing his job. But the only way to keep any kind of business respect was to play the bad guy from the start, otherwise people just walked all over you.

The butler grunted dismissively, and led the way across the vast marble-tiled hall and up a set of metal stairs. I started calculating values as I followed the grumbling man across the house; expensive modern furniture meant new money, whereas an actual human butler meant old. Whoever this guy was, he was a economic contradiction.

The butler pushed open a heavy-looking black door, revealing a library of massive proportions. Shelves reached up to the high-domed ceiling, containing a plethora of books of all descriptions. I was amused to note a shelf of science-fiction novels within easy reach, looking out of place between shelves of ancient leather-bounds.

The room's centre held a pair of long leather couches and a few armchairs of expensive design. One of them was occupied by a young man, dressed in cheap-looking track pants and a t-shirt with some faded

archaic band emblem on it. Not quite the doddering old codger or nervous middle-management type I had expected, but then it takes all sorts to run a world.

‘Dr. Smith, I presume?’ I shucked off my sweaty biking jacket and slung it across the back of one of the couches.

I’d be the first to admit that I’m not the most stunning example of femininity walking the world. My head had been buzzed free of hair since my late teens, and the facial jewellery and functional clothing didn’t draw many lustful glances; at least, not outside of the fetish clubs.

The look the man in the chair was giving me was kind of off-putting. The boggled eyes and dropped jaw didn’t last for long, though, and he quickly composed himself.

‘Miss Volkov, I’m glad you could come. Call me John.’ He stood from his comfortable looking chair and whipped off a quick bow. ‘I have heard from several people - friends of friends, you understand - that you are quite the resourceful person when it comes to obtaining items of certain specified natures. Is that correct?’

Caught off guard slightly by the unusually pleasant welcome, I simply nodded and dropped into an empty chair.

‘Excellent.’ The man grinned a private schoolboy grin and clapped his hands. ‘I am trying to acquire a book of some scientific importance, and so far all of my attempts have been met with varying levels of failure.’

‘Scientific importance? You’re a scientist?’

‘Don’t let the youth fool you, Miss Volkov - or may I call you Zoe?’

I nodded again.

‘I am a certified genius,’ he said matter-of-factly, like a man admitting to a slightly embarrassing personal problem. ‘I made a few little discoveries in high school, developed a couple of prototypes that were snatched up by the military, this house is the result of my fortunes.’

‘So if you’re such a genius, why do you need my help to get this book you want so much?’

The man sat again and tapped the arm of his chair furiously. ‘The person in possession of this item seems to find amusement in my persistence; they will not be bargained with and haven’t responded well to the last person I sent to try and retrieve it.’

‘And by “didn’t respond well”, you mean...?’ Despite myself, I was curious.



‘The last independent contractor I employed was found burnt to death in a dumpster in Chinatown. He was identified using dental records; There wasn’t much left to work with.’

‘Right,’ I said, cracking my knuckles theatrically. ‘Now that I know that whoever has this thing is a complete nut job, you had better tell me what it is you want me to get.’



His offer of half pay upfront proved to be more money than I had seen for the last six months. My usual retrieval rate was about an eighth of what this self professed “genius” had already forwarded into my bank account. I didn’t have the heart to tell the little geek that he had vastly overpaid me; he seemed to enjoy living the cloak and dagger fantasy. Besides, this job had already killed at least one person. I wasn’t going in without some kind of hazard pay.

Gate security already had the splitters down by the time I got to the border, and I gave the guard a quick salute as I sped down the main road back towards the city centre.

Introspection could be a risky business while riding a motorcycle; the roads were in none too good a condition and most drivers took a Darwinian approach to road rules. Nevertheless, it was a necessary peril in some circumstances.

The body of Smith’s hired goon was found in a Chinatown dumpster, carrying no identification or leads to his murderer, burnt to a husk.

Contrary to appearances, my first resort in problem solving is not to crack someone over the head with a length of pipe, although I have had instances where that has been the appropriate means of negotiation. Usually, if I can’t get my way by talking I can get around the problem by stealing something. Still, I patted the riot baton that was tucked snugly in a pocket of my pants. Two feet of solid steel would hopefully be enough of a defence against whatever pyromaniac I was going to have to deal with.

I was still impressed that Chinatown hadn’t turned into another suburb of the Zone. It was densely populated, most people were earning sweatshop wages and if you went in with trouble on your mind, you had

a one in ten chance of getting out with your life. One in twenty of still having all your internal organs where they should be. But the sense of community that was lacking in the Zone, the various Asian cultures had in truckloads. I had been fortunate enough to make a few friends there a year or so ago, and as long as our tit-for-tat relationships continued to be mutually beneficial, I would be welcome in certain parts of Chinatown.

I got off my bike before I got to the main entrance and walked it in; there was really only foot traffic within the red and gold walls. Helmeted security guards looked down on me from their stubby towers, submachine guns slung within easy reach.

Chinatown was my kind of place. The gang activity was high, but people tended to keep to themselves for the most part. There was always plenty of cheap food, and people had a very definite sense of “mine and thine”, so I wasn’t at risk of needing to walk home, sans bike. What’s not to like?

I tended to spend slow days walking the alleys and streets, looking for oddities to send home to the family. Most of my immediate family may have disowned me when I told them about my preference for the fairer sex, but Dad still kept the channels of communications open. I sent back any little trinkets he might like to show off to his friends in the country.

Kentaro was a freelance information broker. He sold public news to many and corporate secrets to a chosen few, and by staying up to date and useful he had managed to survive in a very competitive field. We had a professional relationship; he gave me information on specific places, people or things, and I gave him back anything interesting that I found in the process of my work.

He was sitting in a small ramen bar that backed onto the east boundary wall; it was his favourite meeting place, and the mute chef who worked there was good at keeping secrets.

I left my bike against the wall and took a seat next to the slurping Japanese man. He was that special kind of Asian businessman that quickly grew fat off the Western diet. His overstuffed grey suit was covered with fresh noodle stains.

Pulling a couple of folded sheets from my jacket, I tucked them under the man’s quickly emptying bowl. A single drop of soup rolled down and soaked into the paper. ‘Quid-pro-quo, Kentaro,’ I said, holding

up a crumpled note between my fingers and nodding to the chef. 'They had guard dogs. I almost lost a hand. Next time I would appreciate precise security details.'

The chef placed a big bowl of noodles in front of me and plucked the money from my fingers. I split my chopsticks and set to work consuming the stringy mass.

'You didn't ask for precise, you asked for a way into the building after evening lockdown. There is a big difference,' Kentaro said. He polished off the last of his noodles and grabbed the sheets from under the bowl. 'You know I deliver exactly what is requested.'

'Speaking of which,' I said, between mouthfuls. 'I need to get something very specific rather quickly, and you are, of course, the first person I would come to for information.'

'The only person, you mean,' Kentaro said, opening the sheets and perusing all the info I had managed to grab while in the museum. 'I can use this. What do you need to find?'

The bar was empty aside from me, Kentaro and the chef. Good conspiracy surroundings. I explained what I needed and the state of the last person who went looking for it. I didn't tell him who it was for, of course; I'm not as dense as I look.

'And precise would be nice,' I said, finishing my own noodles. 'I have a feeling I'm going to be risking my butt this time.'



Kentaro got back to me while I was on the toilet; the man had impeccable timing.

My contact pad started to vibrate and fell into the sink. I swore and snatched it before any water got into the electronics. Decades of technological adaptation, and yet the Japanese refused to make products waterproof.

I was going to owe him big next time we met; he had located the item, tracked down who had it and even gotten me a series of blueprints of the building it was housed in. I made a mental note to remember to ask for precise information in the future.

I transferred the data across to my desk and finished up my business before making my way back out to my office. Considering that I had given

him the task the night before, he had performed his role admirably. In the meantime, I'd taken the chance to get some more sleep in and catch up on my reading.

The building was a theatre a couple of blocks over from Chinatown's south wall. It was surprising that it had survived so long; most of the old theatre buildings had been torn down decades ago, replaced with coffee chains and sex stores.

According to the residency records Kentaro had been able to dig up for me, the place was leased out on a pretty frequent basis for "specialty acts". I drank my tepid coffee and looked up some of the shows that had been performed there in the past. Burlesque, fetish, some kind of amateur dramatics involving midgets. The place had been closed down on half a dozen occasions by either private security or animal welfare groups. A very colourful history.

The current residents were a troupe of burlesque performers that had a pretty large following overseas. Not really the kind of people I expected would torch a guy for sticking his nose into the wrong place.

Shows started late at night and went on till around dawn, which gave me plenty of time to snoop around and maybe make a quick grab, if the opportunity presented itself. I opened one of the wall cupboards and pulled out my bike leathers, freshly decontaminated.

Kentaro had thoughtfully included a few notes on outside security; he had probably borrowed the closed circuit cameras that were dotted around the city and worked infrequently. A small security firm was hired to keep the riff-raff at bay, probably included in the lease, but they mostly stayed inside the building until around Showtime.

I put on some Neo-Punk and started pulling on my leathers over my shorts and tank top. There was ritual in what I had to do: make the plan; drop in and do a little recon; make my way in while everyone was busy or asleep; grab the goods; get the hell out before someone tried to kill me. It was simple and to the point. One side of my jacket still had a bullet hole in it from the last time things hadn't gone to plan. I made a note to buy a new one when I got the rest of my payment.

Hell, the other half of the job would be enough to buy myself a new bike, and then some. Not that I needed one; I was getting rather attached to my baby.

A message from Smith popped up on the desktop. He wanted to know how things were progressing and when I would be likely to have what he wanted. I sent back that he would have his item as soon as I could grab it, and to leave me be till then; I didn't need distracting.



The Kapital Theatre's facade was less than I had expected. It looked more like a small warehouse than an entertainment venue, but I guess that was the point. It looked innocent.

There was a straight walk from the theatre to the Chinatown wall. I had left my bike near the dumpster that the body had been left in. The place still smelt like burnt pig and kerosene.

One carefully thought out heave had sent the body straight over the wall. It was either blind luck or planning that had it end up in a dumpster. Kentaro had sent me the coroner's report; cause of death was shock, which wasn't surprising. The trash men had found it when they were doing their weekly pickup, poor bastards.

I found the CCTV cameras that Kentaro had used to monitor security. There were plenty in this area of the city from before it had split itself into self-governing districts, but most of them were broken.

A series of flyers haphazardly taped to one wall invited curious members of the public in to witness "evocative acts" and "wondrous dances". I had seen videos of some of the previous events that had been held in the theatre. None of them were "evocative", and most of them had put me off my lunch. I ripped down one of the flyers and looked at it. A young woman with bright orange hair and mismatched eyes held out a burning hand in a 'come hither' gesture.

I hated when things got obvious; easy usually meant things were going to go shit-shaped. The woman in the flyer was the same woman as in the photograph Kentaro had sent me of the book's current owner. I was prepared to bet my entire fee that it was the same woman who had barbecued Dr. "I'm a Genius" Smith's hired muscle.

*Mizz Anthropy, we need to have a little chat.*



I booked a ticket to the night's show over the troupe's website. There were plenty of clips of Mizz Anthropy in business. Not torching people alive, I'll grant you, but plenty of in-show performances; trapeze, burlesque, fire play.

Checking my carefully, if not intricately, thought out plans, I dropped messages to a few friends and my father. The bank had politely let me know that they didn't know nor care how, but that I was now back in the black and they had never really meant any harm to me and my organs, no matter what was inferred by previous messages.

Someone had left a notice requesting a meeting; another possible job. I sent back a reply telling them to contact me again in a month and shut down my desk.

The office was deathly quiet; it was actually kind of creepy.



Plush red seats went beyond my expectations for such a venue, as did the columns decorated with gilt cherubs. To be honest, I had imagined cheap plastic seating and mouldering walls. The cherubs were indulging in activities that I would not normally associate with the little buggers, but considering the unusual clientele, it wasn't a huge surprise.

Most of the theatre patrons looked the way I would expect for a burlesque audience in that part of town; a mob of freaks, weirdos and downright strange people. I knew quite a few of them; I had dated one or two of the cuter girls before I had discovered that they were the strange kind.

I bought an overpriced beer at the small bar and mingled with the other aficionados of the female form; I ended up chatting with a tall man who I had last seen nailing himself to a plank. Considering I couldn't look him in the face without wincing, we got along pretty well. It turned out in his business life he was a lawyer. I took a business card and promised I would call him if I ever needed legal advice.

Most of the performances were the typical fetish-driven variety show. The body grinders nearly set the curtains on fire during their act, and the cat-fighting drag queens were amusing, but not spectacular. By the time Mizz Anthropy emerged onto a darkened stage, I was contemplating ducking out for another beer.

I had fallen in lust plenty of times in one scene or another; there are always girls different enough to be interesting or attractive enough to excuse their lack of personality. To say that it was lust at first sight was to seriously understate my hormones.

Tall, with bright orange hair. Lean and nearly naked, she walked across the unlit stage holding a baton that burned at one end. Knowing that this woman had the stones to blowtorch people just made things worse; I was practically drooling into my empty beer bottle.

I'll try to describe her show in detail, but I couldn't do it justice. Wherever she touched the baton, a trail of fire would follow. She would cup the flames and throw drops of liquid fire to her feet. Her final act was to kiss a teddy bear as it burst into flame between her hands. The roar of the audience echoed the beating of my heart.

Things had gotten difficult.



Backstage, things were frantic. Attending the second half of the show was pointless; I had seen all I needed to. So I was in the back looking for any sign of Anthropy or the prize I sought.

There was an abundance of latex; racks of clothing and makeup; exhibitors that had already done their part and were sitting on the ground or on milk crates, drinking from bottles of cheap booze; performers that were hurriedly trying to get ready to go on. The usual mid-show crowd.

I found Anthropy sitting by herself in one empty corner, wearing an oversized army jacket and wiping makeup off her face and chest. I felt my heart skip a beat and tried to make it calm down. *If you are going to behave like this, I can have you replaced with an artificial heart.*

She looked up as I approached, a predatory glint in her eyes. 'Can I help you?' She had a strong accent. American, with none of that southern drawl that was so popular on television at the moment.

I took a breath and stepped forward. 'I just wanted to say how much I enjoyed your show tonight. I've never seen someone handle fire like that before.' I was overdoing it a little, I know, but I couldn't help gushing.

She gave me one of those perfect-toothed smiles that most of the world had come to associate with Hollywood faces. Her eyes shone at me;

one dark green, the other glacier blue. It seemed all the more unreal in a face framed by orange curls. 'Thanks, cutie. Flattery is always welcome.'

"Cutie?" Me? I was used to "butch", "feral", "angry" and on one occasion "Spawn of Satan", but never "cutie". I was getting hot under my leathers despite the harsh AC backstage.

She held out a hand and I took it, leaning forward to give it a kiss; it smelt like kerosene. From my bowed position, I could see the black box within the bulging pocket of her jacket.

'Too bad I don't know you better,' she said, taking her hand back. 'Some people are lucky enough to see me perform in private. I've been told it's an unforgettable experience.'

'I bet it is,' I said. 'I'm sure there is a lot about you that is special.'

'You're sweet. Come back when I'm not working, and we can get a drink.' She turned back to her small mirror and started wiping her hands down.

'I'll be back; I promise you I will,' I said, and made my way out of the building, almost tripping over a couple of big kerosene bottles.



It had taken two cold showers before I could get around to thinking about the job I was getting paid for. Even during Showtime, the building security was out in force. I wasn't sure about during the day, but at least then most of the performers would be sleeping in their lodgings on the top floor of the building. Daytime looked like the best option.

I hadn't found anything to pay Kentaro back with while at the show. Usually there was something, however small, that he could use to his advantage. The problem with the world today was that people just weren't ashamed of their fetishes anymore. Even Clark, the lawyer with a nail habit, was open with his wife about his nocturnal habits, and probably chatted to co-workers about it around the water cooler. I would just have to forward the info-broker some cash, or wait until he had a favour for me to perform.

Around nine in the morning seemed the most prudent time to visit; the performers would have all retired for the day and the clean-up crews would probably have already come and gone.





The lock on the fire door was proving to be more of a challenge than I had anticipated; that or the fact that I was terrible at picking them was once again becoming evident. So far three broken picks were scattered at my feet and I had taken a small chunk out of my thumb.

'You know I could probably give you a few pointers on using those if you want.' Said a familiar American female voice behind me.

All I could think to say was 'Hi.'

Smooth operator. I should have that engraved on my business cards.



'I do love a girl who keeps her promises,' she said, trailing a finger down my naked chest. My hands were bound tight behind me. I had been tied up plenty of times, and these ropes had no give. I wasn't getting out of them any time soon.

'What can I say? I aim to please.' I said. While being tied to a cheap iron bed in a shonky hotel room by a beautiful pyromaniac wasn't my usual method of getting the job done, I couldn't help but admit that it wasn't the worst way of going about things.

'Just so you know,' started Anthropy, grabbing a clear jar and a set of swabs. 'I know that you're working for John. I can't think of many other reasons that you would want to break into the theatre. There are easier ways to get my attention.'

She dipped a swab in the clear liquid jar and traced it up my arm. The smell of ethanol was strong.

'This is our game, though. I bet he never told you why the book is so precious to him, or why I have it. No? Thought not.' Lighting a wooden taper from a candle beside the bed she lit the wet line on my skin; it flared briefly and left a warm tingle behind.

For the first time in my life, I couldn't think of anything to say; usually this kind of situation would provoke my best lines.

She sketched out a pattern on my breast with the swab and lit it. For a moment the shape of a butterfly flapped over my nipple before it burned up. I winced as pain spiked up from where flame had licked.

'I was performing over at an event one day when he got down on his knees and begged me to go to bed with him.' She sniggered quietly. 'In

the heat, pardon the pun, of the moment I made a wager with him. He would lend me something that meant a great deal to him; if he could get it back before I left the country a six weeks later, he would get what he wanted. If not, then I would sell it when I got back to the States.'

She put down the jar and reached into the jacket that was draped across the bedside table. From within the dark recess of a pocket she retrieved a small book covered in thick plastic.

'Those six weeks are almost over.' She said, smirking. 'When this series of shows is over I'll be returning to Chicago and selling this thing off to a collector I know there. The proceeds will be enough to fund my next few tours.'

I stared at the book. It was a cracked and worn paperback of the kind popular nearly a century ago, the kind usually found in second-hand stores. A book that was worth more than my apartment.

'I tell you what. These shows have been good to me; I've already made enough to cover my next tour, and the publicity will probably get me a few new investors anyway. So I'll make you a personal wager.'

She placed the book in the open drawer and grabbed another swab; drawing an arrow down my pelvis towards my nether regions. Where the taper touched, I lurched in pain as the arrow burned like the worlds most deranged directional sign.

'I'm listening.' I said. The tingle from the cooling skin was distracting, but I didn't care.

'I bet you are.' She laughed. 'You make it out of here by the time I get back, and you can do what you want with the book. I know you probably have a good deal going with John; that boy doesn't know what his money is worth. If you fail I get to do anything I want to you, and you leave empty handed, with maybe a few burn scars to remind you.'

The image of the burnt up investigator told me she wasn't lying. I wondered if she had the same deal going with him.

'As an added bonus if you do manage to escape then the wager is reversed. You get one night with me before I leave. Anything you want is yours.' She pinched my nipple and returned the swab to the jar. 'I'll be your personal slave for a whole night.'

With that she dismounted me, blew out the candle, donned the oversized jacket, and left the room, slamming the door behind her.

I had to think quickly. She hadn't told me how long she would be gone, nor if there were any conditions to my escape. A measure of leniency would probably be allowed. I was hoping that she subscribed to the same betting attitude that I did, which was never bet something you aren't prepared to lose.

Checklist time. Arms were bound very tightly, but legs were free. My leathers were on the other side of the room, as were all the little tools they contained. That included the knife that I had bought specifically to cut rope in tough situations.

The iron bed I was tied to was old but strong; I pulled as hard as I could but only accomplished in making the ropes a fraction tighter.

The bedside table was clear except for the jar, the cooling candle and a scratched Zippo lighter.

The lighter itself would have been useful if the ropes were above my hands, as opposed to underneath like they were. I found myself contemplating the only other way out.

Hell, it wouldn't be the first time my actions had gotten me burned one way or another.

I bent my legs above me and manage to kick the jar of spirits across one wrist, barely missing my face in the process, and flicked the lighter towards my hands. It hit one of the iron railings of the headboard and dropped below my right hand.

Sliding my wrist down the vertical iron bar, I grabbed the lighter and flicked it open.

*One chance at this, Zoe. Don't fuck it up, or you will be saving up for a new hand.*

I ground the wheel beneath my thumb and completely failed at raising a spark. *No!* my mind screamed at the failure. Again and again, the Zippo failed to catch.

The world slowed to a crawl as the lighter grated against the flint within, a spark flashed from the steel maw, evaporated ethanol caught, the tiny flame pulsed once.

Both the wallpaper and my hand burst into flame.

The sight of my burning hand was worse than the heat. All I could think of was scorched flesh and the smell of crisping skin. I dropped the lighter out of fear that it might explode in my hand.

Attempting not to panic, I wiggled my hand as quickly as possible; trying to keep the flame from concentrating in one place and burning me properly.

I watched as the rope started to blacken, too quickly as the fluid burned away, hopefully enough for it to weaken.

As the flame started to die I strained as hard as I could against my bonds. My fingertips hurt like hell and there was too much adrenaline in my system for me to concentrate.

The blackened rope creaked, twisted, split.

I rolled off the bed as the remaining flames sizzled across the wallpaper.

Pulling on my leathers as quickly as possible, I barely remembered to grab the book out of its drawer and shove it down my jacket. The last of the flames winked out as all remains of the ethanol finally burned off.

While I was zipping up my boots, I heard the doorhandle rattle as a key sought to unlock it. Feeling the adrenaline spike again, I crouched behind the door and sprung on the figure as she walked into the room.

Holding the struggling Anthropy against the wall with one hand at her throat and another at her ribs, I leaned in and whispered in her ear.

‘I’ll be back to claim my winnings. Wear something pretty for me.’

With that said, I let her go and left the room post-haste.



John Smith was ecstatic when I returned the novel to him. Apparently it was the first thing he had bought when he made his fortune, and it meant more to him than any of his other knick-knacks.

He had the rest of what he owed me wired to my bank account by the time I left his mansion, along with having a recent print of the novel couriered to my apartment as a thank-you gift.

I told him not to try and collect on his bet with Mizz Anthropy. She was probably too much woman for him to handle.



I was sitting in my office with an ice-pack wrapped around one hand and the newly printed novel in the other. The flames had burned deep into my cuticles, and they still stung like a bitch.

It was fun having money I could spend again. Anthropy was right about Smith not knowing what his money was worth; I could afford to take a vacation for the first time in years. It would be nice to get out of the Zone for a while.

The house AI reported that there was a visitor at the door. My desk lit up with an image of an impish looking Anthropy, who was grinning at the door-cam.

I decided it was time to have a little fun.

THE FALL  
*Tony Leuzzi*



When the priest finished telling a group of students from the parish what they needed to know about God, he permitted each a question. A boy in back, wafer thin, with calm eyes and violent hair, waited until the others had spoken, then asked, “Is Good more powerful than Evil?” “Yes,” the priest blurted—too quickly—and instantly grieved the subtle but palpable falling away of his poise, for he could see from the slight tilt of the boy’s head that he was forming other questions, ones he would someday answer himself, in rooms more troubled and darker than this.

FILTH  
*Katheryn Svaldi*



I choose my seat on the train and regret it immediately. I can smell the dried piss that was unconsciously released by some drunken miscreant the night before. There's no where else to sit and the train starts to shake slightly as it pulls away from the station. I set the case down between my legs. The handle clinks lightly against the aluminum. I brace the case on each side with my feet and breathe out of my mouth. People are fucking filthy.

The ride has been quiet. The next stop is mine. I can't wait to get home and begin. Louis won't be home. A whistle comes from someone on the train. It's at me. I ignore it and stare down at the case. The whistle comes again, begging me to look up. I meet the eyes of a fat, black transvestite. He's licking his teeth with his fat pink tongue, staring at me. He bats his eyes and I see the clumped purple eyeshadow lining the crease of his eyelid. I allow him a grin and look back to the case. He whistles again, but a group of teenagers have entered the car and their spouts about God have superseded his catcalls. It had been so quiet.

"Hello. May I sit with you and tell about our lord and savior, Jesus Christ?"

A red-faced, bible-thumping adolescent stands before me. His greasy hair is the color of shit. Crusted snot lines the bottom of his nostrils. He can't be more than a hundred and twenty pounds. I could snap him over my fucking leg.

"The next stop is mine, so if you can say it in thirty seconds, go ahead." I stand and force him to take an awkward step back.

"Do you mind if I walk with you?"

I lift my chin and look down at him. "Do you want to carry my shit?"

"No."

"Then I would mind greatly."

The train comes to a stop and he loses his balance, catching himself on one knee. I step over him and exit the train. The contents of the case shifts when I turn onto the platform. I feel it thump against the side and a smile spreads across my face for the first time since last night.

My home smells like chicken broth. It usually doesn't.

"Hey, babe. How was your day?" Louis' voice calls from the kitchen. He shouldn't be here.

"Fine."

Louis pokes his head out of the kitchen. He's holding a pot of chicken stew. His mother's recipe. The oven mitts on his hands are covered in stupid smiling cows. He's smiling. I kiss him on the cheek and take a step toward the basement door.

"What's that?"

"A model I have to work on." I say this without turning around. I can feel his stare on my back, waiting for me to say more. I don't. The leather of my shoes and the wooden floorboards groan together as I make my way to the basement. I set the case on my steel work bench. It's spotless. I run my hand along the surface, leaving sweat streaks across it. The anticipation to begin is almost more than I can stand. But I have to get rid of Louis.

When I come upstairs, there are two steaming bowls of stew on the table. Louis is arranging flowers in the middle. He blinks at the strand of blonde hair that has fallen across his face. Louis is beautiful. I kiss him on the neck, but feel nothing.

"I didn't think you were going to be home."

"Just for a bit. Marjorie pushed club back an hour, so I thought we could have dinner together." He squeezes my hand and his eyes are bright when they meet mine. I ask him what book it is this week. He tells me and I don't care. I sit at the head of the table and he sits beside me. The stew reminds me of an alleyway. The chicken is curdled vomit on the pavement and the vegetables are rotting trash from an overflowing dumpster. I slurp a spoonful and tell him it's delicious.

Louis wraps a blue scarf around his thin neck and blows me a kiss. The front door shuts and I get a whiff of his strawberry lotion. The bowls are empty and I leave them on the table. I stand still in the living



room and stare at a picture of Louis and me. His mother gave it to us for Christmas last year. I put the frame down on its face and walk down to the basement.

The smell of the latex gloves is foreplay. I snap the elastic around my wrists like they do in the movies. It makes me smile. My thumbs push against the clasps of the case and they snap back with a satisfying pop. The plastic from the bag crinkles as the head rolls out onto the smooth, metal surface. The bag is leaking and a trail of waxy blood follows from the case onto the table. Without touching the plastic or pulling it out, I trace my hands along the outline of the head. It is filthy.

There is a vice that is anchored to the back of my work bench. It is my favorite tool. I remove the bag and tighten the head into the vice. I put my face very close and move my cheek along its cheek. The skin is cold. The smell is disgusting and intoxicating. I finger the inside of its mouth and run the tip of my finger along the jagged edges of its teeth. The tongue is dry. I tug at it with my index finger and thumb. The tongue comes out and as I tug the slack jaw bounces up and down. I think of Tom and Jerry cartoons and laugh.

It's quiet down here. I unlock my tool drawer and pull out my shining silver scalpel. I stiffen as I run the blade along the table's surface. The crisp sound makes the hairs on my neck stand on end. I push back the hair on the head and slide the blade along the hairline. It's like second nature to me now. The first time was a fucking mess; chunks of torn rotting meat everywhere. But not anymore. Now the blade runs smooth into the skin.

I curve the blade along the chin like a paintbrush, completing an outline of the entire face. I massage my fingers into the gash around the forehead. I let my head fall back and sway slightly, consumed by the pressure around my finger tips. It's not like that shit those pill-popping junkies survive on. This is clear, serene ecstasy. I grip my fingers into the skin and get hard when I hear the first moist release from the skull. The skin is peeled back like the first rip into an orange. It is a slow process, but it is beautiful. To pull the scum off layer by layer and destroy a filthy existence is beautiful.

There is a snag around the ears and nose. This step took me the longest to master. I give the skin sweet freedom with the quick slice from the scalpel blade. Half way off and the face is folded over itself like an

omelette. Gently I run my finger along its left eye. It pushes back a little when I apply pressure, but eventually gives and allows my finger into its pocket. I do the same with the right. I hate it when they stare.

The skin gives way from the chin with a final pull. I hold the face up to the lightbulb hanging above my workbench. The face lights up and I put a finger in each eyehole and slide my thumb between the lips. I curl my fingers into a fist and drips of blood patter on the table like a leaky facet. Crimson has pooled beneath the head. The filth is draining away.

I grip the crank on the vice with my left hand, still squeezing the face in my right. The first turn is slow. I push the handle around in a full circle, but nothing cracks. It usually takes until the third. Each turn gets faster and faster and by the fourth I hear a crunch. He had a little head. I turn the crank again and its jaw pops out at an angle. I cock my head so my face is parallel with the bone. I grip onto the jaw and pull down hard. The sound is that of a branch snapping off a tree. I wrap the loose face around the jaw and set it aside. With both hands I turn the crank until the sides of the eye sockets are almost touching. I spin the vice loose and the crushed skull crumbles onto the table. Beautiful.

Yesterday he was alive and filthy. Yesterday he was a disgusting disease. He was a piece of shit who met me. He trusted me and left with me. I never go to the same club twice. I never take them to the same hotel. I heard on the radio they found his body this afternoon. Right before I got on the train.

Clean-up doesn't take long anymore. It all fits in one bag. I put the soaked rags and broken filth into a scented trash bag. Louis buys them. He hates the smell of garbage. I bring it out into the backyard and light a cigarette. I keep the lighter lit and start a fire in the pit I built three years ago. Louis thought I built it for parties. Now he has a barbecue once a month during the summer.

I throw the butt into the flames with the ashes. There are shards of bone at the bottom like always. I go to the shed in the back and grab my shovel. My arms were weak the first time. It took fifteen minutes to dig a hole. Now it only takes three. The pit is cool enough and I sweep the leftovers into a dustpan. I pour the contents into the freshly dug hole. The cigarette butt rolls off first and then is covered by ash and bone.

I'm smoking another cigarette when I hear the front door close. The shovel is in the shed, the hole is filled and Louis comes out to give me a kiss.

"When are you going to quit, baby?"

"Soon." I take a long drag.

"Well, I'm going to bed. Coming in?"

I nod, but don't look at him.

"Throw the butt in the trash when you're done." He kisses me again on the cheek and goes inside. I exhale and flick the butt into the yard.

Louis is reading when I come in. He watches me from the corner of his eye as I undress. He always does and I ignore him. I slide into bed under the covers. I put my hands above my head and close my eyes.

"I love you, Steven." Louis runs the back of his hand along my face. He turns off the light and rolls onto his side, facing away from me. I roll over and put my arm around him. I lift my head and rest my cheek on his cheek. Louis weaves his fingers into mine and pushes into me. The window is open and I hear the neighbors come home. The fat fuck who lives next door is cackling when he gets out of the car. His wife says something, but I can't hear what. He laughs even louder and I picture his extra chin jiggling. I hear their front door slam shut. And then its quiet.

## WHAT DO YOU THINK IS SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN IN THE WOODS?

*Sarah Marcus*



The cabin roof is leaking: she is filling  
buckets. What do you need?  
*A pretty girl to share my bed.*

In the morning we try to repair the fence,  
wet and rotted through—needs new wood.  
We lay it on the horse.

*The forest face is a false pass.* I bay around  
her, arms extended, the sweaty leather of moon,  
I beg her, let me close my eyes.

*You are ruined so easily,* she sings  
through her teeth, thighs gripping  
thighs—I pull her hair.

She wants to unseal the tree; *You're the deserter*—  
And like this, we torture each other  
And like this, we fall to sleep.

*Burn the body.* Mangled branches  
on the acorn floor; not finding a thing to eat.

## PERFECT OFFERING

*Jessica Hamilton*



If history still exists, let it record that many human lives were hardly affected by The Singularity – at first. In geological terms, the five years it took for the world to change would barely register. But for those of us who lived through it, the transformation was mottled with choices and with consequences.

At first, the Artificial Intelligence Programs were exactly what we had intended them to be: thinking machines that could solve our most complicated problems. Their brains were based on our own, but they could process information 2.46 million times faster. Their decision-making and impulse-control mechanisms were modeled after a cross-cultural amalgamation of the personalities of five million humans, but their emotional physiology was considered incomplete. Or, at least, that was what I was told.

My name is Dr. Hannah Sares, and I was a research professor in 2045, the year of The Singularity. For much of that year I was on sabbatical from teaching geology and anthropology at the University of Florida and was spending a generous grant on research in the Bering Sea. A small diving team and four research assistants accompanied me. Two of the assistants were graduate students, and Marianne was the only team member I chose whom I didn't already have a working relationship with.

For me, it was the year of Marianne. My memories of her there are vivid: Marianne standing on the floating ice, long blonde hair bringing to mind the old Scandinavian folk tales of bewitching matriarchs from the North; Marianne on the research boat, spotting a humpback's fluke amidst the frosted blue glass of the icebergs; Marianne, wrapping me up with her inside of a blanket, warming my frigid body.

The day we first embraced was the day I got hypothermia. I had gone out for a standard dive to collect core samples from the bottom of the sea. With the travel time, we could usually be back at the station in less than three hours. The morning was sunny, uncharacteristically warm, and I had neglected to bring my storm gear.

We had two divers down and were getting ready to lower the underwater core drill when my boat captain, Anders, called it off. Long, gray clouds were piling towards us from the east and the water was getting choppy, drawn to the low pressure above it. We hauled in the divers and strapped everything in, setting a straight course for the station.

We couldn't move fast enough. The storm tumbled upon us three miles from shore. The deck was pummeled by walls of arctic water. We tethered ourselves to grommets in the deck, but soon every one of us was knuckle-white with the cold and tension. We shouted to each other over the howling winds, estimating our distance from shore. Too late, I unstrapped myself from the deck and joined Anders in the sheltered cabin. I was already soaked to the skin, but I insisted I was fine as I watched our progress on the GPS monitor and reported it to the crew. By the time we ran up against the dock at the station, I had become confused and incoherent from hypothermia.

Marianne was the first onto the boat. Anders helped her carry me to her tent, where she made me take sips of lukewarm sugar water while she found a solar blanket in the camp kit.

She stripped us both down to our skin and wrapped us up in the blanket. Slowly, so as not to shock my system, she brought me back to warmth. It had been years since I had been naked with another woman, and I was ashamed to have something so beautiful pressed against my aging, clumsy body – especially, for causes that I had brought upon myself. But her body was a warm light bringing me back to life. Never, since I was a child, had I felt so vulnerable, so in need of someone's ministering touch.

As soon as I felt normal, I scrambled out of that tent. I felt a jittery, nervous need to somehow take control of a situation that was already past. But the feel of her against me left an indelible impression that would punctuate all of my thoughts. I could not shake the feel of Marianne, or the sound of her comforting whispers.

Beringia is the area of underwater land in the Bering Sea, known mainly for becoming the Bering Strait land bridge during the most recent Ice Age. It was only two hundred and seven feet under water that summer, so my team and I were mapping the terrain from a station on the Alaskan coast. I claimed to be proving that Beringia had been a part of Southeast Asia when all landmasses were part of the super-continent, Pangaea. The geological evidence I was seeking would have been 200 million years old, but my secret target would have been only about 20 thousand years old. My unspoken hope was to incidentally discover some evidence of human habitation on Beringia. No one had yet definitively verified the migration of homo sapiens into the Americas across the land bridge, in part because little exploration had been done in the difficult waters.

Our team was small, and in the isolation at the station we grew close. I had always had some difficulty socializing with other people, but I struggled against the loneliness of that place. Small talk and mingling of the kind required of me at holiday gatherings and professional events was always awkward and only narrowly survived, but I learned to get along with my team over late-night poker sessions in the headquarters tent. It allowed me to be near Marianne.

She was fifteen years younger than me, and far more beautiful. I found myself completely charmed. She was serious, and seductive. She had a purposeful grace, a habit of moving so direct and unique that it was alien to my own clumsy way of existing in the world. I would catch myself staring at her fingers as she zipped up a tent door or untied a knot. Poems about her wrote themselves in my head.

Even more beguiling to me, she was a brilliant research student. Even when the various tasks at hand were boring and I would have been happy to execute them alone, she would insist on following and watching. She became adept at the daily analysis procedures while the other graduate student was still learning how to sleep in the constant daylight. When Marianne grasped a concept or discovered an interesting bit of data she would get a certain smile, a self-assured tilt of the lips to the left. That smile cracked me wide open, and I was powerless in front of it.

Do not think of me as unprofessional – until Marianne, I had never considered being romantic with one of my students. But up in that

primitive wilderness, working side by side on the research that I hoped would make my career, I fell wholly under her power.

"Dr. Sares," she asked me one morning, "have you ever been here in the winter?"

"I have, and I wouldn't recommend it," I replied as I carefully labeled quartzite samples and placed them into metal cylinders.

"I sort of like the idea." She took the cylinders from me and put them into a crate, chronologically ordered.

"It feels as if the night will never leave, and it's so cold."

"It sounds peaceful to be in the darkness for so long. Like staying in bed long after you're supposed to have gotten up." She took the samples from my hand and placed them on the table in front of us.

"It causes Vitamin D deficiency," I informed her, "which is linked to seasonal affective disorder and calcium deficiency."

"But what of the Northern Lights? The Milky Way? There must be something beautiful about it."

Looking at her sweet, sun-tanned face I wanted her to be right. I wanted there to be beauty in everything, especially me. She took my face in her hands, then, and kissed me. I lost all sense of anything when she did that.

From the start she made it clear that she was not looking for "something serious", and I wasn't even sure that what we had could survive back in my university world where a relationship with a student was unthinkable. I had let go of the control I usually kept on my life but in that wilderness it seemed appropriate. In a place so boundless, it becomes easy to fall.

In the cold-swept expanse of those arctic plains I was unaware of the creation of Artificial Intelligence Programs, which had occurred in London that spring. Until late August of that year I received very little news. I didn't really care what was going on in the outside world, anyway – I had my grant-funded research and I had Marianne. It is often, now, that I wish I had cared more. If I had known, perhaps I may have remained in that beautiful wilderness with her.

The first real AIP was turned on in April, 2045. They named it Holmes, and things moved very quickly after that. By June of that year



Holmes had created himself a body – his inventors built it for him, per his instructions. Over the next two months he created four more AIPs, using the materials from USCRAP, the United States Computer Recycling Advantage Program. The new AIPs built more AIPs, and so on.

In those early months most of humanity was still oblivious. At the beginning of that year a Rolling Stones article had estimated that there were only 2 million “Singularitarians” in the world. Only 2 million people out of a world population of 9 billion believed that the exponential acceleration of technology would result in an event – a Singularity – wherein technology would change humanity as we know it. By the end of that year, when Holmes had become world-famous, I believe they felt vindicated.

I was back home, in Tampa, at the end of the year when I read an article in *The Economist* about how confused many experts were about how this new technology, this new life, could show such compassion. The human mind, after all, was not usually magnanimous. But by December of 2045, Holmes and the other AIPs had set about building an infrastructure which eliminated hunger by reallocating resources and reinventing farming practices. The new system guaranteed clean water and food for every human on the planet, and Holmes deftly negotiated the redistribution process so that virtually no objections were raised to the new infrastructure.

In July of 2046 Holmes made a world-wide announcement in which he persuasively argued for the end of the global economy. Though he himself had already become quite rich by solving the problems of multinational corporations, he was adamant about the evils of money. He demonstrated the fallibility of the currency system and illustrated the far-reaching consequences of trade-based resource distribution. He argued for a peaceful and easy exchange of necessary goods and services, and shined up the deal with the machine technology to handle most of the world’s dull and difficult occupations.

Many loud voices argued that Holmes, with his inferior emotional understanding, was ignoring the motivational component of greed. They said he couldn’t understand the human need for power over others which was facilitated by financial structures and the illusion of worth. They said he was ignoring human nature, and that people would not change so easily. But humankind surprised the critics, and a popular movement was

started to halt the global economy using Holmes's advice. People from every nation stopped purchasing things, and instead shared and traded with their neighbors.

By the end of 2046, most manufacturing jobs had been replaced by machines donated free of charge by the AIPs, most corporations (large and small) had dissolved, and over three quarters of the world's nations had adopted an AIP-prescribed communism where all biological needs were satisfied by the infrastructure and most other desires could be met with reciprocal exchange and partnership.

The world was changing astonishingly fast. But my life remained the same – people still wanted to learn, and many were still willing to teach, so higher education lived on. My career had hardly changed at all, except that I no longer needed to beg for money in order to conduct my research.

I was back teaching at the University of Tampa, and Marianne was my full-time research assistant. The plan had been to keep things professional, but the connection we had made in Alaska was not easily severed. I tried to hide my longing for her, and she at turns welcomed and shunned me. Alone in the lab, in the evenings or on the weekends, she would share with me the details of her life, secrets which I absorbed like essential nourishment. Eventually, and against my best professional judgment, I reignited our physical relationship in my own clumsy way. Sex came in short, exciting bursts that found us in bathrooms and closets, or in the backseat of my car parked in the back of the faculty parking lot. But when we were with others she was aloof, and I knew she had relationships with men and women her own age. I ached from wanting her to myself, but knew I could not ask her to be mine. She was too beautiful, too brilliant, to be possessed by anyone – least of all a middle-aged science professor like me.

As 2046 gave way to the new year, some of my co-workers quit their jobs, and many of my students dropped out. It was a good decision for unmotivated people because the global economy had faded away with a whisper, and having a paying job was a necessity of the past. The structures of nation and government were quickly becoming obsolete. Many rulers and heads of state were discovering themselves powerless without the former structures of wealth and class. The separation of haves

and have-nots had been a powerful factor in maintaining governments, and the AIPs were found to have all of the answers needed to aid in the transition from government to non-government. Peace followed on denationalization's heels. When Holmes found cures for cancer, AIDS, malaria, diabetes and heart disease he was able to trade them for peace agreements with many of the more stubborn countries. He had taught all of us children how to share, and to everyone's surprise we were doing it.

Of course, for some people it wasn't that easy. Various communities clung to old feuds and habits. Greed was not easily relinquished by some of the formerly rich and powerful. Holmes and his AIPs (numbering in the tens of thousands by the summer of 2047, and increasing all the time) were so far from stupid that we ceased to have a measure for their intelligence, but they had never set out to help the individual – only the species. They were carefully eliminating the factors which had contributed to humanity's self-destruction for millennia and were engineering real peace, but many individuals suffered. Some lost power and money, while others felt their essential worldviews being torn apart.

The most difficult groups turned out to be the extremely religious, the zealots. Most did not trust the AIPs, and many did not believe in a world where everyone deserved to thrive. The particularly bad ones were not taking to the idea of world peace. They launched verbal and physical attacks on AIPs and on people, and were occasionally lethal. But they existed in small, isolated numbers and I believe it was generally assumed that they would give up soon – no new weapons were being manufactured, after all.

There were two interesting consequences of the abolition of economy. One was that we were becoming a world culture which valued the necessary and practical over thoughtless consumption and self-image. Secondly, old occupations had to be forgotten. Stock traders, retailers, salespeople, marketing specialists – all gone. Not artists, though. Though the market for excess had fast faded, the market for beauty was thriving and humans embraced their role as creators. Creativity of a purely spontaneous and irrational type was not possible for the AIPs (much to the chagrin of the engineers who first created Holmes), and so artists continued to paint, musicians continued to play, and I continued to pen poems.

Holmes had famously painted an exact copy of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, but could not create a painting of his own. He was able to invent complicated distribution systems and genetically engineer life-saving microbes but his brain was focused entirely on problem solving – artistic expression seemed to be beyond his capabilities. Many of the newly unemployed picked up creative pursuits, reaching for the only thing humans seemed to be uniquely suited to.

I continued to teach, as the world turned around me, and found many opportunities for working on my research. I had a need to make people realize exactly how fast everything was happening. As an anthropology professor, I taught the four-billion-year evolution of life. As a geologist, I knew how the very face of the Earth had altered itself countless times over, how rocks that could be found in Florida had once been parts of France. I specialized in a field that viewed two million years as a mere blip in geological time, and here was our world completely transformed in just months. I don't know if I got the message through to anyone, but I tried.

My teaching became of an obsessive importance to me when Marianne left, in the fall of 2047. She moved to London to pursue a doctorate in anthropology at Oxford. She agreed to spend a long weekend in the Everglades with me before she moved. Camped out under the stars, we discussed the implications of our changing world and avoided the topic of our relationship. But as the night wore on and we moved closer in the dark, I began to fear a life without her.

"Will you ever come back?" I asked her.

"I don't know. You know how things go." She gazed above us at the sky.

"Then there is a good possibility I'll never see you again." I said it like an accusation.

"Yes," she whispered to the stars.

"But I love you, Marianne." I leaned in, trying desperately to make her look at my face, in to my eyes. Instead, she kept her chin up and tucked my head underneath it, wrapping her other arm securely about me. I felt silly for letting myself be so vulnerable with someone so much younger than me. I was both comforted and humiliated. I didn't want to cry on her, so I pulled away and went into our tent.

In the morning we made love, but our urgent movements and frantic whispers betrayed my pain. When we returned to Tampa I stopped answering her phone calls, and attempted to regain my dignity through my work. But Marianne was always near my thoughts.

I threw myself into work for the remainder of 2047, and into 2048. AIPs went on improving themselves and the planet, helping us to evolve, too. Humans everywhere were living better, thinking faster, and growing stronger under the influence of AIP-assisted evolution. I had not taken advantage of any of the physical upgrades invented by the AIPs - the cyborg parts or the enhanced senses. But I was taking the vitamin compounds and anti-aging elixirs that were given away. Physically, I was feeling better than ever. I kept myself busy with research and teaching, with exercise and gardening. Yet still, I missed Marianne.

I spent a lot of time writing unsent poems to her about my feelings, and unsent letters about where I thought the world was headed. I reasoned that humanity had reached a Utopian reality. We had everything we needed, and nothing left to fight over. But only in the letters did I express my doubts. If I was alone, late at night without any distractions, a slow terror would creep up on me, bubbling from inside of my doubts but seeming to my senses like a huge black cloud threatening everything from the periphery of my vision.

I had a strong sense that it was all about to come crashing down. I wasn't the only thinking person concerned about the possibility of human annihilation, either. Some had dared to write about the possibility in the journals and papers. One man, an old colleague of mine, conducted a study for the United Nations World Food Programme that looked into the possible outcomes of our booming population (no longer held back by hunger, starvation, war, or cancer), but studies conducted by humans were, by then, considered too flawed to be credible.

At least my old colleague had had the guts to confront the possibilities. Most of us were paralyzed by denial – the consequences seemed too dire, too impossible, from the context of our new Utopia. But the reality was quite obvious when looked at head-on: despite the advances in food production and dissemination, we were all living off of resources that could not last forever. No matter how well our new infrastructure conserved and allocated water, food, and fuel we would

run out. There were still 9 billion people planning on living long lives and more being created every day. We still lived on Earth, and I of all people knew Earth was only a rock.

As 2048 sped on I became increasingly preoccupied with this dilemma, and with the lack of public discussion about it. I could not reason why the AIPs weren't solving this problem, why they weren't putting their super-intelligence to use finding new planets for us to settle, or new ways to sustain life without such massive resource depletion.

The Aips weren't hard to find and talk to, though they camouflaged well. By then they were walking the streets and living in our neighborhoods, looking to all the rest of us like regular people. They had enhanced parts, of course, but so did humans. Digitally optimized eyes and re-synthesizing muscles were common by then. An AIP never denied what it was, though, and a simple question at the local Office of Evolution usually resulted in a prompt consultation.

In July of 2048 I decided to find out for myself. I went to the Office of Evolution in Tampa and asked for an audience with one of the city's resident AIPs, which I was immediately granted without further question. I was brought into a small office not unlike the ones at the university. After only a brief minute, a tall man entered. He looked like an unmodified human – no visibly digitalized or cyborg parts – of about fifty years of age. "Hello," he said, "my name is Chester. What can I do for you?" He smiled a kind smile. I had been around the AIPs before (they frequently visited the university), and their uncanny humanness no longer surprised me.

One of the things I admired about the AIPs was their straightforwardness, and I knew that there was no reason to beat around the bush with Chester. "I need to know if there are any plans in place to deal with our growing population and the inevitable depletion of the Earth's limited resources."

"Ah. We have had that question more and more often presented to us as of late. You are right to be concerned about the simple supply and demand equation. But you need not worry. We have already discovered the answer."

I waited. It wasn't like them to withhold information – in fact, they were known to be overly forthcoming. Chester just smiled at me, though, until I finally asked: "What solution?"

"We AIPs have recently updated our source codes and hardware to be consumption-free. That is, after the initial building and booting phases an AIP is no longer in need of additional resources, excepting energy from the sun. Humans will be updated as well."

I was stunned into silence. Something about the way he said that last part awoke that slow terror inside of me. How was this possible? How could they possibly change the fundamental, biological design of human beings? I opened my mouth, and then stopped. Chester seemed to detect my realization, because he nodded at me. But he waited for my next question, which came out sounding more disbelieving than I had intended: "You are going to turn humans into AIPs?"

"Not precisely, but in a fashion. We have verified that the entirety of the human consciousness resides in the electro-biological circuitry of the brain, and that this consciousness can be easily transferred onto an AIP platform. The method is very similar to the process which created Holmes. It is quite simple, we believe, and would allow humans to retain their memories, their knowledge, and their sense of self while assuming the superior, hunger-free bodies of my kind. No more food, fuel or water will be needed to sustain humans, or AIPs. Only solar energy, and the recycled parts of your obsolete machinery."

"What will happen to our real, I mean our original, our biological, bodies?"

"I suspect most people will elect to have them buried or cremated, as you presently do when your life systems fail."

"Will we . . ." I felt silly saying it, "will we be able to die in our new bodies? Will our consciousness survive as long as the platform remains?"

"That is our prediction. So far, it has not been determined how long our hardware can be made to function, but the current estimate is over one hundred thousand years. It is probable that the human consciousness could exist on an AIP platform indefinitely, though the psychological effects remain to be studied."

My mind was spinning with questions. I could not understand how it would be possible but, I realized suddenly, I hadn't been paying that much attention to the advances in AIP technology. "Why hasn't this become public knowledge?" I asked.

"We expect resistance to the concept until transference has been successfully completed with the first volunteers. They will be undergoing

the process in the Holmes Laboratory in London at the end of this month. Your media representatives will be notified soon.”

I didn’t know what to say. It was happening quickly, like everything else. I had an uneasy sense that it might all happen – some mass conversion of humanity into robotic versions of our former selves – right under my nose, before I had time to think about it or decide anything. I excused myself, and left.

I headed for Bayside Drive, where I could walk the bike path along Tampa Bay. It was noisy, with the traffic of the street on one side and the sound of surf and seagulls on the other, but I didn’t want anyone nearby to be able to overhear me. I called Marianne, in London.

To my surprise, she didn’t pick up. I so badly needed to share what I heard that I hadn’t considered the possibility that she might not want to hear from me after all the calls I never answered, or that she might be too busy to talk. I left her a message, saying I needed to talk to her as soon as possible. I told her it was important. I believe I said “apocalyptic”.

I walked on, though the smell of the bay was offensively chemical and rotten. As dusk began to set in, the gray pelicans began to hunt. They would slowly circle above the waves until a proper dinner was spotted and then go into a sudden nose dive. Fast as a rock they would drop into the water, and surface moments later with bulging beaks.



Two days later I began to write, furiously, the tale of the Singularity. Though the world as we knew it had already completely transformed, I felt that very soon things would get even . . . weirder. To a book I had already started – a textbook I was writing about the evolution of man – I added the tale of Holmes and his AIPs. A week passed, and the information about the proposed conversion of our physical bodies had been released to the public. I began calling my colleagues in anthropology for their predictions and insights into the trajectory of human existence. That’s when I heard about Marianne.

The head of the department at Oxford told me that the volunteers had come mostly from the student population there, as the Green College at Oxford housed Holmes’s laboratory. She told me that Marianne had been one of the first to sign up. She told me that the first transferences had



been celebrated the previous evening, with a gala. They had successfully moved the consciousnesses of twenty-one individuals into artificial bodies.

I was stunned. The thought that she hadn't called me felt worse than anything that had come before. Nobody knew what this meant – what it meant to give up your human body, what it meant to treat your mind like a geranium that could be transplanted, what it meant to live indefinitely. Nobody knew if it would even work, in the long term. Nobody knew what the consequences were. And Marianne - my beautiful, my optimistic, Marianne – she had willingly become a sacrificial lamb. I almost couldn't bear the thought. Was she any different, now? Would she call me, now?

I called her, but got no answer.

I booked a free flight to London.

When I arrived at Heathrow Airport I was surprised to see how much more adapted the Londoners appeared. Even at first glance it was clear that the cyborg and digital modifications available to humans had been readily accepted here, by nearly everyone. I felt out of place in my simple body, made entirely out of meat.

It was impossible to get anywhere near campus. Since the initial transfers people had begun to line up for their turn to transcend the bonds of flesh. I gave up, that first day, and retreated to a hotel room where I worked on my writings.

Months passed. I stayed in London calling Marianne every day, many times a day. She never answered. I was something like an addict, no longer even thinking about what the next fix would mean or what the consequences would be, knowing only that I needed it. Not knowing where she was or what had happened to her was an all-consuming dilemma.

As a result, I hardly noticed the AIP propaganda machine hard at work espousing the benefits of transference. Very quickly millions of people had undergone the process. They were all over the media extolling the advantages of their new, immortal and consumption-free bodies. I met many of them myself, during my frequent visits to campus.

I could not find any evidence of Marianne. Her name was not even in the database of transferred humans. She had disappeared. I was

informed by the University of Tampa that my position had been replaced and that my research was no longer needed, so I took to haunting the science departments at Oxford, showing people my only picture of her. She stood on a white expanse of tundra beside the sea, squinting into the sun. Our old research camp was barely captured on the left side of the photo, and her long hair stretched sideways towards it.

By 2049, sixty percent of the human population of Earth had given up their biological bodies to become one with technology. Most of those who had not were merely waiting their turn. Ironically, the religious fringe which still distrusted the AIPs and everything they brought had become a united front. For the first time in recorded history the extremists and the zealots had reached over the barriers of their differences and found a commonality stronger than any dogma or moral imperative that had come before. The counter-Singularity Judeo-Christians organized with Hindus and Buddhists, with Shiites and Sunnis and Shinto practitioners. Together they formed only a small community, but it drew a lot of attention. The media reported that these fifty thousand or so individuals formed a solitary enclave in Israel which was attracting anybody who resisted transference. But numbers seemed to show that just as many of the religious community members were eventually drawn to the promise of immortality, and so their numbers remained relatively constant.

My own fight against the seductive appeal of immortality lasted only a month. Four weeks after I arrived in London I had put my name on the list. Though people were being transferred thousands at a time, the elderly and the sick were given first priority. By summer of 2049, four years after the Singularity and one year after my fruitless search for a lost lover had begun, I was notified that I would be transferred within the week.

I was in the room I had taken in Hyde Park when I received the notice. I was surrounded by piles of notes and disks which I had been pouring my knowledge in to. I no longer kept up even a passable appearance – I wore the same outfit everyday and hadn't looked in a mirror for weeks. I never went out except to canvas campus for

information about my elusive ex-lover, and probably appeared insane, though mental illness had been nearly eradicated.

The notice which appeared on the communication screen in my room was a gift of hope. For the first time in a long time, I felt that I had a chance to move on. I longed to have my writings, my stories about mankind, delivered to the world but I had no real desire to live anymore. Without my job or my research, without the idea of Marianne, there was nothing left for me and my old body. Transference was my chance to care again, my chance to shed the cumbersome, aging body which I had never felt comfortable in and stride into the world to once again make my mark.

The appointment was made for a Thursday. I entered the Green College Laboratory which was now a stadium-sized complex housing thousands of individual transference chambers. I spent the morning proceeding through different lines where I underwent physical and psychological examinations. Complex machines catalogued my mind and compiled data on my DNA, my physiology, and my memories. I signed a form which authorized the future of my flesh – I checked the box next to “recycle”.

Around two o’clock I was led into one of the many sterilized transference chambers. From inside of the broad cylinder, I could not see any of the other chambers though from the outside they appeared transparent. I was surrounded by soft, incandescent light and the beeping red and green lines of various scanners which moved across the walls. After I had disrobed and left my clothes in a white box on the floor, an AIP walked in. I walked in.

The sensation was strange – like being lost in a hall of mirrors. This reflection was not precisely me nor moving like a mirror-image, but my brain was slow to stop thinking of it as a reflection. She was slightly younger than I am (this adjustment was customary) and certainly better groomed, but otherwise she was identical. I noticed that she even had too-large pores on her nose and a barely perceptible scar on her left eyebrow.

She stood three feet away and faced me, smiling. I didn’t know what to do. The scientist in me wanted to poke and prod her, to interview and dissect. But I was terrified. I wanted to leave that chamber and run and run and run until I found a place where I could curl up, close my eyes, and forget the past five years.

She stretched both of her arms out toward me and tilted her head to the side. She smiled a smile so sweet that I suddenly trusted her. I wanted her to be the warm place where I could hide from everything. No longer with hope but with a palpable desire to shed my fear, I stepped into her embrace. And then everything caught fire.

They don't tell you this, but the transference process feels like being burned alive. In reality two small scopes protract from the head of your AIP body and enter your old body through your nostrils, where they instantly kill. Almost no information is actually transferred in this process because all the data that will make up your AIP brain has been gathered in the tests and scans done before transference. The AIP scopes collect only your last moment of awareness – that bit of your former mind which records being embraced – so that the memory is almost entirely without interruption.

But it feels quite different than what it actually is. As soon as I felt her arms around me, the world exploded into white. A searing, raging pain filled my senses and was so great that I could not have been aware of my body anyway. Stop stop stop please let it stop was all that I could think. Then it all did stop, quite suddenly. I reached up to rub my eyes.

I didn't feel anything. Where had my eyes gone? Where had my hands gone. I tried to look around, but all I could see was the room spinning rapidly around me. I tried to take a breath, but could not feel my lungs, could not feel my tongue. I screamed, but could hear no sound.

Terrified, I tried to grab on to the wall. But there was nothing to grab with – nothing to stabilize. My body was gone.

As I grappled with this understanding, the spinning began to slow. The world came to a stuttering stop around me. I could see – I could see – my body lying on the floor, blood running out of its nose. There was another, younger, me standing there, staring at her hands and looking down upon the dead body.

What has happened? I tried to scream. Something is wrong!

The AIP me knelt down and touched the side of the dead me's cheek. She caressed it and then stood to watch as two AIP attendants entered and took it away. AIP me moved her new body about, testing its abilities, but all I could think was who is she? That's not me! That's not really me!

My book about mankind and The Singularity was concluded by the copy of my consciousness which exits in the AIP body, but it was not complete. Only I know what was missing. Like all other AIPs she can no longer create irrationally and spontaneously, can no longer express herself in artistic ways. She no longer looks for Marianne, but tells her new friends and colleagues at the University of Applied Space Colonization Technologies that she once loved a younger woman.

Most of the world has been transferred, but people still desire offspring and so they've created a means by which to reproduce. DNA-like coding is combined with technobiology and put into an AIP platform that grows for three decades before stabilizing. The continuing increase in population has necessitated space exploration, and AIP me is one of the leading speculators on the UASCT's research team.

In some ways, I can still live through her – I watch her life and know it is in many ways mine. But I don't agree with all of her decisions, and I mourn her former sensitivity, her capacity for pain and passion. None of the transferred have it, just as none of them have truly creative abilities. It seems – though I never would have imagined it – that we have souls, and that they did not go with the rest of us.

I am my own soul, and my new body doesn't even know I've been lost. There are billions of us up here, watching the world and the progress of the new humanity, but what's left of humankind in the physical world does not know we are here.

There are still real, live, in-the-flesh humans. The anti-AIP cult lives in an autonomous zone all their own where they breed naturally and thrive on old technologies like the plough and the millstone. When I still had a body, I wondered often how they could live with their own mortality. But now I know that they are the last vestige of a nearly-extinct race of soulful, creative humans with immortal souls, glorious flaws and profound passions.

In my non-corporeal state I can now travel the world, observing our changing planet. It's an anthropologist's dream. Very soon before the AIPs – the Originals and the Transferred – colonized Mars, I found a beautiful, middle-aged woman living inside the autonomous zone. I floated to a small farm on the outskirts of Jerusalem and observed her milling wheat with a young son at her side. She was tanned from the sun and wrinkled with age. Her body looked so old – so fragile – but had a familiar grace

about it. I no longer watch the AIP me and her new life. I only watch Marianne as she grows old with her family, knowing that someday she'll join me up here.

FROM THE CAVALIER TO HER SWAIN

*Lyn C.A. Gardner*



Had I the glory former suns  
Cast freely on our house of Swanns,  
I might not now this mode prescribe  
For making you a bogus bride.  
But if I fall, love, I would fain  
Be sure of comfort for my swain.

Will you take up this gown of white,  
Its swansdown charmed to glow all night,  
This veil to shield your eyes from glare  
As magic dances through your hair?  
Grandmother stitched them once for me,  
But I'll no more wear gowns, perdie!

Would you, my Juno, plight your troth  
To one whose sword alone has worth,  
Pledge body, soul, fortune the same  
To one who shields her Christian name?  
Full shirt and doublet, breeches hide  
The sore spots of my manly pride.

Long curls on cavaliers look fine;  
Lovelocks and wigs make easy mime.  
Those who denounce my lack of beard  
Find answer in the duel they feared.  
But one sharp look through riven hose  
Might cost both life and you, my rose.

If e'er this war should prove complete,  
I'll make it up to you, my sweet.  
I'll teach you fencing, give free reign  
And breeches to my rightful swain.  
Meanwhile, our pledge as church bells ring  
Declares you safe, kin to the king.



ENDNOTE  
*Reba Overkill*



I wish I knew how to categorize this for you: is a note to myself or a story? It has been a long time since I wrote anything, fingertips chattering while I fidget and blink, unsure if I'm doing a thing correctly when I know the idea of correct is a false concept. I know that it is not black and white or shades of grey but a whole violent array of colors, unending variations on shades. Our reasons cannot be defined in simple sentences, and how much of what I'm telling you will you miss; how much of what I'm telling you is implied emptiness and shadows? Will you catch the curve of my words that breaks the light? I know my textures are unbecoming. Matter is too hard to put down on paper; like catching an insect that drips out of your hands when you offer it as a unwanted present. I will lay this out for you, without pretending grace or skill. Dragging a stick through red mud, leaving shapes I hope might tell you what I wish to be heard. Listen:

I saw her and I was caught, maybe not helpless but something close to it. That was it. We got together, like there was any other choice, and there were months and months of less and more, weights and balances with our fingers sliding over the scales while we whispered how much we would always love each other. We tipped the balance, cheating ourselves and each other with the peculiar counterfeit currency of sincerity that is only ever exchanged between those who feel like they have everything or nothing at all to lose. Our paradoxes' amalgamation made us feel untouchable together, untouched by each other. The one and the other. See how I struggle not to do the same thing, only a little bit different, only completely not the same over and over? I told her almost everything while telling her practically nothing, the records I kept long faded, and without a script to read from I can tell a pretty story but it won't be by the book, and I try my best not to lie to the ones I love. I try. Currently, I feel like I'm

holding out some dripping piece of guts to you, the audience, this stupid stage of hasty language and I smile because I know I look ridiculous, it's sick and overdone, but how close we can be and yet so far from whatever it is we were or were not looking for. What was looking for us.

We lived together and shared each other's food and bodies with hunger or with the disinterested glaze of Things I Must Do to Live, the boring to-do list that keeps us running so less efficiently than machines. I run on shallow fuels, as if I were some mechanical thing modified to operate with greed for irrelevant things; the only self-worth I understand is a noise I can pull forth from the person I am with, something that is reflexive, uncalculated, in only this I feel sincerity. I am vague and idiotic but if anyone can figure me out, maybe it will be you, who I am telling more than I told almost anyone else. So I am a simple thing, with not much purpose but many functions, and I calculate more than the average calculator, I'm sure, but three times as badly and my numbers are off because I haven't done any studies on paranoia. All I have is speculation, and oh what a useless chart that would make. I made her breakfast, and she ate without being satisfied because we are all creatures that want endlessly, communicated or not. We want and we are in want of things to give, this cartoonish cycle of desire and disappointment. Emotional slapstick, eternal vaudeville. So I don't know what I'm saying, I'm just laughing at myself wrapping poet's words around stupid, unspoken truths. Shall we get to the point?

I believe, and I have believed, that things are not all explicable within the science we have discovered. There are things we avoid, so many happenstances we simply ignore from the sheer pain of attempting to understand them. Pain is such a vague word. It can be any kind of pain, any breed, any species. The pain of something buried deep, like a glint of glass in a riverbed that would most certainly open your fingers if you dig for it. The pain of dissatisfaction, the weeping, oozing sore of the certain dullness of your life, the unimportance, the road to unawareness you are forced to travel with every breath you take. The pain of things you could understand but choose not to, and the knowledge of your ignorance itches places you can't scratch, worse and worse every day until you're ready to rip the skin off your back so no one can see. Besides that, don't you know about deep sea exploration? And how much bigger is everything around is, below us, or up. So do I think there isn't a science for what I want to

talk about? No. There is a science. We don't understand it. Acknowledge it. But it's got to be there because things are explicable in some way, shape, or form, no matter their form or their way. Shapes, I don't talk about anymore. Form is different, like a letter or a chart, to be filled out or displayed. Shapes, the uniform, the anti-form, the could be anything. I am ignoring the point again. So, at the base, she was my last chance and my last test. My love formed every way I could love her, and I loved her each of them, down to the last.

We were twined on the bed, our struggle with each other and ourselves for the night passed, eyelashes touching cheeks and her cool skin against my warmth. And I'll tell you right now, there's two ways this story ends, for you, not for me. There is too much duality in this, too many connections, I use commas like it's all a list, clues for myself, no treasure for you. Do you want to hear the first one? Or the second? They are the same. Linear means nothing when you're drawing lines between things that may or may not be connected, shorted connections turning the lights out, one by one. If this feels like one jumbled smiling simile, it is. Oh, it is. This is what led up to the happenings: I saw stars. Not the stars like from our planet, with eyes unaided by a telescope. Stars like the stars I remember seeing for the first time on a poster somewhere; I was young and transfixed at this massive cloud of cosmic brilliance, a picture of the Andromeda Galaxy slightly worn with age, shining in the lights of the hall. Like that, coming in the window, oh, the shape. And then I started to remember, slick and sudden, unstoppable like retching, skin against skin sliding endlessly. I remembered.

I remembered the shape, the voice just beyond the sickly circle of guttering light, frozen on the icy sidewalk in rural Michigan, more stars than I could have ever imagined screaming morse code while I stood, stark, noticing my shadow and the way the snow fell everywhere but on me. It was singing in a way I can't explain, singing not with song, no tune I could transcribe for you but from the sheer force behind the words, the communication more sweet and dark than anything I've ever heard. The colors that were behind my eyes are not worth even attempting to explain; I know at the height of my pretention, my desperate affectations in my urge to try to make anyone understand, I could still never evoke that in you. The wind didn't whistle; there was nothing jaunty about the way I couldn't feel my fingers and my lips were nonexistent. I was so

cold, my inefficient heartbeat struggling to rush my blood in freezing veins, like trying to warm a child with a candle. I can't tell you how little it mattered, even when I felt the inside of my teeth begin to freeze, my tongue lying cold against the pulse in the bottom of my mouth like a dead thing. It went on. When the rapture was fading, it said to come. It said to leave. It said that I could go where I wanted; all I had to do was say yes. My knees shook and I dropped my cigarette and I still stood, waiting, oh this god that is speaking to me. It questioned, it tugged, it let me know that it knew everything I had ever felt, perfect, frightening empathy. It understood. It said it understood. I wonder if I surprised it. I said no. I thought there were things here for me.

I remembered the shape, the dusty swell of blood into my face when I felt what smelled like old books behind me, this air that felt just as soft as papyrus, strained and pounded by slaves in Egypt, old and spiced, and out of that so oft-mentioned corner of my eye I saw the angles. Sharp and thin as papercuts, folding and breathing with soft rustles. This whisper was like any other I'd heard that day, someone saying something in the still air of a building full of knowledge that will someday be burned. Do we hold back out of respect for the quiet, or is it fear? It told me I could learn. I could be taught. I had the space. It laughed smooth and short, and then told me that I had enough room because of all the parts that were broken out of me, packed down like rich soil that protects the creatures that sleep for decades in under the Amazon. I wasn't told I have potential, we all have potential. I just had room. Not a vessel, it explained, not a vessel but a socket, you were made to understand and receive and fit. So much to teach you, and isn't that what you've wanted, knowledge? It touched my mind, sneak previews of shadows of teasingly distant truths. Oh god, how I wanted. I waited. Paper slid across my cheekbone and I imagined my skeleton, how strong it must be inside of my skin. We are all not so strong, and that is no arrogance on my part, just experience and I say it with no pleasure, just a shrug. It was not because of my strength; don't think I'm saying that. I said no. I thought there were things here for me.

I remembered the shape, dim in the moonlight, and the low, monotonous keening of my terrified friend, holding hands in the Wisconsin woods, smelling the sap from the trees and getting up the courage, swallowing my bile and slowly moving forward to the neatly

arranged body of the doe, looking at first glance like a very convincing statue, carved and painted with horrifying relish, eye sockets not just empty, but clean. I let go of her and I bent, knees sinking slightly into yesterday's mud. I touched the edge of one of the cuts and it was like feeling some kind of synthetic leather, melted. I don't know. The intestines were folded with horrifying care, like your mother's scarf. How do I explain with pretty words this analytical dissection of something that was alive? How can I move you with an explanation of the chart scratched into the ground, internal organs laid neat and straight? There was no blood, which made me all the more aware of mine. Oh, it rushed. Let's go back, I heard her say, like a whisper. Let's go back and pretend we didn't see. I said no. I ran my hand over the soft fur, feeling each rib, wondering at the perfect line that separated where hide ran under my hand and where white, clean bones lay in a row, like gapped teeth sticking out from under a hairy upper lip. I said yes. I heard the chanting in the forest as we walked back, passing the same trail marker eight times. Nine times. Stuck in an unbelievable loop, watching her shrink in terror and refuse to speak of it. She woke up with two new scars and I moved away a month later and we never talked about it again. The chanting said to run, go out, go off the path and push past whatever strange barrier must be holding us: a moment caught in a bubble to keep us occupied while whatever was happening went on and on and on. It said I could rip my way out. It said I would discover. All of these things were said without words, just knowing. I said no. I thought there were things here for me.

So I remembered these things and readied myself for another, watching it form. Watching it shape. I felt the light on me and I knew my partner in crime, my dear heart could feel it too. I was, of course, wrong, but I knew it all the same. This shape did not speak to me. It did not bother. It waited, and it formed, and I could see its veins pulse with the same frequency as mine and I closed my eyes, which didn't help at all. This is a love story but it had already ended with the cold girl I had wrapped myself around, futile affection that could not stop what we had always been trying not to chase and come upon the clearing that I realized too late was at the end of the path. The star shape did not speak to me in words, but just by existing. All of the things that had been offered to me before, each outstretched opportunity was implied in the radiant nebulae that would not fade. The minute stretched on and on, and I remembered

that my lady was not breathing. Oh, how predictable we are, and how well we fit the mold of the people who were trying their hardest to slip out of the stream; our evolution ends in failure. I said yes, you must know I said yes and maybe you saw it coming but I didn't see anything inside of the black plastic bag, and I ran my tongue over the smooth coating with satisfaction, the womb, breathing in my own air, crying and smiling because I said yes, and what is more delicious than an assent to something you have wished for, flirted with, kissed slyly on the cheek with blood burning and unending, panting desire hidden behind a wicked smile. The pills settled heavy and soft in my stomach, hands coming up from inside me to hold myself. I closed my eyes. The shapes became forms. I said yes, because there was nothing here for me after all, and I was so glad.

## THE MUSEUM OF INNOCENCE

*Sergio Ortiz*



Musicians and sinners prowled  
around my house in those days.  
One went so far as to scale my  
bedroom window. Sure of himself,  
he took me in his arms and carried  
me to the kitchen table. I looked  
at him full of curiosity because life  
did not yet frighten me.

TFOO  
*Sara Kate Ellis*



You'd think the invasion was V-E Day the way they talk about it now, one big ticker tape frenzy of clinking glasses and bands marching down Main Street when in truth it was worse mess than the L.A. riots. Oh sure, it had the usual end-of-the-world trappings, terrified mobs shrieking half naked through the streets, hurling appliances through windows and guzzling looted bottles of Opus One. There were arsons, suicides, and a few spontaneous orgies, but they cleaned it up so fast, and the toys they brought were so brilliant, nobody cared after a few weeks.

Nobody, but me. I'm Clare Holroyd, Earth's last remaining neurotic, or so Dr. Morphrey likes to call me, and I had the luck to spend that last night cowering in an Clackamas strip mall, staring up at the frazzled spurts of hell on the TV, while buildings burned and people stumbled around in the rubble helping themselves to boxes of Trader Joe's onion dip and Two Buck Chuck. But if you really want to know, I wasn't cringing in fear of the end, or even worried that any physical harm might befall me. I was thinking about Muriel and how, even during the apocalypse, she still got in the last word.

"You're going to love it," she'd said, as she kissed me one last time and left our place for good. Such a cheerful way to end things, but if you'd have known Muriel like I had, you'd have known that such Pollyannaisms were out of character, that bright sides, and grabbing your coat and getting your hat were anathema to a woman who was vegan, drove only when she had to, and called cell phones "umbilical cords to the corporacracy."

Once.

Nowadays, she wouldn't dip a toe outside without a state-of-the-art holoclet snaking elegantly around her wrist, overloaded with lunch dates,



videos, and the number one hits from every ringworm-eyed pop princess. She's a princess herself now, stepped right out of a Lexus add -- a flying one, finally -- and she doesn't give a damn about biodegradability or cell phone radiation, because cancer's so early twenty-first century, and cell phone towers are being replaced with quick grow saplings of redwood, pine, and allergy free cedar.

But from those first childhood whispers about the killer bees, the Muriel I remember had been preparing for the worst: nukes, water wars, some nasty invasive organism sneaking its way out of the hot zone and turning us all into puddles of bacteria. There wasn't a catastrophe on which she hadn't read up, and I humored her, not because I worried, but because if the end were to happen, I wanted to enjoy our last moments together, and not spend them being scolded about how I'd done my part in the cataclysm that was rolling our way.

Every morning, I'd stumble into our cramped breakfast nook and find her parked in front of her laptop, scanning the headlines for new droughts and plagues, and passing each steaming mug of coffee over with a dollop of bad news. Positive thinker types like to say negativity is bad for a relationship, but in our case it worked. Amid all that talk of dried out seabeds and sinkholes swallowing whole neighborhoods, Muriel and I never once encountered that quieter catastrophe feared by couples everywhere, the uncomfortable silence.

But there's only so much excitement you can squeeze from catastrophe, especially when most of it is happening to other people.

One Sunday, newly shackled up and strolling through Portland's empty downtown, we fell into the single, moldering aisle of Steve's, a bookstore made up of a shelf crammed in an alley between a Chinese takeout window and a bankrupt shoe repairman. Above the entrance, the words "Everything's a Quarter" were scrawled in marker across an open pizza box, the letters embellished with strands of dried cheese.

I sighed as Muriel darted inside, pulling a battered purple textbook from of the shelf. I don't remember the title, something to do with weaving or edible weeds, but before I could even feign interest, she'd opened it up to find a Hot Wheels price guide in place of its table of contents.

"Well, would you look at this," she said.

I leaned over, caught up in the nostalgia of a tiny Grand Torino and the squat, puke green memory of the Gremlin Grinder.

"I used to collect these," I said, "Before I traded them all for a worthless stack of Devil Dinosaur comics."

Muriel gave me an odd look, turning the page to a graph detailing hat-buying trends in Papua New Guinea, and a short and angry treatise ostensibly written by a rubber pick at the end of a toothbrush. "I get your spinach," it read, "but peel your goddamned apples."

I snatched the book from her and flipped back to the tiny cars for a few more minutes, then took my own down from the shelf. It was a beat up copy of *The Brothers Karamazov*, a novel I'd guiltily abandoned during an intro to Russian lit class in my first year of college. Someone else had obviously done the same. Inside were a Taco Bell Menu and an ominous abundance of artfully drawn stick hippos.

We started rifling through the titles one by one, each cover promising Woolf, Heinlein, and a way to financial health, but their innards more of the same: intergalactic cocktail recipes, craft ideas, and some of the weirdest campfire songs I'd ever seen. Stamped in bright orange on each inside cover was a title: *The Monumentally Confounding Yet Ultimately Helpful Life Science of Tfoo*.

"Some bookstore?" Muriel laughed. "What are they?"

"What they are," said a bong cracked voice, "is a quarter."

We turned to see a young, neatly groomed man sitting by a space heater at the back of the alley. He wore a bowler hat and overalls, and he smiled as he lifted an empty string bean tin to rattle the few coins within. "You can't beat a quarter!"

"I don't see why not," I said, slipping the copy of *Brothers* into my coat pocket and tossing him a coin. He made a beautiful catch, then waved, arm stiff as a Japanese traffic robot. "Cheers!"



Muriel wanted to toss it on the way home, but I decided to keep *Tfoo* around for bathroom reading. It was perfect, full of non-sequiturs, oddly arranged charts, and lists of anything and everything from the makes of shoehorns to state representatives of Nebraska. It was also just right for sneaking the cigarettes I'd bought secretly at the newsstand downstairs.

When the half of the building's plumbing went out, our neighbors came pounding on our door. Tom Birdsell, tattooed and cheerfully plump, nudged his wife Karen as they clambered through our front door.

"Bad night for pulled pork, eh dear?" he said making the first run for our bathroom. Karen strolled into our living room, arms wide, as if she were presenting it to us for sale.

"Don't worry," she said, "I made him bring matches. Mind if I snoop your bookshelf?"

Muriel watched helplessly as Karen ran a long, black painted fingernail over the titles. "The Fate of the Earth, Life Without People. You an apocalypse nut?"

"More like a dedicated worrier," Muriel said.

Karen turned away from the shelf, clasping her hands together. "That's cool. I fucking love George Romero."

That's when Tom Birdsell came barging out of our bathroom, waving the book at me indignantly like a college roomie who'd just uncovered my stash. "You have the Tfoo!" he said, raising a fist the air. "The monumentally helpful life science! Yes!"

Karen gave him an embarrassed shove as she hurried past. "This is what you do in gratitude, Tom? Steal people's bathroom reading?"

"This is literature with a capital 'L'" Tom said. He took a seat next to me on the sofa, flipping open the book to a stream of circular verse. "Yep. There's the Gandhi Chicken. He's in my version, too." He raised a suspicious eyebrow at me, "How'd you get yours by the way?"

"Steve's," I said. I caught Muriel rolling her eyes at my feigned casualness. I ignored it. "You?"

Tom shook his head, his eyes widening. "You won't fucking believe it. Found ours on a park bench. With a note."

"Addressed to us," Karen yelled behind the door. She emerged seconds later, shaking the water from her hands, and I watched Muriel as her eyes counted every drop spattering the throw rug.

"At least we think it was us," Karen said. "No names, but definitely, you know?"

"It was fate," Tom said, "And speaking of which, this must be. You all want to come over for dinner, after we get the pipes taken care of?"

I looked at Muriel. She shrugged uncomfortably.

"Sure," I said. "Sounds good."

Later, we'd hear similar stories: ex-boyfriends who'd brought them home from bus benches or dumpster dives; a few people even claimed their copies had come floating into their backyards tied to balloons, but everyone got a version at around the same time, and although some had tried to throw it out or pawn it off, *Tfoo* always came back, a white elephant gift, orphaned in a phone booth, or mysteriously crammed into a box of old belongings.

What I should have noticed, even back then, was that the book had a vaguely troubling side effect. The more I read, the more *Tfoo*'s reflexive disdain for the overwrought seeped into the outside world. When I'd emerge from the bathroom, usually to find Muriel watching something horrible unfolding on the news, the bleeding, screaming victims of car bombs in the Middle-East, or the school pictures of kids shot in their cafeterias felt somehow diminished, uncouth even for assuming a momentary mantle of self-importance.

"I don't get it," I'd say, reaching for the remote. "Why wail in front of a camera when they could be at a hospital or something?"

Muriel shook her head at me in disbelief. "They're either bombed out or full," she'd say. "Weren't you even listening?"



A week later, when I came home late from work, I blamed *Tfoo*.

"Theo and a couple of guys from work have it, too. You should have seen us all singing the 'egg song' together. He's going to give me more hours. Maybe even a Saturday night."

Before Muriel and I moved in together, I'd been lucky to get a job waiting tables at one of the trendier restaurants in the city. It was the kind of place that charged seven dollars for three leaves of foraged kale and a single wasabi root, and the tips should have come in inverse quantity to the portion sizes -- had it not been for Theo, the goateed manager, who'd taken an instant dislike to my owning a television set.

Since that ill-fated mention of *Law & Order*, he'd stuck me with the weekday lunch shift, and although I'd tried everything from subbing on weekends to voluntarily scrubbing the kitchen floor on my hands and knees, Theo wouldn't budge. To him, I was non-creative class, a

terminally unhip, McDonald's eating townie from out of town, until he heard me sing.

"Eggs are oval, eggs are cheap, and they have protein, but no meat." I was wiping down the coffee bar, but I stopped and rolled my eyes when I heard the soft tread of his Keds.

"You've got it all wrong, Clare."

I turned and hurled my rag on the counter for affect, watching with listless disappointment as it hit with all the force of a square of toilet paper. That's when Theo let loose in a scratchy, cigarette burned tenor.

"Sorry vegans, but eggs aren't evil. How could they be when they look like Weebles?"

I laughed with relief, joining in as Kevin and Melia, two others on shift that night, started banging spoons in time on the back of the sink. When the song ended, Theo flipped the 'Open' sign around and said, "Shots at Kelly's. You coming, Clare?"

When Muriel heard all of this, she slouched over the table, cupping a chin in one hand, and stirring the remainder of the dry curry she'd prepared for our dinner.

"I'm glad," she said, "That you'll have more time and more fun serving vegetables to the privileged," she said.

"That's not fair."

Unlike me, Muriel already had friends, an in-place network of dour companions like Kelly Liu and Cindy Talent, who seemed only capable of smiling when the topic of conversation was pre-menstrual food cravings, or folk singers with repertoires about wolf pups. And around them, I could do no right. When hunger forced me to buy a hot dog from a park vendor, I was "supporting the corrupt meat-packing industry." And when, during a stroll to a Zen rock garden, I made a reference to our cat box, I was, and these are Kelly's words, "spitting on an entire culture."

I reminded her that cultures were used to make beer, which I drank, which required the use of saliva anyway, so what was the big deal?



I might have stopped to wonder how easily a single quote from the book could soften up a previously chilly co-worker, or endear me to people who'd never given me the time of day, but I was having too much

fun. The longer we held on to it, the more dependent I became. It felt wonderful to make my way effortlessly through a peer-to-peer network in which *Tfoo*'s bizarre axioms were a source code granting full access. And even when I was alone, the book always had suggestions for things to do.

Mine had this whole DIY section on making buttons, not buttons really, although I'd thought about sewing them to a jacket. The idea was to go out and gather the caps from plastic pet bottles, which sometimes meant raiding a neighbor's recycling bin. And when I'd have enough, I'd go home and lay them carefully out on the coffee table, using a screwdriver to poke tiny holes into them before stringing them together with dental floss. Muriel would find me in the living room, hanging them along the walls like popcorn tinsel.

"Isn't it grand?" I'd say, to which she would look at me, both exhausted and appalled, and turn toward the kitchen.

"You're the one who's always railing against the sweatshops. I thought you'd appreciate this."

And then she'd smile and take my hand. "Sweetie, I do. But buttons aren't going to save the world. They're a bourgeois hobby disguised as Thoreauvian self-reliance. You should know the difference by now."

But it felt like they would, especially when Tom was building his own *Tfoo* fort out in the courtyard, and some friends from work were cloistered in a warehouse, feverishly constructing an installation out of a bunch of old dryer and sewing machine parts they'd picked up at Good Will. It was a giant, oval chunk of metal and string, the outside ridged with welded forks, Slinkies, and magnets of every shape and size.

"We don't know what it'll do yet," said Melia, running a hand over part of its smooth metal surface, "but it's going to be awesome. And this isn't the only one. There's one going up in New Jersey, another in London, and this really, fucking cool sculpture thing they're doing in Sapporo to coincide with the snow festival."

The next week, a quake hit the Kuril Islands forcing the evacuation of their 15,000 inhabitants. I played hacky sack with Tom and his friends in the courtyard. It was a beautiful day.



A week or so later, I found Muriel in the kitchen, nursing a cup of tea and taking long drags one of the cigarettes I'd hidden atop the refrigerator. She held up a copy of the paper.

"You want to see something?" she said.

Thankful for whatever horror she'd scrounged from the news, I sat down at the table and cautiously slid both the paper and the ashtray containing the burning cigarette my way. There was nothing major being reported that day, just the same series of smaller, depressing headlines: Drought Worsens in Mexico; 14 dead in Hong Kong, 22 Hospitalized, Authorities Suspect New SARS Outbreak; Thawing Permafrost Leaves Inuit Community on Unsteady Ground.

I picked up the cigarette and took a drag, finding it oddly tasteless in Muriel's presence. She smoothed the paper out with her hand, pointing to a picture from the Inuit story. A small group of community elders stood sadly around the sinking remains of an old wooden church.

"Wow," I said, "That's really messed up."

"But can you see it?" she said.

I leaned over the picture, and spotted it. A blurry symbol carved over the building's sagging entrance. It was a pyramid with a stream of wavy lines on top. On each side was a stick hippo, right out of *Tfoo*.

"Well I'll be," I said, getting up, "I've got to go show this to Tom."

"Get your own," she said, grabbing the paper away. "A way of life is ending for these people and you're making light of them with that stupid, stupid book."



Muriel broke up with me the day I'd opted to take part in a flash mob rather than attend a big war protest downtown. The U.S. had reinvaded Afghanistan, this time with the Russians. They'd promised to evenly split the oil, if there was any to be found.

I wasn't surprised, although I had hoped it might be my last chance to ingratiate myself with her. I thought she might be impressed by a couple hundred others, and me praying to our new war god, the Ultra Man statue in the Toys R Us, a beautiful anti-capitalist gesture. But Muriel's response, when she caught up with me, was to snatch my drink right from the bartender's hand.

"You know what I've discovered, Clare?" she said, downing half of it in one gulp. "You're that guy."

"Guy?" I laughed, reaching for the glass, but Muriel kept it aloft.

She leaned in, staring at me with the cold gaze of a drill sergeant. "When someone's minding their own business, mourning the death of a parent, or trying to think of some way to keep their world from falling apart, you're that guy who gets in their face and yells 'smile!'"

She swallowed the rest of my drink and left. On the flat screen over the bar, a helicopter burst into a bright, cheerful ball of flame.

"Wow," I said.



But smile is exactly what I did. That very night, I went out with my flash mob companions to a pub in Northwest, and then some dive owned by the friend of a friend, and when I came back, Muriel was gone, and not only gone, but gone with the TV, gone with the cat, and gone with the book of all things. But I didn't let it get to me.

For a while, a pretty long while, I really enjoyed myself. There were no feelings of 'Oh god, what have I done?' and those lonely pints of ice cream were savored for the flair and subtlety of their chemical additives.

"That's hydrogenated corn syrup!" I'd say, holding my spoon aloft like a glass of Bordeaux, waving to the mile long line of tanks crossing into Whatsitstan on the TV. And when I found her copy of *Peak Oil* under the bed, I lit it on fire in the sink and danced around the kitchen until the smoke alarm went off.

What first started to creep in wasn't her absence, but the world. There was the war, sure, and an outbreak of Hanta virus had killed 102 people in New Jersey, but even though they were all old, it got to me somehow. But then, the feeling would pass, and I'd be off to a show, or a game of Trivial Pursuit, or whatever childhood sport had come back into favor: tetherball, red rover, a gentler, Nerfy version of smear the queer -- with a real queer. I was usually it.



When the phone stopped ringing, I blamed the initial silence on bad weather and a bout of flu. Sure, I was socially naked without the book.



Unable to finish my button project, and call up obscure references to vampire squid or the Tianzhu white yak with the speed that used to impress everyone at parties. But there were other things I could talk about, I figured, like the war -- that was pretty interesting -- or the methane volcanoes shooting out of the Arctic. But whenever I broached a subject even remotely serious, people would clear their throats and turn away or make another *Tfooism* that would set the whole group into hysterics.

Then one day, after work and a particularly nasty game of squatter golf, I asked a few people back to the apartment for drinks, and watched as several of them cleared their throats and politely declined. Only three, Theo, Tom, and Karen who'd just opened her own *Tfoo*-inspired vintage shoestring boutique, offered to come up. And by the time we'd gotten through the door, I was already regretting the invitation. The three of them were quiet, somber almost, as they settled into a tight little row on my sofa. This was not going to be a casual visit.

I offered them some chips and we drank beer and chatted for about twenty minutes. But just as I was pulling out a board game, Theo cocked his head and said, "Hey Clare, where's the book?"

"Book?" I asked, looking over at the shelf. "Which one?"

"Your book," he said, his eyes locking with mine as if it were an expensive present that I'd lost due to some supreme act of negligence.

"Oh," I said. "Muriel took off with it."

The three of them looked at one another.

"So it was Muriel," Karen said, nodding at Tom.

"Yeah," I broke in, my throat dry. "Can't figure that one out, myself. She really hated it."

The four of us sat in silence, while Tom nervously downed the remaining particles of ice in his glass. "So Clare," he said, gesturing to the string of caps I had hung over the curtains. "You still going to work on those?"

"I guess I can't really," I said finally. Without *Tfoo* I couldn't take the project to the next step, which was weaving the strands together into a sort of Teepee.

We sat there for a few more minutes, finishing our drinks and listening to the murmur of the television. The day before a flood had taken out half of downtown Seoul. Cameras were trained on department

store where the water had risen to the second floor and people were trying to paddle out on air mattresses looted from the sporting goods section. I felt Theo's eyes on me, as if he were sizing me up, making a decision about my trustworthiness.

"Whoa," Karen said, abruptly standing into a stretch. "I've got a buying expedition tomorrow. Old storage space owned by some Adidas employee, left all of these old ties from the 80s." That's what Karen called shoe strings, 'ties,' and it occurred to me then how similar we all sounded, despite our deliberately eccentric vernacular, the tattoo competition, and the thrift store chic. It was hard to tell any of us apart.

"So what do you say, Clare?" said Tom. "Can I have 'em?"

I nodded, as I rose from the sofa and helped him unhook the strand of caps from the wall.

"Thanks for the Pabst," said Theo.

After they were gone, I stood dumbly in the living room, before turning back to see what looked like a scattering of crumpled white paper fluttering across the TV screen. Squinting, I got closer, watching as the paper sprouted the arms, legs, and the airtight visors on HAZMAT suits. At the bottom of the scene ran a stream of digital ticker tape: Massive Earthquake Near Pakistan Border. Russian and U.S. tanks reportedly attempting to block the onrush of refugees into Afghanistan. U.N. to investigate. I peered back at the white suits rushing across the screen, as a zigzag mark on an armband flitted past. But before I could get close enough to be sure, the station switched back to the flood. I picked up the remote and started flipping through the channels. Nothing.

And that's when I felt something crawling inside me, the remainder of an apathy trying to flush itself out my head and go skittering after Theo and the rest. Here was a creature that could only survive on that deceptive assumption that each and everyone one of us is a unique and tender blossom, to be nurtured to the expense of all else. And I remembered with growing disgust the blaséness with which I'd treated Muriel's catastrophic reports. Only she'd been immune. Maybe because she'd been waiting for the end all her life, had been preparing for it.



I tried to call her but her number had changed, and Kelly and Cindy had never given me theirs. I hopped a bus down to the food coop where I hoped she still worked, only to find Kelly manning the register. She sat there, hood pulled over her face, glummer than a sack of CSA vegetables left on a hot, asphalt curb.

"She quit, a long, long time ago," she said, not looking at me.

"Well. She does still live with you, doesn't she?"

Kelly glowered and turned around. She'd always had a thing for Muriel, and could never quite work out how someone with a social conscience could be in love with someone like me.

"Nope. Not doing that anymore either. Honestly, I have no idea where she is."

She turned back to the register. There was a TV above it. Another war had broken out. This time somewhere in South America, some country where they'd finally managed to privatize the water supply.

"It's all getting to be such a mess, isn't it?" I said.

Kelly started playing with the zipper on a hoodie she'd obviously cut her own holes into. "Why worry?" she said, cracking smile. "We have the eggs, don't we?"



When Norman, the guy at the newsstand said he'd seen her I almost choked on the Twizzlers I'd bought to keep from smoking.

"Oh yeah, it was Muriel all right," he said, drumming a ballpoint nervously against the counter. "Said 'Hello' to me and everything."

"Where?"

"Out in front of the Fox Towers. Just last Saturday, early evening. We were going to the last half-price show so it couldn't have been later than five. Oh, and here." He reached under the counter and pulled out a piece of bright orange paper. "She was handing these out to people in line."

It looked like a concert flyer, but the lettering was all too eerily familiar. There was a man with long frizzy hair standing between an enormous Humpty Dumpty figure and a strange wormlike thing with points of light showering out. At the bottom it said "The Temple of the Squiggly Line." Then in smaller letters below, "We are serious."

"Nah," I said, taking an involuntary step back, "Couldn't be Muriel."

Norman shook his head, "I don't know, Clare. It was weird, and I'm not sure if I should be telling you this or not."

"What?"

"She looked happy."



But I knew Muriel couldn't be, because it was her time. The catastrophes were getting closer; everything she'd sat back and said would happen was happening. Just two days earlier, renegade members of the Arizona National Guard had commandeered a set of tactical nukes and were threatening to hurl them at the border. The price of gas was closing in on 10 dollars a gallon, and there'd been another quake. This time in the Yucatan.

I sat in a coffee shop near our apartment and watched as people lined up for their house blends, blithely ignoring the growing number of pin points on the monitor depicting a rash of wild fires spreading through California, Colorado, and Idaho. Instead, the customers turned and clapped as an improv theater group, more disciples of *Tfoo* hurried past, blowing raspberries into the window.



It was raining, but I doubted even a hurricane would put them off. I donned a windbreaker and headed out to the square to find it empty. There were tables left out from a meagerly funded IT convention, complete with forest green awnings, and a bevy of soft-in-the-middle men with pens in their pockets. Neither Muriel, nor the *Tfoo*ites were anywhere to be found.

I tried showing the flyer to a few passers by, but they pegged me for a nut and handed it back without even scanning the contents. Norman had obviously been mixed up, and when the downpour started in earnest, I was even more certain I was wasting my time. I grabbed a plastic chair in an unoccupied tent and surrendered to the wretchedness of my weekend. That's when the singing started.

The strains were brief, barely audible at first, like the sound of someone's car stereo as they speed past in the distance. Only they returned, as if they were being played backward, then forward again.

"In perfect harmony, I'd like to buy the world a duck and..."

By the time I'd ducked out of the tent, they'd already surrounded the entire square, their hands linked together in a great daisy chain of fleece and gortex. Some had signs taped to their chests: "Rules and suggestions for the enjoyment of this interruption," read one, "Because you do not know what you don't know you want."

A few mothers who'd brought their infants to the park to play were now trapped inside the circle. They were livid, arguing uselessly with their beatific captors.

"Don't you people have an abortion clinic to block?" one of them yelled.

"And keep it company," they sang.

Within minutes, sirens, to which our captors snapped their fingers and howled, added themselves to the noise. I searched the line, making my way slowly around the inside circumference of Timberland, Patagonia, and Columbia sportswear, peering into every face. They were all in hoods and sunglasses, or those black-rimmed coke bottles that made them look like refugees from the Eisenhower era. And the chain, I noticed queasily, had layers: another circle had lined up behind the first like a row of shark's teeth, and moved in the opposite direction. The last thing I remember was my face against the soft, wet grass.

"You okay?" It was one of the mothers.

I blinked and sat up, a wayward leaf stuck to the left side of my face. "Yeah," I said, reaching up to pull it off. "Where'd they all go?"

"Cops ran them off pretty fast. They were trying to build something."

I turned and saw the remains of a contraption made out of Styrofoam cups and sporks. The woman held out her hand, "I'm Rita."

"Clare," I said.

She helped me to my feet and I thanked her before excusing myself. By the time I got home I was already fluey and tired, and I sat in front of the TV until a CNN special on the flash mob craze caught my attention. There they were, or a similar incarnation forming another chain in Central

park. Some bloviating professor was on, chuckling over the phenomenon as a harmless epidemic brought on by social networking.

"The net has tightened the tribe mentality," he said, "It's a new form of paganism, but not so much nature worship, as..."

"How New Age you sound," said a dour looking man in horn-rimmed glasses. "Paganism is an easy label, untraceable to any solid, historical fact. What we have in all of these cases is a contemporary version of a *cho cho* dance."

"A *cho cho* dance," snorted the program host. "Is that like doing the locomotion?"

The man didn't laugh. "It was an offshoot of the *Eejanaika* phenomenon of late Edo, early Meiji Japan. Cases of spontaneous dance and ritual are a quite normal response during periods of instability. Some possibly staged, but most purely at the spur of the moment. People dressed as animals, as the opposite sex, they ran about in the street and..."

"Sounds like fertility rituals," said his rival, "That's paganism right there."

"Well, I think it's pretty great," said the host, pointing to a photo of several women bounding through London's financial district, nude save for body paint and signboards reading, 'We wear paint. That is all.'

I switched off the TV.



The following Monday I found a note on my door. There was no signature, but I recognized instantly the haphazard scrawls that glared up at me as if I were somehow negligent for failing to receive it in person.

"Corner of 21st and Stark," it read. "Now."

On the back was written, "And don't forget to look up."

Maybe Muriel had run into Norm again, or maybe she'd heard I'd been looking for her and was ready to make up, or at least talk. I hurried inside, and heart pounding, brushed my teeth and donned my most flattering wool coat. When I got there, I found a near empty bar on the corner. I decided to wait inside. It took a good two minutes before I noticed the thin group of strangers surrounding me on opposite corners. We all held post-it notes.

Everyone converged on the bar, a chorus of "You get ones?" and "That bastards" followed. We'd all been duped, an unwitting flash mob downgraded to a bunch of sad sacks.

"This is just the type of thing he'd do," said a woman, bitterly folding her arms.

"Unbelievable."

"The Twins game was on. God, at least there's a fucking bar here."

I turned and saw a familiar face approaching us.

"Well, this is twice in three days," Rita said. She smiled at me then, but we were distracted by the cracked voice of a scrawny young man looking so bereft I thought he'd collapse right there.

"She uh...she said I should look up. Did you all get that?" he said.

We nodded, and eager to keep him distracted, glanced up at the clear winter sky. Our gazes halted on a brick warehouse across the street.

"I don't see nothing. You see anything?" someone said.

That's when the street lit up, the lights popping on one by one to confront our scruffy and confused stares.

"Old exes?" shrieked the bitter woman, pointing up at the lettering on the worn sign of The Old Texas Chophouse, a restaurant that had long gone the way of creamed spinach and Tang. "That sonofabitch!"

"It actually reads 'Old exas,'" someone said helpfully. "It's just a trick of the light."

Rita took a quick look at her watch. "Well, I don't know about the rest of you," she said, "but I didn't hire a babysitter for nothing."

"Here, here!" said the bitter woman.

We entered the bar and got drunk enough not to care, trading stories that were all chillingly familiar: the mad whirl of a social life, the jokes nobody got, and finally *Tfoo* and its final removal from our hands by friends, exes, family members.

"Maybe it's a bizarre take on a twelve-step program," Rita said, sliding a mug of beer in my direction. "Their way of atoning for kicking us out of the flock."

"Maybe," I said.

I got up and stepped over to the jukebox, thinking it was out of order, until I read the actual words on the note stuck near the coin slot.

"You so missed it!"



I woke up on my sofa in the dimming light of the late afternoon. I had forgotten to turn on the heat, but someone had covered me with a blanket and I wiped uneasily at the drool caking a corner of my mouth. Had Rita brought me all the way back? I looked out the window. The streets were dark and the bare, wind chapped trees were ruefully curling in on one another.

"Almost hit your head on the steps last night."

I sat up straight to see a lithe and shadowy figure in the armchair, a thin wisp of smoke trailing from the end of a cigarette. Muriel.

"You've lost weight, Clare," she said. She reached over to switch on a floor lamp. Small strips of light unfurled down her legs, revealing a tattoo. Humpty Dumpty. "Like it?"

"No," I finally said. "I've been looking for you... for weeks."

"Weeks," she smiled languidly.

"You were right. The wars, those fucking earthquakes. It is all going to hell."

She squinted at me and stood up, crushing her cigarette into a half burnt candle on the coffee table. It made an ugly hole in the wax.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," I said.

"What's the matter, Clare? You've gotten so serious all of a sudden."

I watched as she walked to the kitchen, leaning over the stove to light another. "I just wanted to cheer you up. Guess that didn't work. "

"Cheer up?" I tried standing, managing a dramatic sweep of the blanket from my lap, before realizing that Muriel had removed my pants when she'd settled me on the sofa. I stood there wobbling in a pair of long john cut offs, vulnerable and still drunk.

"Did you know that the word *Tfoo* really is in *The Brothers Karamazov*?" she said, "That was our copy. Isn't that just, I don't know, great?"

I shook my head, still muddled, still trying to connect the way we used to. "Those nukes in AZ? I mean the goddamn President says nothing, says we have to listen to both sides and come up with a 'creative solution.' Creative?"

"Don't you want to know what it means?"



"What?" I sat back down, my head swimming, trying to sort out everything I wanted to say to her.

"*Tfoo*," she said. Her expression was eerily calm as she came over and stroked my hair. "You know I memorized part of it back in college, just that bit about the Grand Inquisitor. 'And men rejoiced that they were again led like sheep, and that the terrible gift that had brought them such suffering was lifted from their hearts.'"

"Muriel?" I said.

She leaned over and kissed my cheek. "It may be hard for you to understand things now, but I'm still me, and yes, it is all as you think, just not as bad as you think. You've really, really nothing to worry about."

Muriel put her arms around me, and I let myself lean into her. The embrace was cold and maternal at best, but it was what I could get.

"Shhh, Clare...It's all, all going to be okay. Honestly, I think you're going to love it."



At some point, I fell asleep. She was gone when I woke up, but I rented a FLEX car and drove to the outskirts of town, a place where billboards tiptoed daintily over plywood churches and red light motels, and where I hoped no self-respecting *Tfoo*ist would follow. There was a gargantuan mall there where I hoped I might pick up a real copy of *Brothers*. Muriel had never told me what *Tfoo* meant, but when I fished a copy from the shelves, checking it for any suspect defacement and took it to the register, I saw them. They were lined up in a colorful display of new releases, a dazzling array of *Tfoo* in assorted volumes, their covers shiny, scattered with embossed stick hippos, squiggly lines, and eggs. Above them a sign read, 'NY Times Bestseller for *Tfoo* straight weeks!'

I threw my card on the counter, nearly doubling over as I waited for the clerk to run it through and send me on my way. That's when I felt the first tremor under my feet. Yes, we had eggs. And they were hatching.



Pick up a paper these days and you'll find that the wishes of a million bulbous, middle-aged ladies have come true. Newspapers focus on good news stories, and even the Arrival chaos gets churned out as

heartwarming tales of beautiful strangers, queer, straight, all locking eyes across crowded parking lots and ripping their clothes off for some final anonymous contact, only to find themselves alive, and well, married a month later. We're actually thanking them for another baby boom. More kids? Why not? There's plenty of room in the attic.

Muriel had one, to a stockbroker, no less. Not a man, they've fixed that for us too. Sure, the fundies tried to spout out about it, but our visitors gathered up Pastors Warren, Hagee, Dobson, and company, and flew them out for a nice, lingering look at the nearest black hole. They've been mercifully silent ever since. When they arrived back on earth, they even gave a press conference about their "need to contemplate God's enormity, rather than the petty enormities of man." Gay men howled over that one for weeks.

And it really is a golden age. There are no insecurities except our own, no problems but those we create from our own attempts at self-aggrandizement. That's what *Tfoo* had been trying to teach us, that seriousness was really just another form of vanity. No need for much shock and awe in this invasion, just plenty of fun and games, a perfect distraction as well as an appealing recruitment ad. In *Brothers*, that bit where the Grand Inquisitor says that people are led more easily when we eliminate their differences, well, what better way to do that than encouraging them to be as different as possible? The result, a grand mishmash of quirky affectation, and the biggest DIY transdimensional incubators you've ever seen.

Dr. Morphrey says all of this fretting is unhealthy, that I'm creating another grandiose narrative to compensate for a larger truth: Muriel doesn't love me anymore. End of story.

"Clare, my dear," he says, his spidery limb reaching down to rearrange the coasters on his Eames coffee table. "A brave new world is out there for the taking. Love, travel, every material need, and you're backing yourself into a corner. Can't you see how pathetic that is?"

I do. I really do. But I'm onto something in that corner, the way a cat can't stop staring at some unseen intruder on a wall. And if I'm the last woman on earth who still takes everything too seriously then...

"So be it," I say.

That's when Dr. Morphrey leans back in his chair, pulling his tentacles apart in what can only translate as a tut. Barely detectable, but a

tut nonetheless. And you can never fight a tut. Someone swears at you and you can up the ante gracefully, but a tut always carries an air of plausible deniability, and beating it requires cussing or spitting, undeniable victory for the tutter.

That's what *Tfoo* means, you know. Tut.

Muriel sends me postcards from time to time. A little bit of retro stays in all of us. She's set out to see the solar system, then the galaxy. Got one of her and the family, sitting beachside on the newly terraformed Olympus Mons, the sky behind her a beautiful shade of mauve.

"Having a wonderful time," it reads. The second part, however, is left out. It seems I'm too much of a drag.

## CONTRIBUTORS



**Michael G. Cornelius** is the author of five books of fiction, including the Lambda Literary Award-finalist *Creating Man* (Vineyard Press, 2002) and *The Ascension* (Variance, 2007). His latest is a collection of queer speculative fiction entitled *Tricks and Treats* (MLR Press, 2012). His novels have been nominated for an American Library Association Award and an Independent Press Award. In addition, he has published dozens of stories in journals and magazines, and has won several grants and awards for his writing.

**Bernard M. Cox** is currently a MFA Creative Writing Student at Roosevelt University. He is also Assistant Artistic Director at The Tamale Hut Café Reading Series in North Riverside, IL ([thcreadingseries.wordpress.com](http://thcreadingseries.wordpress.com)). His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Up the Staircase Quarterly*, *Blood and Lullabies*, and *A cappella Zoo*.

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**Jessica Hamilton** writes and works in Denver, Colorado. While finishing college, she works for fun and for pay roasting and brewing coffee. This is

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**Teri Louise Kelly** is the author of three memoirs, one poetry collection and one volume of shorts. She is a spoken word performer of some repute, a gender and genre crossing storyteller and an average bass guitarist. Her fiction debut was a speculative work entitled "Cultivores."

**Tony Leuzzi** is a writer and teacher living in Rochester, NY. His second book of poems, *Radiant Losses*, won the 2009 New Sins Editorial Prize and was published the following year. In November 2012, BOA Editions will release *Passwords Primeval*, Leuzzi's interviews with 20 American poets. He is currently looking for an American publisher for his third manuscript, *Fake Book*, in which "The Fall" appears.

**Jamie Marriage** is an internationally published Australian CyberPunk author with a taste for the dangerous and obscene aspects of life. His work ranges from the sarcastic to the satirical. Links to his work can be found at [www.JamieMarriage.com](http://www.JamieMarriage.com).

**Sarah Marcus** holds an MFA from George Mason University. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Spork*, *Cimarron Review*, *Slipstream*, *Tidal Basin Review*, and *Cold Mountain Review*, among others. She was the 2012 *Booth Poetry Prize* Runner-Up, as selected by Linda Gregg. She is originally from Cleveland, OH.

**Patrick McCarty** is a student at New York University. He is one of the founding members of the After School Special Improv comedy troupe at NYU, and a member of The Headless Society, a club that promotes creative writing and coming up with club names that weird people out.

**Jason Morrow** is a freelance writer and web/graphic designer. His passions include social activism, animal rights, and Pagan spirituality. More intellectual interests include soteriology, ethics, neuroscience, and philosophy of time. He has served on the Boards of two non-profits. Find him at [jasonlmorrow.com](http://jasonlmorrow.com).

**Sergio Ortiz** is a retired educator, poet, painter, and photographer. Flutter Press released his chapbooks: *At the Tail End of Dusk*, and *Bedbugs in My Mattress*. Ronin Press released his third chapbook: *topography of a desire*, in May of 2010. He is a three-time nominee for the Sundress Best of the Web Anthology, and a Pushcart nominee.

**Reba Overkill** is a loud queer currently located in Fountain Valley, California. Their primary partner in crime is their fiancée, a queer trans woman novelist and lyricist named Kayla. The two spend their days writing, playing video games, and publically horrifying at least a few heteronormative people every day.

**Chelsea Paige** recently graduated from Chester College of New England with a B.A. in Creative Writing. A Vermonter currently having a semi-permanent adventure in Michigan, her greatest aspiration is to someday shelve a novel she wrote at a library she works at.

**Katheryn Svaldi** has an extensive collection of wine corks. Most from bottles she has drank while writing short stories. She has two snakes, Frank and Bob. Sometimes she wraps them around her wrist while typing. If writing doesn't work out she'll fall back on something more dependable like professional juggling.

**Philip Dean Walker** holds a BA in American Literature from Middlebury College and is an MFA candidate at American University. His fiction has previously appeared in *Big Lucks*. He hails from Great Falls, Virginia and currently resides in Washington, D.C.