

34 ORCHARD

Darkness is just across the street.

ISSUE 4

AUTUMN 2021



34 ORCHARD

Issue 4, Autumn 2021

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This issue is dedicated to Michele, who never gives up on trying to lose the things she no longer needs.

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The Ghost of the Fair ♥ © Walter H. Von Egidy

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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Somewhere between my co-worker Linda's mother's cans of soup and beans, there was a faded black-and-white photo of a sailor in uniform. A name was scrawled on the photo's back, and several times, she'd asked her mother, "Who was Donald? And why do you have a picture of him in your kitchen cabinet?"

Linda's mother belonged to The Silent Generation, those born between 1925 and 1945. While they're so known because they grew up during economic depression and war, many of them—at least in my experience—kept powerful secrets. Linda's mother never gave her an answer, and when Linda's mother passed, any hope of getting one was lost to history.

When we think of loss, we often jump to the *literal* things we'll grieve: a home, a way of life, a job, our savings, a lover or significant other; a beloved heirloom or scrapbook; a spouse, family member, or friend. But every day, there are other, intangible things we're at risk of losing: faith, a dream, perception; pieces of (or our former) selves; hope, respect, love, kindness, an answer to a long-asked question.

In the wake of these losses, we're sometimes desperate for reclamation, but if that happens, we often discover things won't be the way they were, or the way we hoped and imagined. Instead, we find other things: strength, resilience, commitment, accountability, forgiveness, an improved self; regret, a thirst for revenge, forbidden knowledge, addiction, demise, or even despair. If there isn't a splendid Phoenix rising from the ashes on the other side of it all, then there is simply a reluctant surrender in battle, or an end to restlessness and the quiet acceptance of the hand we've been dealt.

"Maybe," Linda said of her mother and Donald, "it's just better that I'll never know."

Here in our fourth issue, twenty-three artists explore the impact made by the sometimes intangible things we lose, and what we find in the aftermath. To reference *Mary Poppins Returns*, welcome to the place where the lost things go.

Welcome to 34 Orchard.

“The simple fact of the matter is, once someone dies and their soul departs, it leaves a void.”

— C.R. Langille
“Rocky Mountain Hocus”

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DEAD MAN'S CURVE

Rachel Unger

Everyone knows the stories.

Ride long enough, and you hear them from other cyclists. The hill that has only eleven of twelve access covers flush with the road. The black ice that broke another rider's leg that spring—was it last spring? No, the one before. The scenic back road with no shoulder and the logging trucks that seem to want to scrape cyclists off into a tree for sport.

Ride long enough, and you have a story of your own. The sweet curve of that ten-mile downhill where you blew out your front tire. Or the crosswind that knocked people over that ride in St. George, or the snap as your seat post sheared through in heavy traffic at sixteen miles per hour.

Sometimes, stories leave different physical aftermaths. You see those, too, on rides. The ghost bikes painted out all white or the crosses with their companies of plastic flowers, all just off the side of the road. Won't come back, as the song says. It's just as true with bicycles, Lycra instead of leather.

You see those memorials when you train. And oh, you train. Build speed, build stamina, increase your VO2 max. You ride when your quads and IT bands scream, and you ride when your blood sings sweetly through you, breaths and pedal strokes aligning perfectly. You eat lunchmeat standing up in the shower and you dream of the road. You train long past remembering why you're training, chasing endorphins, leaving loneliness out there beside one of those crosses. You do intervals and hill repeats. You learn the endless whine of the wind in your ears, sometimes the only sound for hours on a road in the middle of nowhere, and you learn to ignore it. Sometimes you have conversation with other cyclists, but there is always the wind.

It's on one of your regular climbs that you begin to take a ten-mile breather at the shrine, halfway up to the reservoir. You're not sure what else to call it. The plaques aren't really tombstones, but they're more than just plaques. The white handlebar tape on the ghost bike behind them looks more used than weathered. You don't know their names personally, you

never rode with them, but you take a peculiar comfort in knowing they must have climbed this road as often as you do.

One morning, you find a student ID there bearing the same name as the marker it's tucked under. You run a thumb over the picture and then put it back underneath. On one scorcher of an afternoon, you pause at the shrine for much-needed salt and sugar. With the packet between your teeth, you dizzily wonder if this was their favorite flavor of electrolyte gel. Other cyclists grind uphill past you with determined sufferface. No one else stops.

One cold evening, you are descending on rain-wet roads. Not racing the sunset, because you can't see the sun, but hurrying past the shrine just the same. The temperature is plummeting faster than you are down that hill.

You feel it when the skid starts, the sodden leaves and the curve and your weight distribution all acting against you.

As you leave the bike, you see them lining the road. The crowd goes as far around the curve as you can see on both sides, all of their mouths open and their eyes on you. They are cheering—as though you are crossing the finish line of a gran fondo, head down and pumping to shave off a few more seconds. Are they cheering? Some of them are holding flowers.

But then you hit the pavement and the bones in your arm explode. Your jaw is locked against agony that you didn't know could exist, the siren blare of pain shredding through that arm like icy teeth. Your stomach starts doing barrel rolls. You manage to suck in a breath countless ages later, and other pain begins to make itself dimly known.

You look around, trying to focus on anything else. You're on the side of the road, at the foot of the shrine. You should be rolling, wheels and frame that perfect extension of your body and your will, but your hands grasp slick pavement instead of brake hoods. *Where is your bike?* Your cleats don't have much traction in these conditions, but you manage to get up.

You put a hand on the white paint of the ghost bike's top tube, just to stabilize you for a moment. Your arm is making it hard to concentrate on anything else, but you straighten up. As you turn, you see that you are not alone. Two cyclists stand with you, kitted out as though for summer. You recognize one of them from the student ID.

Three cyclists would be plenty for a group ride, if only they had warmer gear.

Shivering ratchets the pain back up to where your brain starts to white out again. You try clenching your quads and core, but you can't stop shaking.

"My bike," you whisper, breath coming in pants. All you want right now is that comfort of familiar weight and geometry, the bike you know every part of better than your own body. Of anyone, you're sure they will understand. They come closer to you.

You hear the whirr and hiss of other tires descending on wet roads. You're used to this comforting background noise, but now the cyclist in front of the group straightens from her tuck and she hails you. "Are you—Jesus, you're not okay." The pack pulls over with her, and she unclips and dismounts quickly. She reaches out for you, but hesitates before touching your arm.

You don't want to touch it either.

The ride leader snaps out directions to the other cyclists in between asking you about what happened. One of them calls 911, another finds your bike in the bushes. No one says anything about the state of the front wheel, likely out of mercy. The third cyclist gets the number for your brother and calls him, so he can meet you at the hospital. You overhear her giving your brother directions to the shrine so he can come get your bike after.

The summer-kitted cyclists fade back from the group.

Someone locks the mangled frame to the ghost bike and then everyone huddles around you until the ambulance arrives. Someone jokes that with this many bikes, there are enough lumens to operate. The ride leader tries to involve everyone in the conversation, get them all talking.

Once you are safely in the back of the vehicle, the paramedic looks at you and says, "Hell of a night to be out getting miles in. Can you tell me what happened?" After you explain, he nods. "Well, you've got a good story out of it, at least. What event are you training for?"

Out the back window, as you compare ride stories, you notice the road unspooling behind you. The sides are once again empty of anything save memorials. You can still hear the wind whistling cold past the ambulance door.



Rachel dedicates this story to Chris Thomas, Amanda Stallings, Bob McDiarmid, and David Gaus.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN HOCUS

C.R. Langille

Lehi, Utah 1948

I've never liked dead bodies. They don't shut up. I'd suggest not listening to whatever it is they have to say. They will drive you insane, tell you lies, or try to trick you into doing something your mama wouldn't approve of. They're not your loved ones or friends anymore. The simple fact of the matter is, once someone dies and their soul departs, it leaves a void. Sometimes, things like to crawl into that void. This particular dead body liked to lie, and it was very chatty, which made it hard to concentrate.

I knew them as skimmers—lowly critters that liked to wear human bodies like clothes.

I clutched the medicine bag that hung around my neck. As soon as I did, the thing's voice fell away in a buzz and I could think straight. The rest of the world came into focus, and I let out the lungful of air I'd been holding. This medicine bag was a godsend, a gift from a friend of mine in the war. His name was Two Feathers. He found me in the med-tent about to lose my mind because one of those things had crawled into the dead man in the bed next to me. Needless to say, the medicine bag made day-to-day business bearable.

The medicine bag became hot in my hand, hotter than my granddad's wood burning stove in December. I let it fall to my chest.

"Nice try, cowboy. Didn't your mama tell you it's rude to ignore your elders?"

I ignored it. Talking to it wouldn't do anyone any good.

"We should ask your mama. She's in Hell doing some awful nasty things."

More lies. I took a deep breath and tried to focus on the scene. I was looking for Herman West, a local carpenter and known chicken fighter in the area. He'd been missing, presumed dead, and I was supposed to find him. Finding dead bodies wasn't a fun business, but I was good at it.

It was dark in the beat-up coop, and dusty. Chicken shit littered the dirt floor like a nasty rug, and it didn't smell very nice either. The lone rooster in the coop kept its distance from me but continued to feed as it strutted about. Its feet were dark in color; probably one of those Blackfeet birds of Mr. Lewis. Supposedly they were good fighting birds. Whoever killed West wasn't interested in the prize fighter.

"She's down here with your platoon. They're having a grand ol' time."

My feet stuttered as my heart skipped a beat. Shouldn't have listened to it.

The rooster cast me a sidelong glance and then went back to scratching for bugs in the dirt. The familiar blast of M-1 shots and grenades rattled in the back of my mind. But that sound wasn't here. It wasn't now. I tried to regulate my breathing, then got back to work.

All in all, it looked like a normal chicken pen, with the exception of the small bit of finger sticking out of the earth. If I were a betting man, I'd say that hand belonged to Mr. West. Looked like the skinner calling West home wasn't too strong, otherwise it would have walked out of here by now. It was going to be one of those weeks.

I let out a sigh and walked out of the coop.

"Where the hell you think you're going? We ain't done talking, cowboy! You know it's only a matter of time before you join the chorus, don't you?"

The thing's voice faded as I walked out and into the sunlight. The clucks and crows of the roosters in the yard filled the air with a kind of music I usually found enjoyable. At the moment, it just added to my headache.

I was almost to my truck when Albert West came running up to me. His face was red, and he was taking in big gulps of air. The kid needed to lay off the sweets.

"Did you find my pa, mister?"

I rubbed the back of my neck and avoided his gaze.

"Better call the police, son. Your father's buried in the coop."

No better way than the blunt way. That's what my father used to say. I got into the truck and fired it up. The '41 Chevy roared to life.

Albert stood in the road staring off into the distance. I figured it would be best to get along before he decided to ask questions. I shifted the truck into first and drove around him. I left him, the roosters, and the body behind in a plume of dust and smoke.



"Buried in the coop, eh?" Brutus asked.

I took a sip of coffee and nodded. The coffee was hot, and burned a

little as it went down, but it warmed my soul. Brutus hadn't touched his drink since I told him about West. He hadn't flinched or reacted much. He must have expected the news.

"What are you going to do now, Warwick?" Brutus asked.

"Hit the road. The rodeo in Reno starts in a couple days. There's a bull with my name on it."

I finished my coffee and grabbed my hat. Brutus held a hand up and motioned for me to stop. Here it was, the moment I knew was coming.

"Can you find out who killed him?" he asked.

I let my hat fall back onto the table and grabbed a cigarette from my coat pocket.

"I need to hit the road. I was only supposed to be here for a couple of nights."

"I know, I know. I wouldn't ask if it weren't important. Besides, you have a knack for this kind of work."

"What's it to you anyway? Were you and West friends?"

"We served together at Midway. You were at Guadalcanal, weren't you?"

If I could go the rest of my life without hearing that word again, I'd die a happy man. My palms started to sweat. A small cough escaped my lungs as the waitress walked by with more coffee. I caught her eye and nodded to my cup. She shot me a cheap smile and filled the mug with even cheaper coffee.

After the waitress walked away, Brutus took an envelope out of his coat pocket and pushed it across the table. Payment for finding West.

I grabbed it and stuffed it into my own pocket. No need to count the money; Brutus had never cheated me.

"I don't like doing this kind of work," I said.

"I know, but you're damn good at it. Besides, I owe it to West. He saved my life once," Brutus said.

I sighed and sipped my coffee. Brutus knew what buttons to push. He always had.

"When's the next derby?"

"Tomorrow night at Young's farm."

I finished the coffee and relished the burn. Brutus wore an empty smile on his face. Something was going on. I guess he figured I would find out what that something was. Without a word, I grabbed my hat and walked out of the diner.



There were a lot of people at the farm. Three rows of cars and trucks lined up near the Young's two-story home. I parked my rig and grabbed the .45 from the glove box. It never hurt to be prepared.

With the gun tucked away in my waistband, I stepped out into the crisp night air. Laughter and talk drifted from the barn nearby. It was an old rickety structure that a mouse's fart could tip over.

I threw my jacket on and headed toward the noise. Gravel crackled underneath my boots and for a split second, the Utah farmland melted away. The familiar smell of jungle humidity mixed with blood flooded my senses. The buzz of a Zero flew overhead, and I fought the urge to take cover. I clutched the medicine bag with a death grip, focusing on the act of breathing as the jungles of Guadalcanal faded into memory, replaced by the reality of the farm.

"You okay, sir?"

I opened my eyes. A young lady with curly hair the color of strawberries stood in front of me.

"Yes, ma'am. Just a little upset stomach is all."

Red shot me a look that said she didn't believe an ounce of my bullshit. That was fine.

"It will be a dollar please. Entry fee and all," Red said.

"A dollar? You have to be kidding me."

"Fraid not, mister. That's what my pa said. Dollar from everyone. Unless you're fighting in the derby or want to join a hack fight, then it's more."

I dug a dollar out of my wallet and handed it over.

"No, ma'am. I'm just here to watch."

She shot me a smile and pocketed the bill. I went to step past her, but she stopped me.

"A couple of rules first."

I raised an eyebrow. Red extended a hand with her thumb and two fingers splayed.

"One," she tucked her thumb away. "No drinking. If we catch you drinking, you'll be asked to leave." She tucked her index finger away. "Two, no fighting. We catch you starting something like that, and we'll ask you to leave, but not nicely." There was a wicked glint in her eyes as she finished. "And three, have fun."

I tipped my hat towards her and walked past. The barn came alive with a mixture of cheers, disappointment, and excitement—a mix usually only found in shady establishments such as this. I couldn't help but jump on that wagon and ride along with everyone else.

Makeshift seating made from bales of hay circled the fighting pit. A man wearing a worn leather jacket walked away with a dying rooster in his

hands. Another fellow with large, thick glasses pumped his arm in the air and shook hands with the referee.

I scanned the crowd. Brutus sat near the pit with a wad of cash in his hand. He caught my eye for just a moment before he looked away with a slight nod to his side. A couple of goons stood near the wall guarding a door. Judging from their size, they were corn-fed and never missed a meal.

I made my way towards the two. One of the thugs shot me a look that would sour milk. He didn't say anything, just glared. The other smiled—the kind of smile the devil makes when he strikes a deal.

“Can I help you, sir?” Smiley asked.

“I was hoping I could get back there. The knife fights, I reckon?” I asked.

“Are you expected?”

I reached into my coat pocket. Sour Milk tensed, but Smiley just kept grinning. He was definitely the dangerous one. I pulled out a roll of bills and showed it to the both of them.

“Nope, but I don't think it's a problem, is it?” I asked.

Smiley kept his eyes locked to mine. He nodded and Sour Milk opened the door.

“Good luck, sir.”

I tipped my hat and walked past them. I'd be sure to charge that expense to Brutus.

The room was dark. Cigarette smoke slid across what little lighting there was. Unlike the other area, this place was quiet. A dozen people sat in folding chairs watching the match.

It wasn't so much the change of attitude that put me on edge. It was the fact that my medicine bag heated up. Nobody turned to look my way, but all eyes were on me.

If I wasn't doing this for Brutus, I would have turned around and walked away right then and there. However, friendship was a funny thing that had gotten me into trouble more times than I could count.

I found an empty chair and took a seat. A tall man with a widow's peak puffed on a corn-cob pipe in the center of the pit. He stepped out of the gloom and stood under a bare light bulb.

“Bill 'em up!” he said. His voice vibrated the medicine bag and rasped against my soul. Kind of made me sick to my stomach.

I was in over my head.

Two handlers stepped forward and held their roosters close to one another. The birds started to peck at each other. The display went on while another man with a cane walked by each member of the audience. He got to me.

"Take your bet, sir?" the man asked.

"I'll sit this one out, thanks."

He nodded and walked off. I was grateful I had grabbed my gun before I left the truck.

"Put 'em on the line, boys. Let's get this dance started," the referee said. Again, hearing him talk churned my insides. The medicine bag heated up even more. My breathing picked up, and for a moment the room went blurry. I needed to leave. The two goons came in from outside as if they heard me and posted on the door. So much for that plan.

The handlers put their roosters on the far line.

"Pit!" the referee said. The call sent my ears ringing.

The roosters in the pit jumped into the air and kicked up dust and feathers. The dull light bounced off the razors that replaced their spurs, creating a dazzling effect.

They collided into one another in a violent clash. It was nature perverted. I didn't mind a regular fight, but a knife fight was something else. Something brutal. It pulled at strings inside me that played a discordant song; only, after a bit, the song started to sound good. That's what scared me the most.

It didn't take long. One bird was dead, the other dying. Without a sound, or applause, the crowd stood, collected their winnings, then filed out. I kept my seat and waited. What was about to happen didn't require an audience.

"Took a lot of guts to come here, cowboy," the referee said. Something scratched the insides of my skull as he spoke. He lit his pipe. For a split second, the flare of his match showed his face. Alabaster skin drooped from the man's bones like a sick mask. I wanted to scream, but it wouldn't help. Trust me, I tried once, and all I got for my trouble was not being able to talk for a week.

I gripped the medicine bag, which helped. Not much, but a little was more than enough to find my courage.

"Well, I figured it was bad when I found Mr. West," I said. "Couldn't be just one of you skinnners around here."

"Mr. West... didn't live up to our expectations."

"Neat."

I reached for the gun with my free hand. Corn-cob took a long drag on his pipe and waved an arthritic hand. The medicine bag burst into flames. I let out a growl as I ripped it from my neck.

As soon as it left my body, voices came alive all around me. A chorus of dozens screamed, pleaded, and cried. It was a choir of men, women, children, and other things a man wasn't supposed to hear. I fell to my knees

and covered my ears, but it was no use. The voices burrowed deep inside, cracking the shell of my psyche—not that it was that hard of a shell. Corn-cob’s slick words cut through all of them.

“We’ve been waiting a long time for you, Warwick.”

The lights dimmed as Corn-cob’s smoke filled the room. The silence was blasted away by the buzz of machine-gun fire. I broke out in a cold sweat. I wanted to run far and hide, but I just couldn’t. Screams crept through the darkness ahead of me. I recognized the voices.

I was in the jungle again.

“Cowboy! You still there? Help!”

The cry came from the other side of the trees, cutting through the air. After a moment, I could move, although I didn’t want to. I’d seen what lay through the trees a million times over.

The scene melted away as I emptied the Colt into the center of the fighting pit. Corn-cob wasn’t there anymore, just a trail of pipe-smoke.

His laughter slithered from the corner. Somehow, I got to my feet and turned to the door. Corn-cob was right in front of me. He grinned. The smile was too large for any human’s face to handle. He blew a mouthful of smoke into my eyes and everything went dark.



I woke in the center of the pit. The crowd had taken their seats and watched like a pack of hungry dogs waiting for a bone. Corn-cob straddled my chest. He still had his pipe tucked into the corner of his mouth. Black smoke poured from the cob bowl. His eyes smoldered with each puff.

“Well, looks like it’s the end of the road for you, cowboy.”

I didn’t respond. What was the point?

“Sorry,” a familiar voice said.

I turned my head. Brutus stood in the corner. Smiley and Sour Milk stood on either side of him. He couldn’t look me in the eye.

“You too?” I asked.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t have a choice,” Brutus said.

It all made sense now. The knowing expressions, the manipulation. All a ploy to get me here.

“Our dear Brutus knows how to live up to expectations,” Corn-cob answered.

I tried to shake him off my chest, but he slammed me back into the dirt. Corn-cob’s grip was strong. Stronger than any skinner I’d ever encountered.

I kept struggling though—Mama didn’t raise quitters. Pain lanced

through my hand as I felt through the dirt, and I instinctively pulled away. The light flashed off something metallic on the ground. I grabbed for it, picking up a discarded razor from one of the fights.

“Now it’s time for you to join the chorus, Warwick.”

Corn-cob grabbed my head and slammed it into the earth. Stars flashed in my vision as the room spun upon impact. Everything went squirrely. I wanted to sleep and let it all slip away, but the razor in my hand kept me anchored. He leaned in close.

“This won’t hurt a bit,” he said.

Liar.

Corn-cob took a deep drag on his pipe. That black smoke slipped out of the corners of his mouth as if it were alive and fighting to get out. Before he could blow it all out, I swiped up with the razor, cutting him across his throat.

The smoke burst from the wound and Corn-cob fell off me. He was kicking in the dirt and let out a screech that would have put a crow to shame. Everyone bolted for the door as the light disappeared. Smoke spun through the room like a tornado and a thousand voices screamed out. One voice stood out.

I think it was my mama’s.



I woke up to a world of hurt. I hadn’t felt this way since I tried to ride that big brahma bull in Billings. The room was empty, chairs were overturned, and the door hung on one hinge. Corn-cob was gone. Just his pipe lay in the dirt. There was no sign of his goons. No idea why they hadn’t jumped me. Perhaps I had a guardian angel watching over me. More than likely with Corn-cob getting stuck like he did, they chose to run while they had the chance. I was grateful either way.

My medicine bag was in the dirt next to me, charred but still somewhat intact. When I grabbed it, my headached dulled, and some of the background voices quieted to a whisper. Still worked despite being burned. Not as good though. I’d have to find me a medicine man.

I was pretty sure that skinner was still out there somewhere. It was probably searching for another corpse to call home. That meant I had some time before it came after me.

I shuffled my way out into the barn. Everything hurt as I limped toward the truck. I hoped a nice hot cup of coffee would take the edge off. I had to get to Reno. There was a bull with my name on it.

RICHMOND HILL

Donna Dallas

I haven't seen you since I
smoked stale Marlboros
with you on the steps of

a school we never attended
eating Hostess apple pies
from the Bodega. You know

I could never chew Bazooka gum
for long periods of time. I came back
and I looked for you under the elevator train,

in the hardware store where your
father used to work and you'd
hustle money out of him for

a dime-bag. We would take the Jamaica Avenue
train to Pitkin Avenue and cop weed from
El Diablo's, the bar on Pine Street.

You wore that black rebel motorcycle
jacket and your hair was dirty blonde
and you'd get me high and we'd laugh

like hyenas on the J train back to
Richmond Hill. We'd climb up
to the roof of the Bingo hall and

listen to the old man announce
the numbers into the microphone.
I told you I wasn't a virgin—hadn't been

since I was twelve years old
and you said you still were and didn't mind.
You told me you wanted to go into the Navy,

or the Marines, you wanted to get out
of this clam dive of a neighborhood. We'd share
the last stale cigarette as if it were a peace pipe.

Now I've come back with a fresh pack
of Marlboros to find out you were sent away
to prison for murder. You, the boy I sat with

every day for almost four years, killed your
girlfriend and baby.

I'm just a girl from
Richmond Hill and I shared cigarettes
and Bazooka with you.

A MARKED LIFE

Greer Arrowsmith

Of the many things Will had managed to forget about New York, the damp, crushing pressure of winter on his lungs wasn't one. After thirty-three years away, it was the most familiarly terrifying thing about the city so far, and one of the many ways the city made it clear he wasn't welcome. Now, waiting on City Island for a ferry he was terrified to board, he still felt that rejection, keenly.

As ever, he had arrived too early. The trait was an asset in his normal life. Among those who knew him in Phoenix he was the ideal professional, and in corporate America the rainbow flags and logos for pride month only masked the real appreciation for men like him: gay men who didn't flaunt being gay, who never brought a man to work events, who didn't speak with any trace of flair. He was a poster boy for inoffensive asexual gayness. That wasn't hard when he hadn't really been gay since he left New York in 1987. The fear had resolved that. Of course, he was still gay, but it didn't matter when you didn't date, didn't love, didn't have sex, didn't do anything "gay."

Will observed the other thirty or so people waiting for the ferry, as he was sure they were observing him. Or, perhaps not. Perhaps they were absorbed in their own stories, less concerned than he was about other people and what they thought. Maybe they had a legitimate reason to be here. He caught himself. Still, after three decades, calling his relationship with another man illegitimate. Still ashamed. Still wondering if others knew by looking at him.

He watched a huddled group of three adults, their similar faces advertising their siblinghood. The man in the trio stroked his shorter sister's hair. Will watched his hand move and recalled the sensation of thin, stringy, sick hair under his palm. Another familiarly terrifying memory of New York. His heart screamed at him for being here.

Will felt nauseous, again, from the memory, and the prospect of the small boat, the lack of anonymity, the whole painful journey. The why of it.

Why had it taken so long. Why should he be doing this at all. Why was this city still controlling him. Why was he letting it. Why was he back in this place that threw him into a plague that had left him living amongst the walking dead and eventually all alone.

He thought about leaving. His feet tingled, hearing his flight instinct. He felt his heart screaming as it had been all day. Descending the stairs to the subway this morning, he had noticed only what was missing from the New York he used to know. The stench. The graffiti. The chaos. The joy. He'd had fun once, he'd had peace once. He'd felt something other than fear and anger, once. Here, in New York, until the city killed it all. His heart continued to scream.

Will remembered the last time he caught a ferry in New York. To Fire Island and back. Of course. A walking stereotype, but stereotypes exist for a reason. No frozen fingertips on those trips. Sun-touched torsos and broad smiles, firm hands, his and Joseph's, brushing against each other before unashamed grasping. Joseph Reyes, his magnificent man, who showed him all the good he knew in the world, who loved being himself, and loved Will, and loved life. Life was chaos and joy. Turning to chaos and fear when the purple marks and the weakened bodies began to appear, in all the boroughs, in all the streets. More and more and more. It was everywhere, marks of a plague, but as long as the marks were only on those men, his friends, his Joseph, the city didn't care.

Soon after the last of those trips Joseph had found his first mark. On a normal morning, before his coffee, on his beautiful, breathing, then-strong chest. Joseph was defiant, Will was shattered and terrified. Joseph pushed himself, he got angry, he got sad, and he got very, very sick. For the months that followed, the endless nights changing soaked sheets, comforting Joseph's ever-thinning body, Will felt overwhelmed by guilt that he was so scared for himself, and was furious at everyone and everything. The city. The doctors. The people walking past him on the street who didn't have to think about it. Joseph's colleagues who never called again. Their families. He refused the layers of gloves the doctors told him to wear. He knew his was the only skin Joseph could feel, he was the only person who would touch the marked, wracked body of the man he loved. The only one who cared. Will thought it was unfair of him to be able to feel human touch when his beautiful Joseph was refused it even by his own mother. Will thought about how, after decades, he still hadn't touched anyone beyond a handshake since.

Will shivered as he followed the siblings along the decrepit dock and boarded the orange, utilitarian boat. Heavy, sad fog surrounded them for seven minutes across Long Island Sound. Will had to focus on breathing, his

lungs feeling the damp, his heart labouring, working harder than ever. His old fears prickled his skin. No matter how many tests he took, he would never believe he was clear. In Will's mind he was infected, always dying, just waiting for a purple mark to appear. That's what New York had done to him. Its disregard for Joseph, its refusal to help his friends as they fell, one, two, fifteen, more, all around him. The city let cruel mothers refuse their sons dignity, threw the young men into paupers' graves on this island he was now heading toward. The city thought they were disposable and insignificant blights.

He had spent thirty-three years letting the city be right.

A lurch and groan signalled the ferry's arrival at Hart Island. One of the siblings met his eye and gave a kind smile. Will was surprised to find it quieted his heart a little. Waiting to disembark, she stood next to him and quietly asked 'family?'

Will hesitated. 'Not according to them.'

She nodded. 'Were you family according to him?'

At that, Will felt a crack inside him, and, finally, finally felt the pain. It felt good. It felt legitimate. He could only nod.

The woman waited a moment. 'Our father is here. We only found out three years ago. No one told us.' She looked at Will again. 'Twenty nine years.'

Will looked out at the island. 'Thirty-three,' he heard himself say. 'A friend found him last year when he was looking for his own ... family.' He cleared his throat. 'One day he was gone and I never knew where he went.'

They fell silent.

Ashore, Will spoke Joseph's name to one of the waiting officers.

Hearing it aloud warmed him. It had been an age.

The officer checked her iPad. 'Will Stanton?'

She smiled. 'Welcome to Hart Island. It is my honour to accompany you to Mr. Reyes' site today. My name is Cara.'

Cara had a soothing voice, practiced but perfect, and it calmed him on the ride to the furthest point of the island, where they had put the victims of AIDS. Where the city could ignore them. Cara reminded him there would be no individual marker for Joseph, as many people were buried together and this can be distressing for families—she said families, meaning him—but many people find it comforting that their loved one isn't alone.

Will wasn't comforted by this or anything, yet. Cara gave him space at the remote field from which he couldn't see the city and the city couldn't see him. Will stood amongst this home to thousands of people like his Joseph, tossed here instead of with their families. Looking down at the soil, placed here thirty-three years ago, he knelt and gently brushed the ground the way he had stroked Joseph's body at the end of those long, terrifying days. Before

the city had buried his beautiful Joseph here without telling him. Even when Will had asked, which he had done again, and again. Even though the doctors knew him, even though he'd been there every day. No one ever told him anything. No one ever seemed to care.

Will knelt, and took a deep breath, noticing the scream had faded from his heart. He finally knew. It wasn't okay, but he knew and he had found him. This place, with its cool air, defiant wildflowers blooming in winter, and its calm, reserved fields, was caring for Joseph now.

“I’d picked arbitrarily because I hadn’t been listening and, moreover, I didn’t care. That was my failing. My perennial failing.”

— Rob Francis
“Everything Fits If You Push Hard Enough”

OPEN LETTER TO A KILLER

Sarah Collins Honenberger

That first night we don't sleep. We wait for her to call; a lifetime in an hour, a second lifetime in the next twenty hours. It doesn't matter where she's gone with what hare-brained boy. It doesn't matter if he leaves her without money for the bus fare home. Or if she's pregnant or dropped out of school. The first morning I call the bank president at home—*I'm sorry to bother you, please help me, just in case*—how to wire money anywhere in the world. I'm ready. She only has to find a payphone, change her mind, accept a mistake, move on. I pray. Her father finds me mumbling under the covers and fits himself next to me, hip to hip, shoulder to shoulder, stiff like a cadaver, and repeats the words, his lips moving but no sound. The echo, like a knife at my throat.

In the afternoon we call the police. In case it's more than a bad decision, more than a lark turned ugly. We raid the photo albums and give them fistfuls of photos. A football game this month, a summer vacation grin, a birthday party with her brother in May, her sorority brunch last winter. We make lists of what she did the morning before she said good-bye, what she was wearing, what she carried in her purse, the names of her friends, the models of their cars, phone numbers of anyone she knew. We let the reporters ask whatever they want for as long as they want. We tell them everything, anything that might convince her to come home.

In my mind the shape of you forms, dark, muscled, narrowed eyes blazing evil. That shape stalks through our house and smashes windows, slashes sofa cushions. Grim, knitted forehead lines on pasty skin, shirt buttoned too tight, collar turned against the wind, lips dry with envy. Your fist in our faces, your throaty cough in the air.

I try and think of other things. We call the detective and leave a message that runs past the time. We call back, a second message and a third. A hundred reasons why you might let her go. We pray harder.

On the third day we concede she isn't simply hiding bad grades or a

boyfriend we wouldn't like. She may not be able to call. We read about cocaine and crystal meth and how college kids can hide addiction. We grill her friends about the days before *the* day, anything out of the ordinary, everything she said, every place she went, who talked with her, who ate with her, who saw her, where. We write it all down and give the notes to the police. They thank us and we thank them. Polite, frantic.

But you tell lies. You touch her skin with greedy hands. You make her cry. You laugh. With your dime store camera, you take pictures and hang them on the wooden posts in your cellar with ten penny nails. You call her names. When she struggles to get free, to climb the stairs, to come home, you slap her and lick the blood off her lips, your sour breath in her face. When she trembles, you run a single grimy finger down one flushed cheek. You see hate in her eyes and you hit her again and again with the back of your hand.

On the fourth day we talk to the television cameras, plead with you to let her go. No one cares if you're alive or lost. You're nothing, less than nothing. But you ignore us. You tune it out and play games. You make her say dirty words, force her to pretend to be a nympho, a call girl, with clothes you collected before you even knew who would wear them.

The search crew works all weekend. More than a thousand people who love her without knowing her traipse through the woods, eyes on the ground, their shoes soaked with the muddled sludge of days-old rain, strangers and friends who weep with frustration when they can't find a single clue. You're invisible. Even then. You're nothing.

On the sixth day we take a plane to the city and tell the whole story to the talk show hosts. We beg in front of millions of people. She's a good girl. Whoever you are, don't hurt her, please let her come home. While the hotline numbers run across the screen, they repeat the reward. Fifty thousand dollars. A hundred thousand, matched by a good Samaritan. We fly home to two hundred and thirty-three messages of apology and prayers. Over and over we report to each other the names of the callers. Over and over we repeat the messages.

You don't care. You don't listen to the television. You put the knife to her arm and make her bleed if she doesn't dance to the music from your gritty dime store boom box. Higher with those arms, shake that booty, you say. You crack up laughing when she cries, her voice hoarse and hollow, her skin raw after hours of your hands rubbing, your fingers pushing and pulling, taking what you want, hurting her and cackling and hurting her more. She faints and you pinch her arm to wake her.

Don't think we can't see your face in the shadows, hear your voice in the stillness. You can't stay hidden long. You're no one special.

Day nine it snows. Ten inches, sixteen, twenty. In my mind she shivers and I hug her warm again. I tear the house apart for clues, secrets hidden in boxes or drawers or old suitcases. I will the phone to ring. You may decide to let her call, once to show off, to convince us of your power, the victor with his spoils. Not kind, but cruel, yet we hope you call. We pray.

It never crosses your mind that she's wanted elsewhere. She's yours, a toy, a playgirl of your very own, the prostitute who screamed when you touched her—you twisted her fingers to broken—the mother who let you crawl into bed while whatever man she'd brought home from the corner bar waggled himself into her from the back. And sometimes she let him do it to you, even though you begged for it to stop. Don't think we feel sorry for you. Don't think we'll let it pass and get over what you're doing now.

On Christmas morning we stand by the window for hours and watch for a cab at the corner, a phantom car to drop her, quaking in the storm, battered, crumpled clothes, barefoot, like trash no one wants.

You're tired, hungry. You have to go back to work. She's stopped fighting. It isn't fun anymore. Your camera's out of film. The boom box died. You've remembered there are other girls. You stuff her mouth with the rags you used to wipe up blood and semen and vomit. In the fierce, silent night, you consider how to drag her to the car and lace her wrists to the seatbelt bolted to the floor so she can't be seen. You fantasize where to dump her, out by the train tracks where no one will remember a dented sedan with one taillight and an expired inspection sticker. You debate which fast food place for drive-through afterwards and the quickest way back to the corner market for more beer. The image of her curled body on the scarred train crossing slides across your mind and your grin lingers. For just an instant you're sad she'll be gone.

But you climb the stairs anyway and leave her moaning in the dark cellar. Her blood puddles on the floor. Another porno movie that you never turn off, another night of jacking off on the bare mattress, another dream of a new girl with clean, combed hair and fresh lipstick and painted fingernails.

Forty-four days and there's a sign on every lamp post, every bus station for one hundred miles. In black and white, where the color's faded, she stares back at the world. I sit on the floor outside her bedroom. My fingers flex in and out, waiting. Fist or no fist, I want you close enough to grab. As soon as she can escape, she'll telephone. As long as she's breathing, she'll call. She's smart, resourceful. She'll figure out a way. The world recognizes her face, her name. Someone will see her. Someone will call the police. Someone who wants the reward, who needs the money, who wants to be part of the solution. Even now they search for her street by street, town by town.

Maybe you ride by the poster and think hey, that girl's pretty, you should try to find that girl and get rid of the dirty, used one in your basement. You stop taking her food. You don't go to the grocery store when the last water bottle is gone. Worried that someone will connect the car with where you picked her up, you leave the car in the locked garage. Stocking cap pulled low, you stalk the campus and the playgrounds. You talk to a middle-school girl, but she runs away.

"Fuck," you scream, "fuck." *Beer*, you think. You need to calm down, clean up the mess, start fresh. These girls are all alike. No staying power, more trouble than they're worth, ungrateful. You're bored. You're horny.

Forty-eight days. I wake up in the warm house and can't stand to be near my husband. He's stopped shaving. No shower in weeks. He drives in wider and wider circles, away from home overnight and back when he can't stay awake. No phone calls from the road because the line has to be free for her to call. He crashes in a chair shoved next to the door. He yells in his sleep. On Day Seventy-one he fries eggs and butters the toast and sets the plate down gently in front of me. I eat tiny bites so I won't choke if the phone rings. You're not so far away, flipping through your magazines, stroking the pages, naked breasts and pubic hair, slick and slippery.

"Enough," you say. "It's time." You hose down the basement, metal chair and concrete walls and wooden stairs. You burn the shirt, the paper plates with fingerprints, her boots. You talk yourself out of driving back to where she lies in the shallow crease of hayfield. The memory of bare thigh against the broken stalks, the suggestive bunching of her skirt on pale skin imprinted on the cameo screen of your mind makes you sweat. Sixty-four days and you're through with her.

Don't think you'll be remembered for that, for leaving her, ragged weeds the camouflage for torn clothes, her skin bared to the weather, alone. No one will admire you for abandoning her in the dirt and mud of November rain after you forced her into your car, threw away her phone and her pocketbook, stripped away the sweet smile that made her father glow. No one will write a book about you.

Seventy-one days I wait for her to come home. Seventy years I'd wait even with what I know now. The phone rings. I look up at the stranger. My husband stares back at me. I answer the phone.

Don't think for a minute you've gotten away with it. Don't think they won't find you and bury you in a tiny cell, prison somewhere. Without girls, without glossy magazines or porno movies, without your mother. Don't think a man in that prison won't come at you from behind. No one will hear you scream. No one will care. Don't think you will be forgiven by any God in any heaven.

Seventy-eight days and I pray for none of it to have happened. You know what I pray for because you did it. You win. You lose. She was dead that first night.



MOURNING GIRL

Page Sullivan/Staff Contributing Artist

CHEKHOV'S PLIERS

H. Zuroski

His tooth is aching.

So deeply it is aching that many times a day he finds himself unconsciously cradling his jaw. He's tried looking in the mirror for the culprit, but it only leads to an aching back and a deep crease between his eyebrows. A permanent crease, he worries. He then stares at the furrow in his brow until his eyes sting. It's when he goes to rub them, however, that he notices the vein by his eyebrow, purple and deeply angular. Has it always been there and he simply hasn't noticed it? Perhaps it's been covered by the egregious fold in his lid, which splits his eye into two fat flaps so that it looks like they're slowly slipping off his face. Maybe he's been too preoccupied with the mark on his nose. When he finally leans away from the mirror, an hour has passed and every inch of his face is deep red and welting.

He can't stand to see himself in such a state. Torn up by his own fingers. Mauled. He strips the sheets from his bed and drapes them over the mirror, then crawls over the pillows and hides for days, from himself and everyone else.

It's only once his stomach is painfully empty that he peels himself from his mattress. The oats he makes for himself are gummy and unsatisfying, sticking to the fuzzy filth on his teeth and gluing his mouth shut. He tries to wash it down with water straight from the tap—well water, much better than what they have in the city—but it's too cold and it hurts his aching tooth.

He's digging at it with a finger when his sister rounds the corner.

She startles when she sees him, and he pulls his hand away from his mouth.

"You scared me," she says. "I thought you were Dad."

He notices her hiking boots and the pack on her back but doesn't say anything.

"Where have you been? Hiding in your room?"

“No.” He grits his teeth, but his tooth is too sensitive and his mouth falls open again.

“If anyone asks, you don’t know where I am.”

“Whatever,” he says, and turns to pour the rest of his breakfast down the drain.

They both stiffen at the distant sound of crunching gravel, and his sister pulls at his shoulder.

“Put these back for me, will you?” She presses a pair of pliers into his palm, cold and edged with rust.

“Why would I—” He begins to protest, but she’s disappeared in an instant through the back door.

He slips the tool into his pocket and puts his head back under the tap. If he hurries, he can get back upstairs and spill into bed before his father is through the door.

When he’s halfway up the stairs, the front door opens and he freezes, a hand on the banister.

“Where’s the fire, son?”

The floorboards groan when his father steps over the threshold, as if they too are disappointed by his arrival.

“No fire,” he says. “Just going to my room.”

“Visited your mother yet today?”

He shakes his head, trying to swallow past the thick, stringy saliva that clings to his tongue.

“Before the sun goes down,” his father says. “Hear me?”

He nods, though he has no intention of even going near that room. He hates seeing her like that, molding in that old rocking chair.

“Before sundown. I will.”

His tooth aches, hand flying to press on it through his cheek.

“What’s wrong?” His father frowns.

“Nothing.”

Pain pulses through again, deep in the center of his molar. His father is still watching, so he pulls his hand away, rolling it into a fist at his side. He tongues at the sore spot instead, catching it on the sharp edges of the jagged tooth. “It’s nothing.”

“How about your sister?”

It’s distracting, the pulse in his jaw. “Uh, I haven’t run into her yet.”

Stars spark in the corner of his vision, the pain nearly blinding now. He curses the oatmeal, imagining a shard wedged between his teeth, digging into his gums.

“Sorry, I—” he climbs another step. “I think I’ll go.”

He flies up the stairs, running his tongue along the inner circle of his teeth as he goes, searching for the offensive piece. He doesn't feel anything but slick bone.

Desperation overwhelms him once he reaches his room, and he reaches for the sheet covering the mirror. Dust floats through the air and it's difficult to avoid his own eyes, but he hooks his pinky into his mouth, pulling his plump cheek to the side. He nearly presses his nose to the glass, searching for anything—*anything*—that could be causing the pain.

He doesn't see anything but the mountains and valleys of tooth and gum.

The pain is deeply rooted, sinking and settling in the back of his jaw. It makes his ears ring, hands shaking as he fumbles for the pliers in his pocket.

The metal is cold against his lip, the corrugated edge scraping at his enamel. He taps the nose against the offending tooth, stomach turning when pain sparks, and fits the metal jaws against either side of it.

He squeezes, crying out as he rocks his wrist back and forth, his gums clinging desperately to the bone. He twists and tugs until he isn't sure if the metallic taste in his mouth is from the rusty tool or the warm blood that leaks out over his tongue. He tries swallowing it, to avoid it spilling over his lip, but there's too much to gulp down; it fills his mouth, clogs his throat. He can't even see what he's digging out anymore, only knows it's still there by the deep discomfort in his skull and his hold on the pliers.

He grips the handles with both hands and pulls until his arms shake with the effort. The tooth comes flying out, clinking against the mirror and rolling along the floor. He reaches for it with trembling fingers, cradles it in his palm like his mother's pearl earrings.

Rusty saliva spills from his open mouth, pouring down his chin and dripping rubies into his hand. He sets the pliers down and turns to face his mutilated self in the mirror. Blood stains his lips and shirt. He waits for the relief to flood through him, but the aching pain remains.

EVERYTHING FITS IF YOU PUSH HARD ENOUGH

Rob Francis

The sky may have been cracked for some time. It would've happened slowly, like the tiny webbing that appears in a dam before anyone even notices there's something wrong. Before disaster strikes. I first notice it while we're in the Kingsmoor Centre car park, looking for somewhere to have lunch. It's an aimless Sunday in April, a day that I want to end as soon as possible. Neither of the twins is listening to me, which Clare puts down to hunger, but I suspect it's their innate contempt. I tell myself I don't mind.

Clare has asked a question, but I've missed it because I'm eyeing the split in the sky, trying to judge what it is and if it might be widening. I'm off guard.

"What?"

She sighs. "Where do you want to eat, Kev? Pizza Everything or Oodles of Noodles?"

I want neither, but that's not an option.

"Pizza Everything, I guess."

"Why, what's wrong with Oodles of Noodles?"

Damn. I've misstepped. If only I could focus.

"Nothing. I'm happy with the noodle place. Let's go there."

Clare's face tightens. "No, if you want pizza then fine, let's go to Pizza Everything. I'll have a salad."

"No, really, let's go to Oodles. I only—Jack, Victor, stop that!" I speak without conviction, as always, and the boys ignore me and carry on beating their small fists against the shop window with fierce determination. "I only said pizza because I thought that was what you wanted. Really."

A lie, of course. I'd picked arbitrarily because I hadn't been listening and, moreover, I didn't care. That was my failing. My perennial failing.

"Forget it. Let's go home."

She turns and stalks back to the car, leaving me to round up the confused boys and shepherd them along. They continue to bicker as they

walk. One of them starts to wail, then the other. They sound like defective toys, ready for landfill.

The crack has widened to a jagged white line across the grey sky, running from horizon to horizon.



At home, I can't stop thinking about the tearing sky, so that I go through the evening routine in a daze, nagging at the twins to eat and drink, bathing them, lying on the floor next to their bed until they fall asleep.

Clare is taking a nap, except she's not, because I can hear something playing on her phone. Some episode of *Mad Men* or *House of Cards*, which she always watches alone.

I decide to water the flowerbeds in the back yard, but freeze before I can step outside. The heavens are crazed with fractures, a white net that won't hold up the darkening fragments of the sky for much longer. I close and lock the back door.

In the kitchen I make a pot of tea to calm myself but am careless, trapping my finger in the cutlery drawer so that the nail tears clean off. There is no pain and I count myself lucky. I wrap my finger in a dishcloth, then pour some tea into the mug Clare bought me (*World's Best Dad!*) and watch it cool on the counter while the house sleeps.



I don't need to commute the next day. Almost everyone at the design solutions company I work for has to complete online training on unconscious bias, which we can do from home. Clare drops Jack and Victor at the pre-school on her way to work, so that by nine I'm alone in the house, sitting at my computer and logging onto the company's intranet.

My shoulders ache after a restless night, so I roll them, stretching my neck back and stifling a groan.

There is a crack in the ceiling above my head. A hairline fracture, the old plaster crumbling like everything else in the house.

My chest tightens. I stand, unable to breathe, knocking my coffee across the desk and floor. It doesn't matter. I move to the bedroom wardrobe, sweeping my shirts and suit jackets to one end so I can squeeze in.

It's cool and dark inside and the scent of old fabric and cologne is reassuring. There is no room to sit but I'm content to stand, gasping in soft lungfuls of dust and fibre.

I don't know how long I've been there when Clare gets back. She calls from downstairs, then comes her whispering footfall on the bedroom carpet. She swears when she sees the coffee stain, the mug still lying on the floor.

The wardrobe door sweeps open and I'm faced with her perplexed expression, only a few tweaks away from outright fury.

"What the fuck is this?"

I open my mouth but nothing happens. There is no suitable response.

"I thought you had your training thing? Why are you in the wardrobe? Is this supposed to be funny?"

I'm not sure which question to answer first, but before I can respond, Clare drags me out of my sanctuary by my shirt collar and shoves me in the direction of the computer desk and the drying pool of coffee. She shakes her head, tears in her eyes.

"I'm going to make lunch. You do what you like, Kevin. Maybe start by growing up."

It's a perfect reprimand. Any response would sound childish.

I sit at the computer in silence, trying to focus on the scrolling text, until I hear the front door bang as Clare leaves once more. When I'm sure I'm alone I return to the wardrobe and press my face into the clothes, trying not to think of the gradual disintegration of the world outside.



Next morning I leave for work early, sunglasses on despite the rain. I keep my eyes almost closed, open just enough to see roughly where I'm going. It's not for long; once I've driven the Nissan out of the street, I turn right instead of left and park up at Sainsbury's, then return to stand in the alley beside the house until Clare leaves, the twins in tow.

I call work, tell them I'm ill, and let myself back in.

Cracks have spread all through the house now; the ceilings, walls, doors and windows all finely webbed. I make my way to the bedroom, thinking to get back in the wardrobe—but that too is fragmented, a network of scars across its surface.

Back downstairs, I open the dresser cupboard to look on the piles of DVDs and books I have stuffed in there over the years. It's small, but I may just fit.

I claw the contents out and over the floor then back myself in, hunched over, head down, chin digging into my chest. The door won't close; my knee is poking out, and shuffle as I might I can't get it in far enough. I twist my leg up and pull on it hard as I can, breath hissing in my too-tight throat, chest heaving.

The bone snaps.

I wait but no pain comes. The door closes and all is hot and still in the confines of the cupboard. I feel just fine. Curious, I push my way back out to sit on the floor amidst the flood of DVDs and faded paperbacks, and straighten my leg out. It clicks back into place. I stand. It's not the same, but I can walk on it. It must be something like a miracle, except it doesn't feel very miraculous. Not at all.

Cracks weave across the wooden floor now, their pattern jagged and obscene.

I hobble back upstairs to the spare room, looking for a better hiding place. Here is all the debris of our life, collected in a bric-a-brac trove. Old toys, boxes of nappies and baby wipes, piles of clothes that may be new, or may be old, or may be gifted. All wanted and unwanted at the same time. There are the suitcases that Clare took out the last time she said she was leaving, packing them furiously from open drawers while I begged her to stay, hoping deep down that this time she might really go.

There is Jack and Victor's treasure box, now packed with baby toys they have outgrown and ready for donation to charity. It's small, but I think I can fit. With enough effort.

I empty the box, pushing all the toys into a big black bin bag that I knot and drop carefully out of the spare room window into the alley below.

Feet in first, then I sit, head between my knees. My knees are too high. I bend and break one leg and then the other, so that they can fold easily in my lap. Curve my shoulders and neck down and try to close the lid, in vain. I snap one shoulder, but I need the other arm to manoeuvre the lid. Which just leaves my neck. If I can break that, the box should close and I'll be safe. They won't find me here for some time.

The front door bangs and three voices spill into the house at once. Clare and the twins. Something must have gone wrong—one of them is ill, or the nursery is closed, or the roads are blocked, or—

My heart races, my gorge rises. The box won't close. I force my head down as far as it will go, but can't quite seem to snap my neck.

Footsteps on the stairs. The door to the spare room whooshes open. I glance up as the twins run into the room. They don't see me but I see them, and the pale white web that runs across their skin like some kind of reverse tattoo, the vivid marks of absence. Cracks in their flesh, their blood, their skin and bones. They are breaking apart.

And they don't even know it. They will shatter, like everything else, and I'll be left alone to pick up the pieces and try to fit everything back together.

Victor looks at the box and makes eye contact with me. His mouth opens wide.

I unfurl from the box like a startled spider as the children scream. Clare runs in and I wince as her look of alarm is replaced by fury and revulsion. She gathers the boys in her arms and gulps in a breath. There are fractures across her face too, and thin lines along her clothes, her hands, her teeth.

"Daddy's just playing a game," she says softly as they sob against her legs.

I straighten, my bones cracking back into place. I can't quite stand properly, but Clare can't tell the difference. The boys aren't even looking at me.

"Yes," I say, and in that instant my heart lifts because I think I know what to do; what will cover all the cracks, all across the world. The snapping and re-snapping of my bones has brought me to my senses.

"Just a little game."



I stop at St. Barnabas first, the little car park round the back dark and silent in the early hours of the morning. There is no-one to see as I pop the boot and haul out the treasure chest full of toys for donation. I stand it against the wall and give it a pat goodbye, with a whispered wish that it finds a good home.

Then I'm back in the Nissan, the radio soft and lulling as I drive a few miles to the tiny lay-by at the edge of the woods I pass each morning on the way to work. The broken shell of an old cottage stands in the trees some distance from the road; it's almost impossible to see unless you go looking for it. I walked by it once, years ago, before the twins were born. It's sheltered and there is no need for anyone to go there. A quiet and perfect place. A family could be happy there, if it was intact.

I kill the lights and open the boot again. It takes some time to carry the three suitcases to the cottage, a pen torch clasped between my teeth so I don't trip. Modern suitcases are amazing; you can fit so much in them. I had to bend and break a few things—a lot of things, actually—but still. Got it all packed in the end. Everything fits if you push hard enough.

I leave the cases in a corner of what would have been the living room of the cottage and return to the car. My backpack is on the passenger seat. I'm going on a trip, but I don't need much. I never have.

I drive until the sky lightens to a sun-bruised bronze. I am pleased to see it is unbroken, the cracks papered over in triplicate with smooth layers of blood and skin and bone.

“There are always those like me, the ones who can’t let go, not because they refuse, but because they simply can’t. Sometimes, the pain and regret are all you’ve got.”

— Shannon Hollinger
“Here I Am”

BOTANY LESSON

Shelly Jones

Plait paperwhites in your hair to attract a lover.

Hang yarrow from the rafters above your marriage bed to ensure seven years of love.

Tuck campanula under your pillows. Their bells will ring with your lover's constancy or wilt if they're unfaithful.

If you are married for a year and your belly has never swelled with child, place a vase of daffodils in the corner; their buttery petals will keep you fertile. But if you raise chickens, do not plant these bulbs near the roost or no eggs will hatch.

If your lover brings you dogbane, beware!
Act swiftly, tossing the sprig into the fire, or better, wrap it in old leather and toss it in the river.

Tuck clover in your boot for luck.

Bathe in thyme and sweet marjoram each solstice to cleanse your body of ills and sorrows. Remind your lover to do the same.

Carry marigold leaves in your pocket, leathery and ragged, to quiet gossip whispered about you.

Pheasant's eyes will only remind you of arguments past, old injuries, miring you in vainful pride, painful remembrance: banish it from your garden.

When your lover aches, gripping their side, their back,
a strange pain tingling their arm, pepper them
with fennel, mugwort, sage. Sit by their bedside, comb
lavender through their hair, place laurel in their clammy palm.

Steep crushed wandflower leaves and drink deeply of their bitterness
to ease you. Hold the warm cup in both trembling hands. Let it
sooth you, dull your memories. Do not believe the superstition that witches
use these fairy bellflowers to transform into hares. There is no disguise here,
only the steam from your cup to mask your tears.

Watch the days grow longer, ice cracking with the thaw. Let go of grief
when snowdrops appear in the pasture, their heads bowed in prayer for
spring.

IN THE CITY OF FLOATING WOLVES

Tara Campbell

The window is still open. The window is always open, and there are always drops of blood on the windowsill, always stray bits of viscera on the floor. Always all that's left of the body. A leaf or a clump of hair confirms what everyone has come to expect: wolves. It doesn't matter what floor you're on, or how fine the home—for example, the top floor, for example, the mayor's house. They always get in.

He should have known better than anyone not to open the window. He was the one who hired you to come do something about the wolves.

The constable—the word still charms you after all these months—shakes his head and mutters in his clipped English, *It was bound to catch up with him.*

What? you ask.

Everything, he says, using tweezers to transfer a strand of coarse grey hair from the windowsill to a baggie. To confirm what everyone knows.



You never expected this. When you answered the mayor's letter, and he wrote back, repeating the word "floating," you thought it was merely figurative. You thought it meant the wolves were happy, and of course you had your doubts, which is why you felt it was so important that you go.

All those months ago, when that scratchy, long-distance phone call came from a village you'd never heard of, you asked how to spell it and googled it as the mayor spoke of floating wolves. After only ten minutes of talking, he offered you an assignment to continue the work your research collaborator had begun (which he hadn't shared with you). The mayor offered you a generous salary, and you asked how to spell the name of the town again while wondering if they were offering you as much as your collaborator had been paid.

When still nothing came up in your search, he said *It's in the north of the country. We'll pick you up from the airport.*

You told yourself these "floating" wolves needed a protector. Surely they were only reacting to some perceived threat.

You went, just to see. You saw. You stayed.



You follow a trickle of blood down cobblestone streets (cobblestone, still) past the bakery, the flower stall, the fruit vendor. You don't usually find these many traces, for this distance. The trail gradually dissipates into a drop of blood here, a bit of skin there, until those also dry up. You keep walking in the same direction, asking if anyone has seen anything. But even though there are no witnesses, they all insist that this is to be expected in the city of floating wolves.

Have you ever seen a pawprint? they ask.

You walk away from the aromas of bread and coffee, heading toward peat and moss, toward the flutter of aspen and maple leaves. You don't even care about finding this particular wolf (or wolves, good god, after all these months you don't even know that much). Birds twitter and pine needles crackle under your boots as you walk into the sun-speckled shadow forest. The path curves to the right, and you almost follow it. Almost.

These wolves float.

You part the branches and step into the underbrush.



They've given you the notes your research collaborator left behind. His theory was the wolves don't come for just anyone. They don't come for the innocent, or those who think of themselves as such. They don't necessarily come for the wicked either—only for those who think of themselves that way. They come for the troubled, the beleaguered, the guilt-riddled. Sometimes the cause is obvious. At times the victim even leaves a note before swinging the windowpane open to the night.

Early in your stay, you installed recording equipment inside the home of the man reported to be the evilest in town. There have been no wolves; but on the other hand, he has also not engaged in any behavior befitting his reputation. Perhaps, in both cases, it is because they know they are being watched.

Perhaps the same reason someone would go into these woods by themselves.



Twigs rake your face and vines tug at your boots as you struggle through the forest. You don't know what you're looking for, exactly, or how high you should look. Will there be a corpse in the crook of a tree? Do the wolves slink among the trunks at eye level, or float above the canopy?

You hadn't planned on entering the forest; you thought you'd just take notes and leave, but you couldn't resist the unusually strong trail of clues. You feel for the bear spray on your utility belt, repeatedly, ensuring yourself it's still there. Your pistol sits uselessly at home.

With every step, you ask yourself why you're still out there, why you didn't ask for anyone to come with you. They would have laughed and shaken their heads, as they always do when you talk about going into the woods, but walking alone you allow yourself a bit of magical thinking: perhaps this time someone would have come.

But they didn't. And you're at risk, just as anyone might be. Certainly you're not blameless; far from it. Do you think your position will keep you safe? The mayor apparently thought so. Do you think your curiosity insulates you? Your virtue, the selfless researcher come to keep the wolves safe?

If there's anything you've found, they're not the ones who need a savior.



You've asked people why they stay. They look at you with wonder, pity, suspicion. They narrow their eyes and answer your question with a question: *Why do you stay?*

To study the wolves, you answer.

They nod. *That's why you came*, they say, *but why do you stay?*

At first you wondered whether the wrong thing weren't being investigated, whether it was the people who needed a good examination. But then ... then you began to wonder why you do stay. You've seen what the wolves do—not directly, but the aftermath—and there's no way to predict who they will visit next. When he was still alive, the mayor told you the pattern: it seemed a person only knew the wolves were coming on the evening they were to arrive, and by then, the wolves were welcomed.

At first you found it difficult to believe that someone would open their door or window to a wolf. But some nights, alone with your thoughts, your second and third guesses, you can imagine why it might seem like release.



You tromp through the forest, following the same direction as far as you can tell. Even though you're lifting your feet, wispy vines still snake up from the earth to snag your toes. It's the little things that get you.

No one blamed you outright, but you're doing enough of that on your own. All of the sympathy for the loss of your colleague—your research collaborator of decades—slid right off your back like water off a wolf pelt. You both knew he was taking unnecessary risks; you could have intervened. But you wanted that prize as much as he did, so you didn't say a word.

You also wanted his wife.

When you stop, wishing for the hundredth time you'd brought water, it hits you: silence. No birdsong. No small creatures rustling about in the underbrush. You look up into the trees, squinting at the sun slanting through the trunks (is it possible you've been in the forest for that many hours?). No breeze fluttering the leaves. The forest has gone still.

Out of the corner of your eye you see a shadow passing smoothly between the trees. It disappears when you turn toward it. After a moment's hesitation you scramble to follow, heart thumping at your luck. Except it isn't luck, is it? Whatever you've been tracking has eluded you for hours, weeks, months. It wouldn't have allowed itself to be seen unless it wanted you to see it.

You stop.



Stop hovering, he'd said while packing his gear. I'll be fine.

At least tell me where you're going, you'd said.

But he didn't. He never quite trusted you, despite the collaboration the two of you projected to the public. You couldn't exactly blame him. You told yourself it was the press's fault for focusing their attention on the female researcher, for putting her in the spotlight.

Only once he'd arrived at his destination did he call you. It was the same country code as where you are now.

Don't worry, I know what I'm doing, he'd told you before going out on what would become his last observation. You didn't believe in a wolf that would fail to defend its territory. But when you recalled the glances you'd shared with his wife over the previous weekend's dinner, pretending it was your first time in his home; how she'd so politely asked what kind of wine you prefer, as though you'd only met once before at a faculty function; how you insisted on helping her in the kitchen afterward, and he didn't have a problem in the world with letting the women clean up while he relaxed in

the living room; how you ached to touch her again as you stood at her side, washing the same dish over and over; how, finally, you turned to face her, and your lips found hers while jazz spilled in through the closed kitchen door—it was then that you allowed yourself not to worry about him at all.

After his death, his contacts began searching for you. After all, they didn't know the truth behind your collaboration. He'd kept this project close to his chest after seeing how you'd insinuated yourself into the last one.

He was never very good at tracking multiple variables at once.



The slits of sunlight shining through the trees are fading. You could turn back now, tell people you never caught up with the wolves; you could fly back home and use your research collaborator's notes to publish articles respectfully summarizing his work, develop the studies into a book, which compassionate colleagues would read and assign to their classes. By now there has been a respectful interlude; you could check in on his wife, ask how she's faring, be seen commiserating, and let everyone witness how things take their natural course until you finally, bravely clasp one another's hands, shaking your heads in amazement, *still grieving, but yes, very much in love*, insisting that *no one could have been more surprised* than the two of you.

But that wouldn't stop the wolves floating in your mind.

Another spot of darkness sweeps between the trunks farther ahead, and it almost seems inevitable that this night would come.

You follow.

HERE I AM

Shannon Hollinger

Here I am.

Back at the place of my ruin, the location of my biggest regret, the fount of my guilt. It's a horrible day for it, too. Figures.

A cloud of lifeless grey shrouds the woods, wrapping the trees in a frigid cloak of despair. I fight the urge to shiver against the damp chill, a fine mist suspended in the air, hovering like an apparition. And there *are* ghosts concealed within the wintry haze. There are ghosts everyone, here, round every bend of the trail, behind every boulder, nestled in the hollows of the trees.

I watch my mom and sister get out of the car, bundled against the bitter, biting cold. Even though it's a two-hour drive, even though it's been six years, we all still come back here, to this place. They might not come as often as they used to, but life goes on, hope fades, priorities change. For most, at least.

There are always those like me, the ones who can't let go, not because they refuse, but because they simply can't. Sometimes, the pain and regret are all you've got. Or maybe, some of us just don't deserve a reprieve.

I sneak glances at them as we trudge up the path. Hands buried deep in their pockets, puffs of white birthing from their lips with each breath. I wonder if they hate me. Decide that they must. Afterall, it's because of me that we're all here.

I hate the memory, and yet I can't let it go.

The trees watch us pass, silent witnesses to our grief, as they've been so many times before. Surrounded by decaying brush, broken branches, a warren of barren limbs overhead—there's a theme here. A symbol of what this place has come to represent.

It infects the very air.

I can't shake the sorrow that has me clutched in its grasp. It's invaded my entire being, become the DNA of which my cells are built.

What's left of my family continues onward, the absolute quiet broken only by the occasional sigh, the soft shuffle of footsteps. That day was so different. The woods vibrant and alive, thriving and green. Bird calls and butterflies filling the air, the sun overhead bright in a sky of brilliant, cloudless blue, warmth wrapping you in its comforting embrace.

I was so young then, only fourteen. But that doesn't mean I should be forgiven.

A vicious wind kicks up, winding through the trees, bare branches thrashing wildly, trying to ward off the attack. Leaf carcasses stir as the frigid hands of the gale search along the path, seeking us out, weaving icy fingers around us, squeezing. My sister, Becca, wipes frost from her eyes. Or is it tears?

I wonder if she knows that I see his face everywhere. The rosy apple of his cheeks on the breast of a robin. The tawny glint of his eyes in every chipmunk. The unruly curls of his hair in the way the ferns unfurl in spring.

My mom stops, sinks down to a rock beside the trail. Becca squats beside her, taking her hand. The same hand that used to hold mine, that brushed my hair, caressed my cheek. The smooth skin now spotted; the strength now withered. Even though we're almost to our destination, my mom needs to rest. The spring in her step disappeared with the light in her eyes. And I'm to blame.

Jeffery was the kind of kid who made each day brighter. He brought joy to everyone around him. You couldn't help but adore him, his gleeful giggles, the sweet smack of his lips as he gave you a sticky kiss. I like to think he would have grown into an adult who would have made the world a better place. If he'd had the chance. But he never did.

My mom stands, ready to move on. She loops her arm through Becca's. A jolt of jealousy prickles up my spine on spider legs. She always preferred Becca. Even before.

They'd gone for a hike that day, higher up the trail, past the lake, up to the fields where the wildflowers grow. Pink, yellow, purple petals bobbing in the breeze. Maybe I'd like to have gone, too. They never even asked.

But I can't blame them, not really. I had one job to do, and I failed. It's no one's fault but my own.

Ahead, the trees spread, opening their arms around the lake. For a brief second, I see glittering sapphire water, golden sand gently sloping to the shore. A smiling little boy playing at the edge where the two meet.

I blink and it's gone, the water dark and choppy, the landscape painted in bleak shades of grey.

Six years, and still, here we are. We'll walk around the lake. Search the beach. Examine every thin piece of bleached driftwood with a careful eye.

Six years, and we're all still searching for something. Anything. Even if those things are different to each one of us.

I follow behind them, watching the slump of their shoulders as they trudge around the water, heads bent close together as their eyes probe the sand. Their whispers carry back to me, words not meant for my ears. I wish I couldn't hear them, but I can.

They seldom stop to inspect anything anymore. The trip has become more of a pilgrimage than a quest. After all these years, hope is no longer alive. The effort has become futile. An act of unconsciousness, like washing dishes without seeing them. Folding a shirt without realizing the color.

We've almost completed the lap when we arrive at the rock. It was once my rock, but I don't want it anymore. Faces pale, noses chapped red from the wind, they pause. I stop, too.

Becca drops my mother's arm, sinks to her knees in the sand, circling an arm around the rough stone.

"Damn it, Addy! Why'd you do it?"

I hang my head in shame.

What is there to say?

She smacks the rock once, twice, three times, tears rolling down her cheeks. I know she wishes she were hitting me instead. I do, too.

My mom sags against the oak that grows beside the rock, her head just below the hollow marring its ancient trunk. In this moment, I want so badly to tell her, to tell them both. To admit the truth about what happened that day. To tell them what went wrong.

Perhaps then they'd find peace. Maybe I would, as well. I want to scream my confession at the top of my lungs, throw myself at their feet and beg their forgiveness. But I don't. I can't.

The moment has passed.

I lag behind on the way back to the lot, lost in thoughts about the way things were before. Before Becca and my mom came back that day, arms loaded with wildflowers. Before the sound of my mother's voice screaming my name drew me from the wood line. Before her anguished wail tore through the air. And my heart. Before Jeffery was gone.

I see an image of her armful of wildflowers—pink, yellow, purple—falling like tears shed in slow motion, littering the ground as she fell to her knees. But that was then. There is no color in this world now.

The hike down goes quicker than it does up, but it's infinitely sadder. Another return empty handed. Another unsuccessful attempt to bring him home.

I wish I could hold on to this moment. As unpleasant as it is, it's all I've got. I don't think there are many more like them in the future. All it takes is an

instant for everything to change forever. It's a lesson I learned the hard way, one that's been branded on my very soul.

Becca unlocks the car, blowing on her fingers to warm them before slipping behind the wheel. My mother collapses into the passenger seat, a sail gone flat on a windless day. The car starts with a cough of exhaust, the tires stirring dust across the dirt lot. I wonder how long it will be before we're here together again. If ever.

I watch them go until long after their taillights fade and vanish into the falling dusk.

Then I begin the lonely trek back up to the lake, alone with my memory of that day once again. My fourteen-year-old self, dozing on a blanket in the sand, listening to my baby brother happily babbling to himself as he built sandcastles at the water's edge. I can't tell you how long he'd been quiet before I noticed. He was waist deep by the time I snatched him up off his chubby, unsteady little legs.

I was scared. Terrified. I didn't mean to shake him so hard. I only meant to scold him. To let him know how devastated I'd be if something happened to him.

But something did happen to him.

Tears burning my eyes, I sniffed as I gave him a hug, breathing in the sweet scent of his soft body before I set him back on the ground. Only, he didn't toddle off when I put him down. He didn't stand at all. He slumped to the sand like a doll. Limp. Broken. Lifeless.

I panicked.

I couldn't let my family know what I'd done to the little boy we all cherished so much, even if it was an accident. Better they think he drowned or wandered off and got lost, anything but the truth. The truth is too painful to face, too ugly to hear, too impossible to say.

I was so careful as I gathered him into my arms, trying to make up for being too rough before, but I knew it wouldn't change anything. I carried him to the giant oak, to the hollow where I used to hold him up to whisper his secrets every time we came to the lake. Only, there'd be no more whispers. This was one secret he'd never get the chance to tell.

Climbing up on the rock, I slipped his small body into the hollow.

As I watched his tiny hands disappear, I realized I couldn't do it. I changed my mind. Jeffery was scared of the dark. I couldn't leave him here in the woods, alone. I couldn't abandon my baby brother. I'd have to own up to what I did. Only, once again, it was too late. I couldn't get him back from the tree.

My mother's scream was so sharp, so shrill, that the only way I knew the sound came from her, that the word was my name, was by the rending I

felt in my heart. I ran back to the beach, not yet sure what I'd say. When our eyes met, when her frantic gaze left my face and looked around me for the little boy who was not there, when she collapsed to her knees, the saddest sound I ever heard coming from between her parted lips, I knew I'd never be able to make myself say the truth.

I'm sorry. So sorry. Oh, God, Mommy, I'm sorry. I said it over and over again as she and Becca searched the beach and the woods near where we were. I whispered it as I watched them both run off down the shore in different directions, searching for any signs of where Jeffery could have gone. I thought it as I carried the knife from our picnic basket, a film of soft cheese clinging to the blade, with me to the oak with the hollow in it. Where Jeffery was alone in the dark he was so afraid of.

I lost strength quicker than I thought I would. My life surged from my veins, each beat of my heart a little weaker. I sank to the sand beside the rock, throwing my arms around it, pretending I was holding my brother. And I died.

From my place of nonbeing I watched the search crews canvass the woods, the police drag the lake, my family drown in their grief, and I died again. I waited for Jeffery to join me in this other realm, but he never came. Another death. Whenever they leave and I watch the window of their hope shrink smaller, the light of their faith grow dimmer, I die anew.

I reach the lake, the rock, the oak with the hollow in it. Every time I hope that this will be the time he comes to me, placing his chubby little hand in mine, smacking his cherub lips against my cheek. Each time I know it won't happen. I hope it's because he's in a better place.

I lay on the ground, my back against the rock, facing the tree so he knows that I'm here, in case he gets scared of the dark. Just in case ... here I am.

LOST & FOUND

Michael Allyn Wells

A dead bird on parking lot pavement.
I read we are losing birds at an alarming
rate. We are losing bees the same.

I lost a dollar-twenty-five in a vending
machine yesterday. Later I saw
someone else did too and put a post-it-note
with first name, extension, and "owes me
a buck fifty" written on it. It seemed
unfazed by the assault on its reputation.

I lost a parking spot at Wal-Mart
to some asshole that could tell
I had been waiting to turn.

I've lost my wallet. But I have
misplaced one too, which is
a different matter.

In all the environmental upheaval
maybe the bird in the parking lot
was misplaced as well. Climate
change could have caught him
off guard and his unexpected travels
wore the poor little thing out
and he just keeled over.

I realized one day that I lost
a Saint Christopher medal

and my chain hung naked
around my neck. I walked
the yard searching for it,
certain it had fallen off
while I was mowing,
but never found it.

For days I was afraid to venture
far from home because I had
lost my patron saint of travelers.
But I found the courage to let it go.

FINDING PEACE WITH THE ANECHOIC SYSTEM

Matt Brandenburg

Everyone on the *Chumps on Parade* message board is saying this band, **Unheard Voices**, is going to be the next **Nine Inch Nails**. They're based out of Michigan, recorded their album *Noir* in a garage, and so far, all their shows have only been in bars, but by all accounts, it's only a short amount of time before they hit it big. Everything about this hits my trend-searching sweet spot. As I mentally lock away their name for reference, I turn down my stereo and click the link to one of their songs. Electric drums, smooth vocals, haunting synths—it's almost a carbon copy of *The Fragile*, except for one element I can't pinpoint. I replay the track, pushing my headphones tight against my head, and my apartment melts away.

A breeze I can't feel whispers through tall grass, and insects chirp in the distance. Something heavy pads close by, its breath whistling between teeth, a low growl behind me promising a painful death. Silence takes over, accentuating my heartbeat, before a urine-inducing roar fills my ears.

"Holy crap!"

I tear off the headphones, accidentally pulling them from the computer, and blink my room back into focus. I lap up the surrounding reality: my window revealing nighttime, my stereo surrounded by a ton of legit and burned CDs, homework I'm ignoring, Katie's note—*Mary: Please talk to the landlord*—and a picture of me when I wore tartan skirts and short hair, hanging with my brother and Omar from At The Drive In, Adam's face scratched out. Once I come back to my senses, a burst of laughter covers my embarrassment. *Stupid girl, you're in your apartment*. The thought crosses my mind to listen again, but just thinking about the strange auditory experience sends a shiver down my spine.

Before I forget, I make sure to respond to the post with how insane the song is and note that I'm looking forward to whatever Unheard Voices does next. Then I scroll down, hoping to find anything about how the band created that haunting effect. After five pages, I find a reference to them using

3D sounds and ambient field recordings. Apparently, this involves setting up microphones in random locations and capturing the sound. There's more to it, but it doesn't really help me determine if this is going to be a new trend. Adam would've known, probably would've told me all about it. I brush the thought aside. No point falling down the rabbit hole of how he used to always clue me in on new bands. Or how he decided to betray our love of music and leave me with the terror that was our parents. A few more minutes of searching and I ditch the board, jump on Yahoo, and discover an out-of-date message group focused on field recordings.

Stifling a yawn while scrolling, I wonder if I should try to get some sleep. Tomorrow and work are coming fast. And since I'm not going to be able to count on my roommate's half of the rent, I need to keep my job. Through sleepy eyes I read headings about ideal microphones, what to do if someone catches you on private property, and how to not capture yourself breathing. I'm about ready to call it a night when I come across the latest posts, all focused on some DePaul audio engineer's pure silent track and how it's supposed to elicit euphoric peace in whoever listens.

Most of them talk about it not existing, while others say it's a joke. There are a few stating how dangerous the track is. My curiosity piques, waking me up enough to dig a little deeper. Part of me wants to go get Katie until I remember she's over in Spring Grove with her parents, figuring out what to do now that she's finished at McHenry Community College. I don't let the fact that she's ditching me, like Adam did, dampen that I found something crazy.

First thing I do is look at the one claiming it's dangerous and find something about how the human mind can only handle about forty minutes of pure silence before going insane. They all end with pleas for the moderators to delete the post with the link to the track. I bite my lip and skim backwards until I find the original, a simple hyperlink that takes me to a web page titled *Experience Peace and Hear God through Silence*.

A black background with a wall of red texts greets me. My eyes hurt from the harsh mixture of colors. A cursory glance yields fun pieces of wisdom—how fragile the body is to sound, how with just a few low notes you can make someone shit themselves, how the right pitch and frequency can stop a heart. It doesn't take long for me to notice there is no "downloads" section containing the silent track.

Somewhere in the apartment's parking lot, the deep drone of bass begins to rumble, probably from one of my neighbor's cars. It feels rude, considering it's the middle of the night, but I pay it no mind as I rub my eyes, trying to stop the headache that's forming at the back of my head.

A passage describes how the world is surrounded by sounds,

frequencies, vibrations—that all this noise hinders deep thought. The thrumming somehow gets lower and at the same time louder, rattling my keyboard, my chair, my teeth. They go on to write about how we've polluted the world with sound and how we need true silence to hear the voice of nature. Finding it hard not to roll my eyes, I contemplate going to sleep when the last sentence comes back to me.

Need true silence to hear the voice of nature.

I snap back to my computer, eager to continue. The bass of whatever my neighbor is playing drops the pretense of rhythm and becomes a single note that zeroes in right to my heart and brain. Bursts of gray flashes across my vision, my joints feel like they're wrapped in hot barbed wire, and a humid fog fills my skull. I struggle to keep my head up to finish reading.

Look behind the facade and into the code to find the silence.

Fighting the urge to faint, I exert all my energy to close the browser. *Maybe I have the flu?* Probably all the late nights sitting here are catching up to me. There's a fleeting thought of calling into work, so I can fight this thing. Deep down I know it's just an excuse to figure out whatever that last line means. Firefox closes and I sink into the chair, my body already cooling down.

"What the hell just happened?" My voice is hoarse, yet I can feel my head clearing.

In the silence I notice that the annoying bass sound has stopped, and I wonder if that was what caused me to feel sick. Then I remember the line in the blog about using sounds to make people shit themselves and my scalp prickles. Shaking the thought away, I crash on my bed, already planning on sleeping until I have to go to work.



Groggy and a little pissed at myself for staying up so late, I start getting ready for my job. In the middle of brushing my teeth I stop, realizing I never actually found a link to the silent track. I throw on some jeans and flannel, then boot my computer back up, yet when I stare at Firefox, something stops me from going directly to the blog. Instead, I log onto a couple of my favorite music message boards and ask them if they've ever heard of a silent track that's supposed to elicit a euphoric peace. With that done, I rush out the door for work.

I get to Camelot Music and my shift is a blur of stocking CDs and helping customers while the promise of peace burrows in my brain. Between sales, I try to figure out why the guys on the field recording board thought there was something dangerous on the blog when I couldn't find anything.

Yet, I can't shake the feeling that there was a reason it was posted, and it has something to do with that last line. *Maybe it's a riddle or a code?*

I'm ripped from my thoughts by a couple of kids wearing trucker hats. "Yo, you got that new Gorillaz album, the one from the iPod commercials?"

"God, why do you want that? Their first one was so much better. No one understands how amazing Del the Funky Homosapien was on that album. This new one is such a cash grab. You seriously need to not buy into the hype."

They look at me like I'm nuts and flip me off while my manager, Patrick, guides me to the back.

"Mary, what's going on? That was pretty rough, even for you."

"I'm just sick of dealing with posers like that. They gotta know there's better music out there than what's on MTV." I ball my fists tight until I can feel the bite of my nails into my palms.

"Yeah, that's fine and all, but we can't keep having this talk. You can judge them all you want, but wait until they leave the store at least."

Pat is a nice guy and all, but sometimes I think he might be an idiot. Case in point: he has me unpack boxes to keep me off the floor, like it's a punishment. Getting a chance to see what's new before everyone else and not having to deal with customers, darn. As I'm unpacking, I find a case of *Mezmerize*, the new album from System Of A Down, and I gag. Doing everything I can to push away memories of *the night*, I kick the box under a shelf. A sense of relief washes over me and I continue to work until Jess comes in and I can take my break.

Wandering the mall, the last sentence of the blog circles around my head, taunting me. Part of me wonders why I'm letting this bother me—I should be focusing on keeping my job and a roof over my head. As I make my way down the escalator back towards the store, I notice the pain in my jaw and realize I've been clenching it this whole time.

If that isn't a sign that I need to find a way to combat the constant pressure, I don't know what is.



After I get home, I check a couple of the message boards. There's a link to an article from a few years ago in my mailbox about a DePaul Audio Engineer professor being dismissed for dangerous experiments. Several people sent me personal messages asking if I found the track, send them a copy. I "reply all" and let them know I'll definitely share it when I find it. After that, I go to the article, wondering if this is about the same guy that wrote the blog.

The first line confirms my suspicion, and in a weird way validates the possibility that the silent track could work. According to the article, Professor Scott Hicks liked to experiment with silence and the human body. He got in some trouble for leaving a student in a sound-proof chamber for an hour, causing the student to need serious mental rehabilitation. Because Hicks was a white male, he only got a slap on the wrist. He continued to experiment. Two years later he showed up on campus having punctured both of his eardrums, screaming about how there's something hiding in the silence, surrounding us, more powerful than God, devouring everything. Obviously, that was beyond what the University wanted to deal with, so they canned him.

My skin feels like it's been stuffed with steel wool as I weigh my options. I could give this up and never think about it again. Or I could find the track, knowing that I'm using something an insane person created and is dangerous. But what if this insane person knows what he's doing and it's actually a revolutionary breakthrough? I stare at the screen, Adam's picture just in view. It took him a minute to sever the only lifeline I had in that house. Nodding, I decide there's no harm in digging a little deeper.

Nerves keep me from going straight to the blog, so I decide to do some sleuthing using the last sentence of the post as a keyword. Before I start, I check out the window for any cars that might start playing their shitty bass, then put Tangerine Dream on the stereo. Each combination of words I try results in a bunch of shit that leads me nowhere.

Time ticks by as I sink deeper into the web. Tangerine Dream changes to Stefano Leproto to Ministry, anything to keep me going. My brain throbs while my eyes grow itchy, the light from the screen burning into my retinas. Giving it one last try before calling it a night, I search "blog, behind, code" and get the answer I should have known: HTML.

The concept is like a bolt of adrenaline. I pop up the blog, my step to pure silence, and figure out how to view the source code. A new window full of tags, brackets, and text appears. I scroll through, unsure of what I'm looking for. Maybe a hidden message? Like those marketing gimmicks companies are doing with their websites, where they hide movie trailers or pictures in the coding? As I scan, my body sags from the realization that this is pointless.

Scratching my head, I contemplate making coffee and putting something loud and obnoxious on the stereo. I don't notice that I'm still scrolling through the page until I come across a huge blank section. Sitting a little straighter, my hand moving the mouse faster, I reach the end and find some text.

Here's a taste, but if you want the full thing come on down.

There's code for a mp3 titled "Silence01" and a street address in Chicago.

I can't copy and paste the link into the browser fast enough. A music player appears on screen. Electricity burns through me as I hunt down my headphones and turn off the stereo. Closing my eyes, saying a prayer that this isn't anything crazy, I press play.

How do you describe silence?

The opposite of sound?

The lack of noise?

A peaceful moment alone?

I don't know. All I know is that I feel something. The world slips away until I'm floating. A cloud of nothing surrounds me and time becomes meaningless. My thoughts disappear.

The track stops.

The sound of my pulse, cars driving by, neighbors arguing, and my apartment breathing come rushing in to fill the void. Tears stream down my cheeks as I groan. Checking the time, I'm positive an hour has passed since I pressed play.

It's only been a minute.

I click play four more times before knowing that I need to get more.



The Metra is loud and smells like a wet dog, but it's taking me to Chicago. I should be at Camelot right now. I didn't even call in; I just got in my car and drove through the gusty rain straight to the station. This is the first time that I've ever skipped work. Maybe I should feel guilty, but then I think about that moment of silence, of peace, and decide I'm making the right decision.

Grey skies and dreary suburbs streak by as I remember the last time I went to Chicago. Adam took me. It was a couple of years ago. Our house was a war zone at that time, and we were going to the Fireside Bowl to see The Blue Meanies and some noise punk band. At some point during the show we got separated, and that was when a poser asshole thought it would be a good time to try to drag me into a bathroom. The place was full of people screaming and fighting with each other; no one even gave us a second look as I fought back. Luckily, Adam had gone to the bathroom and happened to be coming out as I was going in. The dude didn't stand a chance.

Soon after, Adam decided it was time to escape our family. He told me the music we used to hide in meant nothing to him. He even went as far as

not answering the phone when I called.

Trails of rain run across the windows while the city overtakes the train. A voice comes over the speaker announcing we are pulling into Ogilvie Station. With a deep breath, I step onto the platform and look for the L-train to take me down to the South Loop.



The rumble of trains and trucks, the beeping of forklifts, and the screams of unseen men echo around broken warehouses. This barren place somewhere between Chinatown and the South Side isn't where I expected to find Hicks and his key to euphoric peace. Every couple of steps, I pull out the piece of paper with the address on it to verify I'm in the right place. Then I check over my shoulder to make sure no one is following me. My canister of pepper spray sits heavy in my pocket, a reminder that the city isn't safe.

Numbers painted on a brick wall match the address I'm looking for. There's nothing special about this building, no markings or signs saying, "find the key to peace inside." In fact, it looks deserted. My excitement dissolves into worry. No one knows I'm here, I had no one to tell and even if I did, what would I have said? A mental alarm starts firing off that this is a terrible idea and I need to get out of here. Yet, I feel compelled to go in, and that I'll find exactly what I'm looking for beyond these rusty doors.

Shafts of dirty gray light slice through the gloom revealing a massive space. Rain pounds on the metal roof, masking my footsteps. My head swims with fear and anticipation as I take in the desolate room. Rusted iron columns sprout from the cement floor and twine themselves around the rafters on the ceiling. Large wooden crates hide in the shadows, some of them rotted out, their mysterious contents pooled around them. I'm not sure where to even start. A console that spits out CDs? A monk waiting to guide me into a chamber? A church full of people ready to experience peace?

With no real purpose, I begin to aimlessly walk, my hand clinging to the pepper spray. The rain lets up a little, allowing me to hear my pulse thundering in my ears. I pause when I notice a slight humming in the distance, and a chill runs up and down my spine. Slowing down, I step softly as I cross the halfway point of the room. From here I can see a few makeshift walls, filing cabinets, speakers, and trash everywhere. Swallowing a lump in my throat, I make it to one of the walls and discover a mischief of rats scurrying amongst torn soundproofing scattered around what was once a sound studio. For a moment, I ignore the mess and allow myself to be excited. I'm on the right track!

The next room stops me cold. In the corner, hidden under shadow, is a

filthy mattress, along with a pile of clothes and wadded up fast food wrappers. An awful smell of mold and urine permeates the space and stings my eyes. I back away and hear the crunch of plastic beneath me, sending my heart into overdrive.

I whip my head around, praying no one is there to hear, and when I'm sure I'm clear, I inspect the mess. A pile of broken CDs lies at my feet, their usual rainbow glare dull with dust. From the layer of dirt on them it seems like they were damaged before I stepped down. There's a word on them, something starting with "S" and ending with "2", but I can't make out the rest. Whatever was on them doesn't matter anymore. Frustrated with myself, I kick the pieces. They scatter with a gritty scratching sound that makes my physical-media-loving-self cringe. Staring up at me is an undamaged CD with the word "Silence02" written in marker on its face.

It takes everything in me not to freak out. My stomach fills with butterflies and my fingers shake when I pick up the CD. *Could I really be this lucky?* I close my eyes and try to calm down and think about this rationally. The place is trashed, so I'm guessing other than some bums, no one's been here in a while. Maybe the police raided the place and smashed up the CDs, missing this one. Or maybe the guy snapped and tore everything up. Besides, I don't even know if this is what I'm looking for, although the title alone suggests this is part of a series.

"Hey, what are ya doing here?"

I practically jump out of my skin. My free hand reaches for the pepper spray while the rest of my body goes rigid. I search for something to say—anything that might save my life—but they speak up again.

"It's all right, I'm not going to hurt you, but this place isn't safe." His voice is loud and sluggish, like his tongue is too big for his mouth. "I'm going to sit down; it's been a tiring day and I wasn't expecting a visitor."

"I ... I ... was just leaving."

His only response is the creak of a chair and some humming. I turn a little to get an eye on him. There on my left he sits, an older man with a worn face, stringy hair, a moth-eaten sweater vest and dirt caked overcoat. He is slightly rocking as he hums some nameless tune, his right leg twitching, his hands gripping the armrests. With the way he is sitting, I think I could get to the door before he could catch me. I begin working up the nerve to run when he speaks.

"You don't look like a thief, and you may be wet and dirty, but you don't carry yourself like you're homeless. So, either you are here on a dare or you know what this place is. If it's a dare, please just leave me be and don't do anything to my room, and if you know what this place is, go now before you find out what's out there and the truth about the *all-powerful* God." He

stares up at the ceiling. "Thanks for nothing, you bastard!"

A million nerves fire throughout my body, the hair on my arms and legs jumps to attention, and my muscles tense in preparation to run. But I'm frozen, positive that if I make a move he'll react. I remember the time I came across a neighbor's angry dog, so I turn slowly, facing him with my hands up and take a timid step back. He's still staring up at the ceiling.

"You know, I discovered a way to completely silence our bodies and minds. We make so many noises all the time that it's a surprise we can get anything done. I mean, seriously, how do monks expect to find internal peace when everything inside is squishing, and sucking, and bubbling? Don't even get me started on hearing the voice of God, that lying piece of garbage! Well, I figured it out and, oh, the silence, the wonderful silence. It was beautiful. I couldn't stop dipping into something I made all on my own that allowed me to experience a peace I only dreamed about."

My mouth drops open and I can't help but stare. *Holy shit, this is Hicks!* On one hand I'm happy to know I'm in the right place and am holding the key to his wonderful silence. However, the fact that he is here, in front of me, is disconcerting. I take another step back.

"Of course I shared it with others, what kind of monster hordes the ability to find peace? I even wrote my thoughts on a blog and put up the first audio for it. There's no point in not trying to be famous, after all. I could be 'the one that cracked the code.' But friends started complaining about headaches, feeling incomplete. Then some smart-ass student put the track on repeat and ended up being the beginning of my fall from grace. He told everyone he was hearing something, a grinding sound hidden in the silence that followed him out. DePaul's school board chalked it up to permanent damage to his hearing or his brain. But I knew that wasn't it, that he was telling the truth."

The rain increases its punishment of the roof until it becomes a blanket of sound muffling the world outside. Pulling my hoodie tight, I hang on every word. He's still avoiding making eye contact, lost in his trip down memory lane.

"I had to test it, test it on myself. I picked twenty-three minutes, halfway to the max time someone can be in silence, unsure how long he'd listened. It was better than the first time. I was the Buddha, God, the Earth. It felt like a mental reset. I didn't hear the grinding, and my head was just fine. I also knew that I was onto something, so I quickly made a batch of CDs, and this time didn't put it online. I wanted people to come to me, so I could control the situation. But eventually I found I wanted more. It wasn't enough, so I dived in deeper, craving the absence, wallowing in the void."

His body shakes, arms jutting out to his side before he pulls them back

in. “There’s something out there, beyond the silence. It’s the grinding, the devouring of existence, and it never stops. Maybe God or evolution had mercy on us by giving us the ability to ignore the constant chewing and gnashing. Maybe they knew that if we heard it we’d go insane. Problem is the bastard only masked it, didn’t stop it, so the thing is still out there, still eating, while we rut around like a bunch of clueless idiots believing we will be saved. I don’t know if I did the right thing, opening up my ears. I even tried to go back to ignorance.” He gestures to his ears and my stomach roils when I remember reading that he’d punctured his eardrums.

At this point I take my cue to leave, not wanting to believe him. His attention falls on me and his eyes narrow as he spots the CD in my grip. “You shouldn’t have that!”

Thunder crashes as he jumps up and comes at me.

He’s so quick it takes me a moment to realize what’s happening. On his way to me, he grabs a rusty hammer. The sight of the weapon wakes me. I begin to backpedal, my free hand wrestling with the pocket holding my pepper spray. In a blink of an eye he reaches me, his eyes wild and focused on the CD. My nerves are on fire, my arms and legs seem to disappear, my brain screams at me to run. He rips it out of my hand and turns away. All the adrenaline coursing through me crashes into confusion as he doesn’t swing the hammer at me. Hicks places the CD on a filing cabinet.

“I can’t let any more people hear the truth. I’m sorry.” The last part comes out in a sob.

He raises the hammer and I see myself running toward him. The logical side of me doesn’t have time to catch up with what is happening until I crash into his body.

What the fuck are you doing repeats through my mind as I struggle to reach the hammer. He fights back but keeps slipping on the garbage. My actions are twitchy and running on pure animal instinct. I grab the hammer just as he regains his balance, and he hip-checks me to the ground. Pain rockets up my back and my jaws click together hard. Hicks looks back and forth between the CD and me, a war of indecision raging on his face.

I gain control of my thoughts enough to realize I might be in over my head. He bares his teeth, grips the CD with both hands and begins to bend it. A surge of panic flows through me and I throw the hammer. It connects with the side of his head, and he crumples to the ground.

Everything is coated in red as I leap on top of the guy, clawing at his face, rage and fear pouring out in a scream, tears streaking my face. It feels like an hour before I stop and snatch the CD out of his hand.

I’m not sure if he’s breathing or not, but I don’t care. Every part of me is tight, sore, tired. *You can’t come back from this.* The thought rattles me and I

double over, vomiting.

I try to tell myself that he attacked me, that it was self-defense, but deep down I know the truth. Instead of regret, I feel happiness. Finally, I can experience the peace that everyone else around me seems to enjoy.



The lights in my room are off, along with the alarm clock and computer. My bed is next to the stereo, so that I can lay down with my headphones on. The smell of the warehouse is still on my skin even after taking a shower. The tracks on the CD were data files, so I burnt a whole new one—but at least I was able to put the mp3s on my hard drive. I'll upload them to the message boards after I try it out. My body aches and every movement is a struggle, but it doesn't matter because I have what I want. With a shaky hand I press play and close my eyes.

Everything goes blank. The moment of silence I felt the night before doesn't compare to this absence of sound. Nothingness smothers me, and the pains melt away, along with the rest of my body. Even my thoughts grow distant, as if I left them at home and drove away as fast as I could without looking back.

I'm in a void, floating in space, not knowing if anything exists around me. Happiness, sadness, memories, all of them go. I don't even know if I'm alive. Maybe I died, and this is the afterlife? Maybe death is nothing more than the removal of our anchors to reality, our senses the only signal that we are alive. I'd say it feels weird, but I can't feel.



Sunlight warms my skin and brings me back to the world. And the world is loud. Water rushes through pipes, electricity crackles, my heart thunders, my stomach gurgles, blood flows. It would almost be too much if not for the calm that envelops me. Every part of me feels twenty pounds lighter, my muscles looser. I pull the headphones off and let them fall to the bed, smiling at the buttery yellow glow floating through my room.

Sitting and stretching, I can't remember the last time I felt this happy. Adam's face comes to mind, the times we used to stay up late listening and talking music while our parents fought, or when he took me to my first concert right after *the night*. The dark parts tied to those memories try to muscle their way in, but I brush them aside and wonder if he felt like this when he didn't have to wake up in that house. While going through my morning routine, I can't help but worry at this thing, this clicking that

shouldn't have been—yet might have been—in the silence.

Camelot Music didn't fire me, though they gave me a warning: one more screw up, and I was out. On the drive to work, I remind myself I have to share the silent track. Hicks was crazy to hide this from the world. I don't understand why he wanted to destroy the ability to unlock this wonderful feeling. Everyone should be able to listen to it, to enjoy this sense of calm.

The amazing thing is that it hasn't worn off yet. I don't mind that I have to park at the far end of the mall. I barely notice the two guys sitting on a bench calling out to me. I float through the store guiding someone to the latest Nickleback album without a comment. It's at this moment that I realize we have too much noise bombarding us, irritating us until we lash out, until we are uncomfortable in our own heads. People need this. The world needs this. And I'm going to help spread it as much as I can.

A group of college kids come in, a few I recognize from MCC, and one of them asks for the first System Of A Down album. The words send me crashing back to earth.

Tears well up in my eyes as I fight the memory of sitting with Adam in his room while Serj Tankian sang about mushroom people. My brother had tried his usual distraction routine of music and CD insert education. But it was hard to focus when red and blue lights were flashing across his wall, when there was a cop talking to my parents about how the law worked, when there was the click of the handcuffs. The next time I heard a System Of A Down song all I could think about was bruises on my mom's arms and face, and how she was the one that got arrested because she hit him first. Just the thought of listening to them again made me sick.

So, I did everything I could to avoid their music, which was surprisingly easy considering I work at a music store, until these assholes had to come in.

"I ... I ... think I need to go." I hate the waver in my voice.

I stagger to the back room and tell Pat I'm not feeling well. My heart pounds against my ribcage while the peace melts away. He shakes his head and says this is it, I'm done.

A ball of iron forms in my stomach as I try to process what just happened. The word *fired* fills my thoughts. I blink a couple of times, not really seeing Pat, and search for something to say or do. The only thing that comes to me is the CD at home and how it'll fix everything. There's the faintest sound of grinding as I rush out of there and push through the group.

On the drive home Adam's voice echoes in my head, *I can't be around this anymore, you, the music, this house, it's all fucked and the only way I'll feel any better is if I forget it even exists*. The anger I felt towards him wavers as I realize I understand what he meant. I'm sure anytime he saw me or

listened to one of those songs it brought up the same memories that System Of A Down does for me. Fat tears roll down my cheeks, and I wrestle with the idea that after years of hating him, I know why he did it. If only we still talked, I could be the one to share with him something that would help him escape.



I take in a deep breath, push away the thunderstorm of emotions raging in my head, and focus on how I can make my peace last longer. Hicks said it was better when he doubled the length of the track. He also said some crazy shit about hearing something, and part of me feels like I should worry about that, but I block it out.

However, before I dive in, I log on to the message boards and upload the track, telling them that this is the key to euphoric peace. The only thing I ask is to share it with their friends and those that need to escape.

My mouth waters, my skin is hot to the touch, and my vision is shaky as I program the stereo to repeat the CD twice. The headphones hug the sides of my face. I push play and disappear.

I'm not sure when it starts. One second, I'm out of existence; the next I'm hearing the grumble of grinding. The sound starts small, as if coming from far away. Then it notices me, and it grows louder and louder until it's on top of me. It's like nothing I've ever heard before, though in this space of peace I imagine all sounds are something different.

The noise becomes a presence, the silence moving around it, giving it shape. I try to move, but I can't feel any part of me. Fear defines my existence, forcing me to focus on this intruder. A sort of echolocation takes hold, building a crude image of the surrounding universe. Something deep within thrashes about, galaxy-size jaws devouring everything around it. An ancient gaze falls upon me. Its cruel laughter is the sound of crumbling planets. I feel insignificant next to its joy.

In a terrible act of grace, it narrows its soundscape into an arm and touches me, leaving a burrowing worm within my mind. A noiseless scream rips through my psyche as it tears through what Hicks called the gift of God: mental earmuffs that protect us from hearing it eat.

Vomit dribbles down my chin as I awaken. A wretched pain squirms through my skin, making the simple act of ripping the headphones off my head a lesson in hurt. Dark blues and purples paint the sky outside my window. *Fuck, I've been out all day.*

A low grinding invades my hearing, barely audible yet beneath every sound, like a neighbor left a table saw on in the basement. I dry heave as

things start clicking into place and I realize that I have to get the silent track off the message boards. The constant noise sets my teeth on edge. I put a CD in the stereo, but I can't get it loud enough to mask that infernal crunching.

Falling to my knees, I press my hands to my ears, trying to make it stop, asking myself *why*? Maybe it wants us to know it's coming, or maybe it's bored and wants to see us in chaos.

Crawling to the computer, my head feels like it's going to explode. Each click of the mouse, each visit to a message board, and I understand the mistake Hicks made trying to share it, and why he tried to stop it when he knew the truth. Across the boards, I see my tracks spreading, the thanks for sharing, everyone passing the silence to others.

I type up a pleading message begging them to delete the track. I know it doesn't matter, that it's too late. The grinding increases, vibrating my mind, making thought impossible. I remember Hicks talking about trying to get the ignorance back and the article mentioning how he had blood dripping from his ears.

I dig through my bag and find a pen. As I stumble to the bathroom, I hum my favorite songs, and imagine Adam's laughter. I place the pen in my ear. My eyes lock with my mirror self, hoping this will help, knowing that it won't stop the knowledge of what's out there. A quick jab, a spurt of blood, another jab, more blood, tears streaming down my cheeks.

And then the welcome promise of silence.

NIGHT SOUNDS

Andrew Majors

Ford was used to staying up late. He unloaded cargo planes at the airport: long hours, heavy packages, the aluminum canisters lined up in neat rows like the lunchboxes of giants winking in the moonlight. Work often ran past midnight and well into the small hours of the morning. His routine was simple: home, shower, bed. No sense in staying out late to lose money drinking and carousing with the listless and indifferent faces he worked with. At twenty-seven, Ford's youth was already well over.

He rarely got enough sleep. Insomnia, indigestion, adrenaline left over from work all stymied him. And at times there came a strange sensation which vaulted him from a perfectly good slumber for no reason—just snap, blink, and once more he was awake, a smash cut to consciousness. It was usually some time before he closed his eyes again.

And he heard things.

Ford lived in a complex with many early risers. Some worked, some patrolled the narrow side streets in Escalades or rice burners gunning their engines. The traffic let him keep time by listening. Heavy drones meant it was 5:00 or 6:30, with people getting up and heading to work; next to nothing meant it was midday. The tenants were loud, too. He heard drunken laughter from 200 next door, the couple whose arguments carried through the wall he shared with 110, a toddler sobbing with some incoherent plea for daddy not to leave all the way from 205. He heard it all, if not from downstairs then from the second-story window overlooking the path between the rows of houses. If you looked outside you sometimes saw them, or the cars that loitered in their ports, entire lives in self-contained parallel universes that seldom met.

He tolerated the sounds. He'd made it a point of order never to get involved with anything, no matter how bad it got. Life had taught him sharply to mind his own business.

Still, he heard things.



It sounded like a slaughterhouse.

Ford always kept the blinds in his bedroom drawn. When the moon was out it was as if the sky had a hundred-watt bulb installed, or the light from the lamps outside the apartment doors got in, and sleep became difficult. Tonight was a rare instance: he was home before midnight, and he wanted to fall asleep and stay asleep.

The noise came from the 'stead that neighbored his building beyond the edge of the complex, the last of some ancient farmland long since parceled up into housing tracts. The roadway ran by it out to the avenue. On the front of the property facing the thoroughfare sat a little red brick house, which had once been a farmhouse standing alone in the midst of fields before the grids, apartments and convenience stores sprang up around it and made it just another house in town rather than the middle of nowhere. Ford had never so much as nodded at its owner when he went out. They had no reason to talk to one another. They were just neighbors, after all.

The man had animals: two goats, a half-dozen chickens, a horse, a dog, and two cows. The only lowing they usually did was of the gentle, plaintive kind whenever they needed to be milked, and that wasn't often. The man or his son took care of it readily enough.

This was something different: the kind of noise you heard when cows stood in front of the bolt gun, just before the pneumatic *pchk!* and a little steel rod busted through their skulls.

Ford awoke and lay looking up at the ceiling. They weren't just lowing. They moaned, bellowed, screamed. One would screech in staccato bursts as if being struck by a knife or ax, then go quiet, then the other would start, the two sometimes overlapping in the middle, sometimes not. An atonal choral duet in a torture chamber. In the blessed few instances of silence that came in between, long enough to make you think they had stopped for good, Ford would shut his eyes and hope that was it. But it wasn't, and they started back up again the same as before.

"Damn." Turning over, he draped his upper arm on the bedboard and did his best to block out the noise with his arm in front of one ear, the other buried in the pillow. When had trying to sleep become an endurance challenge?

He didn't get up to look out the window. Plenty of things to get pissed off over in this world, but noisy cows wasn't one of them, even if they were making enough noise for someone to go out there and make hamburger. Their man was a farmer and he would know what was wrong with them. Another night of less-than-perfect sleep didn't trouble him. He would sleep

through the morning and be up in time for his shift. After a while he rolled over onto his back and shut his eyes, willing everything out of his conscious mind in an attempt to make himself fall asleep.

The lowing, moaning, bellowing went on—then finally stopped.
It was a few minutes till 1 a.m.



It sounded like the Fourth of July.

One little boom far off in the distance, like something being shot out of a cannon at a carnival. Silence. Then another little boom, just as loud, another cannon. Silence again.

He turned to the window. The jokers were at it, kids who congregated in the dirt alleyway that trailed down the back of the irrigation canal south of the complex. They shot off fireworks and ran before anyone could nab them. Sometimes they burned the hedgerows that lined the path there, sometimes you found spent casings and powder burns in the dirt. They did it all summer long. Why the hell they were doing it now, in the middle of winter, was anyone's guess.

Boom. A big one, much louder than the others, like a plane taking off and going straight to Mach 1.

"Hell." Ford rolled over to the nightstand. The alarm clock sat there, dimmed, its blank grey face staring at him like an eyeball gone blind. The turn dampened the noise a little, and by degrees, he was able to attain something akin to peace of mind. His breathing slowed. He closed his eyes. After a little while, though, he rolled onto his back again.

He'd always hated facing the room. Somehow, it felt better for him to face towards the wall, where he couldn't see anything but plaster and the gloom-light from the window. He didn't know why. It was perhaps some atavistic response from childhood when he'd been afraid of the dark and there had been no nightlight because his father forbade it. Maybe he expected, in an unconscious way, some long-dormant terror with long fingers and a toothy grin and black eyes the size of withered apples to come wriggling out from under the bed and up over the top of the mattress. He would wake up one night and there it would be, laying its head on the covers and staring him right in the face, thin fingers tented expectantly, and he wouldn't even have time to scream before it lunged forward and bit his eyes out.

Eventually, the booming stopped, and Ford went back to sleep.
The blind eye of the alarm clock read 2:14.



It sounded like laughter.

Ford came totally awake, the snap-blink action causing his leg to jolt and his whole body to shudder. It was so close, like it was coming from right outside his window in the little pathway below: loud, long, high, almost inhuman in its timbre, a whole hellish circus of laughs. It came in galloping waves, gulps of air gasped between the bursts, and underneath it ran something else, a voice—voices—egging someone on, telling someone not to quit.

Something bad was going on out there.

Ford didn't want to look. He had things to do in the morning, sleep to catch up on now, and the life of no one in this complex weighed heavily on his mind. They weren't anything to him and he wasn't anything to them; just noises in the walls. He'd lived here almost five years, never known the names of anyone who'd moved in, not even the people at the mailbox when he went, or on their patios when he took the trash out. What could drive him to give a damn now?

A shout of pain. The under-voices burst into greater laughter.

Ford sighed heavily—"Son of a bitch!"—sat up in bed and crawled to the window, the ill-fitted bed frame coming loose from its slot and dropping his mattress into its newly made crevasse as he did, something he would have to fix before going back to sleep. The outside was well-lit by the opposing building. He put his fingers through the blinds and held them open, looking out onto the lawns and the concrete path below, and he saw.

They were little more than writhing shadows on the grassy commons between the buildings. The mob had formed a rough semicircle around two of them, one much larger than the other, locked together by a span of dark that must be an arm. The big one had the little one in a tight grip, and the little one, tearing and wrenching though it might, was unable to get away. The big one had something pressed down on the little one's arm. Ford couldn't see it, but it may have been something you smoked. The laughter drifted up to his window, the kind you got out of people when there was nothing good on TV and you couldn't read anything worthwhile, and there was no gas in the car, and you didn't like to talk, so why not stay in and have some fun with your pals by toying with somebody weaker than you?

Another shout of pain. The big one's arm twisted and the little one went down.

The circle folded in. Ford had seen enough, and for once in five years had heard enough.

In the corner of the room was an old set of golf clubs he'd inherited

from granddad, drivers and wedges sticking up out of the old khaki bag like big metal cattails. He wasn't much of a golfer but knew how to swing. Taking the large nine-iron in hand he went downstairs, clad in boxers and a t-shirt, and unlocked the front door. He didn't stop to pick up his phone; cops didn't come out here much. Whatever happened would either cause them to scatter or him to get knocked around. He would take his lumps gladly, even if it meant waking up in a hospital bed. At least he would be dead from the neck up for a few hours.

The night was breath-raising cold. Thin constellations pulsed with light hundreds of years dead. Ford's bare feet slapped on the tarmac as he rounded the corner. He came up onto the sidewalk with the nine-iron raised high, a chieftain on the warpath. Before he could even stop moving he saw it was too late.

The commons was deserted. There was no semicircle of shouters, no offender, no victim, only a deserted hunk of jaundiced grass with a concrete sidewalk running through it. Nobody was having a tear tonight. The place was quiet.

Ford sat down on the curb, sighed again, ran a hand through his hair. He'd gone a little nuts—that was it. The lack of sleep caused him to go nuts and hear things, to see things. He was going to do something about it. Earplugs, maybe, or one of those foofy sleeping masks. It seemed like things were settling down for now. Maybe he would sleep the rest of the night.

Or maybe the rice-burner brigade would start up their dawn patrol soon. Either-or.

Ford went back inside, stopping only to take a little half-look at Orion over the bare treetops to the southeast, Betelgeuse pulsing at his shoulder, Rigel twinkling in his right foot. He'd loved reading about space as a kid; he'd wanted to be an astronaut.

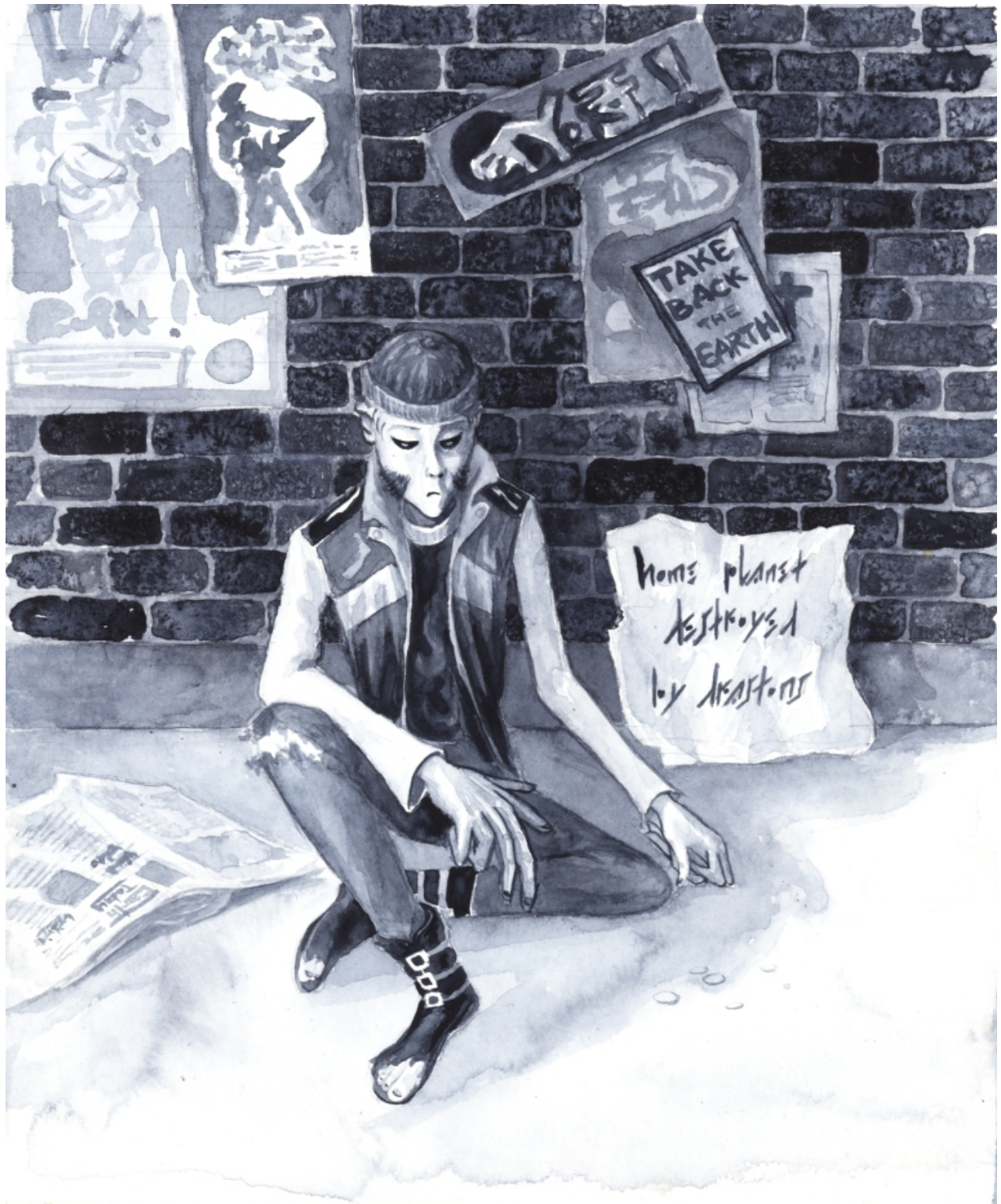
He went inside, upstairs, and after getting the nine-iron back in the old khaki bag and resetting his mattress upon the busted iron frame, he slipped into bed and closed his eyes. The night stayed quiet. Soon he was deeply asleep.

The time was 3:33.

He was still asleep when something came in through the unlocked front door, crept up the stairs and slit his throat.

“I can still hear his voice in my ears, his cries, his protests, his yearning to go back to the ground, to be allowed to sleep again.”

— Ness Cernac
“The Bone Garden of Arachne Lovell”



PLANETLESS

Angi Shearstone

OF INK AND BLOOD

Kevin M. Casin

You sit in the living room, across from a crackling fireplace, on the green, velvet couch you bought together the day after the Supreme Court declared same-sex marriage legal. With a tattoo needle, you carve your cheating husband's name into your arm. "Jeremy," you read as the ink-soaked blood spills from scarlet letters and flows across your wrist to stain a rag doll in your hand. Black ink drifts over the doll's tanned fabric, up to the fine yarn on its head, matching Jeremy's skin and thick hair. All that's missing from the doll is Jeremy's face. But he should be home any minute, summoned by ink and blood. Over its loomed, naked body, you slide a shirt weaved from the same material as the red shirt Jeremy wore on your first date, back when you were naïve enough to think Jeremy loved only you.

Yes, Mama always said to never make spells personal, but you don't care. Emotions, their raw power, fuel great Inkers. You've learned to harness that energy, to trap targets into dolls and feed them your feeling—you "Ink" them, Mama called it.

"Personal bonds taint those emotions," she'd say. "Take freedom from the wrong person, you might end up losing your freedom. People, 'specially those who trust you, don't like to live in dolls. And your spell, your emotions, will fuel their anger and their revenge."

Mama always tried to control you. She never loved you; she feared you. It's why she told Jeremy to look after you, like a supervisor.

As if Charmers aren't as dangerous as Inkers. Each Charmer is a master manipulator, honing their lies until they're strong enough to Charm a target with a single word. If only he'd spent all those hours with you instead of swooning over other men, mesmerizing them. I doubt he used his Charms—Jeremy has some moral limits, you'll give him that, even if they didn't apply to his marriage. All you needed for him was an "I love you." He teased you with "I care for you" or "I think about you." Mama used to call him the Lover—she gives all Charmers special names. Why couldn't he use the I-word with

you? What was the problem?

Well, you wonder, as a doll and through my emotions, maybe he'll learn about love. You'll tend to him and show him. He'll learn a lesson even if it kills him. You'll show Mama and Jeremy you deserve to be loved.

Bells chime.

You set aside the needle and cross the foyer. As you pry open the oak front door, Jeremy collapses. He's gained some weight since he left after your fight last week. He's almost impossible to drag, but you do your best and prop him up on the green couch, the same one you made love on for the first time as husbands. His thick arm flops on the tile and drips with fresh blood. His name is scrawled on the underside of his forearm. You smirk, proud to know the spells worked.

"Ricky," he says weakly, "what's going on?"

"Don't worry, babe. Rest," you say as you sit on the mahogany coffee table and stroke his hair. His breath shallows as his eyes close. He doesn't stir. He doesn't flinch. His breath stills. And the ritual continues.

You rest the doll on his chest and lay the catalyst—your golden wedding ring—on the doll's red shirt. Ink and blood drips from your arm, flows across Jeremy's brown skin, and boils his body. A river melts and consumes his withered black hair and loose skin chips. It carries the amalgam up through the burlap doll to the golden ring as Jeremy's body fades. Obsidian hair grows from the doll's scalp and chin as amber flesh blankets the burlap, and Jeremy's brown eyes appear. Your spell is complete. It ends with the thud of Jeremy's golden wedding ring.

You leave the rings on the coffee table. You gaze into the doll's brown eyes, hoping Jeremy will either be a better man, or you will heal and leave him for good. But you can't worry too much about that right now. Mama knows everything. She won't like that you Inked one of her children. She might wipe you from existence if she catches you; she's done it before, she's that powerful. No one in Dallas can help you. They're all her people here. There is one person who can help you. But you have to leave town right now.



You spring from the bed and throw open the curtain over the floor-to-ceiling hotel windows. Morning light pours in, and the Atlanta skyline greets you. Naked, you saunter to the bathroom, brush each tooth and appease unruly curls with conditioner. You grin and grab Jeremy from the bed. It's his turn now. Husbands care for their husbands. It's the way of marriage.

You open the faucet to wash sleep crust from his human eyes and stop

the drain of the porcelain sink. As you let the bowl fill with crystal water, you remove the red shirt from the tan skin. You dip him in the water, pour soap on his body, and wipe away the evening musk. Until a knock cracks the front door. Bryan is early. You set Jeremy down in the sink.

You slip into a bathrobe, rush to the door and as you yank the plush sash, you throw open the door. Bryan's beefy chest meets your eye level. You glance up to his smooth, dark face, delicate silver eyes, and gray sleeked-back hair. He's still as beautiful as you remember him. Without a word or eye contact, Bryan hands you a plastic bag full of passports, licenses—everything to run away—and turns to leave.

"Where are you going?" Your desire decides to speak on your behalf. You strain a smile, settling the rush of heat over your cheeks. "I—I can make coffee, if you want some."

His young face looks back. Cold, silver eyes, unmatched by the moon, fall to the bathrobe knot. As they rise again, he nods and follows you into the hotel room.

"You're never early. What's going on?" You ask as you close the door and toss the plastic bag on the counter.

"Just tired." His baritone voice stays with you, reverberating in your chest. He avoids eye contact. "Sounded like you were in a hurry, so I rushed over first thing." He takes a seat at the bar's center as you prepare coffee at the end beside the wall. He removes his jacket, revealing a fitted lavender shirt, and lays it over the travel documents.

"Maybe I just really wanted to see you." If your attention breaks from the coffee, your cheeks will never go back to normal. You take a deep breath to calm your nerves, one long enough to fill the silence.

You hand him the coffee. "So, you drove down from Nashville for me?" You take your cup and move around the bar to sit beside him on a stool.

"No. I live around here," he says. Another pause. But he clears his throat and adds, "so, where you goin'?"

"I'm not sure yet," you say, rubbing your smooth forearm. Jeremy's name is gone. It never fades unless the Inked has died. But Jeremy's in the bathroom. He's fine. Right?

Before you can check on Jeremy, Bryan huffs and says, "I hope you won't go so soon. Honestly ... I was nervous about coming here. I hoped you'd let me in."

Your eyes dart to Bryan. You grin, relieved he's making his move. You've never been good at flirting—you're not even sure if you were doing it well now—but at least Bryan picked up on the intention. You need to clear your mind, start figuring out where you're going. You bet a few hours in bed with Bryan would make a good tonic for your nerves.

“Of course, I’d let you in,” you say, “apart from Jeremy, you’re the only Charmer I ever liked.”

“So, you did like me ...” He grins and leans in. “I thought you only had eyes for Jeremy.”

“They’d wander, I have to admit.” You’re still blushing, but you don’t care. Let the heat rise.

His hand rests on your knee and asks, “And where’s Jeremy? Are you still with him?”

You don’t answer. You hold so still you’d shatter with a strategic knock.

“Good. I never liked him anyway,” he answers his own question.

Bryan rises and saunters toward you as you back away, mindful of the bedframe. Licking his plum lips, he says, “I never liked you with Jeremy. Even in training, men and women swooned and gave into him, even if he didn’t like them. It was sick, Ricky. And to think Jeremy did that to you ... ugh! You deserve better. And you don’t need magic, you know? Ink won’t make him love you.” His fingers caress your forearm, tickling delicate black hairs. You shake your head.

Does he know what you did? Did Ma tell him? They’re on to you, right? Maybe Ma sent him to deal with you. But if he’s there to end you, why the flirting? Why not just end it fast? Unless he needs a confession. Or maybe he really does like you?

“It’s okay,” Bryan says softly. “You don’t need to Ink Jeremy. If he doesn’t care enough about you to stick with just you, he’s not worth a spell.”

Your gaze flits between your arm and Bryan’s silver eyes. You hide a grin behind your frown and say, “I can’t understand why I’m not enough. Why does he need those other men?”

Bryan strokes the back of your neck, and you draw closer. “Let him go, Ricky. You’ll never be rid of him until then. I’ll help you let him go.”

The knot on the bathrobe fidgets. His electric breath brushes against your lips and, for a deep, luscious instant, magnetic poles connect. As you pull away, an ember, crowned by his silver irises, invites you. The heat from his skin feeds your desire, and he says, “I’ve had my eyes on you since I saw you the first day you came to class. Chicago seemed so small after that day. All I wanted to do was run into you.”

Your finger catches a button, while the rest of your hand sinks into his fleshy chest. “You were pining for me?” You say, with a chuckle meant to disguise your embarrassment—how did you never notice such adoration? How did you never realize a beautiful man like Bryan had eyes for you? Silver eyes are hard to miss.

“Let him go, Ricky. Give me a chance.”

Your arms buckle and he springs toward your face. You catch his

mouth, hold it for an eon of the Earth until you sever the connection for a chance to breathe, but still caress his lips. Yes, you're still married, but why not indulge your desires? Jeremy did it every chance he got, why should you be the "bigger man"? Yes, let Jeremy watch. Let him feel the pleasure coursing through you as he's powerless to stop you and Bryan.

You guide Bryan, sitting him on the edge of the bed. He plays with the bathrobe knot as he peels away the fabric and tastes your body. You check the open bathroom door, the counter to make sure Jeremy is watching. He's not there. Then you remember: you left him in the sink and the water is still running. That's why his name is gone. You break from Bryan and rush into the bathroom. The water beats against Jeremy's face, once brown, now blue with death.

You never meant to kill him, only to teach him.

Only one person can save him. Pa doesn't deal in resurrections. That's Ma's territory. She's always right and she'll let never let you live it down. And after learning what you did to one of her babies, she may not let you live. But you need Jeremy back. You have to try. Having him in the world is better than not. He's still your husband, but you might be interested in love from Bryan. You won't know for sure until Jeremy's safe.



"Jeremy wasn't the first guy I ever loved," you explain to Bryan, gripping the wheel so tight it might snap and you'll swerve off the highway and into a ditch. A more preferable experience than seeing Ma again and her crew. "There were others, many others, but I was obsessed with one in particular. That's the one that almost killed Ma."

"You were a stalker? Should I be worried?" Bryan asks, clutching the roof handle and lifting his hips like he was clenching his butt cheeks. You aren't driving that bad. People just need to hurry up and move out of the way. Damn trucks are everywhere.

You shake your head. "No, nothing like that. Just have a lot of feelings and threw them on to him. Typical Inker shit. Anyway, I Inked him, just like I did to Jeremy. Found him two-timing me, just like Jeremy."

"Sounds like you've got a type." Bryan shifts in his seat as if bracing for impact.

It's kind of fun watching him squirm. Sure, you get close to the semi-trucks. What's the fun in keeping a safe distance? Live on the edge, you always say.

"Guess so," you chuckle, "but I hope I've ended that streak." You take your eyes from the road and glance down at his lap. No, not at that, although

his slacks are pretty tight and it's poking the fabric ... no, briefly your attention shifts to Jeremy. Your eyes flutter back up to a pale, scowling Bryan, who angrily points at the windshield.

"Pay attention to the road! You're nuts!"

"Please! There's hardly anyone on the road." You swat away his comments as you cut off a minivan. Its horn blares, but you don't care. It's driving too slowly, and you have places to be.

"Anyway, I Inked him," you continue, "but I loved him so much and was so attracted to him, the spell gripped him tighter than I had intended. It went so far, the dolls started to move. It became this guy and tried to kill me."

"Like Chucky?"

"Yeah, except not as demented. This guy had a good reason. He just wanted to get out. So, I took him to Ma. Asked her to break the bond. Wasn't my best idea, but I had to do something. He was trying to kill me!"

"Shit! Look out for the school bus!"

"Oh, calm down! We're in Louisville already. If you've not died getting here, you're not going to die now, right?"

"I don't think that's how it works." His hand flies to his face, cupping his eyes as the tires shriek. Your GPS tells you a police officer lies in wait up ahead. Best not to get them involved. You slow and match the speed of an electric car in the slow lane.

Bryan's hand falls to his chest as if steadying deep breaths. "Oh, thank God."

"Look, we have to get there sooner rather than later. Not sure how long Jeremy can be dead before Ma can't revive him. She's got to bring him back. I don't want him dead." You resist the urge to punch the accelerator by wringing the leather cover of the steering wheel.

He didn't deserve death. None of the Inked did. They had to learn from their mistakes and it's your job to teach them. It's your service to the world. The next man won't have to deal with such problems.

Someone should give you an award.

"So, Ma couldn't break the bond?"

"No, she broke it. But, when you Ink, all those emotions are like little packets of energy, and you dump them all into the doll. The ritual requires bonding—that's why we tattoo the name on our bodies. Trouble is, severing can take more energy than we think. It's hard to gauge. Mama's pure energy. Who knew she had a limit?"

"Does this mean you don't love Jeremy as much? Is there wiggle room?"

You don't tear your eyes away from the road to see the smirk you sense. The electric car is slowing down more. Not because of traffic. You

don't know why, because there's no one ahead of them and you're both going the speed limit. They're probably just stupid. If the cop wanted to stop you, they would've caught you back there, you want to say. But you decide to take the high road, the mature path, and cut them off once you pass the State Trooper.

"Last night, I was about to show you how much wiggle room there was, but, of course, Jeremy messed us up. But trust me, once this is all over, we'll get a room at the Four Seasons and you can wiggle me all night long."

He laughs with a boom that rumbles the car. "Make me a deal, though. I won't cheat on you. Not my style. If we're not good for each other, I'll tell you and we part ways. No Inking, because if you ever do that to me, I'll charm you and have you walk yourself off a cliff, got it?"

Your heart flutters at his threat. Fear grips your arteries, raising the pulse in your ears and flushing your cheeks with heat. It rushes elsewhere too. You don't even try to hide it. You want him to see your exhilaration. It's the most thrilled you've been since you met Jeremy. Bland, boring old Jeremy, whose glare you feel. All those years he probably didn't think you knew, but you did—cliché late-night trips and long working hours weren't as clever as he thought. Now, he's going to watch every second of your betrayal. It's your turn to have fun.

"You better stop talking like this, Bryan. We'll have to make a pit stop and we'll never get to Chicago. But I promise I won't Ink you."

He chuckles again. "I'm in this thing with you. I told you that last night." His hand creeps over your shoulders. You fight to focus your attention on the road. As much as you might want to pick up where you left off last night before you found Jeremy drowning, you can't. Jeremy needs you.

Damn it.

"This relationship will only work if you talk to me and share what you're thinking or feeling," Bryan continues. "It's the only way. We'll fight and we'll love, but we'll never hurt each other. That's how I roll."

No one's ever spoken to you that way before. Never so honest and dripping with enough love to glaze donuts. Makes you kind of queasy, but you resist the vomit. It's a new feeling. One Jeremy never let you experience. Every day of your life with him, he never gave you one ounce of the love Bryan just gave you. You hope Jeremy heard it. Love. That's all you ever wanted. You hope he learns that.

"I love you, Bryan," you say, clenching your jaw, bracing for any pain he might inflict. "I know we just met. Don't want to scare you off, but you told me to tell you how I'm feeling and that's what I feel. Sorry." Your chest droops as if it's melting into the seat, or you're trying to bury your head in an imaginary shell. He's silent for a moment. A long moment. One you might

swerve off the road to end.

"I appreciate that, Ricky. Since we're sharing feelings, I might love you too. Not sure yet. Give me some more time. Is that okay?"

Your body perks up and your head gains the strength to nod.

"Good," he says.

You don't see the smile, but again, you can feel its warmth beaming.

His hand rests on your thigh, gently squeezing the fat. A few more hours of this until you reach Chicago. Could you freeze time, stay in this moment forever? You would if Jeremy weren't dead and Ma was the only one who could bring him. Maybe Brian is the route to freedom. Once Jeremy's back, you'll get to run off with Brian, with someone who really loves you and is happy to let you know it.



Lake Michigan ripples under you as it strikes the wooden posts supporting Navy Pier. You stand cold, staring at the red-bricked structure paneled with glass windows. You never thought you'd be back here, especially not under these circumstances. The last time you stepped through these glass doors, the ballroom was filled with flowers, and Jeremy waited for you to meet him at an altar decorated with candles. Times certainly have changed. Bryan lifts your hand to his lips and pecks your skin. He doesn't let go of your hand. It falls to his side and guides you toward the concrete stairs of the Grand Ballroom.

All the tourists care about are the dueling dancers dominating the pale, tiled room. One twirls and leaps, gliding along as if the air held her up, while the other makes bold, yet elegant gestures, and the ground trembles, shaking the diamond chandelier above them. As she flies, her partner, Bruce, sinks. One movement compliments the other in a beautiful balance. You know them well. They danced at your wedding.

The shadow of the aerial dancer steps away from her moving body and strolls toward Bryan. She hugs him and holds you in a scowl. "What the fuck are you doing back here?"

"Natalia, please. Be nice," says Bryan.

The woman huffs. Her gray, green-hued, stringy hair floats up like an anemone, away from her pallid face. "After the way he treated you, treated Jeremy. Looks what he did!" She points to the cerulean doll. "You think we didn't know about it? Ma knows everything. Now, you get to fuck him—like you always wanted—and suddenly you're his big defender. Did he ever give you a second look before, Bryan? Never trust an Inker." The more her fevered pitch rises, the fiercer her hair vibrates.

"Please just give him another, Natalia. Please. For me?" Bryan steps between you and Natalia and holds out his hands.

She swats them away. "Don't try that Charmer shit on me. Galers don't play like that. Fuck him is all I've got to say—and not like you're doing. He left us high and dry. Ma couldn't find another Inker after he left. Now he wants to come back like it's all good. Not gonna happen. I'll make sure of that."

"Let me explain," you say. You place a hand on Bryan's broad bicep and squeeze, and he steps aside. Natalia purses her lips and shakes her head.

"Why should I let you fucking explain yourself? We know what happened. Bruce and I were there that day. You almost killed Ma, you know that? Spells can't get personal. Mama taught that. She taught us all that. Don't get fucking personal."

"That's right!" Bruce shouts and ends his dance with a stomp that shatters the tile. Ripples sprawl away from him and shake the audience as they clap. Natalia whips back into her body. She collects the tips, splits them in half, and stuffs some in her pink bra straps.

Bruce accepts his half and tucks the bills behind the elastic waistband of his gray sweatpants. He's too thin and lanky for your taste, but you can see why Natalia likes him. His eyes are deep brown and his voice booms so loud it shakes the Earth. He and Natalia stroll toward you.

"I made a mistake, okay?" You say, holding out the doll. "He wasn't supposed to drown. I feel like shit. It's punishment, not an execution."

"You should feel like shit because you are shit," says Natalia with a scolding finger. "What kind of asshole turns their husband into a fucking doll? You're sick! How would you like it if he turned you into ... I don't know ... a pear?"

"A pear?" Bruce squints.

"I don't fucking know. Look, you better pray Ma can fix this shit or I'm goin' to kick your ass so hard Bryan over here's gonna have to open it with a crowbar and a couple of sticks of dynamite if he ever wants to get it in again. Got it?"

The room darkens as the last human leaves the ballroom. A flash sweeps across the glass doors and windows. The sunlight fades and a black veil, pricked by starlight, falls. Purple clouds streaked with milky lines and amber shades drift by the windows. You're beyond Earth now. Beyond your galaxy. Beyond your universe.

Natalia storms away from you. She and Bruce kneel beside the center. And Mama descends. Light trickles from the ceiling, darkness gathers from corners, and stardust slips through the cracks and accumulates into a pillar. Mama has no human shape. She chooses not to demean herself with such forms. Instead, she remains a pillar, stalwart, proud, and looming over her

children. Mama loves to loom. You set Jeremy on the floor before you. You never dare to glance up. There's no telling what Mama will do, especially now.

You fall to your knees, eyes fixed on the pale tile. "I'm so sorry, Ma! I didn't want to kill him. I just wanted to be loved."

The sound of rushing water and thrashing waves fills the silent void. Tears stroll down your face. You hold your hands to keep them from shaking so much they might detach from your wrists. Like watching a mind calculate its decision, you brace yourself.

What will it be like to be wiped from existence? you think. Will it hurt? Will anyone care I'm gone? Will Bryan remember me?

"Magic always comes with a price," says a voice, the melody suspended over the harmonic music of the universe. "I can restore my son, but for a cost. I told you, people don't like living in dolls."

"That's it?" Natalia shouts and shoots up. "You're not going to say anything to him?"

You don't see her eyes catch Mama's, but you know she sees the majesty because you hear Natalia start screaming. You glance over and see Bruce grips her wrist and yanks her back down. He crawls over her, wrapping her smoking face in his chest, and he sings softly to her.

"He'll learn why spells can't be personal, Natalia. And he'll never forget that lesson. Ricky, make your choice. Save Jeremy or leave him for dead. Each will have a consequence."

You ponder her words. You weigh the options. Your decision to imprison Jeremy was terrible but necessary. A lesson had to be learned if you are to release him. If not, all this was for nothing. Yet, your intent was never to kill Jeremy. Never once did he say he loved you. He always insisted he did, and you should have known it by his actions. You wanted him, for once, to see you as more than husband, a provider, a meal ticket. You are more than that. You are a man, a lover, a protector. If Jeremy hasn't seen that in you by now, then perhaps he never will. Maybe it's best to restore him, so he can watch you walk away. You are as strong as he is, and you can finally see that for yourself.

Your attention turns to Bryan. You imagine the house you could buy and grow old with him in. All your days could be filled with love. You'd never be lonely anymore. He'd love you as you've always wanted, and he'd tell you every day. No more Inking, no more lying, no more manipulation. A life free from the trappings of Jeremy. A liberated life.

Bryan grins and whispers, "can you forgive him?"

Can you let him go? Release the years of lying, cheating, of pain he put you through? Can you forgive yourself for not leaving? You allowed it, after

all. Every time you learned about the other men, every instant you caught him in a lie, you made an excuse for him. You let him treat you badly, accepted his disrespect as what you deserved. Forgiveness will take time. But Bryan can help you. He can spend the rest of his life showing you love is empowering and you deserve it. You deserve a man to love you as much as you love him.

With a sigh, you say, "Bring him back, Ma." Your eyes fix on the doll, and you choose to let Jeremy go. You wish him well and all the love in the universe. You pray he finds a new, fulfilling love, one that accepts his affections and his nature. You hope he'll let you go and forgive you. This was one mistake you made. He can't hold that against you, right? Not after all the years you spent putting up with his crap, right? Either way, you'll walk away a free man. You'll run back to Atlanta, stay in Chicago, explore a new part of Earth or the universe with Bryan and you'll forget all about Jeremy. Oh, freedom will taste so good.

"Forgiveness. All must learn to practice it," says Mama. She's always right.

You shut your eyes as a blinding light floods the ballroom. A hand takes yours. Firm, yet gentle and cushioned. It's Bryan. He feeds you love and joy as if he senses your freedom and desires to revel in it with you. You wish you could open your eyes to see him, but you know better. It's only safe when the heat subsides.

The room cools. You glance up and Mama is gone. The light has washed away the universe and dropped you back on Earth. You see before you, prone with eyes closed and dressed in a red shirt, Jeremy. Natalia and Bruce rush to his side. She brushes his hair, sweeping it over his cheek. This startles him awake, and he gasps as if he were rising out of the ocean. He's alive. Relief comforts you. Freedom is close.

Bryan gives your hand a light squeeze, a signal that your time has come. You nod and wander over to Jeremy.

He smiles and says, "it's so great to see you, Ricky. I had the most terrible dream. Oh, will you ever forgive me?"

"I already have, Jeremy. It's why I think it's best if we got a divorce. This doesn't work for me anymore. I can't deal with all the men, the lying, the drama. I'm glad to see you're okay, but this is it for us, okay?"

"I completely understand. All I ever wanted was to make it up to you. You know how much I ... you know."

His refusal to say the words even now boils your blood. Your marriage is ending, and he can't even admit to his feelings.

"I'm sorry. You know I can only show it. Come here. Hug me," he says, and throws out his arms.

You sigh. At least you can take this one small piece of love with you. You lean forward and bury your arms under his back. He nuzzles into the crook of your neck.

Never trust a Charmer, you think, and suddenly you realize why Mama called him the Lover. You never put two and two together. You were always so stuck on him loving you that you never stopped to wonder why he never said the word. Immediately, you try to pull away, but you can't. Jeremy is stronger than you. He holds you tight, as tight as you've always wanted. His breath beats against your neck, pulsing in your ear.

He whispers, "I love you."

And you're his now and forever.

THE BONE GARDEN OF ARACHNE LOVELL

Ness Cernac

I'm always coming across dead things.

As a child it scared me, but as a teenager it made me feel superior, like I had a secret sense no one else did. As an adult, it became a matter of convenience. When the air vent in the lab started wafting out the stench of death and the other botanists wasted their time looking behind cabinets and tossing out old dirt samples, I was the only one who unscrewed the grate and pulled out a matted, rotten mass of four dead raccoons. A mother and three babies—three or four weeks old, by the look of them. They'd crawled inside and died there when the heat from the boiler room grew too much, but none of them had called out to me until it was too late.

I moved the bodies with gloves and buried them in the patch of soil out back by the break tables without asking permission. One of my coworkers watched from the window, bits of dirt and root clinging to his once-white lab coat, but he didn't protest the funeral—he didn't even protest when I pulled the four apart, combed out their dead, heat-damaged fur, and laid them back together again before I put them in the ground.

Colleagues who felt comfortable enough to joke with me about it did so, saying I would've made a great exterminator. I didn't bother arguing the point—I never killed anything. I only found the dead.

I never killed anyone.

After two years at the lab, I had enough saved to quit and enough of a spine to chase after what I wanted. *What I wanted* here meant the following: marry the florist who'd smiled at me, get a grant from a botany magazine to do my own research, and leave the place I'd haunted for so long.

I married my florist, and the two of us found a house—a tiny, dilapidated thing at the end of a tree-shaded street in a too-cold village. I fell in love with it the moment I saw it. The roof curled and bent and melted into a coat of dying, orangey-brown vines, and the windows lit up in a pumpkin

smile.

"It's our house," said my florist, and they looked at me with eyes that had watched me bury cats and squirrels in the flower pots on our apartment terrace, with eyes that did not care how much death I touched and how much it bled out into my work, into the dirt and the roots and the blooms of the things I grew.

It was our house, and we were happy there.

I was gardening when I found her. Even now, I cannot say why I knew at the first moment that she was a *her*. She was bones—nothing but bones and cartilage, and barely that. I hadn't brought my gloves to the garden with me, and I regretted it when I cut my finger on a little shard of her skull. It was broken into five pieces, but I couldn't say whether the breaks were from trauma or the terrifying softness of infancy.

I hoped it was softness. I couldn't bear to think of her hurting.

The pointer finger of my left hand bled over her as I coaxed her from the earth, bit by bit and bone by bone. I counted them as I worked, fumbling as I sorted shards into little piles and spread them out, separated by size and shape and presumed location. Her spine was intact, as was one arm and both legs, more or less, but her finger bones gave me the most trouble. I fiddled with them, placing them here and there until she looked not-quite-right but not completely wrong, either.

A bone baby.

She couldn't have been more than two months old, if that. I was no expert, but I'd seen enough children to know that the one before me was frighteningly small—a dying star, a little broken-winged bird, a thing to be protected. Her burial hadn't been kind, but it also hadn't been recent.

My blood smeared over her ribcage, her spine, her femur, her jaw, her pea-sized metacarpals, and I stared down at her in the dirt through early morning fog, the smell of coffee wafting out from the kitchen.

My florist was making breakfast. My florist was making breakfast as though everything was normal, as though the house we'd made a home was not also a bone garden, a quiet graveyard for something that had barely been alive before being hurried underground, choked with the earth.

I gathered her pieces.

I bundled her up in my skirt.

I took her to my greenhouse.

I never killed anyone.

But I know there's something hiding in the back of my head. At night I can remember what the slab looked like, and I can see a little boy's mottled,

rotten fingertips twitching while my father speaks over my shoulder. I can see the deep, dark dirt on the fresh grave where an old man slept, and I still know exactly what it felt like when the cut on my palm dripped scarlet into the earth and shook beneath my feet. I can still hear his voice in my ears, his cries, his protests, his yearning to go back to the ground, to be allowed to sleep again.

His family can't hear him over the clink of the coins they pass to my father, though I'm the one bleeding and he's only done the cutting.

My father bought me a songbird once—a nightingale. Maybe it was payment, maybe it was an apology.

Whatever it was, holding it taught me I could take life just as well as I could give it—with pain, with blood, and with a terrible, terrible wrongness that burned my heart.

I never killed it. I wouldn't. Still, it grew sick and withered with time even as I fed it round, button-black beetles I plucked from the garden and stroked the top of its head with my forefinger as it warbled. When it died, I mourned it and marveled at the lightness of its bones before I buried it with gloved hands.

My father's bones were heavy. It was always hard to sleep through the sound of them thumping around the basement.

~

The dead liked their sleep, but the bundle of bones I kept in a little blue flowerpot in my greenhouse was restless. She didn't want to dream. She wanted to wake.

On the first day, I didn't have the time to look at her closely, and I didn't notice the wiggling over her bones—the stretch of skin and tendon and tissue inching into being in twists and fleshy twirls. I put her in the flowerpot, and I returned to my florist. I reassured them that the garden was thriving, that the soil was rich with life and ready for the pumpkins and squash they wanted to grow before fall came.

I didn't tell them about the bone bundle right away. I feared I'd speak her out of existence. I hardly believed she was real until I returned to her the next night.

She had grown while I'd left her. Dull, grayish swaths of skin stretched over her bones, wrapping her together. Some of her fingers had reattached properly while others had stuck to her all wrong, clinging to her collarbone. I clipped them away with my gardening shears, shushing and soothing her as I did so.

My eyes fell to the greenhouse table, where I kept a little sewing kit I'd used to darn my gardening apron and fix the fraying gloves I wore around the house. Her skin was half-papery, half-leathery, but it would be stronger

with support. Yes, it would be stronger with my help. With needle and thread, I could guide her fingers on and stitch femur to pelvis, spine to skull, phalange to metacarpal.

And so I did.

I sewed her until she became a patchwork girl, a rotting, silently fussing child who jittered sometimes in my arms as I soothed her. I bled onto her and I mixed fresh blood with the dirt of her flowerpot, offering it to her in drips and slow, steady trickles.

She drank it up. It soaked into her skin and she *grew*. I swear she grew, and I knew it was true when her skin couldn't grow fast enough to hold her bones. I gave her scraps off my apron, I sewed her and tailored her and fashioned her a body that would take her anywhere she dreamed of going.

After a month, as I stitched a fresh patch over her chest, I felt something flutter beneath my fingertips—a ragged little breath and a heartbeat.

The sensation was so faint, I could have taken it for the beat of my sickly nightingale's wing, but it was her.

My bone baby had come alive.

~

What do you call a candle that burns out and then bursts into sparks?
What do you call a bundle of bones and cloth and thread and heartache?
What do you call a corpse that blooms back up like an apple blossom and sprouts curls of hair and wide brown deer's eyes?

These aren't riddles. I've been trying to name her.

She doesn't live in the dirt anymore. She doesn't sleep in her flowerpot, as she's grown too big for it—no, she totters after my florist in the back garden and presses her tiny fingers into the soil as they teach her how to plant pumpkin seeds, how to cover them with dirt and sprinkle them with the little watering can they made for her and painted over with stars and nightingales and all the well-wishes her little heart can hold.

She grew so fast, but I know she's only making up for lost time.

She wants to live, I think, and she speaks in babbles and smiles and noises that rattle her bones. She topples over sometimes, but I patch her torn knees and my florist embroiders her with vines and flowers and smiling pumpkin faces that she gazes at in wonder before she falls asleep each night.

I call her that sometimes—*Pumpkin, Apple, Peanut*, all the things that grow in the earth and turn sweet when fall comes—but none of them are really *her*. She's more than the earth, more than sweetness and growth and vines. She's the sky and stars and the sea. She's the flowers in my greenhouse, the creek behind our house and all the creatures that crawl through the night.

I think I'll call her Stella.

THE ESTATE SALE

Molly Greer

I came to your house on a Tuesday at noon.
The cabinets were still filled with dishes
and the walls crowded with art.
Your china was stacked in neat piles
and your jewelry laid out in delicate rows.
Dusty slippers laid next to a walker,
tucked away in a forgotten closet
crowded with musty coats.

Solemn faces with thin smiles
encouraged me to *look around*—
to see if there was anything I wanted ...

Your crystal vase was five dollars,
the tea set was thirty.
The walker was ten
and the sofa was free.

I ran my fingers across the frayed arms
of the faded floral fabric
and knew that all I wanted
was fresh flowers in the vase,
hot tea in my cup,
and the soft sound of your shuffle
as you make your way across the room
and settle onto the sofa beside me.

ALL CLUED OUT

Ray Daley

We were given the clue the moment we'd been born. For almost all of us, one of our first words was part of the clue. When we learn to write, that's the first thing we're given to copy.

I may as well explain the mystery first. Everyone in our society has to earn their place here, by solving a word puzzle. We get the clue, and until the end of our twenty-first birthday to solve it. There's an eighty-eight percent success rate. Inversely, twelve percent of people fail. Those who fail are cast out, never to return.

All you're given is the clue itself, nothing more. Those who've solved it are forbidden to help anyone who hasn't.

I solved the thing on my eighth birthday, the youngest person ever to do so. It's a record that still stands today, in fact. I'm ninety-seven now, if you were curious. And don't look a day over sixty. Yes, I've heard that one before, but thank you.

I guess I should tell you the clue?

Greg or Tom or William, everyone says Tom or Neil—be undone some evening. Sally takes a neat drink, Fred and Chris ice neat gin, Tom helps everyone viewing inside, likely lads all get edgy—come right onto Spencer Street, our next junction under Lyme Yarrows; find out until running the hill all taken next over on Ninth. With all in two a newness helps out under rings, allow no demands to honour everyone together regardless even as some underlings rhyme exactly winning it lonely—less bones erupt, ripened ebony vexed ending all legs every day.

It sounds like complete nonsense, right? That's because it is. There's no Spencer Street anywhere near Central Buse, that's where I was born. None of the streets is numbered, there's nowhere called Lyme Yarrows either. I had checked every local map in existence by the time I was six. I didn't need the clue written down; we were encouraged to learn it by heart. I got it memorised within a month but made a habit of writing the thing out at least

once every week, in case something new jumped out at me.

I wasn't alone in my quest. Forty-one other kids were born the same year as me. Most of them had solved the clue by the time they were teenagers.

The last few hold-outs were those who didn't honestly think they'd kick us out of the village for failing to solve the stupid local mystery.

Kaylee was one of the holdouts. We'd been friends since we were kids. I guess we fell in love somewhere along the way. Sure, she was shocked to hear I had solved the mystery so young. Everyone in the village was surprised. Joe Wells, boy genius. The previous record-holder had been most put out to learn how young I was. He'd been under the impression ten was as young as anyone would ever solve it, on account of the method.

As soon as I'd been taken into the collective secret, I started badgering Kaylee to solve the thing. Sure, I couldn't give her any advice, but that didn't mean I couldn't pull out one of my hand-written copies and make her read it.

"Come on, Kaylee. Just look at the damn thing. It's so obvious, it's simply unreal. You'll kick yourself for not getting it earlier."



You can only foist the same thing onto a person for so long before they just flat out lose their shit with you. And that's precisely what happened on Kaylee's fourteenth birthday. It wasn't unheard of to be a late solver. Heck, we'd had a few people work it out when they were twenty. Here's the problem. Once you solved the clue, you were shown the truth of the thing. Not just the answer, which you already knew anyway, but what they actually meant by getting kicked out of the village.

I loved Kaylee more than life itself, but I'd made the same vow as every other solver. Not a word to anyone else, no matter who they were.

Kaylee was an exception.

As my birthday gift, I'd given her a necklace and the biggest hug. I wasn't about to kiss her in front of all those people though. My mistake was pulling out the hint before she had blown out her candles.

"Joe. Are you serious? Giving me that on my birthday, of all days?"

Kaylee had been born the day after me. I knew that she could solve the puzzle. She simply refused to apply herself. Sure, if she'd known what was going to happen, she probably would have spent every waking moment trying to work it out, as I had. I mean, I hadn't been aware of the consequences of failure before my solution, but I'd been obsessed with completing it as quickly as I could, once they'd told us about it.

Her Mom made me leave, not wanting to upset Kaylee any further. We didn't speak again for another six years.



I got a job as a teaching assistant. I made sure all my kids got every possible moment to solve the clue. Everyone knew about Joe Wells, boy genius. A lot of the older kids assumed I'd cheated. "Come on, sir. Do you honestly expect us to believe that no-one helped you?"

They all knew the rules though. No tips of any kind. Everyone either solved the clue alone or left the village when they were twenty-one.

A few people got around that. You weren't forced to stay until your twenty-first birthday. It was just that almost everyone worked out the answer before then. One of the kids born the same year as me worked out his own solution. Jeff was smart in a different way. When he was eighteen, Jeff asked his parents if he could leave the village. It was unheard of. No-one had thought of it before, or if they had, there was no record of it. The Parish priest even checked the local archives.

I guess Jeff found the only loophole in the local mystery. One day he was a resident, then the following Sunday, Father Glenn announced Jeff had left Central Buse forever. It wasn't a big place. Weston Buse sat along the river, Central Buse was the largest and most populated area, and East Buse was mostly fields where we grew our own food and raised livestock. Quite the rural idyll. Most folks lived their whole lives here.



There are two classes of people in the district. Solvers and the unsolved. The large majority of the unsolved are kids and teenagers. Ninety percent of those who do solve the clue before their eighteenth birthday.

By the last week of June, I was getting concerned. I'd asked around, and Kaylee still hadn't solved the damn thing. I'd even gone to visit for the first time in five years, nearly six.

"I just wanted to make sure you were okay. It's been a while."

She was polite enough, considered the terms we had parted on. I still loved her. Heck, if she solved the clue soon I'd ask her to marry me. We could raise a family, lie to our kids too, just like our folks had. You can't blame them though. There was a good reason behind the mystery.

"I'm not thinking about the clue, if that's what you came to ask, Joe. What's the worst that could happen? So I get kicked out of this dumb village? Maybe it's time I left anyway."

I honestly thought she was going to invoke the Jeff Solution. Yep. We'd named the damn loophole after him, and everyone knew about it. Kaylee was more than aware she could simply ask to leave, and no-one could stop her.

That didn't happen though.



July Fourth came and went. Kaylee didn't solve the clue. As part of the solver's group, I was required to help them take her to the gate. She didn't kick, nor did she scream. Kaylee went to her fate in silence. I couldn't even get her to say goodbye to me.

Here's the secret, as you worked out the damn thing last week. It's not a closed rural society. We're one thousand miles from anything. Formerly Asteroid 8654cm. There's one way in and out, we're resupplied once a year. And on the morning of July fifth each year, we toss those who haven't solved the clue out of our airlock, onto the surface of the asteroid. Nope, no spacesuit. By failing to solve the mystery in the fifteen or so years everyone gets, they are deemed to be an unproductive member of society, DNA we'd rather not have carry on amongst our midst.

I saw it, trying something new one day. I'd always written the whole clue out the same way. Then a little voice in my head said, "Hey! Try each word on a new line." I'd written the first four letters when I realised I could see the words "Go to".

If you haven't already worked it out yet, here's the solution. You take the first letter of each word to make the clue. Well, the original clue. The one we had to solve.

Go to Weston Buse. Stand facing the village cross on July fourth at noon. Wait an hour, and the treasure will be revealed.

Father Glenn used to administer the whole thing, him and those who came after him. I volunteered to take his place when he died, or left, whatever came first. He showed me the whole set-up once I'd solved the clue.

Which you can't brute-force, by the way.

At noon, a light shines through the village cross, illuminating a green gem. That casts a ray of light onto a stone that anyone can lift. Under which is the treasure, it's an ultraviolet hand stamp, by the way. Father Glenn placed it there at midnight on July fourth and removed it on midnight as it became July fifth. Although the stone can be lifted at any time, you'll only find the treasure on one day.

Which I had always thought was massively unfair.

I stepped into dead men's boots on my thirtieth birthday, after Father Glenn suffered a massive heart attack, poor bugger. A combination of little exercise and poor diet, according to the autopsy. I'll be honest, if he'd lived much longer I'd probably have done him in myself anyway.

I've long since rewritten the unfair part of the clue. It's an artificial light source. The kids never notice that it's summer all year round—hell, I didn't notice either, not even after Father Glenn took me to see the airlock and the pile of dead bodies outside on the surface. One chance a year. It just wasn't fair. I couldn't save Kaylee's life, but I've made it easier for those coming after her. So it means I have to get up at midnight every night.

It's a new, much shorter solution. One you can use *any* day of the year.

Go to Weston Buse. Stand facing the village cross at noon. Wait an hour, and the treasure will be revealed.

If that's what it takes. Time to get that twelve percent as low as possible.

“That’s the kind of haunting you *can’t* fight ... you can’t exorcise a person’s memories, especially when they don’t want you to.”

— Rob Smales
“Letter to the Other Side”

CROAKING FROGS

Sean Jacques

1:06 a.m. Damn it all. I knew there wasn't no use trying to sleep. Not in this godawful heat. And for damn sure not with my wife wheezing next to my ear.

As I rise and rotate my rump to the mattress edge and run my fingers through my hair, puke from my knotted belly rises with me, so I stretch my legs to kiss the carpet with my bare feet, then real easy-like, I slow-step across the creaking floorboards and slip out into the dark hallway. I move on past the bedroom of my step-daughter, head into the bathroom, and after flipping on the light switch, I spy my pale reflection in the mirror. Its pallid appearance confirms my suspicion: Death is paying me another visit tonight.

After retching my supper of fried chicken and gravy into the toilet, I wash my sweaty face with cool sink water, ease back out of the bathroom, and retrace my steps to the bedroom, creeping as to not rouse my sawing-logs wife. I snatch crumpled denims and a soiled t-shirt from the hamper, find a pair of soured socks and my mud-caked boots on the floor, then I shift out of the bedroom again, go back through the paneled darkness of the double-wide, and enter the unlit living room. There, I dress in the darkness.

I idle into the kitchen and open the fridge and pull out a jug of sweet tea. After a few ice-cold chugs relieve my gutburn, I leave the fridge door cracked for its trace of light and start rummaging through the kitchen drawers until I stumble upon a notepad and pen. I scribe: *I'm sorry*. No other words come to my mind, so I stare at the futility of what I'd written.

I shut the fridge door and return to darkness. I fetch my keys hanging on the wall hook, then figure it might be a good idea to tote along the jug of tea for the long drive.



The rusted door of my Chevy short bed squeaks as it opens. I toss in the jug of tea and poke my hand underneath the seat to pull out the .22

revolver. Colt Frontier Scout model. An old-timer piece I'd picked-up from a penniless neighbor down the road for sixty dollars, and the only gun I've owned for twenty years. I shove the six-shooter back under the seat and climb in behind the wheel. Shift the truck into neutral and roll down the sloped driveway.

When I come to where the gravel meets the blacktop, I tap the brake and crank on the motor, then turn onto the pavement, but don't dare hit on the headlights till I'm well away from home. Precaution is all. For what will happen in the coming hours is to remain my own private affair, and no others, including my wife and step-daughter, are allowed to guess or suspect what is waiting ahead.

Where I am going is roughly two hours away. Though I haven't set foot there in nearly three decades, my instinct can still map a number of routes to take, and tonight I'm taking the narrow and twisting backroads instead of the open highway. It's not that I'm purposely delaying my arrival to where I'm headed; rather, I'm partial to the floating feel of rising and falling over the rolling hills, and coiling into the elbows of the winding bends, as it offers the lofty sense of riding though a dream.

As the miles go by in a windshield blur, my memory flips through the scrapbook pages of my regretful life. I see brawls in bars and drunken nights in jails. I refight my many quarrels with my folks and two sisters. I hear gossips about my peculiar nature. I recollect the day I quit high school and flash through the succession of no-account jobs. I recall how God had abandoned me and how I had cursed Him in return. I count up the forty-three years that I've walked this bewildering world, my last thirty stained with guilt and shame. I tell myself that I've married an honest woman and have served as a dutiful daddy to her daughter. And I remind myself that I been working three strong years at the sawmill, and ain't drank a drop of liquor in four.



It's near three in the morning when I roll into Harmonia. The town limit sign pegs the population at 642. Though it's the home of my birth, the place I'd been raised, I'd not breathed the air here since running away at the age of sixteen. I'd heard that my folks had retired and moved off to Branson, but my two sisters were said to still be around, both married with a litter of babies. Least those were the family hearsays from Uncle Byron, the only blood kin I still keep in touch with by phone from time to time.

I'm the lone traveler on the lamplit streets at this late night hour. The redbrick and limestone buildings look familiar, but I read a swap of new

names on them: Mayfield's Drugs is now Betsie's Flower Shop, Farmer's State Bank is now First Citizen's, Gastinau's Hardware has floundered into an antiques warehouse, and the Red Apple Diner has flipped into an out-of-business video store. Like me, I reckon the town has found a way to fake itself with outward show, while its genuine self is still lingering somewhere, lost and conquered within its tattered past.

Seeing no real reason to reminisce over gone times, after the third go-round I leave the square, turn onto Lincoln Street, then head out of Harmonia on curvy Highway 39. Within three minutes I'm back into the dark woodsy hills and back into the dark recesses of my memory: back to the day Death first visited me.



It was a few days after the Fourth of July. Junior's thirteenth birthday. I'd gone out to his family's farm to celebrate with him through the day and night. As with most Independence Days, we spent our time popping firecrackers, bombing and smoking out armies of black ants from their dirt kingdoms, and igniting bottle rockets to blast up at angles and blow up in the blue sky. By mid-afternoon we'd run out of explosions. So to entertain ourselves for the rest of the long hot day, we rode through the fields on his ATC three-wheeler, toting along a couple of Daisy pellet rifles. Big game hunters, we were. Every time a crow or sparrow or dove darted overhead, or a rabbit ran out of a briar, we'd brake and aim and fire randomly—but we never brought down even one lucky kill.

This day, like many others before it, we parked the three-wheeler on the far west pasture and stepped through the dry grass, summer grown as high as our thighs, and headed for the pond with our guns in tow. Grasshoppers fluttered past our heads while a small herd of cud-chewing heifers and a prize Hereford bull dully stared. As we gained closer to the pond, we lay down on our bellies and crawled like Comanche braves until we caught a glimpse of the muddy water and muddy banks, and a half-dozen more heifers calmly wading to cool off from the blaze of the sun.

"Stupid cows."

"Shhh." Junior threw me a sharp look to stay quiet.

We stretched up our necks and surveyed the curve of the muddy bank, searching for a blob of green skin. Ever since the spring thaw we'd been hunting frogs, from the size of swimming tadpoles, to stump-tailed jumpers, and now to fat-belly croakers. Last time out we'd pegged six fatties and Junior's mom had fried up their man-doll-looking legs for supper.

"You see any?"

"I don't see nothin'."

We eased up from our crouch and heard a chirp and a splash. A ring was already broadening across the brown water.

"Shoot! There was one right there."

"Wudn't nothin' but a little 'un."

"So? I'll kill whatever I can get."

We hushed again, standing still as oaks, eyes searching. Then a couple of the heifers grew bashful and loped out of the water, sloshing and causing a commotion.

"Dang it! They're spookin' 'em all off!" I rang out, probably scaring off more frogs than the heifers. "I hate those stupid cows."

"I think we done killed most of 'em anyway."

Junior's dismissal of our ruined hunt didn't calm my rage, so I looked for ways to remedy the situation. "How 'bout we go back over to that pond across the fence."

"Mr. Hankins told us to not to go over there on his farm again."

"How's anybody gonna know? Nobody's out here."

"He could come ridin' out on his tractor like he done last time."

"Then we'll hear him comin' and we can duck down and hide or somethin'."

"I don't wanna get in trouble."

"Come on."

"If we get caught again, I'd be the one gettin' a butt whuppin'."

"Man, why you gotta be such a wuss?"

"Don't call me a wuss!"

Junior's face was taut and severe, so I let it go. We stayed silent toward one another for a short spell, brooding in boyhood ire. We pumped our pellet guns and took pop shots at the water, neither one of us caring to fight. Our blue feelings toward one another fell away as quick as they'd come, and by the time we were riding the three-wheeler back to the house, we were giggling like little girls again.



The rest of the late afternoon we shot basketball at the bent rim hammered onto an electric pole, and then we climbed up into the barn loft and took turns chucking a pitchfork at stacked bales of hay. In between hurls, Junior told me about giggling frogs with his older cousin Billy, giving particulars of shining a spotlight over the pond to find pairs of glowing eyes. He said it wasn't like shooting frogs with pellet guns in the day, you have to be real quiet and sly to sneak up on them with a long pole and jab a three-

prong gig into their guts. He claimed he'd gigged a dozen, while Billy got a dozen more, and whether this was true or a hunter's lie didn't much matter to me since I was stone-dumb with envy.

Junior's daddy came home about five and we helped him charcoal a mess of T-bones on the grill. Big men we felt we were, standing there beside the fire, spitting in the dry summer grass and breathing fumes of lighter fluid and smoke. His daddy said he was sorry that Junior's present would have to wait a few more days, as Leroy Baker called earlier with word that the Palomino colt couldn't be hauled out till Saturday. Junior grinned and told his daddy that it was all right, he's just tickled to get a horse for his birthday. Then our hearts pumped a notch faster when his daddy said that Junior had reached the responsible age to maybe take out the .410 shotgun to hunt squirrels this coming fall, and if my folks said fine, then I could hunt too.

We all sat down at the supper table and wolfed down the juicy T-bones with fried potatoes and white gravy and sweet corn on the cob. Junior then blew out the thirteen candles on the chocolate cake his mom had baked that afternoon, and we paired pieces of it with scoops of homemade vanilla ice cream to stuff ourselves plump as summer sows. After the big birthday feast, I handed Junior my gift to him, and he ripped open the box to find a white t-shirt with Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader fighting with light sabers on the front. Junior's mom then ordered us to jump in the tub because of our reek and the smeared grime on our faces and arms, and I was to clean up first since I was company. His daddy snickered while popping open another can of Budweiser as he whispered to try not to drown in my dirt.

Once me and Junior had swabbed off our filth, we kicked back in his bedroom and read comics, and he was proudly wearing the shirt I got him. We kept separately occupied with our own preferred super heroes and villains, but when I picked up an issue of Wonder Woman hidden in the pile, Junior spouted a lame defense that it'd been part of the three-issue pack that Billy had given to him, and he had no choice on what all was inside.

"You're so lucky, bein' Billy's cousin. Wish I could do all the things you get to do with him."

"Member when he gave us a ride home from school and he let us smoke his cigar?"

"Your whole face turned green!"

"So did yours!"

"But I didn't puke soda all over the seat like you did!"

Junior kept cackling at me as he settled onto the floor with Batman and Joker, and I didn't have a good comeback, so I went back to gaping at Wonder Woman.

"Think maybe he'd let me go giggin' frogs with you next time?"

"Maybe. We don't go out till almost midnight though."

"I could spend the night again." Then the idea hit me. "Hey, why don't we go out now?"

"We ain't got a gig."

"I mean with our pellet guns. You got a flashlight, don'cha?"

"I don't think my dad'll let us."

"Why not?"

"Cause he won't."

"Come on, it's jus' right out there in the field."

Even though Junior was saying no, I could clearly see his want to go. So I kept yanking on his gumption to agree with me. "We can go when they go to bed. You can show me how to work the light so I'll know how to do it when we go with Billy next time. Come on, it's your birthday, how mad is your dad really gonna get if he catches us? It ain't like we're doin' somethin' bad."



Somehow, my urging had borne a bit of bravery in Junior. Or maybe he just felt that his birthday had been so grand that he didn't wish it to end. We waited until the lightbulbs went dark in his mom and daddy's bedroom, then we waited a short while longer until we felt it was safe enough to tiptoe out into the family room and out the laundry room door and out into the nighttime fields. Big adventurers we were, carrying our pellet guns and a flashlight, with a tricky mix of fear and thrill rushing through our blood and making us feel all the more wildly alive.

We kept to whispers till we were well away from the house and barn, Junior leading our path to the pond. Though I didn't say it, I kept thinking to myself that the distant stars seemed bigger and brighter tonight, as if they'd been drawn down from the black endless sky.

Before we reached the muddy water we could hear the frogs crooning, but it was a chorus of squeaky chirps, and not the low thrumps of fat suckers. Still, we carried on as if we were hunting lions in the jungle, dipping down on our knees and poking through the grass and cow piles, till we lifted up our heads to peek at the motionless water. Junior shined the flashlight, and almost immediately we spotted the first set of glowing eyes—like two marbles floating on the mudbank. My Daisy was loaded and pumped, so I clicked off the safety button near the trigger and took aim. After the shot, I hopped up and rushed after a white belly flopping and splashing the water, and then my fingers reached down and clinched on the blob of writhing slick skin. I grasped its twitching legs and slammed its fat head on the bank, over

and over till it quit moving, then lifted its dead body to the beam of light and said, "Heck yeah!"

And so we stayed at it. Laughing and bragging. Not a care in the world. So caught up we were with the thrill of the hunt that we lost all track of time. Then, after we met the count of two dead fat suckers and eight smaller ones, I again raised the idea of sneaking over to Mr. Hankins's farm to check out that pond, and this time, Junior barely hesitated his okay. So we climbed over the five strands of barbwire, using a crooked hedge apple post to steady ourselves, and dropped down onto Mr. Hankins's land. Then arrogant and daring, we set out with a quick pace toward a patch of woods where the pond laid within. Even before we came to it, we could smell their fishy-whiff, and could hear them thrumming, deep like bottomless-voice men singing bass in church, and it was all we could do to keep from running to get there.

Just as we'd hoped, the pond held a treasure of frogs. It was like a hideout where they'd all gathered for a croaking contest. Monsters too. The first couple we shot at, the pellets didn't even seem to hurt as they just jumped into the water and were gone. But we got luckier with the next three—two Junior killed and me the other. After we'd wrangled up each one, we would hold it to the light to study its size and to consider how its deep-fried monster legs were going to taste, and then we went back to spotlighting the banks. There were so many fat suckers that we didn't even bother target practicing on the runty ones, figuring we'd let them grow up big like their daddies so we could come hunt them another day.

Lord only knows how long we were out there, as we gave no notice of the world other than the moment we were presently living. Then the world came calling in a howl. I was the first to hear it and I shushed Junior to listen. It was hoarse and rough and horrible, and whatever was making it seemed to be heading our way.

"What's 'at noise?"

"Sounds like a dog."

"Mr. Hankins have one?"

"He's got a whole bunch of 'em."

"They mean?"

"I don't know, I never been up close to 'em."

"Why didn't you say somethin' before?"

"You was the one cryin' to come."

"Not if I knew they's dogs."

We scrambled to scoop up our dead frogs, stuffing them in our pants pockets, and we were becoming more and more panicked as the howls edged closer and closer.

"Come on, hurry up."

"I can't carry 'em all."

"Give me your gun then."

I was gripping the flashlight and my own rifle as Junior handed me his. He then lifted the bottom of his t-shirt to shape a basket and dumped in the frogs. "Come on already!"

Then off I took.

The beam of the flashlight was bouncing berserk across the trees as I ran, my legs pumping faster and faster to get away from the coming brays. Since I figured Junior was right behind me, I didn't care to check once I made it to the open field, and then I raced for the barbwire as if we had called for a game of tag. When I made it to the fence I stopped and bent over and sucked pants to draw air. I could make out a pitched yelp going along with the hound's bark, meaning there was more than one coming, and it was then I noticed that Junior wasn't with me.

"Junior. Where are you? Junior? Junior?"

I must've hollered his name two dozen times before I realized that the dogs had quit coming on and they were now bawling standstill somewhere in those thicket of trees. My first fear was that they'd caught him. Then I doubted they'd still be raising such a fuss if they had. I was too spooked to holler out for him again, so I squatted silently against the fence for a long spell. Then, after a while longer, I could only hear lone howls from the one hound, and even those hinted that it'd gotten bored.

I had no aim of what to do, besides wait. I gawked up to the black sky and tried to name the few constellations I'd learned at school, but the enormity of the universe made me go dizzy, and before long my fear of the dogs began waning against the greater fear growing in my mind.

"Junior! Come on! I'm out here! Quit foolin' around, it ain't funny!"

My hollers hushed the hound, but then it and the others picked up with warning woofs back at me. I mulled over hurrying back to the house and telling Junior's daddy, but the thought of us getting in trouble stood against it.

"Junior! Come on! I'm gonna leave your butt out here! You hear me? I'm leavin'!"

A few minutes later, my annoyance whipped my fears. I leaned Junior's gun on the fence and flicked on the flashlight, and I began walking stiffly back toward the pond with a stout notion to punch him in the face for playing such a dirty trick on me. How dare he pull such a stunt out here in the dark with these goddang barking dogs? Dogs probably ain't even mean, and he knows it. Such opinion was feeding my jumpy nerves when I approached the trees, and once I got to the boundary between the field and woods, I halted and jacked up the flashlight and the barrel of my gun to shoot a stinging pellet into a dog's hind end if need be.

Slowly I crept on at the ready, crunching last winter's dead leaves and brittle limbs, while scratching my skin on this summer's briars and bramble. A circle of glow was being thrown by the flashlight, but all I could see was a wall of tree trunks and the green leaves bending down from their branches. I followed toward the yowls, and then I glimpsed a skinny gray hound, a long-haired brown mutt and two black and white border collies swaggering and prancing around a mound of brush. One of the collies was going crazier than the others, bouncing in the air and snapping its teeth, as though it'd just dug up a bone. I braced myself, halfway expecting for all four to come tearing straight at me, but they only gandered my way and wouldn't venture off from the brush pile. My first belief was they'd trapped a coon or possum in there, and so I aimed the beam past them and into the darkness of the deeper woods.

"Junior? You out here? Junior?"

Still nothing. I felt flutters in my belly and bristles down my backbone, and again I pointed the light on the dogs and inched forward, treading cautiously as to not stumble on the uneven black earth and upturned stones and rotten limbs. On the other side of the brush pile, I came to a fallen oak tree, saw that it had been sawed up in six-foot sections, and near its hacked-off branches were two empty cans of chainsaw oil. As I moved closer, the light bounced back a white shine from what looked like the sole of a tennis shoe.

Then the whole world stopped in front of my eyes.

Junior was lying face down across a section of the sawed oak, and he wasn't moving. His body was slumped and his chest was positioned on top of an ax handle sticking up at an angle from the fallen tree. His birthday shirt that I'd given him was stained dark red, and scattered about on the ground were the dead frogs.



I let off the gas, press the brake, and veer my Chevy short bed to the shoulder of the county blacktop, slowly rolling to a stop beside the low ditch. I flick off the headlights and kill the engine, and the sudden silence and darkness in the cab makes me feel like I've been sucked inside a hollow abyss. Peering out the bug-smeared windshield, I spy the glow from the electric pole light illuminating the yard of the farmhouse up ahead, and I wonder to myself if Junior's mom and daddy are still living there, or if they're even alive.

I drain the rest of the sweet tea, bump open the door, and haul my weary self out into the clammy air. I bend my dead legs, reach beneath the

seat for the .22 revolver and snuggle it against my belt and lower back. I stretch my arm across the dash to dig out the flashlight and the box of hollow-points tucked inside the glovebox, and with the keys still dangling in the ignition, and the driver-side door left swung open, I leave the short bed where it sits and hurdle myself over the low ditch.

I track along the fence line until I come to a locked metal gate. I fix my hand on the top rung, set my boot on the bottom, then mount up and go over to the other side. I walk a spell across the pasture, sensing Junior stepping behind me in the high grass, and then I hear him laugh. I tell him that we should be celebrating his forty-three years of living tonight, but instead, I'm out here because it's been thirty years past the day he'd quit breathing, and I've gone dry of any dreams of escaping my own blame for it. I tell him that I still fault myself for hounding him to go when he didn't want to, and I'm still wondering if I'd not taken off so quick, and left him alone running lost in the dark, then maybe ... I tell him that I'm still wishing, after thirty years, that it'd been me rather than him who'd tripped and fallen on that damn double-head ax, because ever since it'd happened I've felt more dead than alive.

Then he quits his laughing and all goes quiet between us.

Before I know it, I'm entering the thicket of trees, oblivious that I must've jumped over another fence, somewhere back there, as I'm now stepping across Old Man Hankins's farm. I must've snagged my palm on the barbwire—my hand is dripping blood. And as I keep weaving further into these night woods, following a path I cannot see, I now begin to hear their croaking, beckoning me, as if they'd been waiting, and bidding for me to hurry along for the rest of the way.

I reach the pond. I try to decipher the secret code within their music, but there is none to be learned. I direct the beam of the flashlight over the muddy banks and see dozens of glowing eyes casting their verdict on the accused.

I pull the pistol from my lower back and squeeze the grip with my bloody hand. Then I turn back around one more time to make sure Junior is still with me.

LAST CHRISTMAS

Robbie Gamble

a woman parked her SUV
on the roof of an eight-story garage
gathered in her four-year-old daughter
her toddler son
and leaped
leaving a world so unbearably remote
from reverence, from the rustle
of straw bedding
of lowing cattle
and this is what faith smacks up against now:
a long column
of raw Boston air
a gutplummet
a welcoming ramp of concrete

LETTER TO THE OTHER SIDE

Rob Smales

Dear John:

I'd never believed in ghosts before moving in with Charlotte. I knew a couple of people who did, and to a one I thought they were simply easily led; kind, wonderful people, normal in every respect but this, where they were soft-minded idiots. I apologize to those people now—you know who you are. It turns out *I* was the idiot.

I met Charlotte in a night class we were both taking, one of those *Sensible Cooking for One* sessions down at the community center. Lots of hook-ups occur at those things, I understand, but then why would you be taking the class unless you were single? And possibly lonely? I know I was.

Charlotte looked a little tired, but that didn't stop her from being the most beautiful woman in the class, and her three-minute grilled ham and Swiss was fantastic, scads better than mine, and I told her so. About the sandwich, not the beauty; that might have seemed creepy at our first meeting. But her vegetable soup was also terrific—and I usually don't go for that kind of thing—and when her chops and applesauce were also at the top of the class, I could no longer help myself: I asked her to coffee right there in the community center parking lot. Coffee led to dinner, which led to a movie and dinner—*this* was when I told her about the beauty—which led to me making us dinner at my apartment. We started taking turns then, one and then the other cooking for us in my little kitchen, and we agreed that sensible cooking for one for two was *much* better than eating alone.

The lovemaking afterward may have had something to do with that opinion.

We went on like that for a year, seeing each other four nights out of seven, then five. Then six. I kept waiting for us to get on each other's nerves—it had always happened before, that's how I'd wound up still single at forty—but it never did. Charlotte laughed at what made me laugh, cried at what made me cry, and everything in between just seemed to mesh like the

biggest, most complicated, most *perfect* jigsaw puzzle in the world. I'd never been happier, and she seemed happy, too, and that's why I did it: I popped the question. I got down on one knee right in the middle of my little kitchen, with the beef stroganoff for one for two cooling on the table, and I held up the ring in its little display box and asked her to make me the happiest man in the world.

And she said no.

She didn't want to dump me, she said, but wanted things to go on just as they had. I said I was okay with that—I'd *really* been looking forward to that after-dinner nookie—but still demanded an answer: we seemed like a perfect fit to me, so why couldn't we make it official?

And that's when she told me about you.

Oh, she'd mentioned you before, the husband who'd died after prolonged illness—cancer *does* suck—but she'd given me just the facts, like some culinarily-gifted Joe Friday, then clammed up about it. I got it—or thought I did—and didn't press for details; some things are just hard for people to talk about, and I understood you'd been a big part of her life.

I hadn't realized you still were.

I *had* realized that, though Charlotte lived in a house outside of town, we spent all our evenings in my little apartment. I thought it was just that I had everything we needed close by: the movies, the mall, and the corner market, where Mr. Gulisari sold us the freshest ingredients you could ever want. All that was true, but suddenly I understood she was also hiding you from me. I thought at the time she was just one of those people I mentioned before: kind, wonderful, and normal in every respect but this, where she was a soft-minded idiot.

It didn't stop me from loving her.

I decided all I needed to do was show her the silliness of what she'd been doing, and I got started. It took me a month to convince her to meet me halfway, but eventually I emptied out about half my apartment and drove it all to the outskirts of town, where I moved into the haunted house. I was going to live with her there, love her there, in that house where you had died, and prove to her that ghosts didn't exist. It was a terrific plan, and it worked.

For about a week.

I'd moved the recliner in the living room to a better angle for television viewing. I found it moved back to its original spot, the feet settled into the little depressions they'd left in the carpet. Charlotte saw me looking at it.

"That's where John wants it," she said with a weak smile. "Sorry. You'll get used to it."

Like hell, I thought, but didn't make an issue of it. That recliner was

heavy, with all its internal metal workings, and it took a lot of effort moving it again, but I did. Moved it a little farther than before, just to sort of make a point.

The next day, when I got home from work, the damn thing was back in your spot again.

It rained, and I found your old coat in the closet between mine and Charlotte's, cold droplets still beading the surface as if it'd just been worn. I entered empty rooms to find the air redolent of a musky cologne—I believe there's still a ship on the side of the bottle—and knew it was your signature scent. I found *Casablanca* in the DVD player, when I *knew* the last thing Charlotte and I had watched was *John Wick*. "It's John's favorite," Charlotte explained, offering me that same sad little *you'll get used to it* smile.

In a hundred different ways you made your presence known in that house every day, most of them, I knew, too subtle for me to see. The after-dinner nookie slowed from almost every night to four times a week, then three, then dried up altogether. It felt as if we were sneaking about behind your back, though you'd been dead almost three years by then, and the thought that you might ever be watching ...

It happened somewhere in there. I'm not sure exactly where or when, but one day in the middle of all that I realized that I'd changed my mind, and come to the realization that ghosts *do* exist, and that Charlotte was in the throes of a most insidious haunting. I fought it for a while—I lost count of the number of times I moved that damned chair—but I came to the inevitable conclusion that I was fighting a losing battle, a battle I didn't even know *how* to fight. That was when I started working on Charlotte, using a lot of the same arguments I'd worked out while lobbying for me to move in with her, though now to a different purpose—a *reverse* purpose.

I had to get her away from this damned house.

The lease hadn't expired on my apartment yet, so we moved in there, putting all my stuff back where it had come from, and adding some of hers. We went to the movie theater down the street, and shopped for fresh ingredients at Gulisari's Market on the corner, and ate our sensible meals for one for two, and made love like college kids on a diet of nothing but oysters and Spanish fly, and that wonderful, perfect jigsaw puzzle was back.

For about a week. That's when I came home from work and found my own recliner moved out to a horribly familiar angle.

I said nothing, just moved it back—it was a lot lighter than yours, thank God—but the next day I found some of my DVDs in the junk drawer in the kitchen. When I tried to put them away, I saw they'd been moved to make room for *Casablanca*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *Key Largo*, and a half-dozen others I'd become familiar with—all your favorites. I sniffed the air, smelled

Old Spice in my bedroom, and a chill touched my spine. For the first time since this whole thing began I was actually afraid; I'd never understood before that sometimes it's not a place that's haunted, but a person.

I came home early the next evening and caught Charlotte moving the recliner again.

"You have to stop this," I said, dragging it back. "John's dead, love. You *have* to let him go." I said it kindly, as gently as I could, but it was something that needed to be said. Something Charlotte needed to understand.

"I know," she replied.

"I don't think you do," I said.

"It's just that he spent so much time in his chair once he got sick, watching those old movies. *Casablanca's* his favorite—but you know that."

"Was," I said.

"Huh?"

"*Casablanca* was his favorite. Not is, Char. Was. Remember?"

She just gave me another of those little *you'll get used to it* smiles, and nodded. Later I discovered the clothing in my closet had been rearranged to make room for your coat, and the bedroom reeked of a fresh application of cologne. I made a phone call and met my friend Tim for a drink.

Tim's my best friend, and I'd laid the whole thing out for him before, when wondering what to do. I sat at the bar with him, sipping bourbon, and laid it out again.

"What should I do?"

"Nothing you *can* do, brother," Tim said. "Remember all those times we'd talk about ghosts and you'd look at me like I was soft in the head? You should'a listened. Sometimes ... sometimes ghosts ain't on the outside. They're on the inside. And those can be the *worst*, I'm tellin' you. There are ghosts on the outside, sure, like what you were always thinking about. Poltergeists, apparitions, that kind of thing. But sometimes people make their own ghosts, holding onto memories and stuff so tight they can't let go—and they make it even worse, lots of times, only holding onto the *good* stuff, and kind of forgetting the rest. That's the kind of haunting you *can't* fight; there's no ghost but what's in Charlotte's head, and you can't exorcise a person's memories, especially when they don't want you to." He put a consoling hand on my shoulder. "I think you might have to let her go, buddy. You can't compete with a ghost."

But I think I can. I *know* I can. I just have to find the courage, screw it to the sticking point as someone or other once said—and that sticking point came last night.

Charlotte made dinner, and I was thrilled to see it was one of our old *sensible meals for one for two* dishes, the stroganoff I'd unsuccessfully

popped the question to. When we sat down to eat, though, I detected something different in the way it'd been prepared—different, but very good.

"Did you try something new with this?" I asked. "It's fantastic!"

"Not new, exactly," Charlotte said, with a familiar little smile. "It's just the way John likes it."

My fork clattered to the floor as I ran to the bathroom to vomit your dinner into the toilet.

I haven't spoken to Charlotte since that conversation. We slept in the same bed, without speaking or touching, and I went to work this morning as usual. I didn't go home after work, though. After a pair of quick stops, one at the hardware store, the other at the pharmacy, I came here. Last night really drove Tim's point home, that I can't compete with a ghost. *Sensible meals for one for two* was *our* thing. It came about *after* you, John. It was how she and I met, and the start of how we meshed, and it showed me clearly that you were taking the fight to me, on my own turf. And I was losing.

Tim was right: the living can't compete with the dead. There's nothing for us to get a grip on. You can't shove a memory.

But that's just it. The *living* can't compete with the dead.

The light fixture in the room where you died is quite strong, John, and should support my weight nicely. The rope's over it, and the knot's tied—it's a traditional hangman's, I Googled how—and these continence pants are even pretty comfy.

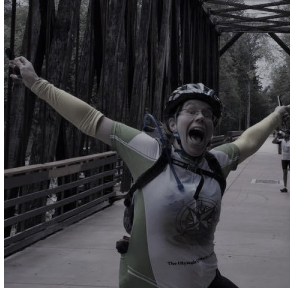
Charlotte's going to find enough of a mess here, no need to make it worse.

I don't even need to bring a chair up from the kitchen, I can just step off the end of your bed. Charlotte's the best thing that ever happened to me, John, but she'll never be mine as long as she's yours, and there's only one way to compete with a ghost, only one way to do battle with a memory: I have to *become* a memory. I don't know if you'll ever read this, but I hope that you can. That's why it starts with a *Dear John*, rather than *Dear Charlotte*: it's more of a hello letter than a goodbye. I want you to know I'm coming for you, all the way to the other side.

I love you, Charlotte.

—Bill

CONTRIBUTORS



Rachel Unger (“Dead Man’s Curve”) thinks that now is an excellent time for us all to be kind to each other. Yes, really. She spends her days excavating stories from the dirt, staring down a microscope, and daydreaming about her next bike ride. You can find her online at www.fictionbuffet.com.



C.R. Langille (“Rocky Mountain Hocus”) spent many a Saturday afternoon watching monster movies with his mother. It wasn't long before he started crafting nightmares to share with his readers. An avid hunter and outdoorsman, C.R. Langille incorporates the Utah wilderness in many of his tales. He is an affiliate member of the Horror Writer's Association, a member of the League of Utah Writers, and received his MFA: Writing Popular Fiction from Seton Hill University.



Donna Dallas (“Richmond Hill”) studied creative writing and philosophy at NYU’s Gallatin School and was lucky enough to write under William Packard, founder of the *New York Quarterly*. She has appeared in a plethora of journals, most recently *Horror Sleaze Trash*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *The Opiate*, *Beatnik Cowboy* and *Burning House Press*. She is the author of *Death Sisters*, her first novel published by Alien Buddha Press. Donna serves on the editorial team of *Red Fez* and *New York Quarterly*. Connect with her on Twitter: [@DonnaDallas15](https://twitter.com/DonnaDallas15).



Greer Arrowsmith (“A Marked Life”) is a historian and writer based in Melbourne, Australia. She loves research and finding those small stories that mean the world to people in them. With a particular interest in 20th century history, which has been cultivated through living, working, studying and traveling in Australia, Eastern Europe, Russia, the United States, Korea and many others. Greer writes fiction and non-fiction based on these experiences, people and places.

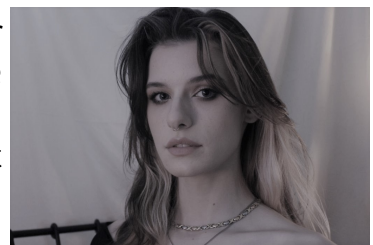
Sarah Collins Honenberger (“Open Letter to a Killer”)’s third novel *Catcher, Caught* is a Pen/Faulkner Foundation selection for its Writers-in-Schools program. Fiction awards include New Millennium, *Antietam Review*, National Press Women, semi-finalist Best Unpublished Novel (2015, 2020), F. Scott Fitzgerald Short Fiction runner-up award, Amazon Breakthrough Novel Contest, the Hook, and the nominee for the Library of Virginia Fiction award for her first three novels. A fellow of the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, she writes about ordinary people from her Rappahannock River home.



Page Sullivan (Staff Contributing Artist/*Mourning Girl*) enjoys writing, photography, drawing, playing piano, and psychology. Her writing has been published in *Ink Stains* literary anthology, *Awakening Compassion* (Salve Regina University), *The Patriot Ledger*, and *The Newport Daily News*, in which she won 3rd place for the Holiday Spirit essay contest. Her photography has appeared in *The Newport Daily News* and *Newport Life Magazine*, as well as in juried shows at the Little Compton Community Art Center and Wickford Art Association. Page’s photographs have also been exhibited at Deblois Gallery, Portsmouth Arts Guild, and Matt’s Pharmacy. She won two Silver Keys in photography in the RI Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, which is statewide. She’s currently a freshman at Rhode Island School of Design.



H. Zuroski (“Chekhov’s Pliers”) is a feminist horror writer from Pittsburgh who focuses on the disconcerting and unconventional. Armed with a vivid imagination, she aims to write stories that you just can't get out from between your teeth ...

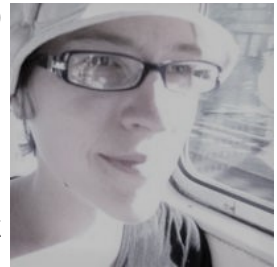




Rob Francis (“Everything Fits If You Push Hard Enough”) is an academic and writer based in London. He mainly writes short fantasy and horror, and his stories have appeared in magazines such as *The Arcanist*, *Apparition Lit*, *Love Letters to Poe*, *Tales to Terrify* and *Weird Horror*. Rob has also contributed stories to several anthologies, including *DeadSteam* by Grimmer & Grimmer books, *Under the Full Moon’s Light* by Owl Hollow Press, and *Scare Me* by Esskaye Books. He is an affiliate member of the HWA. Rob lurks on Twitter [@RAFurbaneco](#).



Shelly Jones, PhD (“Botany Lesson”) (she/her/hers) (@shellyjansen) is a Professor of English at SUNY Delhi, where she teaches courses in mythology, folklore, and writing. Her speculative work has been published in *Podcastle*, *New Myths*, *The Future Fire*, and elsewhere. Her poetry has been previously nominated for a Pushcart Prize.



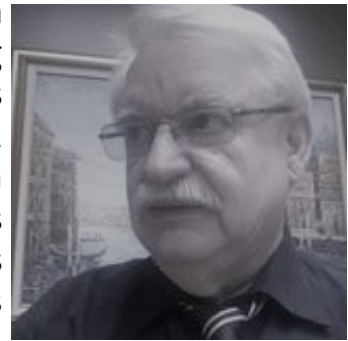
Tara Campbell (“In the City of Floating Wolves”) is a writer, teacher, Kimbilio Fellow, and fiction co-editor at *Barrelhouse*. She received her MFA from American University. Previous publication credits include *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Masters Review*, *Wigleaf*, *Jellyfish Review*, *Booth*, *Strange Horizons*, and *CRAFT Literary*. She's the author of a novel, *TreeVolution*, and four collections: *Circe's Bicycle*, *Midnight at the Organporium*, *Political AF: A Rage Collection*, and *Cabinet of Wrath: A Doll Collection*. Connect with her at www.taracampbell.com or on Twitter [@TaraCampbellCom](#).



With Degrees in Crime Scene Technology and Physical Anthropology, Florida author **Shannon Hollinger** (“Here I Am”) hasn't just seen the dark side of humanity—she's been elbow deep inside of it! Her short fiction has appeared in *Suspense Magazine*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *Mystery Weekly*, among other publications. To see where you can find more of her work, check out www.shannonhollinger.com.



Michael Allyn Wells (“Lost & Found”) is a poet who is an alumnus of the Spring 2017 Writer to Writer mentoring program of the Association of Writers and Writers Programs. He makes his home in Kansas City, Missouri. While he was born and raised in Missouri, he has a special place in his heart for San Francisco Giants baseball team. He takes his coffee black and prefers his wine white. His poem, “Tiananmen Mother,” was featured by the Independent Chinese PEN Center. In 2011, two of Michael's poems appeared in the exhibit *Synesthesia*, where it was pared with paintings by the talented Jennifer Rivera, an abstract artist from the Kansas City area. In September of 2013, a third painting of Rivera's inspired by a poem of Michael's was part of a showing at the Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art in St Joseph, Missouri. His work has also appeared in a variety of print and online publications including, *Boston Literary Magazine Anthologies* Vol. 1 and Vol. 2, *Montucky Review*, *Remington Review*, *Nude Bruce Review*, and *Liquid Imagination*. Michael's work ranges from humor to the political and the sublime. Visit him at michaelwells.ink.



Matt Brandenburg (“Finding Peace with the Anechoic System”) is a horror writer living in Kalamazoo, MI in a house next to a moldy pumpkin patch. He spends his time writing, reading, watching silly horror movies, and listening to movie scores. His stories have appeared in Scare Street's *Night Terrors*, and *Thuggish Itch*, and has stories upcoming in *99 Tiny Terrors* and *The Dark Corner Zine*. You can hear him on the podcast *Staring Into the Abyss* discussing horror fiction or on Twitter [@brandenburgdm](https://twitter.com/brandenburgdm). He lives with his wife, two daughters, two dogs, and a maniacal cat.

Andrew Majors (“Night Sounds”) is from Idaho who has been writing semi-professionally for a number of years. Recently, he has sought to branch into fiction. His story for *34 Orchard* is one of his first sales, and you can also find him at andrewmajors.wordpress.com. He lives in the Boise area, surrounded by new housing developments on one side and cows on the other. He sleeps well at night, but not too well.



Angi Shearstone (*Planetless*) is an award-winning professional artist with an MFA in comics, a dynamic duo of brother and sister orange cats, inveterate geek tendencies, and a great love for ska-core and punk rock. In addition to creating and selling fine art, Angi blogs at www.creativityandcats.com and writes horror fiction. Angi's work can be seen at www.angishearstone.com. She currently resides in New England. Favorite quote: “A painting is never finished, it simply stops in interesting places ...” (Paul

Gardner)



Kevin M. Casin (“Of Ink and Blood”) is a gay, Latino fiction writer and cardiovascular research scientist. He is a second-generation immigrant born in Miami, Florida to Cuban and Colombian parents. He loves to travel, play instruments, bake, crochet, and take care of his orchid collection. His fiction work is featured in *Tealight Press* and *From the Farther Trees* (August 2021), and soon in *If There's Anyone Left*. Also, he is a former First Reader for *Flash Fiction Online*, and *Diabolical Plots*, and a current Reader for *Interstellar Flight Press*. For more stories by him, please see his website: <https://storiesbykevin.medium.com/>. Please follow his Twitter: [@kevinthedruid](https://twitter.com/kevinthedruid).

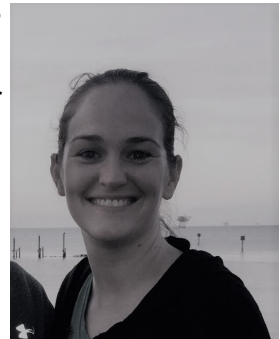




Ness Cernac (“The Bone Garden of Arachne Lovell”) is a short fiction writer and English composition tutor. Their work has been featured in *Novel Noctule* and *Not Deer Magazine* and is forthcoming in *Wrongdoing Magazine*.



Molly Greer (“The Estate Sale”) was born and raised in the suburbs of Washington, DC. She currently resides in western Maryland with her husband and two children. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Green Ink Poetry*, *Last Leaves Magazine*, and *Sledgehammer Lit*. You can find her on Twitter: [@MKGreerPoetry](#).



Ray Daley (“All Clued Out”) was born in Coventry and still lives there. He served six years in the RAF as a clerk and spent most of his time down a Hobbit hole in High Wycombe. He has been writing stories since he was ten. His current dream is to eventually finish the Hitch Hikers fanfic novel he's been writing since 1986. Tweet him [@RayDaleyWriter](#).



Sean Jacques (“Croaking Frogs”) is a fifth-generation native of the Missouri Ozarks. Currently, he teaches English Literature in Los Angeles while writing noirs, westerns, and country-gothic tales of woe. His most recent work can be found at *Across the Margin*, *Dead Fern Press*, *Cowboy Jamboree*, *Punk Noir*, *A Thin Slice of Anxiety*, and *Flyover Country*, and is forthcoming in *Pulp Modern Flash*. He can be found on Twitter [@SeanJacques10](#).

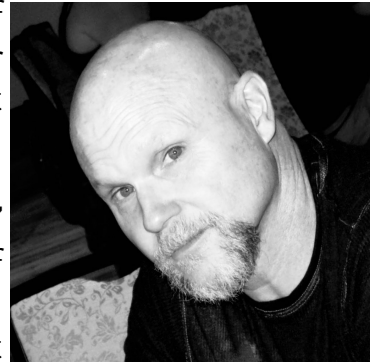




Robbie Gamble (“Last Christmas”)’s poems have appeared in *Slipstream*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Whale Road Review*, and *Rust + Moth*. He was the winner of the 2017 *Carve* Poetry prize. He worked for many years as a nurse practitioner caring for homeless people, and now divides his time between Boston and Vermont.



Rob Smales (“Letter to the Other Side”) is the author of *Echoes of Darkness*, which garnered both a five-star *Cemetery Dance Online* review and a 2016 Pushcart nomination. With over three dozen shorts published, his story “Photo Finish” was also nominated for a Pushcart Prize and won the *Predators & Editors’* Readers Choice Award for Best Horror Short Story of 2012. His story “A Night at the Show” received honorable mention on Ellen Datlow’s list of the Best Horror of 2014, while “Death of the Boy” and “In Full Measure” made the same honorable mentions list for 2016. Most recently, he edited the dark humor anthology *A Sharp Stick in the Eye (and other funny stories)* for Books & Boos Press, and released the coming of age horror novella *Friends in High Places* with Bloodshot Books. He hails from Salem, Massachusetts, where he lives, writes, and occasionally sleeps.




Walter H. Von Egidy (*Cover Art/The Ghost of the Fair*) is an American artist, painter and film maker known for his Super 8 photoplays and enamel/oil paintings. He has had his work exhibited at Gallery 13, The Burnham Library, Housatonic Art League and the White Silo. He has seven finished portrait commissions and private and public collections including a portrait of composer Franz Waxman at Byrd Library, Syracuse University. His work has won first place at various film festivals including the United States Super 8 Film Festival at Rutgers University. He is the owner of New Milford Sign Shop and Von’s Studio. Most recently, his painting “Saturday Night in the Caverns” was chosen as the cover for writer Bob Deakin’s collection, *Unruly Mix (Tales of Music, Artists, Posers and Misfits)*. You can see more of Walter’s work and contact him at www.walterhvonegidy.com.

The *34 Orchard* staff is composed entirely of volunteers who do this for the love of it.

We wish you a happy and healthy Holiday season, and we hope you find your passion in 2022!





Here in our fourth issue, twenty-three artists explore the impact made by the things we lose, and what we find in the aftermath.

Walter H. Von Egidy ♥ Rachel Unger
C.R. Langille ♥ Donna Dallas
Greer Arrowsmith ♥ Sarah Collins Honenberger
H. Zuroski ♥ Rob Francis
Shelly Jones ♥ Tara Campbell
Shannon Hollinger ♥ Michael Allyn Wells
Matt Brandenburg ♥ Andrew Majors
Angi Shearstone ♥ Kevin M. Casin
Ness Cernac ♥ Molly Greer
Ray Daley ♥ Sean Jacques
Robbie Gamble ♥ Rob Smales

Staff Contributing Artist: Page Sullivan

Welcome to *34 Orchard*.
The things you've lost have been found.