

# 34 ORCHARD

*Darkness is just across the street.*

ISSUE 13

SPRING 2026



# 34 ORCHARD

Issue 13, Spring 2026

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*This issue dedicated to Angelica and Danielle, who helped me realize I wasn't delusional for believing in a dream—and an unconventional plan to make it come true.*

## Cover Photo

*Leaving Las Vegas* ♥ © Trisha J. Wooldridge, 2023

A.M. Symes' "It Could Be Anyone's Leg" first appeared as an ebook from Crystal Lake Publishing in 2022.

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## FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

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**When my siblings and I were between the ages of ten and two, my mother's cancer spread through her lymph nodes.** Dad told us, 'if you kids be really good, she'll live.'

My father was not a stupid or ignorant man. He was a college educated English teacher, well read, and cultured; he'd traveled the world. We were kids, unable to understand this delusion was a byproduct of deep shock and grief, so we took him on his word and waited for her to be completely restored so we could get back to our lives. Even as, over the next eight years, we heard things like "we can cut the nerves out of her face," "we can't stop the spread," and "four months to live." Even as she fell down stairs, couldn't get out of bed anymore and bloated up like the famine victims we saw on those mid-80s TV commercials, we waited for the happy ending. *This Christmas things will be normal. By Easter she'll be good. This summer she'll be ready and we can go on vacation.*

Meanwhile, I was being good. Doing everything I was asked. I was the oldest, so I was told to ditch my dreams of becoming an ichthyologist (actually, what he said was, 'that's ridiculous, you can't go off and volunteer or go to school in Florida, your family needs you'). I had to take care of the kids, clean the house, and do everything Mom would've done if she weren't sick. But she would get better soon and I'd be able to pursue my dream. It was going to happen. Happen any day. She was going to get up out of that bed and be normal.

When she died, nobody was more shocked than me.

The breakdown of that delusion exacerbated a condition I had from growing up in a frightening, destabilizing environment—one we now know as Complex PTSD—and it set the course of my life. Nerves shot and dreams destroyed, I started making one delusional decision after another. I agreed to marry my ex-husband after knowing him only two hours, steadfast it would be forever despite the incompatibilities already staring me in the face. I was convinced a former workplace was a welcoming, harmonious pillar of the community, even as gaslighting was commonplace and its policies made clear how contemptuous, exploitative and insular it really was. I trusted someone I believed was my soul mate truly loved me, even though there were numerous

red flags indicating it was simply control, manipulation, and indulgence in reckless appetites. Through it all, I was utterly certain my traumatic childhood hadn't affected me, even as I allowed 'my mother's dead' to define me and bad choices kept detonating my life.

I was a mess because I'd been a victim of not just trauma, but terrible parenting. I had seen everything in life through the extremely warped lens of Complex PTSD, bouncing from delusion, to trauma when it broke down, to new delusion to heal, to new trauma. I was triggered by everything. I did things I'm not proud of. And I wasn't happy because I was unhealthy and damaged, and therefore was *attracting* unhealthy, damaged situations.

Forty years later, this savage truth hit like a tornado. Every belief was pulverized at worst, broken at best. I couldn't identify that pile of junk or tell you what shredded cushion belonged to which chair, and I smelled gas. I stood knee-deep in wreckage, calling for things I knew, hearing no response.

In Issue 13, twenty artists cope with the breakdown of delusion. A town believes its missing youth troop is somewhere safe despite a dead scoutmaster and strange clues left behind—but the truth they're ignoring isn't the one they would've imagined, and it's far worse. An orca shows us that motherhood is fraught with the delusion that she can always keep her offspring safe. A couple is shattered to discover that not only can one romantic evening in the woods fail to repair their relationship, it can make things uglier. A desperate soul hooked on tarot cards continuously refuses to accept their answers. And Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy's wedding gown, destroyed and rebuilt before the big day, was an omen that Camelot itself would come apart at the seams, an omen willfully unacknowledged.

Being trapped in a trauma cycle can yield surprising things. I've been lucky enough since way back in the beginning to have extraordinary friends who understood where I was coming from—even if I didn't, and those bonds between us are strong. The delusion-trauma cycle lead me to the most rewarding experiences of my life: throwing top-notch theme parties, volunteering at two aquariums, starting Pencils! Writing Workshop, going to Goddard to get my MFA, and yes... founding *34 Orchard*. Overall, I wouldn't change any of it.

But more recently, after many months of work on my nervous system, I'm finally starting to become what I'm meant to be. Negative influences are on their way out, and my perception is completely different. Because I'm more positive, positive is coming to me. I'm pursuing what I *want* instead of just grabbing what's conveniently in front of me. I've learned my intuition is always right, so if something feels wrong, *it is* and *get out*. Believe there's something better on the other side of a disaster. Keep going forward. Put the past where it belongs.

I have miles to go before I sleep, sure, and I'm getting there, but the idea that I can be healed, healthy, and have what I want is not a delusion. I see it clearly, and it's reality.

Welcome to the house that won't let you live the lie.

Welcome to *34 Orchard*.

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# BOYS

Jeremiah Towle

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**It has now been two years and two months since the troop went into the woods and didn't come back when they were supposed to, and some of us went out looking for them and found only the Scoutmaster.** He was in a meadow in the hills, his arms at his sides, facedown as if hiding from the world. Insects trundled across his pale forearms and the exposed, punctured skin between his pants cuffs and socks.

Venomous snake.

The Scoutmaster, the person we'd been the least anxious to retrieve. Had this meadow even been on the route he'd planned? He gave us no answers. There were no clues in the pockets of his uniform. Nothing to suggest any wrongdoing of his. There were maps of the forest, but he had not marked them, and there were strange, frightening inconsistencies between them, leaving us wondering which version of the forest we were in. For us, they served only as a reminder that the gash of wilderness beside our town was, and is, immense.

Ten boys, gone.

We looked for vibrant candy wrappers on the fallen pine needles; we listened for the chatter of adolescent speech amongst, behind, beyond. We climbed steep hills and squinted at trees like puzzles, hoping to spot a cap hanging from a branch or a torn piece of uniform used as building material for a nest. We half-expected to see pallid faces gazing back at us from hollowed-out trunks. Deep down, we thought that we were very brave for being in this place—after all, venomous snakes.

We assured ourselves that the boys would be safe, because they knew these woods and they knew all kinds of survival things, and they had compasses and maps and snacks. Without a doubt, the boys knew these woods, but we didn't.

In the days that followed, we walked across wide-open fields in linear formation, arms linked uncomfortably. It might have looked, to a child, like

we were playing some sort of game. Perhaps their eyes were on us. We imagined that they might be watching us from afar, unseen, but why they did not call out to us and run to us with arms outstretched, as we would have to them, is something we cannot guess. The minds of children are unmapped, and it has long been known that the behavior of boys transcends explanation. They will be what they are. We imagined that we might find them just beyond the next hill, just across the next meadow, just through the next thicket. But we acknowledged that they could have gotten anywhere, gotten into anything, infiltrated or escaped from any space. They could have marched right through anything. Our boys.

There were plenty of ponds and creeks and rivers that a boy could have taken an interest in. We remembered all the times they would come in trailing all manner of filth, and how their teathy wide-eyed smiles would turn to scowls when we told them, even at our gentlest, to clean up. But now we could find no muddy footprints leading in or out of anything; we could find no definite footprints at all. We dragged every body of water we could find that was too deep to wade through. Rather, we had others come and drag them; *dragging the lake* was only a sequence of words we'd heard in documentaries, and none of us knew how to do it. We also lacked the mysterious forest-knowledge that the troop had been taught, and weren't even sure what questions to ask that might help us discover it. Some of us had known such things as children, but the knowing had melted away with the years. We felt out of place walking through these woods; woods belong to boys such as the ones we had lost, and the grownups tasked with keeping them on some kind of path. Silently, we wondered what it meant that the grownup entrusted with this had ended up the way he had. Surely the boys would have helped him if they could have, our resourceful and reliable boys.

Some of the searchers continue to maintain that on the first or second day of the search, what might have been a wet shoeprint could be seen on a rock in the hills, pointed toward the mountains, before the summer heat erased it. They would never have headed in that direction, we said. Their maps would tell them plainly that it was not the way back to town. But as far as we walked in any direction, we found no trace.

They left no trail, because they had learned how to cover their tracks.

Why they would do this, we do not know, but it became apparent quickly—quicker still, if we hadn't refused to believe it—that it had been done. Every conceivable route, from the trails on the maps to the most unforgiving terrain, was devoid of any conclusive proof that the boys had ever been present. There was no forest spirit to come along and remove their prints from the earth, collect their discarded wrappers and crumbs, blow their scent away from the brush so that the dogs could not detect it.

The woods were not yet haunted.

The theories were spread almost halfheartedly, and seemed to evaporate as soon as they were put into words. None of us really thought that a man had taken the boys. We could picture the man, the beady malignant eyes, the old and ruined face in contrast to those smooth and innocent ones, but we found no reason to believe he existed. Frustratingly, it proved impossible to find anything implicating the Scoutmaster. None of us thought that something had stepped out of the boys' campfire tales and snatched them up, either. There were no reports, or even rumors, of strange lights in the night sky or strange tracks much too big for a man, and none of the searchers could find ominous occult lettering carved into the trees or graffitied on the rocks. But all of these were more familiar ideas than that of ten boys choosing to disappear.

Had the boys left clues somewhere in the years before they went into the woods?

We remember their smiles, their laughter, their mischief. We remember the wistfulness and child wisdom and impenetrably complex longing in their eyes. Gazing out the window on long drives. Gazing into the trees. We remember faces becoming glum under the weight of our reprimands, whether mild or severe, when they took, broke or misused something of ours and had to be taught a lesson. And apologies that almost seemed sincere.

We remember glancing out of kitchen windows to see them kneeling on the sidewalk in the summertime sun, murmuring in conspiracy with one another. And the things we glimpsed them doing to insects and small animals, godlike on their knees, grouped around their prey with popsicles in their mouths. We remember the shock of their wanton grins, chapped lips peeling back to reveal their white little teeth.

We remember misdeeds at school and in the neighborhood, things we only heard of—pulled hair, torn clothes, dead things inside of desks and backpacks, some girl's cat going missing. We remember girls' faces contorted into embarrassing sorrow-shapes, with hitched breathing and sluglike tear trails down their cheeks, as they told us of things no more important or tangible to us than campfire stories of phantoms, things we are all used to hearing about. Being grownups, we know that some behaviors exist by default and are far beyond question. We remember telling them: *That just means he likes you. And: He was only teasing.* And the axiom that towers over all others, a mountain no one dares approach: *Boys Will Be Boys.* We remember this best. We are awed, as others have been before us and others will be after, by the unearthly power this statement holds. It is the black circle at the center of nature, the ouroboros symbol. A serpent will bite

you and put its venom into you because that is what it does.

We have given up on explaining their absence. *We'll find them someday*, we solemnly intone to one another, and when necessary, we pat each other's backs and grasp each other's shoulders, little displays of mutual support. But the idea that we will find them is something we no longer believe or even hope for.

The summer of the tragedy ended, then another summer, and now a third has collapsed into autumn. By now, their uniforms are torn and too small, their growing bodies forcing their way out. In whatever kind of world they have constructed, there are no mothers to do the mending or the washing. Or tell them how to behave.

The stories started after less than a year. But they are few and far between, and they are so easily questioned that we call them *stories* instead of *sightings* or *incidents*.

A woman's perceived glimpse of silhouettes in the trees, watching her house from the edge of the woods, is only a story. An old man finding dirt and grime tracked into his kitchen, and finding that things in his house are not where he believed he left them, is a tale easily rationalized by his oldness. When strangers with backpacks and khaki shorts come into town complaining about a ransacked car, or a picnic left in disarray when they stepped away from it, we say that that's a shame and we gently remind them to be more vigilant out in the woods. Animals, we tell them. Animals. Sometimes there is no complaining, just an abandoned car with the windows broken, and we dutifully call the county authorities and the car is towed away.

One girl tells another that she was walking home at night and heard rustling in the bushes. That it made her stop for a moment, unsure, but then she kept walking, right on past, not even hurrying, as if asking for something to happen. Then she heard quiet footsteps coming out onto the sidewalk behind her, multiple sets. She didn't look back. She started walking faster and they kept pace with her, and she heard low voices laughing, and she started running and still didn't look back but she could see all their shadows stretching past her under the light of the streetlamps and she heard them making awful sounds behind her, and she made it to her house and she leapt up the front steps and she unlocked the door and she wrenched it open and she threw herself inside while heavy footsteps came bounding up the steps behind her and she slammed the door and she locked it and she bolted it and she ran to her room. It is a story. We hear it second- or thirdhand because the girl only tells other girls, and when we hear it, we tell each other: *She has such an imagination*. We say it whenever such a story emerges. Everyone has such an imagination. When necessary, we remind

everyone they shouldn't be out so late. When necessary, we point to the girls whose faces we have seen in the news.

The sun goes down and the night fills with our questions. Our minds, serpentine, slither out into the darkest parts of the woods.

We think of them when we hear noises in the night. A creak from the porch, a scrabbling from the barn, the door of the backyard shed shoving open. Voices, low and tense. Cracked laughter at the edge of the woods.

Someone trying the back door.

Tapping at your window.

Pretend you didn't hear it.

They are our sons. We remind ourselves and each other that there cannot be something wrong about them. We tell ourselves that there is nothing to fear from our boys.

But we all lock our houses at night, and the girls check the locks again and again.

# I FOUND A LEG BONE IN MY YARD

A.M. Symes

---

## It could be anyone's leg.

There isn't a label tied to it. There are no identifying markers. It's just a bone from a leg. A femur to be exact. It's been twenty years since Mr. Douglas's biology class, but Google Images is pretty specific that what I have is a human femur.

Ignoring the fact that this bone has been removed from a skeleton, it's in pristine condition. There are no bite marks from animals, no scrapes from a tool used to remove it from its home inside a thigh, and no splinters from previous breaks, pre- or post-mortem. Still, the human femur is the strongest bone in the body, so it may not be that impressive to come across a femur in pristine condition. If you don't factor in the improbability of coming across femurs in your yard, that is.

It was under the dead Christmas tree my neighbor put behind my shed. She puts her tree in my burn pile every year, and it's kind of a spring passage of sorts that my first bonfire of the year is burning it. I was raking leaves from last fall when I rolled the tree over and that's when the bone poked out at me.

It could be anyone's leg.

My yard backs up to a wooded lot that's part of a city park. None of my neighbors have fences or security lights—I don't either—so it'd be real easy for a person to drop a femur while passing through. Perhaps they dropped a tibia and a metatarsal as well, but birds and raccoons snatched the smaller bones up. Or an animal could have dragged an entire leg—flesh and all—to my burn pile during the winter, and this is all that's left. We have coyotes in the area. And a silver fox lives under my deck. I'm not sure a fox would eat a human leg, but if the coyotes tore apart a body and the fox snuck a leg away while they were feasting, perhaps he could drag the leg to my house to have a snack behind my shed. Both are viable and potential explanations for the femur in my yard.

They don't explain the clavicle or the mandible, though.

After consulting WebMD, I've come to the conclusion that these bones also belong to a male who is five foot six inches in height. Possibly 165 pounds. Not dissimilar in size to my neighbor's husband. The National Museum of Natural History has articles online about bone remodeling and photos of the minute tubes containing blood vessels, which I learned are called osteons. Given the high number of small osteon fragments in the femur, it's safe to assume the bone comes from a man forty to fifty-five years in age. Not dissimilar in age to my neighbor's husband.

But it could be anyone's bones.

I've excavated most of the ground behind my shed. I thought I was digging up a phalange at one point, but it turned out to be a vole skeleton, most likely the vole I fed poison gummy worms to last fall. I didn't want to kill him, but he was ripping up my yard. I waited a few weeks, hoping an owl would find him to be a delicious dinner, but he continued to rip up my yard. My neighbor's husband was outside smoking and saw the little bugger tunneling around, so he offered to share some of his vole-killing gummies and I accepted. The vole stopped terrorizing my yard that night. When I knocked on my neighbor's door to thank her husband for the help, she told me he'd left for the store. She had a swollen left eye, blood dripping down her neck, and some on her white sneakers, so I left her to be alone, telling myself she was busy and didn't need to be disturbed.

The bones could be anyone's bones.

No one in the neighborhood thinks twice about the police coming to my neighbor's house. They are at her house fairly frequently. But when they knock on the rest of our doors, we grow suspect. My neighbor's husband had gone to the store to buy an ice pack and bottle of Advil for my neighbor after she accidentally walked into a door, giving her a nasty black eye and a two-inch gash on the back of her head. He never returned. His car was still parked in the parking lot and security footage shows someone roughly his size wearing his jacket and hat and white sneakers walking into the store, but never walking out.

None of us saw anything. None of us heard anything, either, especially not a chainsaw mere hours after my neighbor's husband had left for the store. I thought I'd seen footprints in the snow from her house to my bonfire ring, but now I realize I was mistaken. If I'd seen any footprints, they would have been after Christmas, when she threw her Christmas tree behind my shed.

You know what, the bones could be branches.

My neighbor has a white birch tree and when large limbs break off, she carries them to my wood pile. White birch branches could be mistaken for

bones at a passing glance. Since the police are no longer called to check on her wellbeing, and since the rest of the neighborhood no longer needs to pretend we don't hear anything in the middle of the night, there's really no reason I should concern myself with things I may or may not have found in my yard.

I bet I mistook a branch for a bone.

I spend my nights raking up leaves from my yard, my neighbor's yard, and fifty feet into the woods behind our yards. When I come across what looks like white birch branches, I throw them in my bonfire pit along with weeds and leaves. I burn everything I find each night, so that no one else comes across a birch branch and mistakes it for an ulna or a fibula or a rib.

Anybody could mistake a birch branch for a bone.

My neighbor brings over homemade cookies and we sit at the fire and enjoy its warmth. I consider telling her the funny story of finding a bone under her dead Christmas tree—laughing with her over my mistake—but decide against it.

We both already know what I really found.

“He looked forward to spending that time fishing, and hopefully swimming, for as long as he could. He had always been a strong swimmer, and he wondered if he could swim across the lake and back in his present condition. And if he couldn’t, and he tired halfway across, well, he’d heard drowning wasn’t the worst way to go either.”

- Mike Deady  
“Once in a Black Moon”

# AN ORCA MOURNS IN PUGET SOUND

Kelsey Oliver Imanishi

---

For the second time  
in seven years, Tahlequah

nudges the body  
of her calf above the waves.

Over and over,  
as if sunlight were a salve

or could wake her from  
a dream she can't quite believe—

this child, that first child  
she carried seventeen days

before letting it  
slip at last beneath the surf.

She thought she was done,  
or prayed it was done with her,

but grief slides from your  
shoulders to sit at your feet,

and one day it stands  
to look you dead in the eye,

and maybe today  
is that day. Or maybe it

came earlier. Ten  
years ago I saw a boy

lying on a beach,  
and all I could think of was

his mother—her hands—  
the way they held him

until they couldn't,  
the rough net of her fingers

no more than a sieve  
for hope too fine-grained to catch.

# SEPTEMBER WHITECAPS

## WHIP UP IN THE BAY

Kate LaDew

---

September whitecaps whip up in the bay, like meringue forming in a mixing bowl, frothy, glossy, decorative peaks, sugary sweet and light as air. The whole affair is frothy to everyone but them, all white and sunlit, grass a forever green stretching on, on, so far you might confuse it for the Ireland that's only existed in dreams.

Jack and Jackie, alive in a way the young are, anything, everything ahead and *right there*, immune to the inescapable, the inevitable. Jack and Jackie, lovely, varying shades of pale, faces broad and wide open, Jack's scratched from a particularly rough early morning game of touch football with his brothers, who upended him into a rosebush, auburn hair wild and everywhere. Jackie's cocoa-colored bouffant round and curly under her grandmother's lace veil, pinned by a little tiara dolloped with orange blossoms, a single strand of family pearls draped over her collarbone, a diamond leaf pin from Jack's parents, a diamond bracelet Jack laid carefully down her wrist the night before, presenting it like a boy with an interesting shell he'd dug up himself. Bouquet white and pink spray orchids, gardenias braided through, the dress fifty yards of ivory silk taffeta, portrait neckline and fitted bodice making her appear fragile and small, embellished with interwoven bands of tucked fabric, skirt full and bell-shaped, sewn with a trapunto technique, layered in ruffles and concentric circles, dramatic and singular, chosen by her mother. Jackie holds disdain for the intricacy, the billowing fabric, the busyness. She tells the press waiting by the hundreds outside St. Mary's Church in Newport, *Oh, who knows, I wanted something French, but this, this dress is by some colored designer.*

She keeps the name Ann Lowe to herself, the Black woman she's known for years who fashioned dresses for Oscar winners and wealthy high-society clients, who, after her designs went uncredited and shown under only her employer's name, opened her own shop, Ann Lowe's Gowns. The great-granddaughter of an enslaved woman and a plantation owner, the

granddaughter and daughter of women who opened their own dress-making shop in the middle of WWI and, more importantly, in the middle of Alabama, designing for the white first families of Montgomery. Ann, whose mother died when she was sixteen, and who ran the family business until she moved to New York City at nineteen with her toddler son Arthur Lee and no husband, enrolled at a design school and attended classes alone, segregated from her white classmates, had her work walked across the hall and shown as the standard to reach while she watched from the door frame. The woman who'd dressed Jackie as a teenager when she made her debut into society, who'd sewn the dress for her mother's second wedding to Hugh, the stepfather who ends up walking Jackie down the aisle after her own father is found drunk in his hotel suite, barely able to stand and quickly and quietly transported back to New York, away from the cameras and crowds, the six hundred diplomats and senators waiting in the church, the nine hundred guests getting ready for the reception, the two thousand society fans milling anywhere and everywhere, sweaty and close in the too-hot-for-fall Rhode Island air. Ann Lowe is not in attendance, though she delivered the dress herself, all the way from New York, all the way from a studio where, ten days before the wedding, a pipe burst, soaking the bridal gown and nine bridesmaid dresses in rust and grime, Ann forced to purchase new material and hire extra seamstresses to *poof!* like magic recreate in ten days what it had taken her eight weeks to fashion. Ann who, after driving four hours, was led away from the porch of Hammersmith Farm, Jackie's childhood home, by staff who insisted she only enter through the back. Ann refused, hot and tired, declaring she would keep the dresses and drive another four hours back home if she was not allowed the human dignity to step through the front door.

The staff relented and Jackie got the dress she hated cinched and pinned around her, and when her lovely pale face appeared on the cover of every newspaper in the country, (*some colored designer*) Ann's name was never mentioned. But Jackie enjoyed the day as best she could with too many people and too many voices and too much, too much and she gazed at Jack and he gazed back. And when the Archbishop of Boston (the pope was not available) pronounced them man and wife a thrill went through them both, this was real, the rings on their fingers, the feel of each other's hands. And Teddy is there, a little wobbly on his feet, and Bobby, best man, hair falling into his eyes, smiling big at both of them, and Lee, Jackie's little sister, twenty and lithe and perfect in her pink faille silk and Tudor cap, and her stepsister Nina matching her, like a pink fairy, and Jack's sister Jean, and Bobby's Ethel, barefaced and tan. And they are all alive in a way only the young are, anything, everything ahead and *right there*, immune to the

inescapable, the inevitable, and everyone is brimming, just brimming with happiness and hope and the blue sky is so blue and the green grass is the green of dreams and in ten years everything will be over, Jack dead and Jackie blood-soaked, and she will cradle him saying *shh shh* and five years later Bobby's head lolling *shh shh* and everything will be different and everybody will be different.

Ann Lowe's son Arthur Lee will die in a car crash five years before Jack, and she will not believe it for months, her constant companion, her business partner, the one she loved most in all the world, and one November she will receive a clipping in the mail with no return address, her name in the paper, finally, as the designer of Jackie's wedding dress next to the headline:

#### KENNEDY KILLED BY SNIPER AS HE RIDES IN CAR IN DALLAS

And Ann will sit very still for a very long time and then, in what seems like a moment, will be opening another paper:

#### KENNEDY IS DEAD, VICTIM OF ASSASSIN

Bobby's sad, boyish face gazing back at her.

And she is almost seventy years old, her right eye removed due to glaucoma, a scar marring the vision in her left, cataract surgery not quite up to snuff. And she thinks about that drive, four hours with months of work in her back seat, the dread that it would not be good enough, the sting of white hands motioning her away. She thinks about the young man with scratches on his face, the one she only saw in pictures. She thinks about the young woman so tiny and fragile, the sharp planes of her bones under the silk taffeta, the way her eyes were wide and scared in every picture except for the ones with Jack. She thinks about how lifeless that face looked standing next to LBJ, just the barest curve of her eye visible under the swoop of dark hair, suit splattered with gore. She recognized it in her own face after Arthur, her beautiful boy. She had no one to pretend to be happy for anymore and so she wasn't, hasn't been. Ann thinks about being young, sixteen, sitting next to her mother as she perfected her running stitch, how proud she was to be a part of a business that her mother and grandmother owned, a few decades removed from slavery. She hadn't known that day would be the last day, the last day when everything was as it should be, her mother alive and breathing, anything, everything ahead and *right there*, before her son died, before the bankruptcy, before she lost her salon. Ann wishes she could go back, she wishes everyone could go back, she wishes she was a little girl

when life was hard but there was the hope it could be better. She wishes the heart was not so fragile, so close to the outside, open to every whim of the world. She wishes herself young again, that boy and his scratched face, that girl and her big eyes. She wishes the whole world young, before God ever came up with the idea of people, when it was all blue and forever green, stretching on and on, just a dream in God's head.



*Editor's Note: Many know of the Kennedys—but few may have heard of Ann Lowe, the talented African American couture designer of Jacqueline's 1953 wedding gown.*

*The granddaughter of slaves and born in Alabama, Lowe's mother and grandmother trained her in dressmaking from a young age (in an interview, she notes she made her very first dress at eight years old). She studied amid segregation, persevered, and became the first Black woman to operate a couture salon on Madison Avenue. Although she went uncredited for Jacqueline's gown until the mid-1960s, her work appeared in major fashion circles, was in demand by the wealthy, and was admired by top designers.*

*She had a life of hardship—there were business losses, failing health, and the death of her son. But her influence paved the way for generations of Black designers. She died in 1981.*

*The Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture tells her story, and features a 1964 twenty-minute interview on The Mike Douglas Show (with a fashion show of her gowns!) here: <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/ann-lowe>.*

*From September 2023 to January 2024, Delaware's Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library ran an exhibition of Lowe's work, Ann Lowe: American Couturier. The exhibit featured many of her gowns. This page has a stunning overview: <https://www.winterthur.org/ann-lowe-american-couturier/>*

*To learn more about Jacqueline's dress, visit the website of the White House Historical Association, founded in 1961 by Jacqueline herself: <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/galleries/glamour-and-innovation-ann-lowe>*

# ONCE IN A BLACK MOON

Mike Deady

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**Neil didn't think the old white cottage had changed much.** But the last time he'd seen it, he had only been six years old. He wasn't sure if he was really remembering it, or simply the pictures in his mother's old photo album.

He got out of his car, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. Fresh air, a relief after the hours-long drive with the air conditioner blasting. And pine, from the trees separating the cottages.

He walked around to the back and looked across the lake. He tried to pick out the cottages on the other side, the ones his aunts and uncles had rented the same summer his parents had taken this one, but he couldn't tell. The lake was quiet today. Neil didn't see any swimmers or boaters, unusual for such a hot Friday afternoon in July.

He had been surprised the specific cottage he wanted was available on such short notice. But now that he was here and saw how dead everything seemed, he wondered if the lake had fallen out of favor for some reason.

A few steps from the back door, the wooden dock was still there. A small rowboat with an outboard motor was pulled onto the rocks lining the shore along the right side of the dock. It couldn't possibly be the same boat after forty-two years, but Neil was glad one still came with the cottage rental.

He returned to his car. He grabbed his suitcase and other supplies from the trunk, the most important his medical-grade marijuana, his pain pills, and his fishing rod. He brought everything into the cottage to begin his last vacation.



The cancer had spread throughout Neil's body and the doctors could do no more for him. They had sent him home with a handful of hospice care

brochures, which he'd promptly thrown in the trash. He'd then gone on Silver Lake's website and rented the cottage until Labor Day.

Not that he expected to need it that long.

That long-ago family vacation at the lake had always stood out in his mind as the best time in his life. The last summer before starting school. The last gasp of true freedom before the grind of life began wearing him down. It would be a fitting place to end that life. To come full circle.

He thought of the cancer as an alien invader, some kind of malignant black creature racing down the rivers of his bloodstream, crashing through the dams of his lymph nodes, getting its diseased hooks into every internal organ along the way. At some point, once enough damage was done, the synapses in his brain would stop firing and blink out one by one as the ultimate darkness came for him.

He had no intention of letting things get to that point, though. Once he felt his quality of life degrade beyond a certain point, he would beat the cancer to the punch with a handful of his pain pills while he sat on the dock, or perhaps in the boat, watching the sun set for the final time.

He still felt surprisingly well, though. It could change in a heartbeat, but he might have at least a few good weeks left. He looked forward to spending that time fishing, and hopefully swimming, for as long as he could. He had always been a strong swimmer, and he wondered if he could swim across the lake and back in his present condition. And if he couldn't, and he tired halfway across, well, he'd heard drowning wasn't the worst way to go either.



In the morning, the first thing Neil wanted to do was to check out the lake. He stepped carefully over the damp rocks alongside the dock to where the boat was tied up. He stopped short when he remembered what had happened a few days before the end of his family's vacation.

He'd awakened early and snuck out of the cottage, wanting to do some fishing. But there was a problem: the fishing rods were in the rowboat, and having just turned six, he was not allowed to climb on the rocks to get to the boat by himself.

"You'll slip on the wet rocks, crack your skull open, and drown," his mother had warned. "Stay away from them."

Neil had looked around to make sure no one was watching. He climbed over the rocks, reached into the boat, grabbed a fishing rod, and scampered back onto the dock. He sat at the very end, his bare feet dangling over the edge, and dropped the line into the water. The fishing rod was little more than a bamboo pole with a string and a hook, and he didn't even have

a worm. He just loved the act of fishing.

His peace had been interrupted only minutes later, his mother calling him for breakfast. He panicked. If she saw the fishing rod in his hand, she would know he had disobeyed, and he might face his father's belt. And there was no time to return the rod without being seen. He did the only thing he could think of. He tossed the rod into the lake and went to breakfast.

For the rest of the vacation, Neil had refused to go in the water. He wasn't sure if the fishing rod had sunk or was still floating around somewhere. He was terrified he would get the hook in his eye. But he couldn't warn the rest of the family about it without incriminating himself, either. He'd nervously kept watch from the dock while everyone else enjoyed themselves. No one got a hook in the eye. And no one noticed the missing fishing rod. He was in the clear.

Now, Neil smiled. He'd never told anyone about that, even as an adult when it would have gotten laughs instead of punishment. And for all the times his father's belt had been threatened, he could not recall it ever being used once.

He climbed into the boat and started the motor. His father had eschewed using it, preferring to row the family across the lake whenever they visited their relatives. Although Neil would have liked to follow in his father's footsteps and row around the lake, he wanted to conserve what energy he had left for swimming and fishing.

He maneuvered the boat to the right, following the shoreline counterclockwise. He was the only one on the lake. As he made his way around, he'd hoped to finally recognize the cottages his aunts and uncles had stayed in, but he still wasn't sure.

He completed his circuit of the lake and returned to the dock. He went into the cottage to get his fishing rod. Since there was still no one else on the water, it would be a perfect time to get some fishing in.

He had always loved fishing, even before the family vacation on the lake. His father would take him to local ponds, teaching him how to put a worm on the hook without stabbing himself, how to cast, how to reel in the fish. At first, he had caught nothing but crayfish. But he had kept at it and quickly had gotten better.

Later, in his travels around the country, he had learned fly fishing for salmon in the streams and rivers of the Pacific Northwest. He had gone deep sea fishing for bluefin tuna off the coast of Gloucester. He had even tried his hand at trotlining for catfish in Louisiana, and sail lining for spotted seatrout in Corpus Christi. But to Neil, nothing beat baiting a hook with a worm and fishing a lake or a pond. As his father had always said, "That's *real* fishing."

And nothing was better than cooking and eating fresh fish you had just

caught yourself. Neil's father had also taught him how to prepare a fish. How to remove the hook. How to scale, gut, clean, fillet, and debone. How to cook it.

The cottage had come with a gas grill. Neil's appetite was still pretty good, and his mouth was watering at the thought of grilled walleye or pike, both of which were prevalent in the lake. He would have preferred the old-fashioned charcoal grill that had been here during the family vacation. He had loved watching his father arrange the briquettes, douse them with lighter fluid, and toss a match in.

As much as Neil loved fishing, his father had loved it even more, to the extent that it had become his philosophy of life. Whether getting good news, such as winning a bundle at the track, or bad news, like his own terminal cancer diagnosis, his father would just shrug and say, "Some days you're the fisherman; some days you're the fish."

Neil felt a tug on his line. He smiled. At least for today, he was the fisherman.



A few days later, Neil celebrated his forty-eighth birthday with his first beer in months. He had avoided alcohol during his cancer treatments, but he figured it couldn't possibly make any difference at this point. This would certainly be his last birthday, regardless. *Born under the sign of Cancer*, he thought. *What a cosmic joke.*

He wondered if his cancer was a result of his job, which had entailed traveling to petrochemical facilities all over the country. Breathing in that crap for long periods certainly couldn't be good for people. And traveling so much was toxic for relationships, too. *Just ask my two ex-wives*, Neil thought sadly.

Or the cancer could have been hereditary. Both Neil's parents had died from lung cancer. However, they had both been smokers.

Neil shook his head. It didn't really matter how he had gotten it. He had it, and that was that. But he had made it to his birthday, and he still felt pretty good, so that was something.

His mother hadn't liked using Cancer to describe his birth sign. She had called him her little moon child instead. He'd hated it at the time, but now he smiled. This place was bringing back so many good memories, just as he'd hoped.

Another one popped into his head. He had celebrated his sixth birthday at the lake. It had been a surprise party. One of his aunts had given him a set of twelve toy sea creatures, made by Nabisco of all people, which

he and his cousins had played with the rest of the summer.

The lake was very close to the Canadian border. After his birthday party, the family had driven up to witness the reenactment of some old battle. The cannon fire had exploded over the valley like thunder. Neil had been amazed that one second you could be in one country, and then you crossed some invisible barrier and *boom*, you were in another country, another world, so close yet so different.

Neil briefly considered looking online to see if they still did that reenactment, but he changed his mind. He would stay at the lake for as long as he had left. His car had driven its last mile.



July ended with a new moon, the second one of the month. His mother had once told Neil that the saying “once in a blue moon” referred to the second *full* moon of a month. Was there an expression for this equally rare occurrence as well?

He suddenly remembered *when* his mother had taught him the blue moon phrase. There had been two full moons that long-ago July. During the second one at the end of the month, she had taken him out onto the dock. She’d pointed up at the moon and explained that two full moons in the same month only happened every two or three years, leading to the old adage. She had smiled when Neil had said, “But it’s not blue!”

His mother had chosen that summer for the family vacation for that very reason, he now recalled. She had been the opposite of his pragmatic father: a former hippie flower child who believed in astrology. She had thought a summer with a blue moon was an auspicious time for a vacation. And she had been right.

It was ironic, and somehow appropriate, that this July had two *new* moons. It was decidedly *inauspicious*.

Neil had felt himself fading since his birthday. He had a feeling this was his last new moon. But what a place to be for it. Away from the lights of the cities, and with no moon visible, the night sky glittered with thousands of stars.

Pleasantly high on some of his potent weed, which he’d needed more and more as the days went by, he sat at the edge of the dock in his swimming trunks and gazed at the spectacle. There was no breeze at all, and the surface of the lake was as flat as a pane of glass. Silver Lake, indeed.

Last night, the area had been battered by severe thunderstorms. Gusts of wind approaching sixty miles per hour had rattled the cottage. The rain and wind had stopped this morning, but the clouds had been slow to clear.

By sunset they were gone, and the stars had become visible.

*The view would be even better from the middle of the lake*, he decided. It seemed like too much work to take the boat out, so he eased off the end of the dock and slipped into the water. He swam out toward the center of the lake and stopped. He flipped onto his back and took in the starry sky. It was breathtaking. He felt completely at peace.

An ear-splitting *boom* echoed across the lake like a cannon shot, startling Neil. He opened his eyes. *Jesus Christ*, he thought, *did I just nod off in the middle of the lake?* Mixing pot and oxys with swimming probably hadn't been such a great idea.

But what had awakened him? Thunder? Was the storm coming back? He glanced up at the sky. Yes, black clouds were now obscuring some of the stars. *I'd better get out of the water*, he thought.

He flipped over onto his stomach to start swimming back to shore, then froze.

There were stars on the bottom of the lake.

Neil frowned. It had to be some kind of weird reflection off the surface. He took a breath and ducked his head under the water.

He could still see them.

*They're not really there*, he thought. *They're just an afterimage from looking up at the stars in the sky.* He closed his eyes for a few seconds to let them adjust. He opened them.

The stars were still there.

*They can't be real*, he thought. *I'm having some kind of bizarre reaction from overmedicating.*

He lifted his head back above the water and took several deep breaths to clear his head. Another possible explanation came to him. Were the lights actually *real*? Could they be some kind of bioluminescent organisms churned up by the storm? Only one way to find out.

He took as deep a breath as he could and submerged. The water was ice cold just below the surface. He swam down toward the bottom. It was taking longer than it should to reach. And the lights, or stars, or whatever they were, didn't seem to be getting any closer.

Neil was running out of breath and had no choice but to surface. He broke the water, gasping for air. *What the hell?* he thought. The lake was fairly shallow. He should have been able to reach the bottom easily.

He blinked the water out of his eyes. Assuming he was really seeing stars at the bottom of the lake, they *had* to be a bizarre reflection with a scientific explanation. Some kind of freak meteorological inversion, or unusual astronomical occurrence. After all, there had been wild thunderstorms last night, and thunder without lightning just a moment ago.

And it was the new moon to boot.

But something about those underwater stars was bothering him. He studied the portion of night sky that wasn't blocked by the approaching clouds, then ducked his head under the water again and looked more closely. Just as he'd thought: the pattern of stars under the lake was different. It wasn't a reflection after all.

The constellations were *different*. Unfamiliar. Odd clusters of stars in shapes that hurt his eyes to look at. It didn't make any sense. But hell, ever since that thunderous blast, *nothing* had made sense.

He raised his head back above the surface. He was fatigued and shivering, and his imagination was running wild. He needed to get back to his cottage and rest. He took a couple strokes toward his dock and stopped.

He had the feeling he was being watched.

He scanned the shoreline but didn't see anyone. No surprise, since most, if not all, of the other cottages had remained vacant during Neil's stay.

He sensed motion above him and looked up at the clouds. He stared in disbelief as his brain tried to process what his eyes were seeing.

It was not a cloud formation blocking out the stars. It was a dark figure, only visible as a shadow when it moved in front of them. It was impossibly tall. A thin black leg on each side of the lake rose up into the sky to join the main body of the thing. It was straddling the lake as if it were a puddle. Other appendages higher up were moving around randomly. He couldn't make out the shape of a face. Or if it even had one.

*It can't be real*, Neil thought. *Neither can the stars under the lake*. Keeping his eyes straight ahead, looking neither up nor down, he started swimming again. There was a splash just ahead of him as a silvery object landed on the water.

*Now what?* he thought.

Neil stopped and trod water, studying it. Was it a *hook*? Absurdly, he wondered if it could be from the old fishing rod he had thrown into the lake all those years ago. But it couldn't possibly still be here. Besides, this hook was much larger than that one had been. And it was attached to a heavy-duty black fishing line, not a string.

He debated whether to touch it. What was he afraid of? It couldn't be real, had to be another illusion. He reached out a fingertip. It certainly *felt* real. His touch sent a vibration up the black fishing line.

The hook launched itself out of the water at Neil. He recoiled, but he was too slow. He felt a blinding pain as the hook punctured his eyeball and lodged in his orbital socket.

And then the real agony began as he was yanked across the surface of the lake.

After his battle with cancer and acceptance of impending death, he hadn't thought he could ever feel fear again. But he felt it now. Surely the intense pain should have awoken him had this been merely a dream or hallucination.

He couldn't believe his own stupidity. Lured in by a shiny object just as easily as any dumb fish. And now he would be a meal for the tall black thing that had caught him. He hoped he would be dead before he was flensed and deboned. Or would he be swallowed whole, like a sardine?

In his head, he could see his father shrugging and saying, "Some days you're the fisherman; some days you're the fish."

He sure as hell was the fish today.

He was being pulled back and forth across the lake, blood and ocular fluid from his ruined eye trailing behind him, each change of direction bringing a new level of suffering. It felt like his skull was being torn in half. Why didn't the thing just lift him into its net, or cooking pot, and get this over with? It was almost as if—

*Oh Jesus*, he thought. The thing was *trolling*. Neil wasn't the fish at all. He was the worm.

But what in God's name could he be the bait *for*?

With his good eye, he peered through the surface of the water. Something blacker than the night was rising from the depths of the lake, blotting out the stars below one by one.

“The attic was where they disappeared altogether. That was where He completed them. Erasure: femininity in its truest form.”

- Megan Douty  
“Rot”



# **A HEART BROKEN**

Míša Hejná

# THE FIRE

Keira Reynolds

---

**They pitched the tent, and Corie searched the surrounding woods, seeking out withered grass, dead twigs, and dry moss, which she piled in a heap in the hearth she had built from a ring of stones.** It had rained recently, and the grass and leaf litter were wet, but she knew how to search in the lee of trees and under rocks and fallen branches. When she had enough kindling, she searched again, this time looking for slightly larger twigs and thin sticks.

‘I don’t know why you insist on being the wild woman of the woods,’ Ashley complained, stamping his feet and rubbing his hands as he stood beside the unlit fire. ‘We could have just brought firelighters.’

‘Take a deep breath,’ she replied without pausing in her search. ‘Smell the woodland air. That sweet scent—can you smell it? That’s honeysuckle. Do you really want to pollute that air with the stink of firelighters?’

‘I think there’s a dead hedgehog around here somewhere. The smell of firelighters might be an improvement.’

She sighed. ‘Well, we don’t have any, so could you please stop complaining and help me find dry firewood?’

He did, though he gathered as many green branches as dry ones. She didn’t say anything. What was the point? She dropped her own armful of firewood beside the hearth, took a box of matches from her backpack, struck one, and held it to a bit of dry dead moss, cupping her hands to shield the flame from the wind. The moss charred and then burned, and she carefully arranged dry twigs around and on top of it.

‘I’m surprised you brought matches,’ said Ashley. ‘I thought you’d strike sparks from rocks or rub two sticks together or something.’

‘Didn’t we agree we weren’t going to do that this weekend, Ashley? Didn’t we promise to stop carping and sniping at each other, and try to enjoy ourselves away from all the pressure and stress, and just have some fun, the way we used to?’

‘You’re right. I’m sorry. Here, let me help.’

He dumped an armful of wet green branches on the fire, provoking a column of black smoke, and rummaged through their packs. She set the wet wood aside and placed a few dry branches on the fire instead.

'I can't find the cooking gear,' he muttered, dumping the contents of their packs in the wet grass outside the tent. 'Are you sure you remembered to pack it? Oh, never mind, here it is.'

He returned to the fire with cooking utensils, bottled water, and food in plastic containers. She placed a pan on the fire and poured a little cooking oil into it. When the oil was hot, she took some sausages and rashers from the containers and placed the food in the pan. Soon the campsite was filled with the sound of oil sizzling and spitting and the aroma of frying sausages and bacon.

'I found this too,' he said, sitting beside her, his shoulder touching hers, his voice soft. In his hand he held an old, battered hardback copy of *The Wind in the Willows*.

She smiled. 'Remember how we used to read to each other?'

'It's been a long time. I'd almost forgotten.'

She took the pan off the fire and slid sausages and rashers onto plastic plates. The food was good, flavoured with the tang of woodsmoke.

When they had eaten, she filled a pot with water and heated it on the fire, poured it into two mugs, and stirred in spoons of cocoa powder and powdered milk. She handed one cup to him while she blew on her own to cool it.

It was growing dark now. He lit a lantern and by its light read from the book, pausing every now and then for sips of cocoa. 'The Mole had been working very hard all the morning, spring cleaning his little home ...'

She smiled and leaned into him, her head resting on his shoulder. How long had it been since they used to read that story to each other, two students living in a grotty little flat, with no money but full of hope, their whole lives ahead of them? Back then it had seemed like anything was possible. Now they had careers and a mortgage. Somehow, they had lost something along the way. They never read to each other anymore. They rarely read anything that wasn't work-related.

'... he learnt to swim and to row and entered into the joy of running water, and with his ear to the reed-stems he caught, at intervals, something of what the wind went whispering so constantly among them.' Ashley finished the first chapter, set down the book, and sighed. He turned toward her, and she turned toward him, and they shared a cocoa-flavoured kiss.

She took her guitar from its case, tuned it, and played. They sang together as the sun went down and the moon and the stars came out. They sang 'This Land is Your Land' and 'Blowin' in the Wind', and 'Which Side Are

You On?' He stumbled over the words at first, but the longer they sang the more the words came back to him.

This was the way it used to be. She had missed this so much. This was the man she used to know, the man she had fallen in love with, full of fun and idealism, before he became so materialistic and career-focused and petty and bitter. She kissed him again and put away her guitar.

'Gather up our stuff will you, love,' she said. 'I'll roll out the sleeping bags.'

She smiled to herself. Bags? They'd only need one tonight.

He began picking up the gear he had earlier tipped out of their packs while she rolled out a single sleeping bag in the tent.

'Aww crap,' Ashley complained. 'All our stuff is wet. I told you we should have hired a camper van.'

Corie sighed, and rolled out the second sleeping bag, and the last embers of the fire flickered, and died.



*Editor's Note: "The Fire" was longlisted for the Cranked Anvil April 2024 short story competition.*

# ROT

Meg Douty

---

**The house stood at the edge of secrecy: small, splintering, and quietly cursed.** Built from wood, the color of faded parchment, rising in three crooked stories stacked like a secret. Its windows, three per floor, glared like lidless eyes from a skull too old to remember its own name. The roof, once proud in color, had rotted into a tired, flaking gray, sickly green veins bleeding through like mold on its bones.

The inhabitants were nameless. They were called the doll people, but were only distinguished from each other with titles. That was His rule. The Darkness did not permit names. Names conferred history, identity, the dangerous illusion of self. And self was the first thing to go. When the dolls awoke, they began on the ground floor. Where the light still lived. Where desire was born. Because every doll knew, without knowing why, that the goal was always to go up. To ascend. To enter the place where The Darkness lived. To be chosen. To be claimed.

Each level higher dulled the skin. Painted flesh turned to porcelain chill. The ultimate goal was third-floor transparency, like breath on a mirror. The attic was where they disappeared altogether. That was where He completed them. Erasure: femininity in its truest form.

The Witch whispered her spells into chipped teacups. Her hair was black yarn stitched tight to her scalp with metallic thread, like thoughts sewn shut.

The Mother cradled absence in her arms, her porcelain smile cracked just enough to let the grief peek through. She smelled of milk and mildew, and rocked an empty cradle that never stopped creaking.

The Hysteric danced on broken toes, her laughter jagged as glass. She tore her paper dress into strips and wove them into the floor like roots that refused to die. Her beauty was a scream trapped in a mirror.

Then there was The Militant.

She snared where others simpered. Her fingernails were not painted

but sharpened; blades that peeled wallpaper like flesh. She hunted rot. She fed the maggots. She defiled every inch of domesticity she touched. She made herself unsightly with surgical precision. Her hair, once curled, was hacked short and scorched at the ends. She wore her cracks like armor. She reveled in the mess. In defiance. In the art of undoing. She bent femininity until it splintered, a lesson she learned from the only walls she ever knew.

The more she desecrated the feminine, the more the light returned. Not sunlight, but light born of defiance. The kind that bruises. That screams instead of shines. And that, more than anything, made her invisible to Him.

The Darkness rarely spoke. When He did, it was only to satisfy his hunger. He wanted delicacy. He wanted surrender. He wanted to possess, and so He possessed only what begged to be kept. He slid through cracks, through silence, through softness. He dissolved what pleased him. And oh, how easily the others were fed upon.

First began The Witch, concocting a silence that turned her to dust. The Mother followed, her arms growing heavier, rocking air like it was made of sorrow. The Hysteric was His final supper. Her laughter slowed, her ribbons stained a darker shade of red.

But The Militant? She climbed like a curse. She stomped through thresholds. She broke chairs, bent herself into angles that screamed against symmetry. She chewed through her own stitches. She ruined herself, satiating the desire to be undesirable.

By the time she reached the attic, the house was sagging. Paint sloughed from the ceiling like dandruff from an aging god. This was the final room. The mouth of Him. This was where the dolls disappeared into elegance.

Not her.

She brought infestation.

The maggots came in waves. White, slick, and relentless. They birthed from behind the peeling wallpaper, from the ruptured cracks in dollhouse corners, from the wounds she carved into the stairs. They spilled over floorboards like living pus, withering with hunger, with vengeance. She fed them teacups and tulle, lace curtains and perfumed pillows. She fed them everything He once desired.

They multiplied on her command, devouring symbols of beauty like priests desecrating a false god. Their mouths were small, but they were many. Their appetites? Limitless. The wallpaper bubbled. The cradle split. The silence ruptured.

The Darkness gagged. He could not consume what revolted him. And The Militant had become a cathedral of revulsion. She was a sermon of unpleasantries. Where others softened, she scarred. Where others faded,

she flared.

He shrank. Hissed. Recoiled. He needed beauty to bind. She gave Him resistance. She gave Him rot.

And finally, she gave Him nothing at all.

# FORTUNE TELLING

MJ Vickers

---

My mind is water flowing through sand  
never settling  
ever changing and unclear.

Yet I design to predict the future  
like finding meaning in the shapes of clouds  
turning to storms.

The water wheel keeps turning,  
sifting through mud.

Do I make sense of these symbols?  
Will Luck deliver its favor,  
or is this a serpent in a well?

Is the sword, drawing my own blood,  
staining this brook?

Am I doomed under this furious cloud?

If my fate is etched in ink on these  
blank pages, do I have the will to  
blot it out, to carve a new bed?

Do I dare to place my faith in these cards?  
Or will they sew poisonous whispers behind my eyes?  
Do I steep in their meaning like a bitter black tea?

No, I want to cast them away  
in a brilliant colorful rain, strewn before me.

Tell me what secrets you must but  
upon my own heart I swear  
I reject where you lie.

# DESCENT TO THE PLANET OF THE GREMLINS

J.H. Siegal

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**We're already puking.** Several of us down the bulkhead crumple in their suits and spray their lunches into their face shields. We've trained hard for the descent, but we're all first-timers, knocking knees and white-knuckling the handholds. We don't ask one another for courage—no human has made it twice. They all turn into Gremlins.

At first we sent big ships, which entered the Gremlin planet atmosphere and tumbled, careened, scraped themselves to bits on the crags below the clouds. Communications either ceased before impact, or were intercepted by the screeching, gurgling Grem-speak. So it was assumed, until ships sent back images of Gremlins cavorting around our passageways and bridges.

Teams of engineers, the rumor goes, struggled to show how the Grem infiltrated the ships. They bent over schematics and ducked the bellowing tantrums of the generals, until one timid engineer proposed the obvious, only answer: the landing parties were *becoming* Gremlins.

Our craft begins to shudder, and Sarge steps up in front.

Sarge, who taught and trained us, a first-timer like all of us, clicks on his comms. He takes a deep breath that crackles in our earpieces.

Through the sparking air and rattles of the ship, Sarge rasps about the latest reports, that the Grem have dotted their realm with genetic disruptors, beaming from peaks all over the planet. The disruptors, according to the wizards in our Intelligence Service, take effect about halfway through the atmosphere, the one we are currently entering.

A queasy feeling enters my stomach. I tense my grip on the handholds.

Sarge catches his balance as the ship shivers. The best of our squad, he was picked to lead us during the recent military selection, and since that day, we have hidden our terror behind his commands.

Sarge calls us to attention, and we straighten the best we can as the ship rocks and pitches, buffeted by the vapors of the Grem planet.

A special serum has been provided, made especially for this mission by the best, brightest minds of Intelligence, and which, Sarge makes clear, we *will* drink before we enter the lower atmosphere. The serum should protect us from the genetic disruptors just long enough for our objective: demolition of the nearest disruptor tower.

After this, Sarge says, more waves will follow onto the planet, targeting tower after tower, ridding our sector of the scourge of the Grems.

Sarge walks the line, slapping a pink plastic packet into each of our mitts.

I pull the packet under my face shield and chew through the end, greedily suck the pink goo. I lick it up from my lips, afraid to miss a drop.

It tastes like smoke and rubber and ash, with an aftertaste that closes the back of my throat.

We all begin to cough, Sarge too.

"It's okay," Sarge says, "just cough through it."

The ship bucks and skips sideways.

"We're entering the lower atmosphere," says Sarge. "Everyone ... stay ... sharp ..."

One of us near the front of the ship has begun to remove their suit.

"Stay in your gear!" says Sarge.

The one in front steps out of his suit and takes off his helmet. He stands in his underwear, rubbing his body, stepping from foot to foot.

"Sarge," he whimpers. "My body doesn't fit."

More of us have begun to shed our suits.

Sarge turns around, grasping each of us in turn. He pulls off his helmet and tries to speak. A black wad of phlegm surrounds his tongue. He hacks and gurgles, grasping at his mouth, falling back against the bulkhead.

It occurs to me that not everyone might survive the transformation to a Gremlin.

I pull off my gloves and several fingers come along. I examine the bones. They're pink. Incredible.

My helmet comes off, and my suit. There's an itchy, antsy feeling all over my body. My limbs want to move, more than I can let them. My skin knots up, tightens, constricts. I start to dance, hoping to let my bones out. I tumble into a clot of us, all in undress, rubbing our arms and torsos together, shedding skin. It stings, with a fresh coolness, when the patches of skin pull away, letting the raw young scales hit the air. I laugh, but it comes out a skidding squeal. My mates shriek and begin to aid one another, tearing off the old skin, gawking in glee at all our yellow new eyes.

A few of us didn't make it, lying still in their suits. We cover them in layers of old skin and hair. One of them was a Sarge or something.

We clutch and cuddle. Soon home.

The bridge door bursts open, and two more of us leap out, stripping old human feet off their pink bones, letting the scales emerge, fingering the bright, wet new talons beneath. They throw their old feet against the walls and tack their talons, dancing their fresh bodies.

The ship begins to pitch forward.

Through the window of the bridge, I spy a hazy glowing spire in the distance, turning as the ship spirals in. Genetic disruptors. What a funny idea.

The ship crunches onto the surface, shedding metal and plastic and bodies. Inside, we smash into one another, gnarling and nibbling.

Only a few of us crawl out of the wreck, to the welcome smoky air, the soothing glow of the towers on the hills. We make our way to the warm burbling pools of pink tar.

Before slipping in, we give thanks—we bite our friends, we screech our songs.

A stream of bright ships tumbles through the haze at the horizon, one by one impacting in plumes on the zags of the hills. Ever has it been, since the ships began appearing, drawn by the lure of the towers.

We steam our scales in the pink mother liquid, drink it deep into our bones, nibbling one another, awaiting new surviving friends.

“I’ve seen it happen. Guy goes for a night search, gear malfunctions. All he has to do is swim two meters to the surface. But he panics. Experiences vertigo. He drowns, desperately clawing at the bottom of the riverbed, wondering why, oh, why, oh, why he hasn’t reached the surface yet.”

- Christopher Hann  
“The Alligator”

# THE LAST ROAD TRIPPER

Andrew Majors

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**He always slept in the car.** No money for hotels, he could start earlier, and he wanted the lowest possible profile anyway, which meant improvising, which was all right. He'd improvised his entire life up to this point and things had gone all right. Mostly. The only problem was finding somewhere to park in the evening, when his eyes were sore and his arms got rubbery with fatigue, but the Midwest, bless it, still had plenty of lonely places to crawl into, maybe even disappear.

Lonely places were best: quiet side streets, deserted farm roads, empty cul-de-sacs in industrial parks long abandoned for overseas prospects. Sometimes he didn't stop till the sun sank low enough to blind him, or well after it set beyond the ragged low skyline of some forgotten town. Most nights he didn't want to sleep at all, even if the featureless oblivion that met him when he shut his eyes was the closest he would ever get to relief in this life.

Being tired was bad. Dreams were worse.

Tonight's rest stop was just off I-80, a tarmac no-man's-land between a half-empty strip mall and a closed Sizzler. His car was one of three in the lot. Splayed out across the backseat, he pulled his jacket over his chest, closed his eyes, and had no dreams for the third night in a row.

He still didn't sleep well. The remaining arc lights outshined a thin crescent moon, glaring through his rear window like the haloes of avenging angels, and the wind sent shadows of dead oak branches crawling in severed limb patterns over his chest and face. No matter where he went, something waited there to remind him that it was all over, that he was doomed, free only to bide time till luck ran out on him.

Like she had, and like he had, after the last fight he'd ever win.



Two weeks on the road, and he'd stopped looking over his shoulder. He'd stopped punching the paneling till his calloused knuckles split and two fingers on his left hand had fractured, stopped screaming his animal rage at America's desolate interior—the last measure of everything that had exploded in Boston exorcised. With each mile ticked over on the odometer, he burned another memory of that place into an ashen, half-remembered ghost, piled each one into a black moraine in back of his mind, tamped them down, and willed them to disappear: He had doubts.

The police would investigate. One more crime of passion in the bowels of Southie wasn't that memorable, and with the shape of things, there weren't enough people to spare chasing him. That didn't make it clean. He'd broken two ribs, maybe three, with shots that would have KO'd men his size, hard blows that had landed across her perfect face and delicate body in blockbuster strafes. Aggravated assault, or worse, was still serious, even when the victim had lied through her rotten lipstick-encircled teeth about love and commitment and other assorted B.S. before running off with a dyke who'd probably gotten a good look at his face as he drunk-staggered out the door.

He was dead to rights, but the open road didn't pass sentence. As long as he had a car he was a free man.

In the earliest after-moments he knew he had to get out of the city. No planned route, no GPS. His phone died near the Massachusetts border. From the tangle of BosWash along the Atlantic coast, he headed across a New York desolate of anyone but squatters and a handful of retired farmers, pushing ninety, stopping only in Albany for gas and, on a whim, a road map from the spinning rack on the station's front counter. After Albany, he took I-90 west, past Syracuse, through Buffalo, over the border into Pennsylvania and then Ohio. At Cleveland, he started south on I-71, a stalling conveyor belt for the rusted-out factories and plasterboard townships that lined its flanks.

He tolerated the Interstates. Even with potholes and patrolling vigilance groups they were still fast, and right now fast meant smart. He'd gotten a lot smarter the past few days, making moves under the gun without too much thought, the kind he usually only made in the ring. Those lightning-quick impulsive thoughts, half about footwork and half about where to piston his arm to sock the other guy, were now part of his daily life, and so far he was 3-0: Out of Boston, three states away, and for all he knew still anonymous. That made him more than just an angry meathead who got lucky. It meant he was *getting away with it*.

He didn't know how to feel when getting away with something. He'd never done it before a day in his life—family, school, the cops, his job, everybody had always pinned him down and screwed him. It felt good. Turned out all he had to do to unlock that much-vaunted potential and turn

on the success machine was beat an ex-girlfriend to a bloody pulp. Life sure was funny. No wonder there were so many happy folks out there.



With the road map he began plotting a course. The car was old but running, his wallet flush with digital installments from their joint bank account emptied in small enough increments to avoid suspicion. Between that and a mote of hard cash there wasn't much, but he stretched every penny, and his new brains were coming up with more income sources every day. Despite that, he'd failed to follow through on one of his notions at a bank near Mansfield, then again at an ATM in Columbus, either because of nerves or because his last major purchase before leaving Boston wasn't part of the equation.

She'd had a saying, which was everyone else's saying: *Third time's the charm*. Next time he'd do it for real.

He was a first-time road tripper, never out of Boston in his life. The route he'd chosen was a torturous rogue kite's path through the Midwest—no two-night stays, few metros. At long last cars were becoming an endangered species in America, and he didn't want to become a victim of irony. He wouldn't stop anywhere east of the Mississippi. Better out west where he could still hide, maybe get the chance to go to water. Limp the car into Frisco or Portland or Seattle, leave it in a lot for any still-working alphabet agency to find, lift a boat from some marina, and sail off into the big blue. He'd spend nights navigating by constellation and get tanned selling Pacific Fleet salvage to the Hawaiian Kingdom Navy or the merchant mariners servicing the People's Territory of Guam.

It'd still be running. That didn't matter. As long as it was on his terms, he'd keep running until all the gas left in the world ran out and he had to walk. If his feet were cut out from under him he would crawl, and if he couldn't crawl he would slither. She'd called him a snake the last time they talked, a cold-blooded bastard. She was right, but in his defense, he also drank a lot and replaying things over and over in his head had made him mad enough to kill, it was at least partly her fault he was here now. Everybody was a snake when you got down to it. They'd only shed their skins earlier than most.

He stopped one night on the ragged northern edge of Cincinnati, in a neighborhood burned over by the last big race demonstrations. In the houses the shades were drawn and the lights were off. Around three in the morning he woke with a full bladder and knives in his back to see a long, thin shadow float across the sidewalk, its form barely drawn by the waxing moon that shined through the clouds. He watched it writhe down crumbling

concrete on five legs, then it sparked yellow-orange eyes at him and disappeared into a row of dead hedges, where darkness swallowed it whole.

Just a cat.

No more sleep.



Brunch at a Shell station off I-65 south of Louisville. Gas was ten and three-quarters, the pump taped with a sign that said PURCHASES OF \$75 OR MORE PLEASE SEE CASHIER. He took a bag of donuts from the half-bare shelves, along with some generic instant coffee—plenty of that left, they sold it in bulk—and mentally ran the numbers to see if he could pay. A nail had robbed him of \$300 for a tire change, along with a \$450 toll from a vigilance outpost at the Kentucky border he would have been loath to ignore if he wanted to keep the car and most of his teeth. The remaining \$520.45 was stored in the side pocket of a ratty duffel bag in the trunk, the car parked at the rough-graveled edge of the asphalt.

He went into the restroom with a charger lifted from the front rack. Surprisingly, the wall outlet still worked. As he charged he flipped through emails and messages. The bank was complaining about overdrafts and his boss told him he was fired, but no important news, no detective's emails asking pointed questions. They'd probably searched his place by now, but he'd started running from the dyke's apartment. No leads there. Apart from a body, maybe.

He thought hard about where the rest of the money would go. Gas swallowed more than half, followed closely by food. Toiletries he'd given little thought to. He gave himself a quick inspection in the mirror: pale, haggard, unshaven, but at least he wasn't losing weight. His health would keep sliding if he didn't get something more substantive, which meant next stop was a real grocery store, and maybe later he would primp a bit. Since Boston it had been exclusively whore's baths, not counting the sink at the BP in Worcester he'd used to wash off.

A fourth category was steadily forming in back of his mind. The car's timing belt was loose, and some undetermined exhaust problems meant the check engine light was now permanently on. Repairs would mean parting with the half-grand, maybe more if he went for the surreptitious types that didn't ask questions, and even then he might attract attention. Nobody moved around too much anymore. What would a mechanic say to a cash reward for somebody who'd hauled his clunker in for a tune-up that would get him to the Golden State?

The joys of an endless road trip. He palmed a few energy bars before getting in line. The cashier might have spotted him, but said nothing from

behind his steel wire cage. Even in this economy lost merchandise still didn't mean much.

He spotted her from the checkout line.

Not all of her, and only briefly, but enough for him to know. The top of her brunette head bobbed beside the rusted-out dome of an Escalade loitering at the station island on the opposite side of the lot. A long, shallow dent curved across the left-hand side. Through the tinted glass he could make out the roundness of her ruined face, the hazel of her bloodshot eye. She swiveled toward him like an animatronic as he walked out the front doors. He saw the swollen lips distort, the eye go wide and glassy with fear, then narrow with hate.

Screw gas. He peeled out at forty into the wrong lane of a divided highway, dragging the underside on tarmac to jar one of the panels loose. In the rearview mirror, he saw her sprint barefoot down the cracked sidewalk after him, wearing the same gory halter top and shorts she'd worn that night, her face black bruises, her mouth open in a silent scream.

A quarter tank and fumes got him to Bowling Green. He'd watched for her in the rearview mirror the whole way.



More than once he'd thought about ditching the car. They had to be searching for it, and it would do well to try and snag something better if circumstances presented, but with no bubble lights flashing in his rearview mirror and no sirens blaring since that first night, he figured he was being paranoid. There was such a thing as being too smart.

He remained careful. In Bowling Green he swapped plates with a 4-Runner in a Kohl's parking lot—his third pair—then spent the afternoon cleaning up in the locker of a YMCA down the street before plotting out the next leg of the trip. The Great Plains weren't that great anymore. I-90 was the best bet. Smaller cities, fewer people. Take I-165 up to Owensboro, onto U.S. 60 till Morganfield and State Route 56, then State Route 13 across the southern tip of Illinois to Marion. At Marion he'd take I-57 up to Champaign, then I-74 from there to Davenport, then good old Highway 61 up to Wisconsin. A bitch in wasted time and money. He could have taken I-90 all the way from the start if not for his indecision and one unavoidable detour, but he'd pay that price. So after doing a double take on cash, he opted for a withdrawal.

The old woman, tired and distracted, didn't notice his approach, or that while he helped her put meager groceries in back of an aged minivan, she'd left her purse sitting against the wheel stop of the parking space. He went through the thing in one swift motion while she returned the cart. After

he walked off with a smile and wave, he counted out \$370 in what might have been SS payout money, plus a few ancient but perhaps still lively cashier's checks. A half-dozen cameras, if they worked, had recorded a young man in baseball cap and shades doing a bit of good in a depraved world.

Another hundred or so miles, another few days of living. It didn't occur to him at all that the old woman might have needed the money. Petty theft was strictly minor league when you started on murderer's row. The gun, which had rested the whole time in his hoodie pocket, went back into the center console, like a hidden token from some infernal guardian.



It was a pocket universe, just him, his duffel, and the accumulated detritus of the open road. Receipts, wrappers, and plastic bottles plied in fossil layers on the passenger-side floor, where she used to wiggle her feet and laugh when he told dirty jokes or recounted street matches like they were bouts for heavyweight champ. Rumpled laundry, his bedsheets, crowded the back. Company meant DJ chatter intermixed with umpteen plays of "More Than a Feeling," hectoring from the True American enclave at New Jerusalem/Kansas City, traffic updates, static, and news regarding the stalled-out construction of New I-80 or the third year of food riots in Chicago.

If all this displeased, there was road noise whenever he rolled down the windows instead of cranking the A/C, which wasn't often. Something beneath the dull rush of tires on asphalt and whistling breeze sounded like whispers, like her: angry, embittered, and endlessly accusing. The prickle it gave whatever tiny portion of his conscience that hadn't been knocked from his head was like someone sticking a needle into his brain.

He had the highway more or less to himself. Any vehicles that passed went by at least twenty miles above the speed limit, most of them military hardware or armed and armored big rig convoys carrying food and medicine. Between towns, desolation. Farmhouses stood empty, their fields going back to weeds, the few porch lights still blinking on at night overshadowed by the deep ranks of stars that crept in above.

It had been her car, and even after so many miles he didn't know how much he trusted it. The smallest tap of the gas pedal made it jump ten feet. Steering was sketchy, the wheel rattling apace, nothing like the pickup he'd left behind for too little time and poor mileage. She'd tried to teach him to, in her words, "respect" her vehicle. He tried not to remember her laughing that one time on Boylston when he swapped gas for brake and shot forward like a rocket to almost tap some kid off his e-bike. Whenever he thought back to

things like that—her brunette hair, her upturned nose, or that mischievous little sparkle in her hazel eyes—the ghosts of Boston grew a little stronger, laid hands on him and began to drag him down with her, wherever she'd gone.



Illinois became a problem when half-starved insurgents started screaming southward after breaking the military cordon at Champaign. The detour went down I-70, not far, but not at all good when orange quarantine fences stretched down both sides of the road, and every so often there were checkpoints staffed by people in full decontamination suits and N-95s. Cameras on the prefab tollbooth tops made him sweat even with the windows rolled up. He would have left the highway and taken his chances in the sticks if not for traffic, and another visit.

She was no one he'd ever met. Some chick in a National Guard uniform, another medical officer or desk jockey, maybe a volunteer, maybe a conscript. Like she'd come back to life and joined up with the service: the same round face, same pale skin, same height and build, same hair, same hazel eyes. Her hair was now regulation short, she had no eyebrow or nose piercings, and her body wasn't bleeding and broken, but it was her. When he saw her watching him from across two lanes of traffic, he kept cool, hands at five and seven on the wheel, eyes locked on the barely moving bumper of the Chevy ahead, until two armed soldiers stepped over the plastic barricades and made for the driver's side.

He knocked over a few cones and scraped the sides of both the Chevy and a vintage Buick getting onto the shoulder and through the chain fence, but made it through. The next fifty or so miles he took at a hundred on average, his heartbeat going about the same. If they sent out a patrol it never saw him.

St. Louis was an abandoned fortress on the Mississippi. He could barely make out the shattered steel rainbow of the Gateway Arch silhouetted against the southeast horizon. The new I-70 bridge crossed ten miles upriver of where the old ones had come down, a mix of acidified water and toxic cyanobacteria eating away their foundations. Whenever he cracked the window it smelled like summer egg salad gone bad. Like the rest of the world, he'd seen the bodies on TV, pale and bloated, green slime leaking from their mouths and noses as one more eco-disaster took hold of the Midwest. He had no desire to layover.

Highway 61 wasn't closed, but guarded, a weak aorta for trucks that passed through the still arable, still nominally American parts of Missouri and Iowa. For now the Interstate was the jungle line, subject to change. While at

another checkpoint, he saw more soldiers asking for ID.

They didn't ask for ID at Danville, and after some time on State Route 161, he was on course again. Dry hills wandered by as he headed north. He spent the night in another Bowling Green and planned to make Keokuk the next day because he liked the name. Before bedding down he saw a vagrant slouched next to the corpse of a semi across the way, quite possibly the only Avia trucker left in the country. The sign in his skeletal hands read HERE TO INTL FALLS—EVERY BIT HELPS BUT I WOULDNT MIND A RIDE—BLESS

Fifty bucks went into the man's tattered cap while he slept. No ride. He wasn't about to pick up another hitchhiker.



Iowa technically wasn't under a state of emergency. Highway 61 remained inside the National Agricultural Exclusion Zone for a good part of its run through the state, fallow land and empty farmsteads on both sides, prepped for sterilization in some places but otherwise untouched. Not dead, but dying, hanging on in a gray silence more terrifying than any explosions or screams or fires beyond the horizon. Every night was full dark. He was passing through a phantom land filled with people no longer registered to anyone but themselves, maybe not even that.

He almost got carjacked at Davenport. The kids were emaciated, in rags that barely passed for clothes, but they had fire in their eyes and very large pistols looped in their belts. At the light, when he saw them approach, he instinctively floored it. They pounced anyway. He heard shots hammer through the rear doors while he scooped up the nearest punk and watched him roll sideways over the hood to fall hard on the ground like a felled tree. Two more shots punctured the trunk as he sped off. He heard one of them scream something sounding like "asshole" as though he were the one at fault.

His mood improved, and he began sleeping through the night. Nothing else assailed him as he entered Wisconsin. He gassed up at twelve dollars a gallon in La Crosse. A large billboard that had once held an ad for a regional wireless company proclaimed EVEN IF GOD IS DEAD HIS KINGDOM WILL ENDURE.

He watched sunset one evening from the bluffs overlooking the river, large thunderheads swooping out of the south like swarms of bats. The town's rich kids played luxury soccer, two solar panel-rigged Priuses chasing a technical hauling a white flag on an open field. He silently wished them all the happiness he could no longer hope for. The weather stayed good as he rolled his sleeping bag out on top of a picnic table in a deserted park. The region was on rationed power through September, and as day slipped into

night, he watched the stars appear again, one by one, in greater numbers than he'd ever seen in Boston, or that he even imagined there could be.

He remembered their last day together before everything went bad. She'd asked him what his favorite bout was. It was the time he'd knocked out Assam Dzugayev, the Chechen sonofabitch who'd tried to shank him below the belt with an illegal barb in his glove but couldn't muster up enough speed to avoid getting his jaw fractured by a left hook. That memory warmed him more than any blanket as he drifted into sleep, the air cool and humming with the prospect of something new.



By Rochester, he knew for certain the car was going to die. He'd run over something big not ten feet into Minnesota, something that tumbled end over end into the morning fog, probably a young moose. The bumper and hood were both accordioned by the blow, the front axle wobbled with every pothole, and the engine's whine was now loud enough to drown out everything but his grinding teeth. He had blinding headaches and his hands were raw from pounding the dash.

Every repair shop in town was booked solid for the next year, and when they weren't, they either didn't have the parts or he didn't have the money. He heard rumors of a miracle worker in Owatonna. On Highway 14 due west he dropped his speed to fifty, then forty, as if he could coax out another hundred or so miles by treating the engine like it was made of glass.

The transmission went around mile 206. It started with a low grinding that rose higher and higher even as he slowed. There came a rattle that shook the seats. He felt something pass under the rear wheels and, in the rearview mirror, saw an aborted lump of metal, oily black and red in equal measure, bounce down the highway.

The engine stalled. Gray smoke poured from under the hood. He crossed the shoulder and entered the drainage ditch in a spray of brown and black. The front wheels dipped as the seatbelt fractured his collarbone in two places. If he'd been holding the wheel at ten and two, like he'd been taught, his thumbs would have snapped off at the first joint.

His head hit the expanding pillow of the airbag, and he slept.



When he came to it was dusk. Aching and pissed, he clamored out of the splintered front end of the car. The trip would continue, on foot now unless he hitchhiked or stole a ride. He still had the gun. With it and the

duffel, he stumbled away and began a long walk to somewhere.

It was no time at all before he heard gentle pattering from someplace far behind him. Footsteps. With them he heard whispers, phrases chanted below the level of intelligibility, sounding almost like "Turn around asshole I said turn around." He said nothing, and resisted until he heard the words grow louder, their pace more frequent. Then he looked back.

The moon was full, the road behind him shadowed by a palisade of trees. At the curve which would have kept him in Rochester, just before the vanishing point, he saw a dot of ghostly white, almost silver, sprinting like crazy to catch up.

He remembered *Third time's the charm*. Then, he turned and ran like the angel of death was chasing him.

Because she was.



The car stayed in the ditch for less than a week, all valuables stripped from it by the time an old nobody, the only real mechanic left in Owatonna, towed what was left of the chassis away. No sense wasting good steel, even if nobody paid good money for it anymore. He hammered by a curious spot less than a mile from the wreck, mind already focused on keeping the shop open without paying thug protection money, his wife dead three years of the flu, the Korean crisis, and whether he would take lunch at three or four.

A big oil stain lay at the shoulder of the road, dark and spreading, half pooled onto unpaved ground. Within it lay scattered a few gleaming bits of trash and tendentious footprints fossilized in mud, spaced close together as if there were two different sets which had spent a lot of time face to face. A couple in argument, young probably, old maybe. Barely a dozen yards from the stain, they wobbled and merged into snake tracks in the mud, then vanished altogether.

They had gotten some other kind of ride, he figured.

The world stumbled on, blind but crushingly aware of its predicament, with more pressing things to ponder over than the fate of two unlucky young people with no one but each other and everywhere left to go.

# THE BATH

Elizabeth J. Coleman

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I miss my first cousin once removed  
pouring the wine at Passover. He, who seemed

more an uncle, coming around the table  
as if a sommelier, serving us children

grape juice, then finally one blessed year  
Manischewitz. He who said at a Seder

decades later, when he was the only one  
left of that generation, our grandchildren

were young and out of control, and I was  
sure he must be appalled,

*It's like Spring having them here.*

We learned at Chuck's funeral  
he liked to spend Saturdays

in the bath, would bring a book  
and a cocktail into the tub. Later we took

turns shoveling dirt onto his casket.  
I think of Chuck, evenings when I bathe,

even now dreading the moment  
when the water loses heat.

“They took my license, and my throat grew a lingering lump where, if I were a true captain, saltwater should have gone. I'd hung the stone around my neck, because old tales said truth could be seen through a hagstone's hole. I only ever saw tunnel vision.”

- Ray Chanteur  
“The Unrequited Love of the Ocean”

# THE ALLIGATOR

Christopher Hann

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**The configuration of the river meant the body should have washed up on the eastern bank by the fifth day—but it didn't.** On days three and four we scoured the bed of the connecting reservoir, which was the only place the girl could possibly be stuck. Rocks. Water plants. Trash that was too heavy to float. We left no stone unturned, but could not find the girl.

Sixteen-year-old EJ Lim was last seen floating down the valley, just a hundred meters from where we were conducting the search. "Summer trip," muttered her father, as her mother wailed. Her twelve-year-old brother had a blank look on his face, as if the events didn't quite register yet. "I'm sorry," I muttered back, and not knowing how to appropriately address their anguish, I left my condolences at that. Chances of survival were now close to nil.

*Close to*, we tell ourselves, upholding the flimsy umbrella we call hope. With each passing day, each passing hour, each passing moment, rain pelts violently through this façade of a shelter; the watery shards cutting through flesh and bone. We'll get over it, sure. But not the families. The families hold on to that umbrella, drenched to the soul, for years—perhaps even a lifetime. I never liked the word, but if there was one thing we could offer as respite, it was 'closure'.

Even so, we stuck to the rules. Water-faring people can be a superstitious bunch, and the special rescue unit of the Korean Coast Guard was no exception. It was infuriating, for Rule Number Two was significantly delaying our search for EJ, but team leader Kun remained firm. *Rules are rules*, he said. *You're not helping anybody by adding another drowned soul to the mix.* The rules were as follows.

Rule One: Never approach an upright corpse.

I had encountered this during my service in the Navy SSU. The year was 1995, and typhoon Gladys had just decimated the south of the peninsula. Fishing out drowned bodies was never part of the job description (or so I believed), but in the military, you do what you're fucking told. Maybe

an Admiral needed a promotion, whatever. It was a national disaster and we were serving the people, so no-one complained.

It was a strange sight. Entrancing, almost. The sun shone so spitefully bright, as if the death and destruction of days prior had been nothing but a lie; a waking nightmare, soon to be forgotten in the solace of the morning. And upon the glistening ripple of the water they floated: a dozen patches of ebony silk, tranquilly bobbing up and down like a school of jellyfish.

It was hair. I was looking at the tops of their heads. Victims of the typhoon, floating perfectly upright.

I radioed it in from my boat.

“Can you ID the bodies?” radioed back our commanding officer.

*Negative*, I replied, and explained the situation.

A brief silence.

“Do *not* enter the water,” the response finally came.

“Say again? Over?” I asked.

“I say again, do *not* enter the water. Do *not* enter the water.”

The apparent science behind the reason was this: bodies don’t usually float like that. When decomposition begins, gas builds up—mostly in the torso and the abdomen. As physics go, this results in the body floating with at least *some part* of the back, shoulder or chest visible atop the water. An upright body could mean an undercurrent, or even a whirlpool, was raging beneath the deceptively calm surface. A dozen upright bodies? That was a no-go.

An hour later, the bodies reverted to their ‘more natural’ positions. We retrieved them, as gently and respectfully as we could. I must admit, the sight of the dead did not bother me. The wailing of the families did. So here I was, five years later, looking for young EJ who was lost in the water.

Rule Two: Never go dive searching at night.

Self-explanatory. As anyone who’s dived in murky waters can attest, visibility can range from shit to none. Even in daytime it is difficult to navigate, and suffice it to say, a torchlight offers no help in pitch black darkness.

I’ve seen it happen. Guy goes for a night search, gear malfunctions. All he has to do is swim two meters to the surface. But he panics. Experiences vertigo. He drowns, desperately clawing at the bottom of the riverbed, wondering *why, oh, why, oh, why* he hasn’t reached the surface yet. Sunlight might have been his only saving grace.

So I fully understood where our team leader was coming from. Yet the frustration remained. As public servants, our time was limited. A search like this was not done at random: Areas of coverage were carefully mapped and planned. Efficient use of the government’s resources, so to speak. And if we

failed to locate the body—in the areas of potential and within a reasonable timeframe—we were forced to assume that it had been washed out to a larger channel. Search would continue at the banks, of course, but our jobs as divers were done. EJ would be deemed lost until found.

The third and final rule I didn't quite understand at the time.

Rule Three: Avoid working with alligators.

Not the reptile kind. 'Alligators' was the moniker given to divers for hire; civilians who took up corpse recovery as a trade. They got paid per day, multiplied by the number of dives, with reimbursement for expenses and overheads. They say the business is lucrative, especially during typhoon season.

I had never met one before. In fact, I wasn't even aware of the term. But one was sitting before us now, in the evening of the fifth day of our search for EJ, casually cracking open a soju bottle at the end of a 'hard day's work'. His face was gaunt, eyes disinterested.

He had arrived at the scene a day before we did.



"We split in two groups," said team leader Kun as we huddled over a map. "Alpha covers the bend here by the eastern bank, but don't approach the midstream. The current is too fast and it's impossible for the body to be stuck there. Bravo covers the bottleneck here, by the reservoir. Slim chance, but worth a try. And—"

He paused. The sun had barely risen on the sixth and final day of our search. He looked over the team before continuing.

"And if you do find her, don't go rushing in. Wait for the team. We want her recovered proper."

*Recovered proper.* We all knew what this meant. Yes, decomposition happens. Yes, there's fish in the water. So yes, the body could be in a fragile state. A rough recovery could result in mutilation—or even worse, 'lost bits'. We nodded in silence.

"Any questions?" asked Kun.

"What about the alligator?" I asked.

"What about him?"

"He won't coordinate with us? Not even on our final day?"

A pause.

"Well, there's no other way to put it, so I'll put it bluntly," answered Kun. "Fuck that son of a bitch. Let's get to work."

And we did.

Our reptilian friend turned up to the reservoir at high noon. He laid his

gear down on the rocks and began to peacefully enjoy a cigarette. Being in the vicinity, I approached.

"You're up nice and early," I said, making no attempt to hide my disdain.

He glanced at me through the side of his eyes, making no attempt to hide his own.

"What's the plan?" I asked. "Where do you plan to cover?"

"What's it to you?"

"What's it to *me*? You mean what's it to the family who's lost their daughter?"

"Yeah, the family that pays me. So, again, what's it to you?"

I saw it. It happened in a fraction of a second, a microscopic twitch at the corner of his lips—but I saw it. The fucker had smirked.

"The center of the reservoir," he answered the question, as if to interject my outrage. "Not sure if you fellas did a thorough enough job here. I might check it out."

*"You can't be fucking serious."*

My teammate caught up with me in the nick of time, pulling me back. "Come on," he whispered. "We don't have time to waste." He was right. We began walking back to our oxygen tanks when—

"Hey kid," called the alligator.

*Kid?* The balls on this scumbag.

"You served in the Marines?" he asked.

I don't know what made me answer. But I did.

"The Navy."

"Eh. At least you got the temperament. You should look into this trade. Apprentices are welcome. Can't raise a family on public servant paychecks, not in this economy."

I laughed. *Wow, WOW the balls on this scumbag.*

"Doesn't it occur to you, young fella," he continued. "Why I'm still hanging around, costing the girl's family money every day? Ninety percent recovery rate. You heard that right, ninety percent. Let's get one thing straight: I am the professional here. The family trusts *me* to recover the body. And I'll find her—oh, trust me. So don't get your panties in a knot, okay? Relax."

The drivel wasn't worth listening to anymore. We went back to the search, in firm reminder of why Rule Three existed.



Day six came to a close. No sign of EJ. Next morning there would be a

debrief to the family, then we'd be gone.

I sat outside my tent, exhausted. The moon was bright. Too bright—like a floodlight at the theatre aimed directly at our campsite, making its grand announcement with me at center stage: *You failed!* I tried to put it out of mind, but the alligator's statement continued to bug me:

*The family trusts me to recover the body.*

Did they? Or was it desperate hope, that given enough time, the body would turn up in the unlikeliest of places? I stared into the night as I let these thoughts bother me, when my eyes caught sight of something small, standing at the edge of the clearing.

It was EJ's little brother. The boy approached.

"You'll leave tomorrow," he said. "Won't you?"

"Yes," I said. "I ... don't think you should be out this late. You should go back to where your parents are."

"There's something they didn't tell you."

I sat up, half curious, half concerned. "What is it?"

"It was my fault. What happened was my fault. I went too far to the deep side, and then, suddenly, I don't know, the water became *really* fast, and then, my sister tried to grab me, and then—" His pale, blank exterior finally broke. He trembled as tears streamed down his face. All he could mutter was *and then, and then, and then.*

I got up and hugged him. "Hey, hey. What happened was an accident. It was no-one's fault. No-one's fault."

"There's something else," said the boy, as he wiped away his tears.

"There was something in the water."

A pause.

"What was it?"

"It was near the deep end. That's why I went there, to check out what it was. It looked like ... a submarine."

"I beg your pardon?"

"It looked like a submarine. It swam with my sister as she floated away."

*Huh.* At the time, I paid it no mind. The boy was grieving—worse still, guilt-stricken—and was probably reciting all the details he could remember. Most likely a piece of wood. Or something.

"It was my fault," he said. "I wish I never looked, so she would still be here. My sister would still be here."

Eventually, I walked him back to his parents and returned to the campsite. Seeing the boy like that only inflamed my frustration: *How on earth could we not find her?* We had searched all the places she could possibly be. Areas of potential. Carefully mapped out and planned.

A question then reared its head at the back of my mind: how does one—to the truest definition of the word—define ‘possible’?

Kun had told us in the morning. “Don’t approach the midstream. The current is too fast and it’s impossible for the body to be stuck there.”

*No, dearest team leader, I thought. The correct word isn’t impossible. It’s improbable.*

Yes, the current was fast. But it wasn’t *that* fast.

Our entire team was asleep. And the moon was bright. Too bright.

I packed my gear in secret and headed to the river.



The trick was to lay prone against the bottom of the riverbed, as it greatly reduced the effect of the current. Oxygen, check. Torch, check. Lifeline, check. I dived in all the way, and began to crawl.

Perhaps it was the lack of mud due to the speed of the water. Perhaps it was the moonlight. But to my astonishment I had excellent vision, better than any other time during our entire search. The torch cast its luminance against the cold dark void, revealing just a few feet of the riverbed ahead of me—but that was enough. As I had expected, the environment was mostly barren.

*Yeah, I thought, checking my radius in a one-eighty angle. Pretty much impossible for anything to be stuck here.*

But that didn’t matter. The breaking of Rule Two; the scolding I would get from Kun; the eventual waste of time this exercise would turn out to be—all of that didn’t matter. In the end I would surface, slouched and tired, as the ever watchful ray of the moon smiled upon my defeat. But to that I could respond: *I looked. I tried.*

I waded forth.

A tiny mud crab appeared, then scurried away. Fun little buggers. I used to catch them, back when I was a child myself; back when my family used to go to valleys for summer trips.

I spotted another one, perched on a stone.

Crabs. Crustaceans. Janitors of the water world.

There was an image in my head. I tried to push it away, but couldn’t, so I came to terms with it. Yes, there are crabs in the water. And yes, if a body is found, it could be crawling with them. *It’s part of the fucking job. Keep looking. Keep trying.*

Before I knew it, half an hour had passed. There was plenty of oxygen in the tank, but protocol dictated now was the time to refill. In any case, the best approach would be to reposition the lifeline, and continue the search on

a second dive. I was ready to surface when I saw it.

It was a jagged rock formation, about two yards wide. It slanted away from me, in the direction of the current. Impossible for anything to be stuck there, but I looked.

EJ stared back at me, tucked beneath the rock.

No crabs. No crustaceans. But I bore witness to something far more repulsive, far more putrid.

Stones had been placed on her. Heavy stones. Jammed right in between the rock formation and the riverbed, secured by a fishing net, so that the corpse would remain in place.

The girl hadn't been stuck. She had been hidden.

Then I remembered: The alligator had arrived at the scene a day before us. He had found the body on the first day. Then he placed her here, where no-one would look. So that when we were gone, he could emerge with the body—emerge the hero—a true expert of his trade with a ninety percent recovery rate, with a hefty sum of the entire week's pay. He would be the only diver left on the scene, so none would be the wiser.

I felt rage, oh yes, but first came shame. First came the apology. Apology that there were adults out there who would do this. That there were *humans* out there who would do this.

*I'm sorry. I'm sorry I found you so late.* Instinctively, I reached out, wanting to retrieve her, wanting to free her from this state of indignity.

Ever so gently, EJ shook her head: No. Then her bloodshot eyes widened. Her pupils dilated. Then moved. She was looking past my shoulder.

It occurred to me: If I was the alligator, I might keep a close eye. A close eye on the prize. A close eye on anyone who might disrupt his plans. *You served in the Marines?* he had asked. Guy was definitely ex-military, and not the conscript kind. Maybe special forces. If he had the cunning—and the ruthlessness—to formulate a travesty like this, perhaps it was just as easy to stage an accidental drowning.

Suddenly the water felt colder. I turned around.

There was nothing. I looked back at EJ. Her face was bloated, eyes lifeless.

*Stress, I told myself. You're fucking stressed. Admit it. This isn't easy.*

I took a moment. I should recover her proper, and for that I needed my team. Either way, the girl's current predicament, as heartbreaking as it was, should be seen by others as evidence.

I surfaced.



All three of my teammates had to pull me off the alligator, by which time I had turned his face into a bloody pulp.

"Bullshit! You're delusional!" he shrieked. "I'm taking you to court for this. I'm putting you in fucking jail for this, you motherfucker."

"Oh that's funny," I spat back, still swinging my fists around. "You fucking scum. You *worthless, inhumane* fucking scum."

"You're insane! You don't have proof!"

*Proof? Proof?* Oh, I had proof. I could see it: the unease, the guilt, the desperation in his eyes. *You fucked up bad, didn't you?*

"Keep a tight hold of him, team leader," I said. "Let's go check the proof. Now."

And so we went. Our entire team and the alligator. We found the rock formation. We found the stones. We found the net.

EJ was gone.

"I told you," he screamed again. Relieved. Gleeful. "You delusional little runt. I'm putting you in jail. I'm putting all of you fuckers in jail—"

None of us could retort as the alligator reveled in his apparent victory.

Kun took me aside, and whispered. "You tell me now and you tell me straight. Did you find her?"

"Yes, yes," I replied. "*Fuck*, I swear she was here. She was here."

Team leader knew I was not the one to be delusional. And the scene was exactly as I had described.

"And you didn't touch the net? Move any of the stones?"

"No, no I didn't—" *Wait*. Had I? Had I, by accident? When I reached out on instinct, did I move anything that might have made her float downstream?

Kun was quick to catch it: I wasn't a hundred percent sure.

"All right," he said. "If the body was here, it would have washed down to the reservoir. We can still find her."

*Yes, we can ...* but what of the alligator? I was no expert on forensics, but was there anything to link him to his crime, even if we retrieved EJ? The body had been in the water for days. Was there anything more than circumstantial evidence, if one could even call it that?

In the end, my alleged accusations were not the priority. Before I knew it, we were on the move.

The first light of the seventh day had crept over the valley when we arrived on the banks of the reservoir.

It was a strange sight. Entrancing, almost. The tranquil gleam of dawn fell softly through the misty air, as if the chaos and tragedy of days prior had been nothing but a lie; an unpleasant dream, soon to be forgotten. And in the center of the reservoir it floated: a veil, a dress, a wavering patch of ebony silk.

It was hair. We were looking at the top of her head. EJ's body, floating perfectly upright.

None of us moved. None of us made a sound. The water began to glisten as the sun continued to rise.

It was the alligator who broke the silence.

"Are you all going to do something, or what?" he said. "Huh? There she is. We found her. I knew you weren't thorough enough. Bunch of delusional assholes."

I didn't even need to look at him to know. The man was afraid.

"You all just going to stand there? Until, what, she topples over to show her belly? Fuck it," he said, taking one set of our gear. "Fuck it. You know I get paid a recovery bonus for this. Leave it to the pro. Fucking amateurs."

There was no undercurrent. No whirlpool. No possible movement of the water that could make the body float that way, not in the reservoir. But we all felt it in our bones. *Do not enter the water.*

The alligator began swimming towards the body.

And that's when I noticed it.

"What the fuck is that?" I asked.

"Yeah ... " answered Kun. "She shouldn't float like that. Not in the reservoir."

"No, I mean- " I paused as I looked at my teammates. Blank faces. Entranced. I was sure in that moment I was the only one seeing *something else* in the water.

It appeared dark and oval. It moved, somehow, both swiftly and slowly, swimming in a circle around EJ's body. The circle became narrower, narrower, then narrower still. It could've been described as a submarine, but it didn't look like one.

To me it looked like a predator.

The standard practice for body retrieval is to place the harness on the pelvis. To place the harness, you had to go under. The alligator did exactly that.

He never came back up alive.



By seven o'clock EJ had returned to a more natural position, so we recovered her. It did little to ease the pain of the bereaved, I imagine. But for what it's worth, there it was: 'closure'.

It's been a year since the incident, and I still don't like the word. The finality of it. The feigned sense of comfort it purports to offer; the dreadful reality it forces you to swallow. But I guess it is necessary, to lay down false

hope. Because families hold onto that umbrella, drenched to the soul. They hold onto it for years. Perhaps even a lifetime.

And so we continue to dive.

Returning to the seventh day, to round out the story of our reptilian friend:

The harrowing irony was that we had to look for the alligator (the piece of shit had taken our gear, after all). We found him, all right. The difficult part was explaining to our superiors what the hell had gone down. The man's crime I certainly attested for, but questions remained. *Why didn't your team go straight for the body, and why on God's green earth would you let him take your gear? And, most importantly, what the hell happened to him?*

Long story short, all four of our team members got chewed the fuck out. It was reports after reports after reports, then (unofficial) revisions of said reports, until our stories lined up in a way that remotely satisfied the higher-ups. And so, officially, here was how it happened:

The alligator went in the reservoir to retrieve the body (he was violently adamant, so we let him). He went underwater, *but*, in fear of my accusations against him, decided to sneak away. He swam *all* the way across the reservoir to the bottle neck, then swam *upstream* towards the eastern bank, but along the way, *somehow*, by some superhuman feat of stupidity and strength, got himself stuck under a jagged rock formation. He tucked himself in there, and drowned.

No mention of upright corpses, no mention of dark oval shapes. And certainly no mention of the way EJ looked at me, the night when I found her hidden on the riverbed.

I could look back on these events and tell myself thus: The alligator got his comeuppance. Retribution was dealt. Justice was served. But I'm not sure if I believe it. The alligator was the scum of the earth, yes. And I don't know a thing about sixteen-year-old EJ Lim, save her age and name, may her soul rest in peace. But my intuition tells me this: she was no vengeful spirit.

I still remember it. Her eyes. The way her pupils moved. The way her gaze flew past my shoulder. The way her expression changed.

The girl was terrified. She saw what was behind me, and became terrified. Something else was in that water. The same being that her brother saw. The same being that *I* saw—dark and incomprehensible, circling the reservoir. He saw a submarine. I saw a predator. And if what I saw was correct, then the only plausible reason why I survived a close encounter was that *it simply wasn't hungry at the time*.

I did say water-faring people can be a superstitious bunch.

# THE UNREQUITED LOVE OF THE OCEAN

Ray Chanteur

---

**The creature moaned softly in the tide pool at my feet, drowning out the complaints of the seagulls and my well of homesickness.**

I bent over the cold rocks, my hagstone necklace swinging away from my throat the way the guilt never did, as the small, green-brown being hummed a plaintive song of separation and craving. With a sympathetic pang, I took an empty clamshell and ushered the pitiable thing toward the pool's edge.

It was a mermaid cherub the size of my hand, and she gripped the rocks, gills fluttering pathetically, tail undulating in the tide pool. What I'd taken for rotting seaweed was mussed hair. Her pupils were green-white like sea glass, like a whirlpool, like a void.

Words splintered into my head: *Take me home.*

My chest ached. If I couldn't go home to the sea, I could at least help this creature. I lowered a calloused palm for her to slither into. But when I stepped toward the frothing shoreline, she clung to my thumb, tiny claws pinpricking my finger. She looked mournfully at me, biting her lip with jagged, red-stained teeth, and I stopped, understanding.

*Deeper.*

"I don't have a boat anymore." The admission was like scratching a scab.

The echoes of that night haunted me: the low, rumbling crunch. Broken wood. Wet screams. They took my license, and my throat grew a lingering lump where, if I were a true captain, saltwater should have gone. I'd hung the stone around my neck, because old tales said truth could be seen through a hagstone's hole. I only ever saw tunnel vision.

But her lilting voice cut through the memory like parting clouds: *I can find another.*



She guided me downshore, past the sign for *PRIVATE BEACH: NO TRESPASSING*. In one seaside backyard, a wooden dinghy lay overturned with a note: *NEEDS CAULK*. My new friend nodded her encouragement.

Relief flooded my body as I pushed offshore. Home, home, home: hers and mine. I belonged here, cradled by the rocking sea, sighing into the salt breeze. Here, with my friend's lullaby purring over the crash of deepening waves and my shoes splashing in the rising water.

The last time I'd rowed like this was on the lifeboats with only half my crew. On that awful ride to shore, a nightmarish thought possessed me: Home couldn't love me the way I loved her. I was infatuated; the ocean was indifferent. The whale eat the krill eat the algae, but the ocean wouldn't even swallow me.

My friend's song was a promise. This time, I'd look through the hagstone's hole and see the depth of the ocean's love. I'd be whole again. The music lapped at my ears: *Oh, but she does love you. Let me show you. Deeper.*



A rowboat out of water too long dries out, cracking at the seams. I was that wood now: soaking up the ocean, swelling with every crest. Rowing was harder as the boat rode lower. I swung my whole weight against the oars, the stone smacking against my sweaty chest.

Perched at the bow, my friend tilted her lovely head as I lifted my sore hands from the oars. She sang on. Trembling, I closed one eye and lifted the stone to the other.

It was time.

I thought I'd see the music's promise. To see the ocean celebrating her broken rowboat's return. To tell me she loved me, and tell me the truth.

Through the stone, the creature's hungry eyes locked into mine. The song turned sour, like a sip of wine that was vinegar all along.

She launched at me, scrabbling at my knees and knocking the stone from my hand. But she was so tiny, and I swatted her overboard with only a few scratches stinging my calves. I exhaled, rubbed at the red lines beading up on my legs, and put the stone to my eye again. Just a little time, and surely I'd see—

There was a splash. A wet weight slapped into my bicep.

It was harder to pull her off this time, with her scales wet and her claws dug in like a splinter. Peeling her off made a stinging mess of my arm, but the crash of waves drowned out the pain, and I pressed her facedown to the rowboat's bench. She scratched and writhed and gnashed her jagged

teeth, still trying to take a bite of her would-be whalefall. But I held her fast. I still hadn't seen what I'd come for.

She stilled, and I felt her take a deep inhale before she let out a sound: a song like a war horn, like a dinner bell. A funeral toll. Dread wriggled down my spine. Even a man with pockets full of stones will thrash against the first lungful of brine.

Plunging her into the water at the bottom of the boat muffled the sound, but made her harder to hold: The thick muscles of her tail thrashed, her body slippery. The boat rocked as I knelt hard on her fin, and looked around for tools.

There was nothing nearby but the boat, the water, and my necklace.

I slipped the cord from my neck, and looped it twice around hers. I pulled, and she gagged as the clove hitch cut off the song. But her gills were still flaring in the water, and she clawed at the cord, loosening it for a gasp before I pinned her arms, then half-hitched down her torso to make a straightjacket of knots. I couldn't throw her overboard—the hagstone I needed still dangled from the cord—so I waited until her body stilled.

Not long enough.

I removed my knee from her tail, and she thrashed one last burst of power, like a fish on a dock, that lifted her upward and over the gunwale. The stone sank, and she with it, and my heart followed them both.

With the siren's song silenced, I looked back at the distant shore. I could make it back, if I fought. There was so little for me back there, through the rocks and regret—but there was nothing here at all.

The endless, empty horizon stretched out gray arms, and the cold water bit kisses into my ankles. I picked up the oar and filled my lungs with the salt breeze. It smelled like a storm had passed.

"I'm going home," I told the waves, and turned the boat. I still listened in the vain hope of a reply.

But the ocean said nothing at all.

# THE OCEAN IS HAUNTED AND SO AM I

H.V. Patterson

---

Plastic lurks in the hadopelagic zone,  
spirits of fast-food meals  
drifting in the Mariana Trench

Forget boiling seas,  
whale-breaking shriek of sonar,  
bleached coral:

We weave our worst ghosts from synthetic polymers.

We consume our own haunting,  
nanoplastics lingering in fat and blood,  
in breastmilk, yearning  
to be an infant's first communion,  
haunting us into  
our very graves

In a million years,  
after skyscrapers metamorphize  
into compacted soil,  
these ghosts will be the cenotaph of our annihilation,  
an aberrant wound in deep time

What strange fish will hatch,  
what chimeric descendants  
will swim through sunless trenches  
when even our bones are gone  
and only plastic ghosts remain?



**LAST YEAR**  
Jennifer Winston Mayette

“Those are the stories even the writers are afraid to tell ... Critics look for the arc, the process, the structure, but any poet will tell you the saddest stories, the ones you’ll never forget, are the ones with no arc at all.”

- Cassandra Windwalker  
“I Was an Irrelevant Man”

# WHAT SORT OF ANGELS AND WHY

Matthew Thomas Bernell

---

If you had looked at a photograph of the land that evening, it would have appeared as an overexposed shot of nothing less than hell itself, giant white flames whipping against the sky. Now add howls of wind and a bone-aching cold. And if you were to blow with that icy snow through the streets, you might have ended up at 1755 Willow Boulevard, and you might have worked your way up the cracked concrete steps. You might have gotten under the door and melted on the welcome mat.

Inside, if you had been there, that is, you would've clung to one of the many pairs of Jordans and Vans and Uggs, and you might have even wetted the sportswear-style sock of Tim Irvine, who was the host of that night's rager, or maybe that of his friend, Jaquan Davis, who had driven across the ice-slicked Laverne Hill Bridge to visit his old high school quarterback. Would you have realized that little had changed between them in the two years since Tim had connected with Jaquan for a forty-five-yard touchdown to win sectionals? How would you have felt following them as they entered the basement, where a strobe light throbbed at eighty-five beats per minute and young shirtless men bared their teeth and slung Jell-O shots of every color down their throats?

And if you had looked at that party as if it were a film, the camera would have been upside down. It would have spun up the stairs and stopped on a woman leading Tim to a bedroom by the tips of his fingers, shutting the door, and emerging later, one after the other and speaking not a single word the rest of the night. More baring of teeth and more strobe lights, louder music, and stronger liquids. More bass, and more Jell-O shots of all colors, and more Solo cups full of equal parts pleasure and foam.

If you had been looking at that night through one of the many empty bottles laying about, by this point things would have started to calm abruptly, as if in the eye of a storm of unchecked desire, and you would have seen a blur of only Tim, Jaquan, and a small male figure on the mothballed

vintage couch. You would have heard Tim saying, “Yo, party’s over” and Jaquan echoing Tim with his own “Yo” while reaching a blurry arm down to jostle the couch-layer. You would have heard miserable retching, and the two of them would have seethed with anger about the carpet and the couch, questioned each other who “this kid” was, and then Jaquan would have said, “This kid’s foaming at the fucking mouth bro.”

If you had been the foam in that kid’s mouth, you would have seen two strangers, hovering above you like hapless angels arguing over what mission God had sent them on that night. One would have started to weep and say the word “scholarship.” The other would’ve shouted “Don’t be a pussy!” and “hospital” in no certain order. Then there would’ve been an argument and, if you had been there, if you were still that foam, you wouldn’t have understood everything said, except that there had been some kind of deal. You would’ve spilled onto the kid’s shirt as the taller, stronger one lifted him and dragged him crudely out of the house, back into the night, out to a navy-blue sedan half-covered in snow, and you would have heard the scraping and grunting of fast, sloppy shoveling. You would’ve felt the scratchy cracked leather of the backseat as you were tossed in chest first and one of the figures joined you there, the other sitting in the driver’s seat.

If you had been that cracked leather of the backseat, you would’ve been used to the pressure of people from years of friends and lovers jostling over you, and you would have felt the tight musculature of one and the utter limpness, lightness of the other. You would have heard the two conscious figures speak in whispers, and you would have heard the crunch of snow as one told the other, “Roll the window down, maybe some fresh air would help.” And if you had been that window winder from the early 2000’s, you would have felt a palm soaked in cold wetness, you would’ve tasted the distinct saltiness of human sweat. If you’d been especially astute, you would’ve tasted fear and shame.

If you had been fear and shame, you would have hung all throughout the air. You would’ve seen the car rumbling to a halt and heard them bantering back and forth. One would’ve been crying, the other bellowing with a frothing sort of madness you had never heard before. They would’ve opened the doors and gotten out, and one would’ve said “no” and pushed the other gently, as if only half committed to resistance. You would’ve seen their snotty, snowed-obscured faces, disgusting and paler than you’d ever seen, and you’d have seen them drag the light and quiet one out and toss him in a two-foot pile of snow.

And if you had been, again, the snow that night, you would’ve felt a car rumble through you while a body lay cooling until stone cold. But what if you hadn’t been snow? What if you’d still been with Tim and Jaquan? What if

you'd been right inside Jaquan's head, would there have been fire? Would there have been fire every time over the next week the news station talked about how the dead student found in a snow drift had been too drunk and had tried to walk home? Would there have been an impulse to feel for your phone and look at the number on the screen accompanied by a slow realization that that number would never be dialed? If you'd been the satellite sending signal to that phone, how would you have felt when it never dialed for help? And what would the view of the world be from where you are?

# THE FOX.

Priya Evans

---

& he lies on the road, legs outstretched in one last attempt to feel  
the wind in his fur & the stars are so small, so far away & he dreams  
of his mother, wants to feel her warmth one more time

& he wonders when it got so cold, when the wind changed, the earth turned  
& he can no longer remember  
a time when he wasn't afraid

& he tries to track it back to some beginning, to a time before screams, be-  
fore blood & why can he feel  
a draft on his heart?  
tracing its way through intestine & lungs & throat & eyes,

everything is cold,  
unfamiliar  
& his heart is so heavy & he wants to go home

& in the morning the crows will come but for now the stars are small, so far  
away & he watches them in the hopes of finding comfort in a distant flame  
& they reflect in his unblinking gaze & try to  
warm his soul

but they are small & so far away.

# I WAS AN IRRELEVANT MAN

Cassandra Windwalker

---

**I watch her galoshes trudging grimly through the swampy underbrush and try to ignore the increasing dampness of my own pants.** I've dried my glasses a hundred times already on my undershirt, but to no purpose. Forty degrees and driving rain have left me blinded by water and fog. My teeth have stopped chattering, at least.

Two old people have no business in the Alaskan bush in this weather, but we have no business anywhere else. Our only son Billy is missing, and where the searchers go, we go, too.

Seffie's voice rises against the wind every few minutes, a forlorn plea. "Billy!"

I know what she hopes. Somehow she's convinced herself he's wandered off, gotten distracted, gotten hurt. That he lies somewhere, confused and injured and disoriented, waiting for his mother to find him.

She doesn't look my way. I doubt she notices my own silence. I wouldn't expect her to. She forgot me—ten? twelve? years ago. I became irrelevant shortly after we moved Billy into assisted living. He was lonely, between my job at the high school and his mother's natural solitude. Living completely alone wasn't a possibility with his Down's Syndrome, but he loved the assisted living center. He quickly decided the other residents were his responsibility, and between singing nights, board game afternoons, and his job at the grocery store, he was never happier.

My subsequent disappearance from our married life was a relief. Seffie pulled me out of her purse at our weekly visits with Billy and on church Sundays, but otherwise my life was my own. I quietly erased all the titles assigned to me—man, husband, father—and retreated into the ones I'd chosen—reader, hiker, teacher.

Seffie has long since stopped talking to me—she still issues edicts and drops occasional tidbits, but she's ceased unfolding her secret self. The students in my high school English classes, though, can't stop talking. They

don't just unwrap a different incarnation every day: they become new, incessantly, unashamedly, devoted to the metamorphosis of being. And I am an ardent reader of all their awkward, ill-placed words.

I try to match my steps to the state trooper's to no useful end. The line in which we walk becomes a tangled string, but the trooper directing our steps doesn't seem to care. Perhaps he knows our efforts are fruitless, nothing more than a salve for the aching. I walk on, sweeping aside the head-high reeds and straining through my rain-fuddled glasses for any sign of the red jacket Billy wore last. All I see is gray and brown.

*An arc.* That's what I always tell my kids to look for in literature. The character must have an arc. What's his journey? How does he change? But Billy has no arc. He's the same, sweet, stubborn child he always was.

Those are the stories even the writers are afraid to tell. The strokes the artist fears too much to begin, because the ending comes too soon. Critics look for the arc, the process, the structure, but any poet will tell you the saddest stories, the ones you'll never forget, are the ones with no arc at all.

I think of Billy last Sunday, his triumphant crow as he bested me at Uno. I want to be sad, but I am only angry.

No. I am only anger. I have lost my name, again.

Seffie stumbles, and I grab her elbow. I don't think she even feels me, but I feel her. All that grief and energy, something so close to power but robbed of its strength, radiates from her and makes me afraid. I shove my hands into my pockets. She strides on.

"Billy?"

There will be an arc here, but it won't be Billy's. Someone far less wonderful will get to finish the story. Maybe there will even be redemption. How is that fair? I know God grants mercy to the merciful, but I am not in search of mercy.

I am looking for my only son's body, desperate to find his bones before the snow covers and the animals scatter the pieces he tried so hard to learn how to keep together, and I do not want mercy.

When the trooper came to the house last night, he asked about those boys a few months back. I knew then we weren't looking for Billy. We were looking for his left-behinds.

Billy had sworn they were his friends. Drop-out tweakers who thought it was funny to get the retard stoned and watch him go. Seffie and I had tried our best to convince him they meant no good. It's a hard thing to tell your child that his only value to some people is as a buffoon, a fool. Billy heard what we said. He heard us telling him that he could have no possible real value to people like that. He just didn't realize that we thought they were the real fools. All he heard was that his parents didn't think he mattered enough

for the cool kids to like him for his own sake.

You can imagine how that would have backfired.

Not that those kids were likely to have had any grand master plan. But you don't need one in Alaska. The ground here, the oceans, the swamps, the lakes, the rivers—they will consume all your mistakes before they're even realized. Step by step, grid by grid: We know well the futility of our steps.

No arc here.

I imagine Billy lying still and silent like a fallen tree, his face covered with moss and mushrooms and ferns. How soon till he disappears?

He has disappeared already.

That doesn't stop us, of course. Ask Joseph Conrad, if you doubt me. We humans must persist on our course, however nonsensical, to keep our cells from becoming unnameable stars. We do. We do, because we have given our names to that, and we know no other way.

We all crave a name.

Except, maybe, me.

Tonight, I trundle Seffie into a hot bath, scrub away the mud and grass from skin that's grown so strange and unfamiliar. Without intending to, I trace the map of her moles and the roads traversing her neck and breasts. There are secrets here, secrets she has not told me.

She cries into the bathwater, an unending, awful grief I think might kill her. I wipe her face, again and again, but still her face is wet.

I have no tears, and no remorse for my tearlessness.

My son. My son. My only son. Nothing more than food for monsters, and casual food at that. I am an aching cavern carved clean out by rage, where not even anger can live now.

I am a wasteland. My son is swallowed by the swamps, but I am a desert.

We stay up long after the aurora shatters its fist in the dark sky, stay up till we are driven into bed by a fatigue too complete for thought. Seffie curls against me, her loose-skinned, bony body a strange fierce crescent against my own. Her fists grip mine, her knees press into my thighs, and her mouth opens against my bare back in the most awful silent howl I have never heard.

I cannot help my wife. I cannot help my son.

I miss being irrelevant. I miss not having a name. How terrible, how tragic, how hopeless it is to be needed.

# **CONTRIBUTORS**

Maryland native **Jeremiah Towle** (“Boys”) is a musician, an occasional actor, a contributor to *The Hard Times*, and the recipient of two awards from the Community College Humanities Association for the short fiction he contributed to the college magazine, *The Sligo Journal*. His first novel is forthcoming, although he has no idea when it's coming forth.



Camping as a child, the adults used to tell **A.M. Symes** (“I Found a Leg Bone in My Yard”) the yipping noises in the dark were from banshees hunting for kids up past bedtime. She still believes banshees are lurking in that dark line at the edge of campfire light, and enjoys bringing readers to the edge of that light to make them squirm. Symes writes suspenseful, ghost-infused stories, some of which have infiltrated publications such as Crystal Lake Publishing, Sinister Smile Press, Dead Birds Publishing, *Creepy Podcast* and *The NoSleep Podcast*. Symes writes and lurks in the backwoods of Minnesota with her best friend and a banshee.



**Kelsey Oliver Imanishi** (“An Orca Mourns in Puget Sound”) is a poet and media analyst raised in semi-rural Appalachia and currently living in Nara, Japan. A professional news reader, she often finds poetry hiding in the headlines and human-interest pieces, and sometimes even has time to write them down. Her poetry has been featured in *Frogpond* and *The Asahi Shimbun*.



**Kate LaDew** (“September Whitecaps Whip Up in the Bay”) is a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with a BA in Studio Arts. She lives in Graham, NC with her cats James Cagney and Janis Joplin.



**Mike Deady** (“Once in a Black Moon”)’s work has appeared in *The Rack II*, *Wicked Sick*, *Reader Beware*, *Totally Tubular Terrors*, and other publications. He is a member of the Horror Writers Association, the New England Horror Writers, and the Boston Horror Society. He is a lifelong resident of Massachusetts. After retiring from a forty-two-year career in engineering, he started writing horror fiction at the urging of his brother, Bram Stoker Award-winning author Tom Deady.



**Míša Hejná** (*A Heart Broken*) writes and performs poetry in Denmark. Míša's work combines the textual, the visual, and the aural. She paints primarily with watercolours, ink, and menstrual fluid. She has published her work in anthologies published in Denmark as well as in *Asterales*, *Cacti Fur*, *Brief Wilderness*, *En\*gendered*, and *The World Insane*.



**Keira Reynolds** (“The Fire”) (she/her) writes short stories. Mostly fantasy. Mostly. A former software developer, in 2024 she earned a BA in Arts and Humanities, with specialisms in Creative Writing and Classical Studies, from the Open University. She has had stories (and one poem) published in various magazines and anthologies. She is Assistant Fantasy Editor at *Cosmic Roots and Eldritch Shores*. She (very) occasionally posts (very) random thoughts on her blog at <https://keirareynolds.com>



**Meg Douty** (“Rot”) is a freshman at American University, where she studies literature and sociology. Her writing is driven by her passion for these disciplines. Through her literary work, she hopes to initiate important conversations and inspire change, especially in the field of women’s, gender, and sexuality studies.



As a child, **MJ Vickers** (“Fortune Telling”) once accidentally stumbled upon a published collection of vintage crime scene photos, and thus was born a fascination with the dark and twisted. She earned her PhD in sociology from Texas A&M University and spends much of her time reading, writing, and playing video games. She is supervised by her feline companion, Cricket.



**J.H. Siegal** (“Descent to the Planet of the Gremlins”) writes prose, poetry, and music. His writing has appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *PodCastle*, and *Skeptic Magazine*, among others. In 2021, he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. In 2025, he was a finalist for the Rhysling Award. He plays barrelhouse piano, produces the musical group [Red Spot Rhythm Section](#), and is currently at work on a novel and/or screenplay and/or kinetic sculpture. He lives with his wife and two children near Chicago, IL.

**Andrew Majors** (“The Last Road Tripper”) is a writer of science fiction, fantasy, horror and the weird. His work has been published previously with *34 Orchard*, *The NoSleep Podcast*, *tdotSpec*, and *House of Long Shadows*, and his nonfiction essays and other writings can be found online at [andrewmajors.wordpress.com](http://andrewmajors.wordpress.com). He lives near Boise.



**Elizabeth J. Coleman** (“The Bath”) is a poet, guitarist, and attorney. Her new book, *Mega-Galaxies*, was the winner of the 2025 Adrift Chapbook Prize, Matthew Olzmann judging, and will be published in 2026. She is the editor of *Here: Poems for the Planet* (Copper Canyon Press, 2019), an international eco-poetry anthology, featuring a foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The author of several poetry collections, Elizabeth is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania Law School and received an MFA in writing from the Vermont College of Fine Arts. The grandmother of four, she lives with her husband in New York City. More information about Elizabeth can be found at [www.elizabethjcoleman.com](http://www.elizabethjcoleman.com). *Photo credit:*

*Danil Netu*



**Christopher Hann** (“The Alligator”) is a speculative horror writer who hails from New Zealand. He is of Korean descent (a Kiwi-Korean, so to speak) and hasn’t thought twice about his love for horror since reading “The Black Cat” by Poe. Part time English teacher and full-time office grunt, his interest in horror stretches from the occult, to the cosmic, to whatever else that intrigues him in this wonderful umbrella of a genre. You can find his work at <https://www.christopherhannhorror.com/>.





**Ray Chanteur** (“The Unrequited Love of the Ocean”) (she/her) is a professional teen whisperer and a writer of short speculative fiction. Her work is published or forthcoming in *Small Wonders*, *Flash Point Science Fiction* and Bona Books. She is an alumna of Mary Robinette Kowal’s Short Story Cohort. When she isn’t writing, she knits socks, runs slowly, and cooks too much soup. You can find her on [ray-is-writing.bsky.social](https://ray-is-writing.bsky.social).



**H.V. Patterson** (“The Ocean is Haunted and So Am I”) (she/her) is a speculative poet, fiction writer, and playwright living in Oklahoma. Poetry credits include *ETTT*, *Star\*Line*, *Small Wonders*, *Haven Speculative*, *Dwarf Stars*, and *Brave New Weird*. She’s a cofounder of Horns and Rattles Press, and you can find her on BlueSky: [@hvpatterson](https://hvpatterson.com), Instagram: [@hvpattersonwriter](https://hvpatterson.com), or at [hvpatterson.com](https://hvpatterson.com)



**Jennifer Winston Mayette** (*Last Year*) is a licensed marriage and family therapist who wishes she could read voraciously. She lives in Connecticut as a Mom to twin girls and a supportive spouse. She’s grateful to be part of this issue because she took a quick picture of her front walkway during Christmas, and she gets to be part of this amazing publication!

**Matthew Thomas Bernell** (“What Sort of Angels and Why”) is an emerging writer from somewhere near the banks of the Wabash River in Indiana. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *New Ohio Review*, *Chestnut Review*, *North American Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *Cream City Review*, and elsewhere. You can find him on Twitter [@ImmanentFlux](#).



**Priya Evans** (“The fox.”) is a writer from Ireland. She is currently an undergraduate English Studies student at Trinity College Dublin. Her poems have been published in various international literary journals. She is drawn to writing emotional and experimental pieces, and enjoys trying to find beauty in the sadness.



**Cassandra Windwalker** (“I Was an Irrelevant Man”) presently writes full time from the foothills of the Colorado Rockies. She's the author of ten traditionally published novels, including *The Gardener's Wife's Mistress*, released January 2026 by Type Eighteen Books. Her fourth and fifth traditionally published poetry collections will be released in 2026 as well. Her work has been awarded multiple times, and she served as poet-in-residence for Cinnabar Moth Press. Her short-form work regularly appears in literary journals, art books, and anthologies. *Photo credit: Nika Refr Wolfe*



**Trisha J. Wooldridge** (child-friendly T.J. Wooldridge) (Cover Art/*Leaving Las Vegas*) is an award-winning pan-genre, pan-media chaos word witch. Find her in the Shirley Jackson Award-winning *The Twisted Book of Shadows*; some *HWA Poetry Showcase* volumes; all the *NEHW* anthologies (that she didn't edit); *Don't Turn Out the Lights: A Tribute to Alvin Schwartz's Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*; *Pseudopod* podcast; *34 Orchard* literary journal—and her first collection, *Where Monsters Pray*. Her fantasy duology, *Children of Earth and Fire*, part of her 27 Kingdoms fantasy series, is releasing soon after a 200% backing on Kickstarter. She also lovingly tortures consenting authors with her editing talents, which has resulted in over four hundred books (several bestsellers and award-winners) she's helped bring into the world. Due to her ADHD or possibly being part fey, she's further driven to create visual art through photography, pen and ink, and other media. She spends mystical “free time” with a very patient Husband-of-Awesome, a tiny witch and large witcher kitty pair, and a rescued bay gelding. You can follow her at [www.anovelfriend.com](http://www.anovelfriend.com).



# COMING NOVEMBER 10, 2026

In Issue 14, twenty artists absorb the nature of shock. Here's a glimpse of what's to come.

## 34 ORCHARD

*Darkness is just across the street.*

ISSUE 14

AUTUMN 2026



"I ask what they're doing, and they say, 'playing funerals'. This is one of the many reasons I don't have children."

Eve Naden,  
"Pallbearers"



"Sometimes somebody lives to welcome the surprising glory of one more sunrise by licking your steering wheel, long and longingly; don't worry, it dries well before your lonely commute."

Alyce Lomax,  
"In the Dark"



"People were seen hiding from bankers and loan sharks; the quake killed in an instant, but the debt took its sweet time."

Ayush Pokheral,  
"The Town in the Sky"



"[Fungi] literally absorb the memory of the past and pass it on. Nothing ever dies in the forest. The molecules live on, they just take different form."

Cyrus Green, "Memory of My Celia"



Cover Art by Stacy Horn

Interior Art by Brenna Behel, Michael Takeda, and William Hall

Welcome to the house where the shaking's over...  
but the settling has just begun.  
Welcome to 34 Orchard.

# COMING SOON!

## A COSMIC WESTERN SERIAL BY C.R. LANGILLE

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At *34 Orchard*, we believe westerns endure because they remind us the most dangerous, forlorn and savage frontier is actually inside each of us.

With that in mind, *34 Orchard* is pleased and proud to announce we've commissioned C.R. Langille to write us a four-episode western serial which will appear across our 2027 and 2028 issues!

Langille's stories have been widely published, and she's also taken her deep love for weird and creepy tales and poured it into Timber Ghost Press, a Utah-based independent publisher of multi-genre dark books. You can learn more about her here:

<https://www.crlangille.com/about-cr-langille--press-kit.html>.

While it might seem like a ways off, the first installment'll be here faster than a jackrabbit on a date. Want a little taste? Langille's work has graced our pages in the past—she is the voice behind Issue 4's "Rocky Mountain Hocus" and Issue 11's "It's Electric." Read them both at the links below.

"Rocky Mountain Hocus": <https://34orchard.com/issues/issue-4/>

"It's Electric": <https://34orchard.com/issue-11/>



*Photo Credit: David H. West, 34 Orchard Staff/Boothill Graveyard, Tombstone, Arizona, 2023*



**The twenty artists in Issue 13  
cope with the breakdown of delusion.**

Trisha J. Wooldridge ♥ Jeremiah Towle

A.M. Symes ♥ Kelsey Oliver Imanishi

Kate LaDew ♥ Mike Deady

Míša Hejrná ♥ Keira Reynolds

Meg Douty ♥ MJ Vickers

J.H. Siegal ♥ Andrew Majors

Elizabeth J. Coleman ♥ Christopher Hann

Ray Chanteur ♥ H.V. Patterson

Jennifer Winston Mayette ♥ Matthew Thomas Bernell

Priya Evans ♥ Cassandra Windwalker

**Welcome to the house that won't let you live the lie.  
Welcome to *34 Orchard.***