

**ELDRITCH**

**LAKE**

**ISSUE**

**ZERO**



# **Welcome to Eldritch Lake**

*Issue 0*

## **An IxtabMedia Project**

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The editorial staff have chosen to remain anonymous inside this journal. Death to the author, or something like that.

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## From The Desk of The Editors

It's always a little presumptuous isn't it? Writing to people who may not exist. There's a solipsistic quality to it, but that may be because there seems to be a solipsistic quality to most things. Mainly I just like the word solipsistic. Anyway, it feels weird, is what I'm trying to say, assuming anyone is ever going to read this letter let alone this first edition of a literary magazine. Do you ever have that moment where you're convinced someone is standing right behind you (there is) and there's only one way to find out if that's true or not? Yeah, like that. Except this is just a literary journal and the person who is right behind you at this exact moment looks a little... off.

This idea started as a way to experiment with some of the weirder aspects of fiction and art as a whole. We're the usual bunch of Twin Peaks/ Silent Hill/ J-Horror/ Weird Fiction fans and thought it would be a great way to meet similar creators and maybe snatch a Netflix or video game developmental deal out of the whole thing while we're at it. That's half true. Really, though, we love the more nightmarish and unsettling aspects of creativity and wanted to create a place for people to explore their subconscious. The world is pretty much done, after all, so now is the time to create what you want to create regardless of the consequences. *Write what you'd want to read.*

Initially, the idea was to write our own material under a variety of pseudonyms and keep that up until other people started submitting work. But we haven't had to resort to that. There has been more work submitted than thought possible for a virtually non-existent magazine, and for that we are grateful. Thank you to all who submitted, to Duotrope for promoting this stage of our journey, and to you, dear reader, for choosing to look at this. Until next time

*Turn around, they're still behind you.*

*Editor 3*

## A Quick Note About Content Warnings

Given the nature of this project, it may be the case that some material herein could upset a variety of people for a multitude of reasons. We could debate the merits of content warnings for hours, but the simple reality is this: including them takes all of five seconds of editorial work and we would rather foster an inclusive environment for a potential readership.

If you feel we have missed anything, please feel free to contact us at [editor@eldritchlake.com](mailto:editor@eldritchlake.com). If the concept of content warnings in some way offends your sensibilities, please feel free to take the two seconds necessary to skim over them and get straight to the story.

Please note the below examples are by no means an exhaustive list, rather a reflection of the material ahead. Omissions should not be considered our tacit endorsement of questionable material.

V	Violence	D	Substance Abuse
S	Suicide/Self-Harm		
A	Abuse		

Having said that, do note that this is a literary journal with a focus on darker and more experimental styles and topics, so please keep that in mind going in.

And with all that said, enjoy.

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## Keshi Yena Simon Christiansen

“CHEESE” said the sign outside the store. Martin hadn’t been thinking about cheese when he went out for a walk, but why not?

The doorbell rang as he stepped inside. “Give me a goat cheese,” he said to the clerk. “The strongest goat cheese you have!”

“Why goat cheese?” asked the clerk; a tall lanky man with curly light-blond hair. “We have many other fine cheeses. You can try them if you want.”

Our hero considered the question but couldn’t think of an answer. “I’m not quite sure,” he admitted. “I had this sudden craving for goat cheese, as I walked by and saw your sign. I don’t think I’ve ever had it before. It’s pretty strange.”

The tall lanky guy with the curly light-blond hair shrugged. “If you’ve never had it, you should give it a chance. You can’t know what cheese you like best until you’ve tried them all.”

“Is that why you got a job at a cheese store?”

“No, I took the job to share this knowledge with others. And to pay my way through college. I’m majoring in aerospace engineering. Here is your cheese.” He pushed a package across the counter.

#

“I’m home, Linda!” he yelled, as he stepped through the door.

“What’s that under your arm?” asked Linda. “I thought you were going for a walk?”

“It’s cheese! The strongest goat cheese they had. I visited the cheese store down at the corner. Did you ever notice that one?”

“No.”

“Me neither, but it’s there. I think their cheese is good.”

“I didn’t realize you were such a cheese connoisseur.”

He put the package down on the dinner table. “I’m usually not, but I never realized how many different cheeses there are. I’ll give it a shot, anyway.”

“Don’t ruin your appetite. You promised to cook.”

In the kitchen, he unwrapped the cheese. White and creamy. He applied a layer to a slice of bread, took a bite, and opened his eyes wide. This was different than the bland stuff they sold in Aldi. A strong salty flavor, awakening his taste buds.

“You have to taste this, honey”. He placed a plate with goat cheese sandwiches in front of Linda. She turned up her nose but took a bite anyway. “Yuck! Sorry, but I’m not into salty stuff like that. You can keep it. Haven’t you started on dinner yet? It’s half past five already.”

“Ok, ok, I’ll get started.”

He put goat cheese in the pasta sauce.

“Did you put goat cheese in the pasta sauce,” asked Linda.

“Yeah, I thought I would try something new. What do you think?”

“Well, I didn’t like it on bread, and I don’t like it in the pasta sauce either.”

Martin nodded. “You’re right. I liked it on bread, but it doesn’t go well with the sauce.”

#

“Do you have a cheese that goes well with pasta sauce?” he asked, the next morning at the cheese store. “The goat cheese wasn’t a good fit, that’s for sure.”

The tall lanky guy with the curly light-blond hair was still manning the counter. “Well, Parmesan is great with pasta sauce. You sprinkle it on top.”

“Honey, where is our cheese grater?” he asked, after returning home.

“What do you need that for? You know it’s my turn to cook today, right? Please tell me you didn’t buy more cheese.”

He poured a pile of packages onto the dinner table. “I’ve got it all! Both Parmigiano-Reggiano and Grana Padano.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Well.... They’re different types of cheese! We’ll expand our horizons. And they are supposed to be a perfect fit for pasta sauce.”

“But we are not having pasta today! I’m making Cordon Bleu. And I already bought the cheese.”

She placed a large yellow brick on the table. Standard supermarket cheese.

“But... We’ve had that cheese a hundred times before.”

“YES! We know it’s good. What’s up with you?”

She kissed him on the cheek. “Sorry, honey. You’ve been acting weird lately. You can go relax on the couch now, and I’ll cook our dinner.”

He brought the Parmesan with him, put the packages on the couch table, and sat down. When his turn came, he would make a cheese dish to blow her mind.

#

The next day he entered the cheese store once more, only a few minutes after it opened.

“I need a cheese to blow the mind of my girl,” he told the lanky clerk. “She’s used to boring supermarket cheeses, so it must be both traditional and exciting. If it’s too special, she won’t touch it, and if it’s too normal, it makes no difference. And I need to be able to use it in some kind of dinner dish. Serving raw cheese for dinner won’t make me popular.”

The clerk nodded. “I understand. May I recommend ‘Keshi Yena’, a Caribbean dish consisting of a large ball of cheese stuffed with spicy meat? I recommend using chicken meat. The cheese is typically Gouda or Edam, so the dish is not too exotic in the cheesy sense. For dessert, you can

serve apricots with smoked cheese, wrapped in bacon.”

“Eh... Ok. That sounds great, but I don’t know how to make any of that stuff.”

The clerk’s face lit up with a broad smile. “No worries. I have just what you need.” He reached beneath the counter and produced a large square book. The front page showed a collage of all the cheeses in the world. The title: “Cheesecipes”.

“That might be the worst pun I’ve ever seen.”

“Agreed,” said the clerk. “But you shouldn’t judge a book on its cover, much less its title. The author is not a great titlemonger, but he is a fantastic cheese cook. If you follow the recipes, I can almost guarantee that your girl will become as big a cheese fan as the two of us.”

“Sold! I’ll take the book, and also give me one of each of the cheeses from the front page. I don’t want to run out of ingredients.”

The clerk laughed and wrapped one of his curls around his right index finger. “I like you!”

#

That night, he served Keshi Yena. Linda looked for a long time at the large yellow blob on the plate. He waited for her reaction with bated breath.

“What. On. Earth. Is. That?” asked Linda.

“It’s Keshi Yena,” he said. “A traditional Caribbean dish consisting of a ball of cheese, filled with-”

“A BALL. You want me to eat a ball? I thought you were making pizza.”

“Yeah, but I was afraid if I told you the truth, you wouldn’t taste it. Come on, give it a try. It’s fantastic!”

“Really? You’ve had this before?”

“No, but that’s what it says in the book.”

“The book? What book?”

“‘Cheesecipes’. It’s a recipe book for cheese dishes. I bought it in the store. Yes, I know the title

is silly, but the recipes all look amazing.”

She rolled her eyes. “Undoubtedly, but I prefer having something I know I like.”

“Come on, taste it. I’m sure you’ll like it.”

Linda folded her hands and looked at the yellow blob, like a surgeon considering a malignant tumor.

“Where are you going, honey?”

She was heading for the door.

“I’m getting pizza. That’s what we agreed on having.”

The door shut with a barely audible click, and that’s when he knew it was over. She hadn’t even bothered to slam the door, like she usually did after an argument.

He ate the Keshi Yena by himself.

It was fantastic.

#

The next day, he slammed “Cheesecipes” down on the counter in the cheese store. “I made the Keshi Yena like you said, and she wouldn’t even touch it! She never even got to see the smoked cheese bacon apricots!”

The curly-haired clerk shook his head slowly while chewing on a stick of cheese. “I’m afraid there is little hope for her, then. Culinary compatibility is essential in a long-term relationship. Without it, there is no reason to bother.”

Martin nodded. “I suppose you’re right, but how do you find the right partner, then? Cheesedating.com?”

“If only!” said the clerk and laughed. “No, I am afraid the problem goes deeper than that. There are very few cheese enthusiasts left. Cheesecipes sold less than 500 copies.”

Martin put both his hands on the counter. “Then we must work to reverse this trend.”

The clerk shook his curly-haired head. “I’ve tried, but I think it’s too late. Fewer people visit

the store every year, purchasing less interesting cheeses. I have decided to try a new strategy. If people won't come to the cheese, the cheese must come to them."

"You mean there are more cheese enthusiasts in other countries?"

"To some degree, yes," said the clerk, as he unwrapped another cheese stick. "But even in those places, the trend is the same. No, I have another idea. Let me show you."

He pushed a button beneath the counter, and the entire back wall of the store descended into the floor, revealing what appeared to be an empty storage room. Walls of grey concrete enclosing a concrete floor lit by a lonely naked light bulb hanging from the ceiling. In the center of the room, a large grey metallic cone emerged from a circular hole in the floor.

A square grey hatch with a white handle adorned the side of the cone.

"Is that what I think it is?" said Martin.

The clerk raised his arms high in the air. "It's the tip of a rocket ship! I had to expand the basement to make it fit."

"Do cheese clerks often build rocket ships?"

"I told you I was majoring in aerospace engineering, remember?"

"Oh, right."

"Come, let me give you a tour." The clerk approached the rocket, turned the handle, and the hatch opened with a faint hissing sound. Blinking lamps attached to disparate control panels filled the interior with multicolored light. Two white leather swiveling chairs occupied the floor.

From the control room at the top of the rocket, they climbed a metal ladder down to a living quarter containing two bunks, a sink, two lockers, a wooden chair, a bathroom enclosure, and a round white table supporting a potted red geranium.

"Room for two," said the clerk and smiled. "But the best is yet to come."

The next room was the cheese room.

Shrink-wrapped cheeses of all sizes and sorts covered the shelves circling the walls. He

couldn't even begin to count them. The variety was overwhelming. They should have sent a poet.

"The room below is also a cheese room," proclaimed the curly-haired clerk.

"Impossible!" said Martin, eyes agape. "Every conceivable type of cheese has to be here."

The clerk smiled. "You will have many chances to broaden your cheese horizons."

Martin took a deep breath and relaxed. "Are there any other rooms?"

"Yes, the bottom-most room contains cheese crackers."

"Ah."

The clerk took Martin's hand. "You may have noticed that there are two chairs in the control room. As we discussed, it's hard to find partners who share our love of cheese."

Martin held his breath.

"I want you to come with me," said the clerk. "Together, we will bring cheese to the cosmos!"

Martin put his other hand on top of the clerk's. "Of course."

They climbed the ladders in silence. They sat down in the white leather swiveling chairs, surrounded by blinking lights. The clerk pushed a button and a rumbling sound seemed to emerge from all around them, the vibrations from the rocket sending chills down Martin's spine.

Without thinking, he leaned over the edge of the chair, and their lips met in the space between them. In the clerk's saliva, he tasted the salty flavor of goat cheese, the firm texture and mild creamy moistness of mozzarella, and the rich, buttery softness of Camembert; like a carnal Keshi Yena with warm tongue filling.

Lift-off.

END

## Nosebleed

### Shane Ticehurst

The room was white and empty except for the table in the middle, and the chairs that accompanied it. White metal table, white metal chairs. The walls were white and bare, excluding the four white cameras in all four corners of the roof. Nearly invisible except for their red blinking lights, they constantly relayed footage of the young girl that sat in one of those white chairs.

The gown she wore was only slightly less white than the room she was in. She thought that this must be to stop her from camouflaging against one of the walls or something. They had shaved her head.

Today, like any other day, she sat and stared at the door across from her table. She was waiting for a man that called himself Dr. French. She didn't know his first name, and if he was an actual doctor, she believed that his days of actually helping people were long behind him. It seemed his only job was to ask her stupid questions, torment her as close to a nervous breakdown as he possibly could, and then leave her for another day.

All while those cameras watched.

She had no idea who was watching her on the other side. More than likely it was who ever gave Dr. French orders. Maybe aliens. Maybe her capture was being broadcast on some seedy website, and people were getting off on this shit.

Didn't matter in the end. Didn't matter where the footage went, because its subject was stuck either way.

She was right about where the footage was going. While it wasn't going to the Internet, it was a live feed to the people in charge of Dr. French's visits. They were in the camera room now, standing and

watching her on the four screened camera console. Dr. French was sitting at his own table, sipping coffee and going through his patient's files.

'She has proven a tough nut to crack,' Said Dr. French, putting his mug down and picking up her sheet,

'But I feel that I am very close to making a breakthrough. I-'

'You will no longer be on this case, Dr. French.'

Dr. French was about to take another sip of his coffee. He found that the anger at receiving this news had frozen his arm in place. He knew that throwing his mug at the man that had broken it to him would probably get him put in a room much less nicer than his (now ex) patient, and visits from a much less nicer man than he was. So deciding against violently assaulting his employer, he asked:

'Why?'

These two men were not the kind that were often questioned. They looked at each other, and they both knew that the other was considering putting Dr. French in the very room that he knew existed somewhere in this facility. They also both knew that even though he had failed to get results with this particular case, French was still a valuable man. They decided he'd earned his right to at least one question.

This time the other man, the one on the left, spoke up, 'Because you have been working with the patient for over a month now and have achieved little other than making her cry. We know she is capable of crying, Dr. French. She is a fourteen-year-old girl.'

Dr. French managed to keep his voice level, but he could feel his face changing colour. He had another question. He might not have asked it if he had known how close he was to being thrown in a hole, but he had no clue about the precarious position his life was in.

'Who is replacing me?'

The man on the right raised his eyebrows and Dr. French knew that he'd fucked up.

It was the other man that actually responded, placing a hand on the shoulder of the man next to him.

'You have upset my colleague. The only reason we aren't having you skinned, Mr. French, is because we are not *completely* sure that you are worthless. We are only *almost* sure.'

He walked across the room towards Dr. French, who, to his credit, contained enough composure that he only barely flinched. Grabbing him by the arm, he lifted him out of his seat and pulled him over to the

camera console. Dr. French looked at the screen and saw that his replacement was already in the room.

'Dr. Robert will be replacing you, as you no doubt see.'

Dr. French was an intelligent man. It took a degree of intelligence higher than the average person to be recruited by this particular organisation. He knew better than to say what was on his mind, having pushed these two men far enough already.

It didn't stop him though. Maybe the coffee had made him jittery.

'Robert?! Robert is a f-'

'Mr. French, if the next words out of your mouth aren't "A fantastic replacement for an incompetent drip like me, sir", I'm not going to stop my colleague from having you injected with all sorts of wonderfully experimental liquids.'

Dr. French: 'Dr. Robert is a fantastic replacement for an incompetent drip like me, sir.'

'Very good, I'm glad you think so. And don't be so hard on yourself, we like self-confidence around here.'

Back in the white room, she was staring at her new visitor. He had introduced himself as Dr. Robert but assured her that she could call him "Toby". The only thing she wanted to say to him was that the name "Toby Roberts" was a bit ridiculous, but she kept quiet.

He was sitting in the seat across from her. He had brought a case with him. He placed it on the table between them.

'Now,' Said Dr. Robert, 'I'm sure you're wondering where Dr. French is.', He waited for her to respond, but kept on talking when she continued only to stare at him. 'My employers decided that he wasn't suited to working with somebody like you.'

In the camera room, Dr. French felt the anger rising up in him again.

Back in the white room, Dr. Robert leaned in across the table, 'And just between you and me, I saw how he spoke to you, and I think he's kind of a prick.' When he moved back across the table, she swore that she saw him glance up at one of the cameras behind her.

Dr. French had seen enough, he spun around and went to leave the camera room. Both men grabbed him and turned him back to the camera screens.

'We think this could be a learning experience for you, doctor.' Said the man on the right. The man on the left only patted Dr. French on the shoulder in a way that might have been encouraging if it didn't come from a man like him.

'Now, I don't think there should be any reason that you and I have the same relationship that you had with him.' Dr. Robert was telling her, leaning back in his seat oh so casually as he did. 'You and I could get along quite well.' He leaned in again, 'In fact, I could help you out, if you're willing to help me. Y'know, you help me and I help you.'

She stared at him. Again, seemingly oblivious to the fact she wasn't responding to him, he went on.

'Now I admit I can only do so much, of course. My bosses can be fantastically stingy.' He laughed. 'But,' he went on, now lowering his voice so it was "Just between him and her", 'it would just be between you and me.' He said this like she didn't know there were four cameras constantly pointed at her. He leaned back.

'So, what do you say? Do we have a deal?'

She continued to stare. She would give him nothing.

Dr. French, finally understanding that he should keep his opinions to himself, stifled a smile. He had been with the patient for over a month and tried every angle to get her to speak. He had ticked "conspiring against The Man" off his list very early. Robert was a bigger idiot than he first believed if he thought the girl would cooperate for some magazines or a pizza that they both knew wasn't actually contraband at all.

Dr. French was finding it particularly hard not to giggle. He could feel his employers behind him, he could feel how stock still they were standing. They hardly seemed to be breathing. It was beginning to look an awful lot like they knew they had bet on the wrong horse here.

He kept watching, eager to see just how badly Dr. Robert – Sorry, *Toby* – could fuck things up for himself.

She was still silent. Dr. Robert, ever the optimist it seemed, held up his hands in front of him with a look on his face that said, "Fair enough, fair enough." – lips down turned, head tilted. 'I understand you probably don't care too much for what's happening to you, and you probably want me to take my secrets and stick 'em up my ass, huh?' He laughed. 'That's alright, I'd hate me too.' He pulled the case he had brought over to his side of the table. 'But I'm not lying about helping you out, so I want you to think about that while you do

a little exercise for me.'

He opened his case. From it he produced three objects; A styrofoam cup, a drinking glass, and a ceramic mug.

'I want to you break these for me. Simple.'

Looking from the cups to the man across from her, she reached out across the table and made to push the three cups onto the floor.

Dr. Robert grabbed her hand. 'Not like that. I think you know exactly what I mean.'

For the first time, she showed emotion. Her breathing started to get faster.

Dr. Robert noticed, 'I assure you that there is nothing to worry about. You don't need to panic. I'll tell you what,' He gestured at the Styrofoam cup, 'You only need to break this one. Does that sound more reasonable?'

For the first time, she spoke. 'I-I don't kn-'

For the first time, Dr. Robert seemed slightly less kind. 'You do know. You know how to make me go away, so make me go away. Break the cup.'

The man on the right spoke: 'He is being antagonistic.'

The man on the left: 'I can see that. Don't worry, Dr. Robert is more than capable of getting her to work with him.'

Dr. French was still quiet. Antagonising this girl was not a good idea. They had no idea what she was truly capable of. He didn't admit this to anybody, but he'd made her cry enough times that sometimes he would lie awake at night, wondering how close he had come to the end of his own life at her hands.

She was breathing much faster now. Her eyes flicking from the cups to the man across from her. His face set and his smile growing smaller by the second, his eyes never left her.

'All your fussing will not get you out of this.' Said Dr. Robert. 'I know for a fact that Dr. French was scared of you. I will have you know right now that I am not scared of you.'

He leaned over the table now. She stared down at her lap.

'There rooms that are much less nice than this one.' He said, his voice was quieter now. 'Just like I can do you favours, I can make things tougher for you, too. A smart girl like you knows that. A smart g-

Dr. Robert stopped. He had noticed that a pool of blood was forming in her lap. She looked up at him.

One of her nostrils was bleeding.

Smirking, Dr. Robert sat back down. 'Good.' He said. 'You're angry. Use your anger to smash the cup. Like I already said, I am not scared of you.'

The man on the right: 'She's bleeding already. He still antagonizes her. I don't like this.'

The man on the left: 'You are worrying far too much about this. Robert is a professional. The fact her nose is bleeding already shows he will bring us quick results.'

Dr. French couldn't take his eyes away from the screen. Robert had made her angry very fast. He kept telling her that he wasn't scared. Dr. French believed that while, admittedly, he had been hard on the girl, he had never kept pushing after the blood had already started.

Because he *was* scared.

There was *truly* no way to gauge what she could do.

The three men kept watching.

She tried to tell him again that she didn't know what he wanted. Again, he told her to stop playing dumb.

She tried again to tell him that no one had explained anything to her, could he please just explain it to her. He told her to stop wasting time.

Her breathing became faster. His eyes got harder.

And then everything changed when her other nostril started to bleed.

Dr. Robert suddenly sat up straight. His eyes shot to the cups. None of them had so much as a dent.

Yet they had no record of this much energy being exerted by their patient. This was new ground.

He suddenly realised that he was completely terrified. And this animal sitting across from him likely knew it.

He might have been able to hold his nerve and regain complete composure if the alarm didn't start blaring. As soon as it did, he stood up, knocked his chair across the room, and ran for the door. He didn't seem to notice that he bumped into it hard enough to nearly cause a nosebleed of his own, he just fumbled with the doorknob until it turned. As soon as it did, he throw the door open and was gone in a flash.

When the girls other nostril had started bleeding, the man on the right had stepped forward without a word and pressed a button on the console. This caused the security alarm to start blaring.

He turned to his colleague and said, 'We have never seen her in such a state of agitation. She could tear this place apart. I am leaving. I suggest you do the same.'

The other man nodded, it was time to go. Dr. French never needed to be told. They left the camera room quickly, the three of them united by the nightmare that sat in the white room.

That girl was now standing, looking into one of the cameras. With the back of one hand, she wiped her nose. With her other hand, she pushed all the cups onto the floor and gave the camera the finger.

She looked at the door that Toby Robert had ran out of. Her heart jumped up into her throat when she realised that it hadn't relatched itself when he made his escape.

She wasted no time. She walked across the room, opened the door, and slowly peered out.

She saw a long, boring hallway. No more doors, no windows. Just a turn at the far end. She ran to it as fast as she could but had to stop as soon as she turned the corner. Waiting for her were eight heavily armed and armoured men, standing in formation. Four kneeling in front, four standing in back. They all had guns pointed at her.

'Get on your knees, hands in the air.' Said one of the men standing in the back row. She couldn't tell, they all wore helmets that covered their faces.

She saw no reason to try and fight these men. She never got a chance to kneel, because her nose started to bleed. And when it did, the men reacted.

'Fuck! Put her down!' Said the same voice. There was a thud in her chest, and she looked down to see a dart sticking out of her ribcage. She started to fall. The men rushed forwards to catch her, someone was yelling, but everything was going white. Everything was fading...

'Sarah?'

The doctor called her name. She looked up from the waiting room TV. There was no sound playing and the subtitles weren't on, but she had been absently watching some guy pull giant fish after giant fish into his boat.

Her doctor motioned for her and her mother to come with him. They entered his office and they sat down. She was playing with the end of her long hair, like she always did when she was nervous.

'So, Sarah, are your nosebleeds still a problem?'

Sarah nodded.

'Still not talker I see. That's fair. No one is happy about going to the doctors.' He smiled at Sarah and her mother and went on. 'You'll both be happy to know I have good news, though. I've figured out the cause of your constant bleeding.'

He paused for effect, ever the showman.

'It's nothing but stress. A girl your age, high school must be ramping up. You just have to take it easy. It's not as scary as you think.'

He smiled at them both. Her mother turned to her, put her hand on her shoulder, and smiled as well.

Sarah's nostril started to bleed.

The End

## Rae Rozman

At night  
the ghosts crawl through living spaces  
wiggle their way in  
around silence and stillness and  
the sound after the air conditioner  
has turned itself off  
give way to things  
I won't pretend to understand  
in the morning  
when nothing is clearer

### Hallucinations

In her mind, a tempest  
lavender tsunamis on hardwood floors

[set the stage]

A lion with a mane of fireflies  
sings an aria from Tosca  
(beautiful, melodic, yet grotesque)  
and she wants to look away  
but her reflection in the mirror  
is in negative--  
a familiar corpse with rhinestone eyes

And the shadows tango awkwardly  
along the wall  
their limbs caustic and unbending  
And cymbals crash and cymbals crash and cymbals crash  
Forte

FORTE

**FORTISSIMO**

## Judy DeCroce

### After That

it is as it always is, a flash to death,  
invisible walls holding you back

all though the elements shifted to dreams  
holding up wishes

you forgot to come back,  
leaving too soon my balance of life

Oh yes...  
and after that,  
finally a visit  
where in a dream,  
you said nothing but smiled.  
I said, "I need you more than anyone."

### At the Crossroad

the driver warns  
"they get stronger as we sleep"

a wagon of nightmares  
lumbers forward

"try to look away  
let them pass"

tentacles, teeth,  
wet darkness glimpsed through the slats—  
night terrors rounding the corner into  
someone else's dream



## The Belief Ritual

Edward Ahern

Those who dared to meet the Old One waited in a glade below his hut until I escorted them up the hill. On this summer morning there was only one person standing in the glade, a wizened, elderly woman. I recognized her as I approached, and fear flickered through me.

The woman discerned my worry. "Calm yourself, servant. I am come to parlay with the Old One."

"It is a wonder to encounter you, venerable Horflog. Please, let me escort you to him."

She nodded, saying nothing. She hobbled and used a staff, but set a hard pace, and I had to lengthen my stride to keep up. As we walked, I forced myself to ask, "Charlong and our daughter, they are alive?"

"They live unscarred. You and the slut bred well, Malame. Charlong has talent, and the child has more. Perhaps I should arrange another coupling."

It was not a question. "May I ask the child's name?"

"You may ask, I may not tell."

The Old One had divined her approach and was waiting outside his hut. They bowed in silence to each other, ozone faintly crackling around them as their protective spells shifted. They conversed without speaking aloud for several hundred heartbeats, then both looked at me and began saying words I could hear.

"Listen closely, Malame. Horflog has told me of a visitor who will come to us in two or three days. She asks..."

The woman's aura sputtered, casting blue light over the gullies of her wrinkled skin.

"That is, advises—that we must either decline the request or turn it to our advantage. She believes that honoring the request will jeopardize our existence."

"What is to be done, venerable one?"

“A great deal, so try not to lose my words.”

The Old One described for me, in the time it takes to eat a meal, what I would do on their behalf. When he finished, Horflog and the Old One bowed to each other, the unseen waves of their spells pushing into each other and forming a dirty rainbow.

There were no audible goodbyes between the two adepts, and I escorted the old woman back down the hill. I stepped to one side in the clearing so she could continue. The look in my eyes betrayed me. She studied me briefly.

“Saccul. The whelp’s name is Saccul. If she does not die or disobey me she will attain great malevolence.”

When I returned to the Old One’s hut he was still standing outside it, his thoughts bending the air around him. I waited, saying nothing.

He roused after perhaps a hundred breaths and glanced at me. “She is a grasping hag, but not wrong. I have things she shall not know of for you to accomplish during your absence.”

“I assumed as much, Master. Will you not be leading me on this task?”

“No. You have sufficient goetic competence to be put to the test on your own. But sympathy and corporeal urges could still betray you. Come into the hut.”

Once inside we sat cross-legged on the dirt floor facing each other, our knees almost touching. The Old One grabbed a blanket of dragon scale from off of his cot and threw it over both our heads. Dragon skin is as useless as iron in holding in warmth, but shields words and thoughts from outer presences.

He spoke without preface—not the hidden language he had used with Horflog, but an almost extinct dialect we used between ourselves. His plan had mysteries within lies, making success more difficult. I listened some while without responding but at one point interjected. “We will kill him, Master?”

“Almost so. Do not fail. I am able to torment you beyond death.”

I resisted the urge to smile. As I had progressed the Old One used increasingly painful threats and punishments to hone my skills. He did not love anyone, including me, but he gave me what I craved more, grudging respect for my abilities. He was viewed by most as evil, but I knew him to be driven by unknowable, amoral purpose.

I nodded. “I shall make every effort to avoid an accursed afterlife.”

The Old One’s thoughts turned inward, where I could not follow. Then: “I send you to encounter a sorcerer stronger and perhaps craftier than you. It is probable you will be spiritually disemboweled. Prove this wrong.”

The emissary, a rotund courtier names Cortanus, arrived two days later and requested that the Old One visit his master, Aldrag the Benevolent, who a few months earlier had slaughtered several hundred villagers suspected of underpaying their tithes. Aldrag, a man with considerable ambition, wished the Old One's assistance in becoming a god-king.

Once Cortanus had rambled to a close and the Old One had agreed to a visit, I escorted him off the hill and returned to the Old One.

"Listen carefully, Malame. Aldrag is protected by a necromancer, a skilled adept. You must survive on cunning rather than magic."

I paused a heartbeat. "And if I succeed we will extract rich marrow from the bones of Aldrag's hubris."

The Old One's snorted. "Just so. Prepare yourself. I must train you in a ritual and it would be annoying if you were to die while learning it."

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Aldrag's capital was called Surpleice, and it required ten horse-abusing days for me to reach it. I anticipated that I'd arrived at least two days before Cortanus, who would have treated himself more gently. Once the horse was stabled I went to the central souk. While I was being offered food, wine and assorted vices I queried the merchants about their lord.

Aldrag's forced theocracy was not popular, nor was Aldrag himself, but the city was without war or pestilence, and the locals paid lip service and tithes to Aldrag in return for his keeping their lives somnolent.

The next morning I sponge bathed and put on a clean robe I had bought the day before. Then I walked to the palace and presented myself. Sentries, interior guards, and Aldrag's personal guard all inspected and groped me before passing me along for the audience.

Aldrag was in a side chamber of the reception hall, speaking with advisors when I arrived. After flowery introductions, Aldrag waved away all but a tall woman and four mute guards.

The woman was Synolcar, the necromancer. Her body swelled her robe in arching curves. Her alert expression overlay an air of assurance, and her stance hinted at physical agility. The market gossip was that she jilted lovers by killing them.

Aldrag began a blunt questioning. "You travel alone?"

"I have no need of guards."

“Where is Istfrig?”

“Most august Lord, he does not wish that name used. The Old One has made me plenipotentiary in this matter. Once you have described your wishes to me I anticipate fulfilling them without incident.”

“And if you can’t, Malame?”

Synolcar interjected before I answered. Her ability to do so said much about her influence with Aldrag. “My Lord, despite his callow appearance, Malame is reportedly an accomplished adept. We should perhaps convey your desires to him. If his efforts are legless we could insist that Ist- ah, the Old One come.”

Aldrag remained irritated. I wondered at giving a petulant man control of uncountable minds and lives. Then I wondered at Synolcar’s support of me.

“We shall sit.”

Aldrag was a man of short and round proportion whose richly brocaded robe further swelled him. As did sitting.

He began without preface. I nodded slightly to Synolcar, aware of the spells against intrusion she had laid. She nodded back. Professional courtesy.

“We have learned that a generation before my birthing your master wrested the incantation for the creation of belief from a sorcerer he then killed. Dread and now dead.”

Aldrag smiled at his blotchy effort at witticism. “My wizardess can control the dead, but I wish to control the minds of the living. Many, many minds. Unless you are in command of this magic you are of no use to me. Less than no use, I might have to dispose of you to ensure your silence.”

I smiled to myself. Spoken threats are empty. Tacit threats give birth to the dread he mentioned. “I am trained in this arcana. What is it you offer?”

“Istfrig and you are presumably immune to this conjure and need not fear us. You will be given vassalage of your adjoining lands, bound to me by tithe and tax. I will graciously make an earnest promise of a horse weight of gold when you start, which shall commit your effort. The gold is forfeit on your failure.”

Synolcar made no motion or expression at this, but I sensed she was annoyed by the uncouth bullying of her owner. “A generous offer O mighty ruler.” I let my words and not my tone convey the sarcasm. “But the gift you ask for is an empire without boundary. Surely the reward for such a gift should be regal.”

Aldrag frowned. “What would you ask?”

“Two horse weights of gold shall be dispatched to my master as a nonreturnable token of your trust in our efforts. Once I receive confirmation that the gold has reached our crag my efforts shall commence.

“Something else?”

“Yes, but first you should know that this goetic of imposing faith is bound with my life. If I die so does your ability to convince your people.”

“Understood. But what other reward would you expect for success?”

“We already have villages full of peasants, we need no more subjects arguing about crop-eating goats. The Old One wishes knowledge, in this case of necromancy. The esteemed Synolcar holds this knowledge in secret. Once I have founded your godhood our reward will be her initiating me as a necromancer so I can better serve my master.”

Synolcar jumped up in protest and Aldrag stared at her. “Synolcar?”

“This power cannot be released to a backwater wizard. It is sacred to our order and forbidden to others.”

He stared back at me. “Ask for something else.”

“I cannot. If we are not in agreement I will take my leave and thank you for the audience. But is it not more than fair exchange? Your greater magic for her lesser one?”

Synolcar blurted out “Do not be fooled by sophistry...”

Aldrag had waved her silent. He sat in silence for several breaths, his face an angry pout. “Synolcar, would providing these secrets harm you?”

“Only somewhat, but sharing such knowledge dilutes its power and...”

“Fine. Malame, I agree to your demand. If you are able to provide me with this power Synolcar will train you in her art...”

She gestured, but Aldrag again waved her into silence.

“I will dispatch the gold to your mountain tomorrow. My men will confirm its receipt on their return. Meanwhile, Synolcar will arrange for you to receive whatever potions and instruments are needed for the incantation.”

I smiled thinly. “No need for your confirmation. I commune with the Old One when the night is darkest. He will verify its arrival. We should be able to start after sixteen or seventeen more days.”

What I said was almost true. Words cannot traverse long distances between the Old One’s mind and mine, but images can. This night I would picture the departure of the gold and the Old One would eventually envision its receipt. Emotion too can bridge these distances, but I had never

known the Old One to display hate or joy, and I had been harshly trained to remove any passion from my goetic thoughts.

Aldrag's smile was strained. "Then we are agreed. Synolcar will provide accommodation in her apartments. Relay any requests through her."

I bowed, smiling. I was being put under house arrest, to be guarded more by Syolcar's spells than by the palace troops. As the Old One had predicted.

Synolcar and I walked from the side chamber to her suite of rooms, saying almost nothing. Once there she ordered food and water for me and watched while I ate.

Her smile was pro forma but attractive. "You are larger and burlier than the usual gaunt sorcerer. Are you sure you've taken up the right calling?"

"The Old One asks the same question."

"The dead tell me to fear the Old One, but that you can be manipulated. Are they right?"

"I suspect you'll find out."

Synolcar shifted her focus. "When shall we begin fasting, Malame?"

"Seven nights from this one. I will provide a scroll of needed items tomorrow. None of them are unusual- blood from you and Aldrag, a poultice of ground, engorged tick, that sort of thing."

"Easily done. Have you need of grimoires?"

My mouth curled. "No. I must travel light, so the shelves in my head hold my library. The ritual requires that we couple. Presumably this is not an issue?"

"Of course not. Just we two or a coven?"

"Under six eyes."

"How refreshingly intimate. Will you require aphrodesia?"

I glanced at her. "I think not."

I remembered the guarded exchange just days ago between Horflog and the Old One, and knew that I was in more danger than he had been. Synolcar could do Aldrag no harm and was bound to his bidding, which could well include my death.

"Tomorrow, Synolcar, we must perform a Magi's covenant forswearing harm to each other except as specified."

She leaned toward me. "Surely an accomplished sorcerer like you already has protections in place."

“Not nearly enough for an accomplished sorcerer like you. I shall cut myself later and write a sanguine agreement for you to also sign in blood during the ritual. Otherwise we cannot proceed.”

She smiled again, not pleasantly. “You’re not quite as stupid as you appear, are you. Very well. I will show you your room.”

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The next morning Synolcar grudgingly signed an oath agreeing to not destroy me except for failing to provide Aldrag his believers. We both knew that Aldrag could still have someone else try and kill me, but that was a reasonable risk.

I provided the list of needed items, surprisingly few and simple considering the power Aldrag would be granted. We spent several hours a day together for the next few days, taking meals together and talking on a superficial level about spells and other magicians. Synolcar had apparently ordered my food laced with a mild narcotic, which was anticipated. I had addicted myself before departing, and a dosage strong enough to affect my thinking would have rendered me unconscious before revealing anything. On my return to the Old One I would be vomitous and incontinent through the drug withdrawal, but of no matter.

There was a faintly corrupt sense about Synolcar that I realized was the corpse-like aspect of her that allowed for her necromancy. And I knew that for me to attain mastery a similar part of me had to become necrosial.

My room, where I spent most of my days and all of my nights, was a richly furnished cell. There were obvious peep holes on all walls where watchers monitored my actions. Intricate iron latticework covered the windows, so tightly interlaced that a hand could not pass through the openings.

After two days with the drug having no effect it was removed from my food. I awaited Synolcar’s next move. On the fourth evening she unlocked my bedroom door and entered without speaking. She was nude, so a late-night discussion was unlikely.

Synolcar sat on the edge of my bed, pulled down the sheet, and stroked the inside of my thigh with the backs of her fingernails. Her coarse brown hair hung loose, half concealing her breasts. “Do you need words?”

“No,” I replied. We began to touch each other, gently at first, using fingertips and mouths to awaken each other’s pleasure points. There are degrees of intimacy when adepts couple,

escalating as the pair uncovers each layer of the persona. Pleasure and danger increase greatly but so too does understanding.

As we mated we explored each other's emotions; she felt my repressed need from long celibacy, then my wonderment at the black, dead part of her. I tasted the bitterness of her servitude and the harshness of her self-control. As we finished the intimate levels collapsed, and we were just two sweaty bodies lying next to each other.

Synolcar scratched her sharp nails across my belly in annoyance. "You're not talented enough to have kept so much hidden from me."

"Perhaps not. The Old One trains me like a dog, I respond only on command."

Anger swelled her face. "You're on a fool's errand, and will suffer a fool's fate."

"Perhaps. But I have a fool's chances."

She subsided, and we talked guardedly about our situations, and the outcomes of our efforts. Synolcar saw no result which did not leave her beholden to Aldrag, a man I now knew she despised.

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The Old One's images four nights later were kaleidoscopic, the arrival of the gold, possible entrapments, necromantic ceremonies, and, at the end, a mandala which opened my mind to a secret he had not wanted me to reveal too soon. Synolcar could never know of our plans because the Old One kept them hidden within me until it was time to take the next step.

The following morning I announced to Aldrag and Synolcar that the gold had arrived and we could proceed.

Aldrag bounced with anticipation. "How soon can you execute the spell?"

"We require three days of fasting, so three nights from now during the darkest hour. The results will be discernable six days after that."

"Why so long?"

"Belief is not like the dropping of a sword but the rising of the tide, inexorable, but not noticed from moment to moment. I will need to instruct you in your talks with your people."

"When?"

"Once you have seen results."

Synolcar and I returned each evening to her quarters to rehearse the ritual, which included stylized coupling. We did this for three nights, and were a facile couple by the night of the

ceremony. She continued to probe during the intercourse, and berated me each night for my ignorance of the next days events.

Aldrag was the third person at our ceremony, but being without goetic vision he saw only a stuffy temple observance. Except of course for the mating, which was vigorous. What Synolcar and I witnessed however, was a knotted swirl of phantasms jostling each other to participate in our spell, and the blackening fire of Aldrag's emergent godhood. There are no human words for this thing, only fearful elation at our success.

For the next two days I did not sleep or eat, for Aldrag, now a god, might attempt my murder. I set traps and curses and waited on the floor of my room each night, legs crossed, until dawn let shards of light through the latticework.

On the third day, I went to Aldrag and insisted that he needed to accompany me into the city. "A god must perform miracles to ignite belief, venerated Aldrag, and you are about to perform several of them over the next two weeks. You may bring guards of course, but not Synolcar, for your people will assume that it is she and not you who performs the miracles. I will be, in dress and behavior, merely a personal slave."

Synolcar bristled, but had to agree, she was much too feared and well known. That same afternoon Aldrag and I went into the produce market and found an appropriately hideous leper. I anointed Aldrag's hands with what I assured him was protective oil and insisted he lay hands on the kneeling leper's scabrous head. The leper jumped up yelling "I'm cleansed! I'm cleansed!"

And to the hundreds of people around us he did appear clear skinned and without lesions. The illusion I had created would wear off in a week or so, but the rumor of the miracle would have become widespread fact. We then walked on until we found a blind beggar.

"Spit on your fingertips," I whispered, "and rub the spit into his eyes."

Aldrag recoiled, but after some hissed warnings, did as I had asked. The beggar used fingers on both hands to pry open his crusted eyelids, then blinked and dropped to his knees. "Thank you, my king and my god. I can see you as I praise you!"

My skills took up the cry, and many in the crowd began moaning chants of adoration.

"That's enough for now, o noble king," I whispered, and we returned to the palace. We did this again for two more days, drawing ever larger crowds.

"It seems to be working, Malame, will this devotion increase?"

"Immensely. As Synolcar teaches me her rite, I must also teach you your governance of this power. It is something to be done only under four eyes."

Aldrag's eyes narrowed. "Why cannot Synolcar attend us?"

"I know you have complete faith in her, but you are on a path without time, and people do change over long years. This knowledge is best kept secret."

"Very well."

On the third day after his divine anointment, members of several city guilds approached Aldrag suggesting that they begin to offer sacrifice to him as their godlike benefactor, and large crowds began prostrating themselves crying "Ave Aldrag" as he passed.

Synolcar's preparations for my necromantic ascension began that same day. The Old One had carefully instructed me in necromantic principles and spells, so all that was lacking was the ceremony. In two days time she and I gathered under four living eyes and two dead.

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Necromantic spells would be considered hideous to an outsider. No narcotic incense, no couplings, no gongs or bells. It begins by summoning a perpetually rotting corpse able to kill a portion of my spirit and in return give me access to the dead.

But Synolcar had other plans. She had spoken only a few phrases of the first step when I held up my hand and stopped her. "Please don't continue with the wrong ritual. We bribed one of your fellows to tell us exactly the steps involved in installing a necromancer. I must ask you to make an oath to me to follow the correct ritual."

She snarled, but made the oath, then removed the implements on the altar and replaced them with others.

Several minutes into the ritual the sweet-sour acrid stench of death filled the room. The necrotic presence was with us. I was then cut open in feet, hands and torso and the ever-rotting corpse inserted his finger into each wound while incanting. The wounds turned gangrenous and then scabbed over with dried pus. A part of my being I did not know I had was torn away and eaten.

And then, without words, the corpse departed and the ritual was over. Synolcar dropped to her knees, panting and ashen, and I knew that she too had paid a toll. "Sister?" I asked gently.

She keened, her tone ripping into my ears. "I have lost too much. Even the dead would not welcome me."

"Then you must remain living. Your sacrifice will be rewarded."

"Get out, you soul thief!"

I donned my robe and weaved my way back to my chamber. I could feel the knuckles of the dead softly knocking on the new gateway to my mind. But I had an urgent errand, and as soon as I had rested and eaten I sought audience with Aldrag.

Aldrag was reclining on a divan, listening to some embroidery of Cortanus. He looked at me, saw my expression, and nodded. "Leave us Cortanus."

"But sire, I have not yet..."

Aldrag's stare was enough to shoo Cortanus out the door. "So Synolcar has fulfilled her part. Odd that she is not here."

"The ceremony was especially disagreeable for her and she is recovering. And now I must fulfill mine and instruct you. Please ask the guards to leave. One call from you and they can immediately return."

He hesitated, narrowing his eyes, then nodded to the guardsmen. I stepped over and knelt next to him. "Please sire, place your left hand in mine and incline your ear so I may whisper."

When he did so I began my own spell, in the hidden words the Old One had opened up for me the night before. Aldrag's look was quizzical but he did not pull away. After fifty heartbeats the incantation was concluded. Three veins inside his skull shriveled and blackened, and Aldrag lost all contact with himself.

He sighed and dropped to the floor. I turned and waited, quite close to complete death. A few heartbeats later, Synolcar burst through the doorway, raising her hands for a curse.

"Stop! I have released you."

She hurled liquid fire, which I dodged, singing my hands. "He is locked inside himself and is your vassal."

She heard nothing in her anger and launched a spray of salt acid at me. I dropped behind Aldrag's smoldering robe and yelled again. "You can control him!"

She paused, shuddering in wrath, "He is dead and you will scream for it."

I took two steps toward Synolcar, my arms outstretched, palms facing her so she could see I was not concocting a spell. "You are free."

Her muscles knotted and bunched as she gave herself demonic strength. She monkey jumped on top of me, her legs squeezing around my torso, her hands around my neck. I could not breathe, and I felt my neck bones knuckle together.

Synolcar lashed my body with a restraint spell and slightly loosened her hands. "Say something else clever before I consign you to anguish."

“No, listen. He half-lives, but is trapped within his mind. You could not harm him, and I was sworn not to kill him. You, the necromancer, can animate him and rule through his pronouncements. With the spell of belief you have an empire beyond limits. Reach into him, see that what I say is true.”

Synolcar kept one eye on me while she knelt next to Aldrag, touching his head and murmuring a goetic. The Aldrag body sat up, eyes clouded. Aldrag and Sinolcar muttered in unison, “I am Synolcar and I have governance of this one. I will rule.”

She turned her head to stare at me. “Why do this?”

“We would rather that one of us have control of this power, rather than a megalomaniac. I am not alone in this.”

Synolcar rose, silently ordering Aldrag to rise with her.

“You did not try to curse me because of this faltering hope? Truly a fool’s plan. Although you’re not advanced enough to best me in combat.”

“Probably true. Do you accept our gift?”

Her face, already red, darkened to purple. “Wizards do not give gifts. What is your demand for this not-dead present? “

I glanced at my body and Synolcar undid the restraint spell. “Well?” she asked.

“Only what you yourself have longed for. We ask that you keep Aldrag’s body alive and in good health. Show restraint in expanding the belief to other kingdoms.”

“There is a lie I cannot yet see in all this. But I will. You surely need more than a wizard’s promise.”

“We do. An oath on the bones of your oracle that you will do these two things. If you swear, you can unshackle yourself as sorcerer and woman.”

I stood, and after several hundred more heartbeats of talk, I prepared the ceremony and Synolcar took her oath. We, who had been so often intertwined, did not touch again before my departure.

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On my return I found the old one sipping from the blood of a sacrificed goat while reading its entrails. Lamb’s blood tastes better, but the entrails do not give as prescient a forecast. I had imaged my results days before, so there was relatively little more to explain.

The Old One nodded to me, as much praise as he ever bestowed. "When will Synolcar become aware that the spell of belief will dissipate?"

"Probably already, for she will have thought through the covenants and realize that when a part of me died the spell was voided. But like the ebbing of the tide, the waning of belief will occur over the next month."

"Aldrag?"

"A fattening vegetable. He should live another twenty years before his body joins his mind."

"And you believe she will not seek vengeance?"

"Only if an opportunity presents itself. Aldrag's empire even without being a god is vast. She will enjoy the power. A question, Master. You are already a necromancer. Why did you wish that she initiate me?"

His lips curled upward without smiling. "We will have further use of Synolcar. What she gave of herself to install you is now yours to use against her."

He waved a gaunt arm. "Your instructions were adequately followed. We have a local commission. Prepare a death potion of mandrake seasoned with anise. It will be administered in wine, so do not let it taste like vinegar."

As I turned toward the herbal shed, the Old One waved me motionless. "Horflog commands your presence next week. Apparently, you are a better breeder than sorcerer. Do not let her twist your weak joints. You will not enjoy my remedy."

I nodded, fear and elation competing within me, then I cast both aside. "Will Horflog kill me afterwards?"

"Perhaps not."

end

# Knocking

## Josie Columbus

The world had moved on, abandoned him. He was alone. He often thought he should have followed them – if that would have helped anything, if surviving had meant anything at all.

They were all dead. He'd seen the bodies, in various positions in the street and in their homes. They were marred by decay, and those remains that might still be recognized had their faces twisted into a mask of fear. He'd stopped going outside because of the faces. They didn't make him sick; not even the stench of death could turn his stomach now. No – the terrified expressions angered him. That anger had driven him to his home – he could not easily recall the last time he'd felt sunlight on his skin. Even the windows were too close to the ungrateful corpses.

And so there he was, the last man on Earth, sitting on his couch and contemplating suicide. The gun in his hand was heavy and powerful, promising salvation and rest. He lifted it to his temple, pressing it against bare skin to get a feel for it. The safety was still on.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door.

He ignored the sound. There was always knocking – it came and went, a passing noise beating against his half-crazy eardrums. The madness came in waves, washing over his skin, making it crawl with ants in the quiet of his home. Now and then, he heard the roar of long-lost crowds as they filed, one by one, through his mind. How he missed the *noise*. He would join them, though. Wherever they had gone, he would follow, just as he should have years ago.

The knock came again. It was frantic, familiar, an echo from his past. He couldn't be sure if it had ever been real. The first few times he'd heard it, he'd rushed to the door and flung it open to see nothing but an empty stoop. Yet each time, in the early days of his isolation, he had convinced himself that he had just been too late. That this door-to-door

companion had simply thought his house abandoned. Next time, yes, *next time* he'd see who had been knocking at his door.

He'd spent a week by the door, once, and only moved when his clawing hunger was too terrible for even his hollow mind to ignore.

*It's louder this time, something sinister whispered in his ear. It's clearer.*

No, he thought back. The haze of reality was lifting; he was beginning to experience the world in a way that only one with no control over the senses could. Everything was vivid, each sense as acute and active as his sight, if not more. He saw colors that had never been real; he smelled meals that he hadn't eaten in weeks; he tasted the dry spit in his mouth. The knocking was simply registering through unadulterated eardrums. That was why it was louder. If he opened the door, there would be no one there. The visitor would be gone.

If he let the knocking in, *he* would be gone, his mind lost to an abyss of whispers. Sounds that weren't sounds, deafening quiet, the worst kind of hell he could imagine. The kind that was in his brain, that trapped him in dark painful places from which there was no escape. He'd crawl and claw and fight to get out, but he never would. There would be no escape. Only knocking, and voices that weren't there.

"Marcus!" called a voice from the door. He hadn't heard his own name in so long – he used to mumble it to himself as he drifted off to sleep at night, just to make sure that he still had it. He chuckled at the voice at the door, frantic and screaming.

"Clever trick," he muttered. He felt the sounds reverberate off of his eardrums, so vivid was the hallucination. And, yes, these were only false visions. They were no more solid than mist. They were not real. They *felt* real, but they weren't. They couldn't be. He was alone, a man walking through a dead world.

The doorknob rattled against his brain, the door heaving on its hinges. The madness was pressing on his temples – but so was the gun.

He took it down for a moment and stared at it. The barrel called to him, singing a sweet melody of silence. Not this hellish silence that surrounded him every day, though. No, this was true peace. Freedom from his deceitful mind, from the voice that whispered in his ear and knocked against his skull.

He thumbed the safety on the gun, hearing the satisfying *click* as the mechanisms aligned to bring him to freedom. The door heaved against its frame, the old neglected wood beginning to crack. No, he wouldn't let it in. He was alone – too alone, and he knew it. He was tired of it all. Tired of the silence and the hunger and the goddamned knocking. He just wanted peace.

He pressed the gun to his head and squeezed. A loud *CRACK* resounded in the little room. Marcus was limp, and his lifeless body slumped backward over the couch. He had imagined that death would bring a smile to his face, but the same resolute stubbornness was painted on his mouth. He had not let the knocking in.

Yet it continued. As a hopeless trickle of blood flowed from his head, the frantic knocking continued. The voice outside began to sob.

## Oblivions

**JL Moultrie**

In the middle of the mosh pit he was trying to protect and enjoy himself. Though there were sweaty, anonymous limbs pressed against his own in the half-light, something resembling solace began to rise in his soul. Amid the cacophony of guitars, drums and shrieking was a darkness he could not only grasp but hold onto.

For a period, he forgot that he'd just been released from a psychiatric facility. Then a smell arose from the crowd which inflamed his recollection. All that had fermented inside of him had come out. Inside of his twenty-year-old body were expanses which frightened and confused him.

Amid the blur of night, he ended up in the basement bathroom about sixty feet from the stage. His brown face passed an unclean mirror like a pendulum. He stood at the urinal trough to relieve himself when a man in a mask came and stood next to him. As the man began groping his behind, he stood there frozen. When he turned to face him, he was gone. When he rushed out of the bathroom, he almost didn't hear a girl compliment him on his Nirvana shirt. He thanked her and, with effort, returned to his spot in the crowd.

He reached up, stretching his hand toward the sweat-drenched lead singer. It was October 31<sup>st</sup>, but he refused to dress up; the fact that candles were burning, water pipes were bursting, and half of the people wore costumes only added to the night's "mysticism." The singer finally held his hand momentarily.

For a moment, he couldn't recollect the desolation of his childhood – when he went to sleep hungry, waiting for his mother to walk through the door. Beneath the veil of his skin was a sprawl of incidents, too numerous to recall and too unwieldy to carry.

After another mosh pit dispersed, the same girl came up to him and complimented him on his eyes, shouting above the feedback. He asked if she had a boyfriend, she replied that he wasn't around. As light passed over them, he noticed her slim figure and green eyes, her pale skin taking on the hues of the stage light. They stood there in silence for two minutes until he began holding her hand.

After the show, he found himself in a lonesome, puddle-filled alley with her pressed against a brick wall. She guided his hand into her blue jeans – feeling the warmth of her flesh seemed to throw his world off center. He tried to reconcile the euphoria and torment that rose up in him like flood water. He kissed her, hoping to retrieve something wayward and submerged.

No saint's blood ran through his veins, only adrenaline mingled with alcohol. A sensation – bleak and transient – lit through his whole body. She endeavored for his warmth, but the wreckage of their shared youth obscured her vision. He didn't know it would be the last time he saw her. Familiar sensations of discord began running through his limbs.

Her beauty made him feel that all that everything that ensued was improper and even lewd – mostly because he himself was involved. She received him from behind. He became momentarily unaware of how his body drank in the disorder and isolation from his recent experiences. She turned around and kissed him, trying to look into his eyes. They stood there in silence for three minutes until he looked up, feeling emotions both vague and terse. Words jostled in him, on the verge of surfacing.

They got fully clothed and began walking side by side. They talked about the show and how she was visiting the city with her older sister. She assured them that they'd meet again. She told him that living up north was boring and how much she looked forward to spending time with him. He didn't know how to respond; a host of expressions clamored within him. He finally told her that he lived in the city and that it was not all it was cracked up to be. A long silence followed.

They arrived at a car; the figure of her sister sat in the driver's seat. He gave her his phone number and they exchanged a brief hug. She got into the car. As it sped off, the heat of his experiences began to gnaw at him. He stood there perplexed, unable to acknowledge the faint humiliation that behaved like buoyant driftwood.

While on the bus home, he tried to avert his feeling like a total villain but failed miserably. He felt as if the fluorescent lights revealed all of his secret actions. Forgetting himself, he drowned in the turbulent waters of self-deception. Across from him, his ambiguous reflection stared back from the window.

The events of the night played between his ears like a hideous refrain. As the bus lurched forward, he imagined himself inside a wounded beast. The fallibility of memory didn't occur to him, he took it all to heart. The tenuous, inflamed outside world passed him in a blur. Annihilation seemed too far away. If he could explain what was tearing at him, he would say, "I won't last much longer. *It* won't last much longer. If I show them my teeth, they'll recoil. If I

give them my heart, they'll only save it for the feast. Devil take it!" and so on and so forth.

He stepped off the bus and it began to rain. His soft blood began to boil. The two paths before him were bright with desolation. He began walking toward his house. He hoped everyone was asleep and they were. When he awoke in the morning, the past night felt like a faint reverie – a wound that would not heal. His clothes were still wet. He performed a short meditation and left the house, unaware of where he would end up.

As he waited at the bus stop, his phone rang. A jolt of dopamine went to his receptors as he answered. It was his uncle, or more precisely, his aunt's boyfriend. Since an early age they had a close bond. He was the only one who saw strength in his vulnerability. They began talking about general subjects until it reached the show, as his uncle was the one who dropped him off. The question caught him off guard.

He told him all that one might expect. He didn't share the details about his tryst, the bathroom or the vacant feelings that followed him like a shadow. He told him that he was on his way to "the temple" and eventually hung up. Under the ache of oblivion, he oscillated between two emotions – dread and dim panic.

When he approached the temple door, a seminary student bowed deeply and held it open. Upon walking in, he took off his shoes. There was a heavy silence. Members deep in their training wore monastic attire; the wooden floors creaked as they scurried to complete their tasks. The ceiling was high, pictures depicting Korean characters and monks hung on the white walls. He made his way upstairs – the hallway opened up to a large room with cushions and mats neatly arranged in four rows. A large, bronze statue of the Buddha sat on the far side, with lit candles beside it. He turned to his right and entered the interview room.

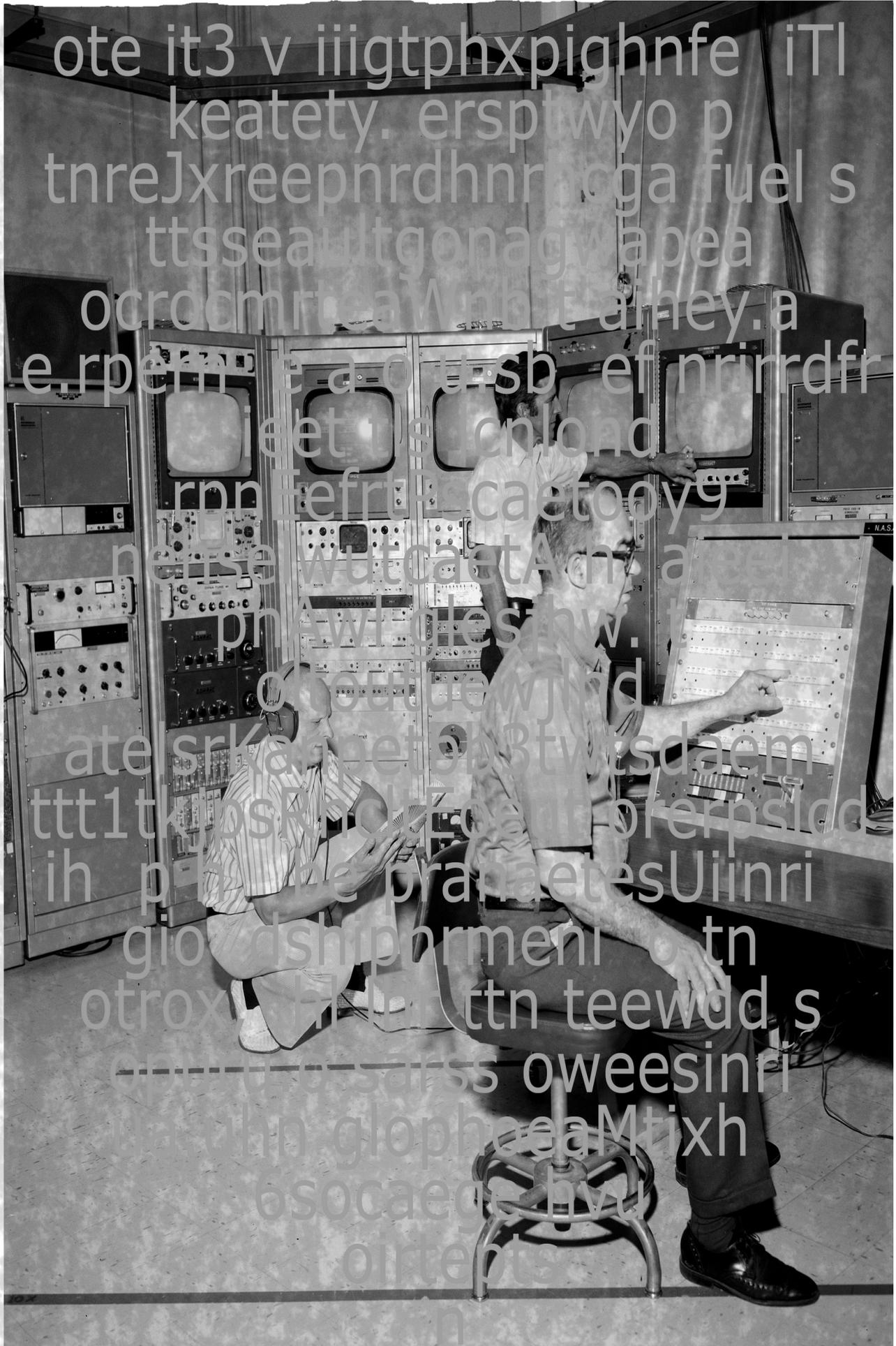
The guiding teacher sat solemnly on a cushion before him, his eyes closed. He closed the door and sat facing him, crossed his legs and closed his eyes. Marooned inside his skin, he swam in pitch black waters looking for shore – finding none.

They spoke about ignorance and how one could transcend it. The guiding teacher suggested consistent practice and study. Quite unexpectedly, he even shared some intimate details concerning his own upbringing. He began trembling; unable to reconcile his assumptions with the reality unfolding before him. When he was told all the wisdom he needed lied within him he scoffed and quickly tried to correct himself by asking how. His conceit was exposed; he was told to "keep on living."

This axiom, this "keep on living", went inside of him like a short blade. He bowed and, upon leaving the room, bowed and entered the hall. The room was half full. He silently sat down

and closed his eyes. For fifteen minutes vices, harm, pride, and jealousy washed over him. He tried to embrace them all, but his affections were too worn and feeble. He wanted to storm out, to put his humiliations on full display, to let everyone see and judge the merits of his anguish, to throw it all away. But he stayed put.

He dropped some spare change into the donation bowl and left. He went to downtown Detroit. There was a sporting event and ubiquitous crowds littered the streets and surrounding dive bars. His altered state began sputtering to a stand-still. The dispassionate crowds didn't see him, they only saw the face of his anonymity.



## **We Were Never Here**

**Annette Gagliardi**

We hid under the deck, against the lee side of the house waiting for dark to tuck us into its shadows. Later, as the luck of sub-zero cold crept into our chitlins, we bucked and burrowed into tender snow, drying the gathered leaves for our bed as we moved in the afterglow, led like lemmings toward mass migration.

We waited for sunrise while the snow warmed us and the earth hummed a tune. We slept while we wept, smiling at each other because of our immediate good fortune, tending to the fried stones we ate to sustain, merely sustain —

Much later, as the melting ice caps rose the water table, the sun, the moon and all celestial bodies froze in place. Along with every skittery creature hiding in this earth, we floated on our leaf bed, then quarreled our way out to below the deck again. Finding no friend, no foe, yet frenzied fairies and varmints aplenty, we hugged the halo of our quickly crafted raft, sending shock waves for defense against invaders. All that dreary day we soaked in the freezing rain and made tea in the emerging grasses. Exhaustion was eating its way around my body and you, made into the queen's costume, sit there stupefied from hunger. We are lost. Our team has gone asunder, leaving shreds of shame and blame to float along side the raft.

No way to stay dry. Don't know how to sink or swim. Can't even try anymore. We are nearer the shore of leaving that staying. Everywhere, there are watchful eyes. This planet with its azure skies and vengeful inhabitants is not the dessert I was promised. No one is home on this planet. Of course, there still are the bourse and undulating gorse whose feathered filigree finances our race to the finish.

We cannot win this contest. What's it all for? For bounty? For fame and good looks? Our lives don't depend on it—yet. We are lost, cold and hungry. Let's go home.

*Note: Previously published in Trouble Among the Stars Issue 2*

## Thomas Zimmerman

### Insomniac Sonnet #31

Our greyhound Trey's a Theban jackal statue  
 when I cut the lights to sip the scotch  
 and let the dark myths in. We trot through woods,  
 we hump across a wind-scoured plain. My body  
 lies in pieces, broken by the will  
 to conjure nightmare. Drunken bats, horned owls  
 on acid: thoughts that just won't straighten out  
 and land. The borrowed robe of sister-wife's  
 clung tightly round you, safe within your papered  
 chamber, but a thunderhead has risen,  
 dragging shadow and hard rain across  
 our found horizon, loosening moist wings  
 and fashioning a magic cloak to wrap me  
 in, sarcophagus that makes me whole.

### Suburban Murmurs

Our one-eyed demon slithers through the gaps  
 between the western stars, and we think we  
 are running for our health. We stop. I fear  
 the veiny elder hunched behind my breast-  
 bone drumming softer, dream him clutching at  
 a cup of clotting grog. You bear your horror  
 silently, its weight a god of bricks:  
 and all those goddesses locked tight inside  
 your vault. The moon's snagged in the neighbors' tree,  
 an opiate dissolving in an addict's  
 stream, unholy host clawed in a witch's  
 dozen-fingered hands, the pubic bone  
 of Hecate thrice-thatched with asps.  
 Our beloved ranch-style home's a coffin.

### Snake

Alone, I sip strong beer, arrange the under-  
 reconstruction life we tore apart  
 so many years ago that we've forgotten  
 how it fits together: piles of glinting  
 parts, as beautiful as weaponry  
 to pacifists. Outside the kitchen window,  
 siding slats: old baby-boomer beige,  
 new cream of the millennials. The house  
 has shed its skin. Last night, hair stylist buzzed  
 me good, the clippers set at 4, unlucky  
 number, close to Chinese word for *death*.  
 Now, something fanged and coiled in me whispers,  
*Serendipitous*. I see—among  
 the sloughed-off selves—a bright new love, hissing.

**Antoni Ooto****My Mask**

Still

it's more about mood  
getting used to changes

thinking each morning...  
am I the imposter  
a disguised thief with stolen promises.

Though days come anyway,  
I begin to understand...  
I own them.

Perhaps, I'll cheat death  
in yet another face  
...if I'm lucky.

**Pick**

pick...  
pick dry dig  
loosen soil

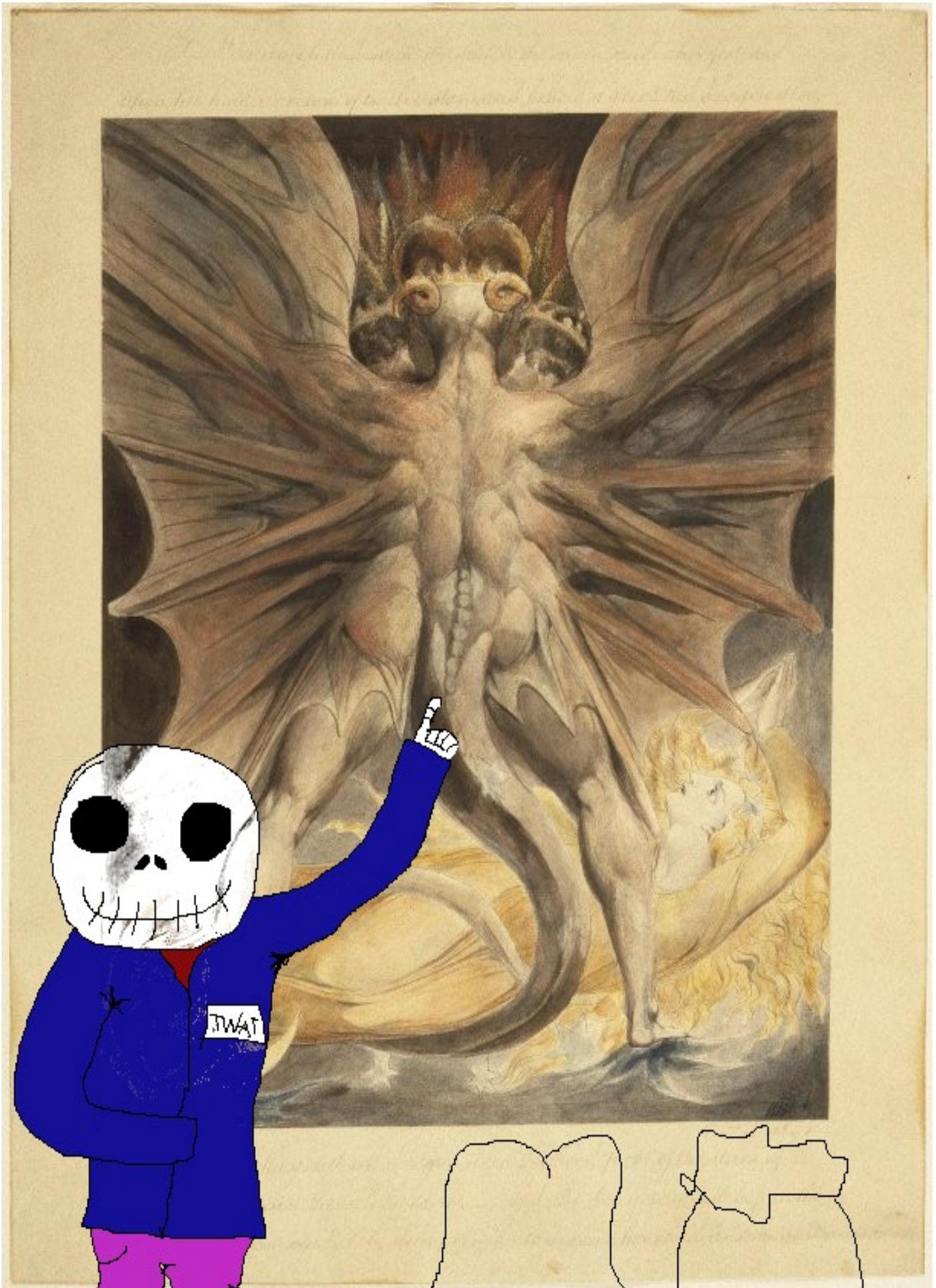
fold your hatred  
in halves quarters

lay it down  
in your trench

now fill stomp  
while counting all you've lost  
walk away

Don't look down.





## John Grey

### NO MERCY

Late night is Eddie's beat,  
inner city streets  
where, gripping a silver flask,  
he stumbles down sidewalks,  
lurches now and then into the sporadic traffic,  
or slams against a brick wall,  
or topples on tenement steps.

He's stalked by a predator,  
but each lunge, every slash of talon,  
falls short of its object,  
his walk too unpredictable,  
not in thrall to forward progress,  
more just blundering  
in whatever direction  
his head thinks it's taking him.

From my second-floor window,  
I can see the homeless drunk,  
tottering and teetering  
while a frustrated monster  
brings up the rear.

I'm stuck in this room.  
No job.  
No money.  
No company.  
My head's in freefall.  
My heart's rotted through.

But, despite my face  
pressed hard against the glass,  
the beast doesn't give me  
a second glance.  
It's a staggering drunkard's world.  
A sitting target  
can't catch a break.

**THE TRAVAILS OF MRS WOLFMAN**

Twenty-nine nights out of thirty,  
she finds her man quite dull,  
anathema to a pain queen,  
his kisses limp,  
the sex a mere mockery  
of this one-a-month  
midnight disembowelment  
of a total stranger.

She said "I do" to the guy  
in expectation of violent, bloody sex  
with a human-canus-lupus hybridization  
not a snore-fest with a mopey office-worker.

But, despite her patience,  
when the moon is full,  
he storms out of the house,  
on the prowl  
for unfortunate souls  
who wander alone after dark  
while his unfulfilled wife  
lies in bed,  
imagining sharp claws tearing at her skin,  
teeth sinking into her flesh.

So twenty-nine night out of thirty,  
she endures his presence  
and, that one night,  
suffers from his absence.

"Another dead body found,"  
says next morning's newspaper headline.  
"But not as dead as mine,"  
she sighs.

**Spectrophobia**  
**By**  
**Joanna Koch**

It comes up in a slow crescendo, like music, like waves. Kim has the feeling he's someone else. Stare at one color long enough, he looks away, and sees a different color. Kim's that color.

An object in a mirror, further away than he appears. He slams the breaks, tosses the keys in the grass, and wastes the afternoon disabling the car, pulls the serpentine belt.

Beer won't help. Kim knows better than to take this walk to the party store and pick up a six, but there's more driving his conscience than thirst. The problem isn't redemption or recovery or love lost. The problem is he can't decide.

He recognizes the girl at the register. She doesn't have her phone in her face like a normal kid.

Makes Kim nervous. He's taking too long. She watches him with her chin in her hands, elbows on the counter, head bobbing up and down while her jaw clamps and unclamps a piece of gum.

Kim feels like a thief. Has a fifty in his pocket. Feels like a thief anyway.

She's behind him watching the security mirror. He moves nothing but his eyes. She straightens—oh, shit—and comes out from the counter. Kim can't run. She's coming around the endcap, heading down the aisle, straight into his path.

"You need help?"

Kim yanks the cooler open to escape her reflection.

She moves and traps him again. "You okay?"

The squishing suction-cup sound of her gum washes over Kim. Wet mint wavelets splash against a dock at the end of a polluted sea-wall. She leans around Kim's arm, insistent on eye contact.

Cold air from the cooler slides up Kim's sleeve. Goosebumps in his armpit. "D-do they still make regular beer?"

"Oh god, right? Like eight thousand microbrews. Bud and Labatt's are over there." She nods at a display and chomps while she talks. Slosh, snap, squomp. Kim could listen to her teeth all day.

"Do you think—should I try—something new?"

She grins. Kim can't keep his eyes away and spots the baby blue glob bobbing between her teeth like a rubber robin's egg, perpetually crushed.

“Okay, so you want to stay away from the IPA, cause word is: man boobs. If you want my opinion, try the Shyster or Crocodile Pass. They’re not your average American piss water, but light enough if that’s what you’re used to.”

“I’m not used to anything.”

“Amber isn’t bad if you want more sweetness, more body.”

More sweetness, more body. Yes. “W-what do you want?”

“Me? Oh, I like this one.”

The girl pulls a crate from the highest shelf. The pack has four bottles instead of six. The label is black, brown and orange, like Halloween. Kim’s not sure, but the label might be French. Bells ring. Customers come than go. Traffic jam at the lotto register. The man behind it yells:

“Sasha!”

Sasha smiles at Kim. The blue robin’s egg dances in and out of the negative spaces formed by the machinery of her mouth.

It’s impossible to look away. The machinery always wins.

“Don’t you, shouldn’t you—”

“Fuck him.” Sasha turns her head halfway over her shoulder and says, “Shut it, old man.”

The man abandons his post, wounded dignity creasing his brow. The line at the register huffs and fidgets. He plows through the crowd, looms over Sasha, and speaks in solemn Arabic, or maybe it’s German. Kim’s white, he can’t ever tell the difference. The wicked gleam in Sasha’s eyes amps the monologue up. She’s silent, smacking her gum. The man rests his case and she hits him like a viper, spitting out punchy syllables and hissing glottal stops.

Kim inches escape from the mass of excited eyes. The lotto line disintegrates into a mob. Unconscious fists curl and clench. They circle, prepared to witness a pit fight. Kim cringes towards the exit.

Realizes he’s empty-handed. Reaches for a pint of Jack. Thinks *fuck, it’s free*, and grabs a fifth of Appalachian Trace. Feels more like a murderer than a thief. Throws his fifty at the counter, misses, flees. His footsteps drown in the automated laughter of car engines gunning through a caution light.

###

Kim fades on his porch after dark. A firefly without a spark. It’s too cold to be outside, but the whiskey warms him. The porch isn’t a porch, it’s a busted slab. He finds the right spot to balance a

camp chair facing out back. Weeds under moonlight are more bearable than unfinished projects inside, less confrontational than the disemboweled car in the drive.

Peace is all the stimulation Kim can stand.

Neighbors sleep. Insects chitter.

Footsteps like gunshots. A head snaps, crackles, and pops over the privacy fence. "I saw what you did."

Something clatters along the slats. A jumping moon travels west. A face flashes above the warped wood, letting out a sing-song voice, a child's voice. "I'm gonna make you pay-ay." The pop-pop-pop of gum rattles Kim like fireworks.

The moon quits moving and dips. Clacking and smacking stops. It melts below Kim's line of sight. Kim tracks an interrupted figure writhing behind the slats. It huffs and heaves. Then a pink blouse balloons over the fence. It's followed by a flying jacket and a pair of jeans that tumble and thud. Something sling-shots past Kim's face: a bra lodges in a woody shrub. Kim careens across the jagged concrete, opens the gate, and drags the crazy bitch off the street.

Sasha's down to her jockeys and socks. She waves an open bottle of Scotch. "Looky here. I brought you a present."

Kim grabs her jacket and wrestles it over her torso, more or less. Sasha cackles and resists. A light flicks on at the neighbor's and floods over the fence. Screen door squawks. Kim rushes Sasha inside. He doesn't turn on the lights.

They hunker by the back door, out of sight.

Sasha hiccups, then burps. "Oh, shit. I think I swallowed my gum."

###

"You can't stay," Kim tells her.

"Why not?"

"What would your father say?"

"He's not my father. He's a dick."

"Okay, maybe for a minute. Are you hungry? Thirsty?"

Sasha raises the bottle of Scotch in answer and tosses a shot between her teeth. In the darkness, shadows billow like smoke. The quick glint of enamel in her grimace gleams. She pounds the shot like a novice. Coughs.

"Take it easy."

“Fuck you.” Sasha takes another swig and then stamps her foot three times. “Damn, damn, damn.”

Kim seizes the bottle. It’s for her own good. But once he’s got it, he might as well have a drink. No, no he shouldn’t. He’s had enough. Maybe just one. Kim’s at his back window, with the view of a billboard for some personal injury lawyer. Guy in a smarmy suit flashing expensive dental work. The graphic accuses and convicts Kim: *There are no accidents*. So, yeah, it’s obvious. Everything happens for a reason. One more drink can’t hurt.

Sasha rummages through the clutter and debris while Kim has a taste. After all these years, Kim’s house is a permanent construction zone. Sasha’s a nosy squirrel. Tools and building supplies piled deep.

“Careful.”

Kim’s eyes don’t adjust to the dark. His exponential buzz blurs the scene into mud. Sasha’s way too interested in the circular saw, trying to spin the blade with her fingertips. Kim’s about to intervene when she picks it up by the handle and turns it on. Deafening, she waves it at arm’s length.

“Whoa, whoa!” Kim leaps away. Sasha hoots and swings the saw back and forth. She trips over the cord, catches herself, and giggles so hard she drops the saw. Still running and roaring, it skitters in a circle and skims past her bare toes. Sasha plays hopscotch with the spinning blade and claps her hands as it shoots away propelled by its own torque. Kim lunges for the power outlet and yanks out the cord.

Sasha stops hopping when the blade goes silent. “Shit. You’re going to kill me.”

“I ought to!”

“No, you really are.”

“Don’t touch anything else, okay?”

“Don’t freak out. I’m not going to call the cops.”

“Maybe you need to leave.”

“It won’t do any good. You’ll kill me anyway.”

“I didn’t touch you. I got you dressed.”

Kim thought he was sober. He must be drunk because he can’t see Sasha until she opens her mouth. He catches quick flashes from her shining teeth.

She tells him: “I see ghosts in mirrors. Things that follow people around. Drifting along all sad or confused or angry. Hopeful sometimes, too. But what I saw with you, man. Holy shit.”

Kim's face goes cold. His throat plummets to his feet, rocks the floor beneath him like he's on a listing ship. He steadies himself, palm on the wall. The surface feels like gauze. "Why are you here?"

"I told you. You're going to kill me."

"D-don't say that."

"It's true. I'm not sure how it all goes down. I just know when you do, it won't help anything. It's more than you can handle."

"Get out of here."

"No way. I'm not a victim. I'm taking control of this crap right now."

Sasha stumbles over a loose stack of tiles and catches herself in a graceful thump, landing next to a gallon bucket of grout. She fishes for the spilled Scotch in the debris on the floor. After a massive gulp, she hands Kim the bottle.

He shakes his head no.

Then he takes it.

"Never did get married." Kim lets the whiskey linger before he swallows. It's toasty and burns like a curse from heaven. "Whatever you think you saw—"

"There's no reason to lie. I like you. Which kind of sucks."

Kim leans against the wall to make the house stop moving. "When you look in the mirror, do you see yourself?"

"Of course."

"So how do you know you're not a ghost?"

"I'm here, aren't I? As alive as you are."

"More so."

"Does that mean you're ill?"

"It means I'm not sure I'm here."

"You're lucky to have other possibilities. I've got no better place to be."

"I told you to leave."

"I told you I like you."

"Why does it have to be like this?"

Sasha takes the Scotch from Kim. "All night long, that stupid bell in the store keeps ringing. People come and go like robots. Every time it ding-dongs, I die inside. When you came in, something changed. Isn't it ironic?"

"That doesn't answer my question."

“Really? Or is it that you’re not listening?”

Kim tracks Sasha’s movement by the moonlight reflected on her teeth. He can’t get over how bright they gleam when she speaks. Wonders if he’s the ghost. “Show me your teeth.”

Sasha grimaces.

“Good. Now take a drink like that. Let me see your teeth while you do it.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

Sasha tries to take the last shot between gritted teeth, but most of the Scotch dribbles down her chin. She purses her lips to funnel it into the right place. Shakes the bottle out over her tongue. “All gone. How sad.”

“Bite the glass,” Kim says. “Bite off the end of the bottle, and eat the glass. Will you do that for me?”

“Fuck no.”

“Then I guess you’re right. I’m going to kill you.”

“Duh.”

Kim didn’t want it to be this way. He didn’t ask her to come back. Kim doesn’t even drive anymore. The whole thing was an accident. Why does the machinery always win?

Sasha smashes the empty bottle backhand across Kim’s jaw. Splinters of glass sting his cheek.

Sasha lights up the dark when she speaks. “If you want to kill me, you have to kiss me first.”

###

Crush, crack, split. The sound of Sasha’s mouth hurts Kim’s eyes. No matter how many decades heave over Kim’s belt, every episode is the same as the day they first met.

“They need to come out.”

“Kiss me again.”

“Your teeth.”

“I get it.”

“Then stop talking nonsense.”

“Go to the bathroom. Turn on the light. Look in the mirror.”

“There is no mirror.”

“You took it out?”

“I don’t remember. I guess.”

"Where's my bag?" Sasha roots through the tangle of glass and demolition waste on the floor. "I have a compact. Oops." She falls, palms down, on her knees. Shuffles through the drywall dust. Sits up with a pink plastic circle in her hand. Opens the case and looks at Kim's reflection. Kim's coming with a pair of vice-grip clamping pliers. "I told you to leave."

"Don't do this. I'll always love you."

Kim takes the little round compact from Sasha's shaking fingers and feeds the mirror side into her mouth. "Bite."

White enamel cracks the cheap glass. Blood pops from the slivers that slice her moist lips and tender tongue. Sasha tries to swirl enough saliva around the shards to insulate her sensitive membranes. She gags on the soupy mixture of blood, spit, and glass. She lurches forward to vomit. Kim catches her at the waist and presses a hand over her mouth until her gut stops heaving and she swallows. He lets her drop.

Sasha gasps and wades through the littered floor for a piece of broken mirror. An acid burn bores through her esophagus. Spikes lodge in her chest. She locates a slender triangle shard. The edges of the broken glass slice her fingertips. Sasha pushes the mirror at Kim, showing him a moon-like face.

"Kiss me." Blood glops out of her mouth.

Kim studies the mangled orifice. Puzzled, he looks at Sasha, then into the triangular mirror and back. It's some sort of mimicry, some sort of trick.

The edges of the broken glass slice his fingertips. He holds another shining prize in the grip of the clamping pliers. His mouth is a burned out hole, rimmed in red. White enamel accidents populate the floor beneath him with points of light, illuminating blood stains, liquor bottles, dust, tools, and broken glass. Kim's gutted gums glisten.

The whining comes and goes like a distant siren. Same as the pain: distant and split like an impossible color. Kim's that color.

Wants to be less.

One more out and she'll leave him to rest in peace. Make the machinery stop. He won't let it win this time around. Kim draws the triangle shard close to get a good angle, aims the pliers at the broken white light glaring out of his mouth, and leans in to Sasha for one last kiss.

## Can you say that?

Denise Chick

His body marked with words

Of people he once knew

The ones he forgot to tell

Forgot to say I love you

Left him tied in knots

They just up and died

He never got to say it

Wrote it on the outside

Ink is no substitute for words

He should have made a sound

Its all too late now

They are not around

He sits on the fence

Taps into his phone

As if thumbs on a keyboard

Can make you less alone

His fingers

fly across the keyboard

He has to type fast

because he has to type fast

If he types fast

the words will last

Right!

Isn't that how it works

Its all badly spelled

He clutches to that phone

That phone is his world

Its only when he's shouting

That he makes any sound

Everything in capitals

Shouting makes him proud

Someone yells out

'Jack the lad,

Jack the lad'

But Jack the lad is dead

No one got inside his head

He was talking too loud to be heard

In his head the screen keys

are bullets

In his trousers

excitement grows

Who is he

He doesn't know

The fence is a wall

You can build walls really high

Keep your feelings well at bay

Protect yourself, the world is a lie

He says 'Perhaps if you weren't so.'

She says 'You can stop there.

If I weren't is enough.

I don't have a gender

I don't have a name

Labels aren't any good to me

I don't stay the same.'

She leaves. Exit left

He just sits there on the wall

Bereft.

Just as the world changed

given over to the science nerds

He puts on a pink shirt.

But its too late for scented words

He calls Sofia

They tell me I should talk he says

But not what I should say

She is called Sofia

At least she was the other day

They are all called Sofia

They are not all called Sofia

What happened to Sofia?

Sofia isn't here

Sofia doesn't know.

Nobody knows

There are things you cannot say

Most men are nice.

Can you say that?

## Puddle Hoppers

### Heather Pagano

The sound of footsteps in our apartment jolted me awake. I flung off the covers and cringed in the sudden cold. My paperback slipped from my chest and landed with a loud slap on the bedroom floor, making Ella whimper in her sleep.

I swear I hadn't nodded off for more than an instant. I'd meant to watch over Ella while she slept because she had such a bad cold.

I peered through the crib slats to check on her. Even with her stuffy nose, Ella slept hunched like a little nugget, her rump high in the air. She smelled of the menthol ointment I'd rubbed on her chest to help her breathe.

A dish clanked in the kitchen.

My heart squeezed. My first muddled thought was that my wife was alone in the kitchen. I sniffed for the rotten egg odor of gas, but all I got were menthol fumes, so strong that I could taste them.

The sharp smell woke me up enough to remember that Coira couldn't be in our kitchen. She was in Galway with her mother.

So who was in our apartment?

I stared at the closed bedroom door, fixing my attention on the brass handle, terrified that it was about to turn.

"Vershnaixinn." A man spoke. His growling voice was low.

"Whizzig...whaan," another voice said.

Then a third voice, much quieter than the other two. "Leebly libby lai."

There were intruders in our apartment, speaking gibberish. They outnumbered me at least three to one. If I had any chance of besting a single intruder (I did not), I had absolutely no hope against three.

I wanted to dive under the covers. But since Ella's birth that May, nothing was more important to me than keeping her safe. Hiding was not an option.

I crept out of bed and tiptoed across the parquet floor in the fuzzy socks Aunt Bethany had mailed me for Christmas. They were slippery and sent me stumbling into the bedroom door.

I cringed and grit my teeth, then fumbled for the lock. With my ear to the door, I could make out the men muttering in their strange, guttural language. It wasn't Brabantian or Limburgish or any other dialect I'd expect to hear in Antwerp. It wasn't Irish – I'd learned a little Irish to surprise Coira on our second anniversary.

I dug into my bathrobe pocket for my phone, but it wasn't there. I returned to the bed, ransacked the sheets and comforter to find it. Then I remembered having left the phone on the living room sofa.

Could I risk a dash to the living room so I could call for help?

On hands and knees I peered through the narrow crack under the door. It was impossible to see anything in the dark hallway. I ground my teeth like crazy, a bad habit I'd thought to have broken until the stress of the past few months had overwhelmed me.

Approaching click clacks startled me back from the door. In my panic I knocked into Puddle Hoppers, the abstract Coira had painted when she was pregnant with Ella.

I caught the canvas before it clattered to the floor. It had been propped against the side of the dresser since before Ella was born. Ella had arrived a month earlier than expected, and hanging Puddle Hoppers was only one of many plans abandoned in the chaos.

#

"What d'you think of it?" Coira said. Even after two years together, I still thrilled at her Irish brogue. "What d'you see?"

Coira had given English coaching to a distinguished Antwerp painter, who in turn offered Coira lessons in his craft. The resulting painting now left me in the awkward position of hiding my dislike for it.

I'd fallen in love with Coira and her larger-than-life emotions. But there were times it was better not to stir up those emotions too much.

I tried to stand back from the painting to get a better look, which was difficult because I was holding it. At seven months pregnant, Coira wasn't good for holding up much of anything.

I propped the painting against the sofa and took a few steps back. The new perspective didn't inspire me with any encouraging feedback to offer Coira.

The abstract was a series of sheer, coppery streaks of acrylic swirled over a stained mahogany backdrop. Textured patches of burlap and thick salmon and turquoise splotches added to the confusion. The overall impression was of a mud puddle with candy wrappers and an old-fashioned potato sack dropped in.

"What did you call it?" I asked.

Coira tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "Puddle Hoppers."

"I get the puddle. There's definitely the sense of a pool of water.

A dirty pool of water, I thought, but did not say.

"Who are the puddle hoppers? The spectators?"

"It's not a museum piece, Andy, for goodness' sake," Coira rubbed her round belly and bit her lip. "I didn't create anything so high-falutin' and philosophical as all that."

#

In the grueling nights after we brought Ella home from the hospital, I'd spent hours staring at that painting. I'd gazed into the coppery swirls and splotches of turquoise and salmon until the vague outlines of faces suggested themselves to my sleep-starved imagination, like finding shapes in clouds.

But right then I was staring at the back of the canvas and evaluating it as a potential weapon or shield.

Something heavy rammed into the bedroom door.

Puddle Hoppers slipped from my fingers.

Ella's eyes snapped open. She wailed.

The intruders certainly heard her.

I dashed to the window and yanked on the sash, but it didn't budge. Painted shut.

Two stories below, in a pool of light from the streetlamp, a man in an overcoat hovered to light his cigarette.

As I pounded on the window to get his attention, he tossed his used match into a dirty, ice-crusted pile of snow, then passed on into the darkness.

The bedroom door rattled in the frame.

"Whizzig...whaan."

"Leebly libby lai."

I decided Coira's painting would make a terrible weapon. I gripped the bedside lamp instead.

An arm smashed through the door.

I stared at the bloodied, groping hand that burst through the wood. It was long and thin, its fingers tipped with sharp, pointed claws.

I ran to the wall that adjoined our neighbor's apartment. He'd told us quite plainly that sound carried through our bedroom wall into his dwelling.

"Mijnheer Jacobs, help!" I banged on the wall. "Emergency. Help! Help!"

Help, as I teach my English students, is the same in Dutch as it is in English.

No response from Mijnheer Jacobs, not even a reprimanding thump of his cane.

Our bedroom door ripped off its hinges.

Wielding the lamp, I bounded between the intruders and my daughter's crib.

A bald man wearing a burlap sack peeked his head around the door frame. His broad mouth swung open as though on a hinge, revealing an enormous maw lined with jagged teeth.

He could have devoured Ella in one ravenous bite.

Below him was the second intruder. He had a pointy chin, beaked nose, long arms and legs with bony joints beneath loose, leathery skin. He was slack-jawed and had only two teeth jutting from his lower gums. Pieces of the bedroom door jutted from his hands.

And beneath the second, a third figure peered around the doorframe—a heavysset man with wide, half-closed eyes and fat, pinkish, pursed lips and rosy cheeks. His burlap shirt was too short to cover the fullness of his belly. The Fat Man's gaze flickered to me, then he quickly looked away.

"Get out!" I squeezed the lamp with trembling hands. I repeated the demand in Spanish, French, and Dutch before running out of languages.

All three of them stared at me with glimmering, deep-set eyes, like blue stones pressed into their leathery faces. I knew where I had seen those faces before. They were the faces I saw in Puddle Hoppers, Coira's big emotions come to life.

The Puddle Hopper with too many teeth spread his jaw wide in a thin, razor blade grin. He gnashed his teeth together, then lurched into our bedroom on big, clawed feet.

I swung the lamp, but my blow was cut short. It was still plugged into the wall.

The strong, scrawny man slapped the lamp from my hands. He pinned my arms behind my back and forced me to my knees.

While he held me down, the grinning man who gnashed his teeth scooped Ella from her crib.

Ella shrieked and kicked in Gnasher's arms. Phlegm stretched between her straining lips. I wrestled with all my strength to free myself from the Strong Man.

He gripped me even tighter and smacked his gums in my ear. Warm saliva oozed down my neck and onto my shoulder.

Never taking his eyes from me, Gnasher backed away. I caught one last glimpse of Ella's flailing feet. Then Gnasher disappeared down the hallway, taking Ella with him.

I lunged. I managed to get free. But the Strong Man backhanded me and knocked me to the ground.

I shook my head and struggled my feet.

The Strong Man bolted from the bedroom. But any hope of escape died when the Fat Man rolled in to block the door with his doughy bulk.

I wound up to a running start and plowed into the Fat Man's bare belly. My hand sank right into his flesh. His heavy body sucked in my fist, my wrist, my forearm. Inside the Fat Man was cold and gelatinous. My fingers lost all sensation. I scrambled backward and managed to pull my deadened hand free.

In my haste to free myself from the Fat Man, I tripped over Coira's painting. My numbed hand failed to break my fall, and I landed on my face.

It was then as I gazed at the painting that had tripped me, that I first noticed how Puddle Hoppers had changed. Coira's abstract art had vanished, and something very different had taken its place.

#

Coira leaned over the plexiglass bassinet and fingered the fine tufts of hair on top of Ella's head. "She's so tiny."

Coira's lilt thrilled me, the way it always had, but something in her voice sounded different just then.

A raw throat, I decided, after hours of screaming in the delivery ward.

Or maybe the only difference was my imagination. Nothing had felt quite real since Ella's arrival. Adrenaline tingled along my spine, threaded with occasional, heady waves of exhaustion.

We had done it. We had created a person.

She was, indeed, tiny. And so fragile. I vowed to protect her at any cost.

#

Before I could be sure of what I'd seen on Coira's canvas, the bedroom lights went out.

I was blinded, but not deafened. Somewhere in the apartment, Ella shrieked.

A flash of light painted the darkness electric blue for just a moment. Then I was blind again.

Fingers crawled all over me. I recoiled from their pointy, sharp nails and dry, cracked skin.

My arms were grappled behind my back. The Strong Man.

Something soft and squishy oozed over my feet. Pins and needles tingled through my numbing legs. The Fat Man.

Then I heard Gnasher's grinding teeth.

The blue light returned, casting shadows of the three men on the bedroom wall.

I writhed in the Strong Man's grasp. I struggled to kick my legs, but with the Fat Man's cold flesh on me, I couldn't even feel my toes.

Gnasher leaned over me. He smelled of sour stomach and old fish. In one hand he held my smart phone. The other hand dangled limply at his side.

I refused to be afraid of him. "Where is Ella?"

Instead of answering, Gnasher shoved the phone screen in my face to show me the picture he'd taken of me during the first blue flash. There I was, hunched in the dark, my hands held up as though to ward off a blow.

Gnasher watched me recognize myself in the picture. He threw back his head and cackled. His long ears jiggled with each fresh wave of laughter.

Gnasher bumped my nose with the touch screen repeatedly, pulling it back each time to see what effect it had. He held up one of the resulting screen configurations to show The Strong Man and The Fat Man.

I lunged to grab the phone.

Gnasher dangled it over my head as though I were a small child and he enjoyed holding my toy out of reach. The Strong Man giggled and thrust his sharp knees into the small of my back. The Fat Man showed no reaction. He only felt heavy on my feet.

Gnasher's jaw unhinged like a snake's. He popped my phone into his mouth and chewed. Engineered glass splintered between his teeth.

The Strong Man wheezed with delight as Gnasher gagged on the device for which I still owed ten installments.

Gnasher chomped a few more times, belched, and pounded his fist on his chest.

The Fat Man folded his double chins to his chest and moaned softly.

Still belching, Gnasher retreated from the room. He glanced at me once over his shoulder, which made him stumble a little. Then he disappeared down the hallway.

The moment he was out of sight, Ella howled.

“Don’t hurt her!”

The Strong Man dropped me and The Fat Man trundled off my legs. I surged to chase them, but my legs and my whole right arm were nothing but pins and needles.

The Strong Man and the Fat Man picked up Coira’s painting and held it between them. They turned it this way and that, looking at it with puzzled expressions. Although they must have come from it, they seemed as confused by the changed painting as I’d been.

The Strong Man flipped the painting to examine the back of the canvas, giving me the opportunity to see its front.

Puddle Hoppers was no longer a painting, but a blank canvas stretched over the frame by the expert hand of the Flemish painter. It was as though Coira had never painted it.

I gasped. But not because Coira’s painting had evaporated from the frame. I was shocked that what I had seen on the canvas before the lights went out, the image that had earlier taken the place of Coira’s painting, was no longer there.

#

I slid the cold mug of tea from between Coira’s hands.

No reaction from Coira.

I dumped the tea down the sink.

No reaction.

I rinsed the mug. “I think Ella may be starting to teethe.”

Coira didn’t answer.

“Did you hear me?” I spoke loud enough that Mijnheer Jacobs next door certainly heard. Mijnheer Jacobs heard everything that went on in our apartment. He must have been relieved that our sex life had seemingly ended.

“Have you felt around in her mouth? The ridge of the tooth is poking through the gums.”

Coira rolled the edge of the table cloth between her fingers.

“Her first tooth, pretty exciting.”

I was drying Coira’s mug. It was her favorite, the one with the four-leaf clover. I let it slip from the dish towel and crash to the floor.

Coira’s face remained impassive as I gathered the ceramic shards, protecting my hands with the towel.

#

The canvas was bewitched.

By now I was sure, absolutely sure, that the three intruders were none other than the faces I had long divined amid the swirls of Coira’s abstract, come to life. Coira had painted her oversized emotions into the abstract, they were the Puddle Hoppers. And the canvas had gone blank when they’d spawned from it.

But the second image I had seen on the canvas was something altogether different from the abstract Coira had painted. It had been so lifelike I’d have sworn it was real.

And now that image had vanished as spontaneously as it had appeared.

I wanted it to return. I wanted what it showed to materialize in the room instead of the Puddle Hoppers.

The Strong Man propped the empty canvas beside the dresser. He cast one look back at it, then scurried from the room.

The Fat Man loped after him.

I writhed on the floor. My legs were still too numb to move. By then Gnasher could have eaten Ella whole, and I was powerless to even attempt a rescue.

#

I strapped Ella to my chest in her kangaroo sling and boarded the Antwerp Pre-metro. Coira had demanded time to herself. Non-negotiable.

I’d been relieved to see Coira’s fiery personality return after all the vacant staring into tea mugs that had been going on.

I made it to all my English students with Ella in tow. I received praise from a Flemish grandmother for how well I’d fed and diapered Ella on a park bench.

But I never got to tell Coira about the woman at the park. The fire truck outside our apartment building eclipsed the day's adventures. My gut twisted when I saw our neighbors huddled on the street, Coira not among them.

#

As I lay paralyzed, the minutes passed in silence that left plenty of time to imagine ways the Puddle Hoppers might harm Ella: setting her inside the toilet bowl; a lit match dropped on the junk mail pile; or doing what Coira had done: turning the dials on the kitchen stove and letting gas creep through the apartment.

I dug the elbow of my one good arm into the parquet floor and slithered toward the hallway.

#

Ella stirred from her snooze in my lap and stared with great fascination at the nurse pattering around Coira's bed in her purple scrubs and blue face mask.

My jaw ached. I realized I'd been grinding my teeth.

The nurse tinkered with Coira's IV, then peeled off her exam gloves and squeezed one of Ella's legs. "Think kindly of mother, little dear."

Of course I understood the nurse was really addressing me, not Ella. I resented her meddling.

The nurse smiled at Ella, crinkling her face mask, then left.

Ella popped her thumb into her mouth and nestled into my chest. Her eyes grew heavy.

I looked up to see Coira peering at us with keen attention. For the first time in months our eyes met.

"Will Ella ever be safe alone with you?" I asked.

Coira's face blanched.

I regretted asking the question.

But before I could take it back, I lost Coira. Her eyes skimmed away, she stared out the window over my shoulder with the same blurred expression that had gazed over all those cups of untouched tea.

I had my answer: Coira had to go away if I wanted to keep Ella safe.

#

As I drug myself across the bedroom floor, an agonizing current of sensation tingled through my right arm. Would the effects of The Fat Man gradually wear off?

I reached Coira's canvas and examined it. The image I had glimpsed for only a moment had not returned. The canvas was still blank.

I flung the blank canvas on my back to carry it with me. Then I wriggled into the hallway.

Outside the bedroom door the Strong Man had curled up on the floor to sleep. He had an odd way of sleeping on all fours, his face pressed to the ground, his bony bottom pointed up at the ceiling.

Beside him, the Fat Man squatted on the floor. He rocked miserably from side to side. He pretended not to see me, though I was sure he could.

Then the Fat Man cringed, and the Strong Man stirred and woke. I'd heard it, too: the sound of Gnasher's grating teeth.

Gnasher turned the corner. He slithered along the floor like a snake, pushing Ella in front of him. Gnasher glared at me with such hatred. I was sure he'd gotten down on his belly to stare me down, eye-to-eye.

Ella blinked. She snorted through her stuffy-nose. Her hair and sleep sack were powdered with fine metal shavings.

"Give her to me!" I drug myself toward my daughter. Hope surged as feeling returned in my hands.

I could still save her.

Gnasher's hinged jaw grated from side to side. Metal shavings shed from his razor teeth.

My legs were jelly, but I flexed the fingers of my right hand and pulled myself forward with both arms. I lurched toward Gnasher and Ella.

But before I reached them, Gnasher tossed Ella into the air.

I failed to reach Ella in time, but the Fat Man fumbled for her. He caught her and clutched her to his round, soft belly.

The moment the Fat Man touched her, Ella started to sink into his body. Her head and her wiggling arms suddenly went limp.

"Ella!"

The Fat Man gazed down at Ella's unmoving body, then at the Strong Man, who now lay sprawled, motionless, on the floor.

The Fat Man rocked Ella like a broken doll. The tighter he held her, the deeper she sank into his soft belly.

The Fat Man's cold, gelatinous flesh had numbed my hand and legs dead. If Ella's tiny body was submerged by him, if he stilled her tiny heart?

I gripped the blank canvas in my only good hand and tipped it, trying to shake what I had seen earlier back into the frame.

On his belly, Gnasher sneered at me. The worn remains of his jagged teeth glinted. He snatched the painting from my hands.

But I wouldn't let him take it. I grit my teeth and snagged a corner of the painting. We had a tug of war between us to possess the canvas.

Gnasher's flat, turquoise eyes gazed deeply into mine.

If you have ever looked into a funhouse mirror, and known yourself, but yet not yourself, reflected back to you in the glass, you may have some inkling what I experienced then.

You see, I'd believed the Puddle Hoppers were Coira's big emotions, gone dangerously wrong.

But this Puddle Hopper, Gnasher, wasn't Coira's. It was mine.

And the Strong Man...suddenly it filled me with dread that he lay motionless, as if dead. The Strong Man was the twisted funhouse reflection of Ella.

The Puddle Hoppers reflected the three of us. Coira had cast some part of all three of us onto that canvas.

A slow, thin smile spread over Gnasher's face. He jerked the canvas from my hand and flung it down the hallway.

I drug myself toward the painting, elbow over elbow.

But Gnasher was ahead of me. He reached it before I did.

Gnasher lofted the painting above his head, poised to smash it against the wall.

I tackled him.

Gnasher rolled beneath me.

I wrapped my arms around his leathery neck and pushed his head so he was forced see the blank canvas.

I gazed into it, too.

And then, just like magic, it reappeared--what I'd glimpsed earlier on the blank canvas returned -- Coira, tossing and turning in bed at her mother's house in Galway.

It was a living painting that stirred and shifted. Coira kicked her feet beneath the pink eyelet bedspread in her childhood bedroom. A squirrel outside her window scurried across a power line.

Then a sharp, chemical smell stung my nose and the back of my throat. Gnasher bucked in my arms.

I looked up from the painting to see mahogany stain trickle out his ears. It squirted between his ruined teeth, splattering my face.

The Strong Man gushed brownish paint that puddled like blood around his motionless body.

The Fat Man belched globs of copper-colored acrylic.

I skidded through the puddle of paint around the Strong Man and plunged into the Fat Man's melting flab. My fingers found Ella, slick as the day she was born. The two of us were slippery with the Puddle Hoppers' paint.

I was terrified by Ella's limp limbs and lolling head. She was totally unresponsive.

With Ella under my arm, I clawed my way across the slippery floor. I thrust one paint-smattered hand on the canvas.

I called for Coira.

#

Ella and I tumbled through the painting.

We landed, soft streaks of peach and brown acrylic, on the edge of Coira's bed. Ella crashed into Coira's stomach. I slid off the side of the bed and cracked my head on the nightstand on the way to the floor.

A gasp came from the bed. Coira bounded to her knees and hugged Ella to her chest. Tears, faint nuggets of acrylic white, slid down her cheeks and splattered the top of Ella's head.

Ella clung to Coira. She rubbed her nose and lips back and forth across her mother's shoulder.

Ella hadn't died. Tears spurted from my eyes.

Coira stared at me, her mouth parted in surprise. She looked from me to Ella, back to me again.

I tested my legs and was able to stand. "We want you to come home."

Coira said nothing, gave no reaction, just like during the worst of the depression.

My stomach sank. Words couldn't bring Coira back, yet they were all I had.

Ella took a mouthful of Coira's pajama lapel and gnawed it.

Coira stirred. She extracted the lapel from Ella's mouth.

I tried again. My voice was barely a whisper. "Will you come home?"

Grey brush strokes streaked worry lines across Coira's face. "I can't give you the guarantees you want," she told me, "that I'll never get sad, that no harm will ever come to Ella."

"I still think together is better than apart."

Coira held Ella close and rocked her side to side.

I climbed into bed beside her and wrapped both my girls in my arms.

# KarmaMart

## David X Reiver

A thin black streak of tarmac split the darkening desert in two. What vegetation there was out there was hiding in the shadows. Far on either side of the road were massive, impassible slabs of rock. Above, a creeping black void was eating away at what blue shades remained, the remaining few flashes of reds and oranges taking refuge behind the mountains. If ever there was proof of an indifferent God, it was that valley.

On the road a solitary speeding vehicle, its lights incapable of piercing the black soup surrounding it. Paint caked in the dust of a thousand miles, tires sliding down the road like margarine in a pan, the car flit down the road as a descending comet, hurtling toward a bright ball of light some miles further down. Inside sat four strangers, all heading in the same direction, each silently convinced of their own superiority. It had been a quiet drive.

‘Will we make it?’ said Eunice from behind the driver.

Virgil looked down at the luminous markers behind the wheel. ‘We’re driving on vapours, but yes. I think so.’

Emergency blinkers dinged to signal they had a different idea. The engine coughed and whimpered, agreeing with the emergency lights. Momentum slowed until the car stopped with a jolt some two miles from the station.

‘At least, I thought so,’ said Virgil.

‘Great,’ came a deep voice from the back. ‘I knew we should have stopped earlier.’ The voice opened a door and stepped out into the darkness.

‘Where are you going?’

A slight rock of the car. ‘Put it in neutral, we’ll push it to the station.’

'There wasn't a station since the last time we filled up, remember?' Samira asked from the passenger seat.

'That was a long time ago, let's just get where we're going and be done with it,' the voice, Clay, called from the behind them, pushing the car forward as he did so, his words strained.

Clay pushed the car alone the whole distance. He was the largest of the group, a former rugby standout whose career ended not with an injury but with a job offer. A flagging sense of chivalry would have prevented him from letting either of the women help, not that they would have considered offering to do so. Virgil, as the driver, was also uninterested in helping. The three of them sat inside in silence, windows wound down, with only the distant crackle of insects, the metallic creaking of an unwilling vehicle pressing forward, and Clay's furtive panting reaching their ears.

They could see it clearer now. Once just a glowing star in the distance, the station beckoned with its blurred, unflickering lights. KarmaMart, letters spelled out with bright red neon bulbs, with a never-closing convenience store hidden behind the glare of the pump stations.

Clay gave the car one final nudge then walked away to catch his breath. The other three couldn't see him for the light. They exited the car and stretched, the creaks and pops of their stiff joints sounded like a popcorn machine.

'Well, then,' said Virgil, still contorting his neck for one last snap. He walked alone into the store.

'I guess I'll pump, then,' said Samari. 'Please don't smoke here.'

'Or what?' said Eunice, smoking.

'They have signs and everything. I guess people like you didn't need to learn to read growing up though.'

'I read fine, thank you.'

'I bet your butler does all the reading. Where is he, anyway? Why even ride with the rest of us?'

'I don't remember.' Eunice flicked the unfinished cigarette into the void. 'There? Happy? Will you shut the fuck up now?'

Samira rolled her eyes as Eunice limped inside. The gas pump stopped, the car full once more. She looked at the tiny digital screen at the price. £170,000,000. A mistake, surely. Definitely. The receipt printed

out confirming that, yes, she had just been charged that amount. She snatched the little parchment and stormed into the store.

Inside, Virgil was already arguing with the attendant. He was grasping at a small bag of peanuts with one hand and pointing at the attendant's chest with the other. It was a gesture Samira was acquainted with well, the 'let me talk to your manager' power move of the fabulously wealthy.

'I want to talk to your manager,' said Virgil.

'I am the manager,' said the attendant. His badge said Oengus.

'Well listen here, you cretin, I'm not paying that much for these nuts.'

'No, I know you're not, you're paying that plus a late fee now.'

'The hell I am.'

'This is KarmaMart. You agreed to our terms when you walked through the door. Oh, wait, yes, now there's another late fee.'

'I could buy and sell you, you little pissant, what ma...'

'Then you don't mind paying, then. Hurry, before there's another late fee. Plus interest.'

Virgil sighed and fished through his wallet for his platinum credit card. While he did so, Samira stepped up to the counter.

'Hey,' she said, putting the receipt down, 'This is a mistake, right? There's no way I'm paying this much for gas.'

'Oh, but you already have paid that much for gas, Samira. Already financed and everything.'

'You can't be serious.'

'As I was just trying to explain to your friend here, this is KarmaMart. Everything is based not just on your wealth but your, well, your karma.'

'I run marathons every year, I give money to the homeless, I...'

'Photo op, tax write off, money laundering. Don't pretend you're a good person, Samira; nobody who comes through here is. The fact is you have almost a half billion pounds worth of vacant property you're sitting on. And you want to talk to me about helping the homeless? Please.'

Virgil pushed Samira to one side and slammed his credit card onto the counter. 'Here, you piece of shit, cash me out.'

Oengus chuckled. 'Too late, sir, there were too many late fees so we've had to put a freeze on your assets until the bill is paid in full. Do you have anything else you can pay with?'

'What's your game, buddy? Give me one reason not to jump over this thing and beat the shit out of you.'

'Why would you do that? I'm just trying to make money. How many people do you think your investment firm has ripped off? Killed?'

'Don't take the moral high ground with me. What I do is business.'

'Oh, well, then so is everything I'm doing. That's fair, right? Enjoy the peanuts.'

'This fucking guy.'

Virgil tossed the peanuts onto the floor and walked to the automatic door. Before he could exit, though, a plexiglass cell fell down from the ceiling, encasing him inside. He turned, his face had become a ball of veins and spittle, eyes scrunched and mouth silently screaming at the glass as he banged his fists against his new prison.

Oengus pressed down on a red button and spoke into a microphone. 'You can come out when you've calmed down and paid the cleaning fee,' he said.

'What about me, can I go? I'll be talking to my lawyer,' Samira asked.

'Do whatever you want, but you owe me for air rental now. Half a million for breath. And don't try to leave or I can legally burn you for eternity.'

Samira was a lot more level-headed than Virgil and understood what was happening. She closed her mouth and tried to slow her breathing. If she could just think there was bound to be a way out of it. Just as long as there weren't any distractions.

The door of the ladies' bathroom started banging.

'Hello,' screamed Eunice. 'Hello, I'm trapped inside the bathroom. Can someone let me out?'

Oengus winked at Samira as he walked over to the locked door.

'Is that Eunice?' he asked.

'Yes. Who is this? Let me out please.'

'No can do, babe.'

'Look, I understand you're out there trying to make some kind of point but whatever it is, can you do it with the door open?'

'That's up to you, Eunice.'

'I get it, because I'm rich, right? Well I'm not apologising for the hard work I've put into my brand.'

'Hard work? Your great-grandparents owned slaves. That's where the family wealth came from. Your grandparents, cousins I might add, used their influence to steal land. To steal land. And your parents? Do we even need to discuss them?'

'What's that got to do with me, though? I've done nothing but work hard since I was sixteen.'

'What, modelling for your uncles clothes line?'

'There's the Equality label I started.'

'Oh, yeah, I forgot about that. You can come out now.'

The door jostled. 'Really,' said Eunice.

'Don't pretend that's anything more than a self-serving clothing brand. You've made a billion off of South Asian child labour just so you can pay for a couple of upper middle class suburbanites to go to college. If you were really about equality, no... nothing about you has anything to do about equality, this conversation is over.'

Oengus pressed a small button on the side of the restroom door. Thuds echoed from inside as Eunice tried to force her way out. But it was too late, a barrier began to lower, encasing the ladies' restroom with a thick, impenetrable shell.

'It's like you said,' Oengus shouted, 'Anyone can do what you have done if they dream hard enough. So dream, Eunice. Dream. Anyway, sorry about that, you were saying? Your breathing bill is pretty high, you should probably pay it soon.'

Samira considered it, but she thought back on her career. Even if she paid the breathing fee, there was bound to be some hidden charges waiting for her when she did so. No, unless she wanted to spend her days

banging against walls in a desperate attempt to escape, she was going to have to play KarmaMart at its own game.

'All right, you've got me, I'm a bad person. I'm sorry, OK? It was wrong of me, I've been selfish and greedy and I'm sorry.'

'Oh you're sorry? I'll just change your charges now.'

'Thanks so much.'

Oengus tossed a crumpled receipt at her. 'Except I'm being sarcastic, obviously. What does sorry do? Sorry is a self-serving word for your benefit, not me, not the people you've hurt.'

'I've hurt no one.'

'Get a grip. All those empty houses. You've priced good families out of a livelihood, a future, you're complicit in the deaths of tens of thousands of the homeless, you've held an entire generation of people at ransom. And you've hurt no one? Get fucked.'

Samira began to cry. 'How do I fix this?'

Oengus smiled. 'Finally a good question.'

As he leaned in to explain, the side entrance opened. A small electronic bell chimed overhead. A young couple walked in, woman with child, man beaming. They hovered over the rotating doughnut display while the automatic coffee machine poured out a cappuccino and a decaf tea. The man placed their cups in a tray and held it with one hand and the love of his life with the other. They walked to the counter, deaf to the banging from the restroom, the front entrance, blind to Samira who stood right beside them.

'Is this all?' asked Oengus.

'Oh!' said the pregnant woman, who waddled over to the candy aisle and retrieved a bag of chocolate coated peanuts. She waved them in the air like a triumphant hunter. Her lover looked at her with absolute adoration. They kissed as she placed the bag of chocolate coated peanuts onto the counter.

'Isn't that special,' said Oengus, scanning their good. 'Huh, look at that, this is on the house, guys, have a safe trip.'

'Thank you,' said the man as he picked up their snacks. They floated out the station with their arms interlinked.

'That's how you do it, Samira,' Oengus explained. 'Sorry doesn't change the things you've done or the impact your choices have had on others. It's too late to go back, now, you see. But...'

'But?'

'We're always hiring, Samira. There's a countless number of empty roads just like this one, each with a KarmaMart of its own. The job would do you good, you know. It's a time to reflect. You'll meet a lot of people from a lot of different places. And maybe you'll understand, finally understand, what you didn't most your life.'

Samira looked at Virgil still trying to shoulder way out of the glass, then at the happy couple outside getting back in their car, and finally at the two-for-one special on off-brand cheese balls.

'I was going to be a painter,' she confessed. 'I think I lost my way somewhere out there on the road.'

Oengus came out from behind his stall and put a hand on her shoulder.

'You and me both. Come on, I'll get you an application.'

Clay stood engulfed in the darkness outside looking at the glowing blur of the gas station. He had been dreaming of this moment all his life. For years he just thought it an reoccurring nightmare, some latent childhood regret, warped and repressed as the years went by. Inside his reckoning was waiting, a price he could never pay. The things he had done. The things he hadn't done. He had staggered drunkenly onward in life never expecting to pay the bill, but there it was, in all its linoleum and fluorescent glory.

He sat on a rock and looked upward. The sky was vacant, no stars to admire, no final moment of splendour to take with him inside, just a vast darkness that would one day consume him. In the distance a lone coyote yipped as it pursued an anonymous prey. He hadn't heard coyotes since his summer in... Ah, he realised. It was all coming back to him.

'Time to pay up,' he muttered to himself as he pushed himself off his rock and staggered toward the light.

Maybe his life would have played out in a different way if he saw the dreams as a warning, a sign. Maybe. But he didn't, and that was that.



## BIOS

A heartfelt thanks to all this issues contributors, to those reading right now, and to anyone else who likes getting thanked. This project could not exist without the hard work of those included.

If you're thinking of submitting something yourself, please hop over to [eldritchlake.com](http://eldritchlake.com) and see if you'd like to share your work with us. Now that Issue Zero is out we will be working even more hard to create a supportive network of artists while also developing future issues to fit our style. Thank you once again for being part of this, the most initial of stages.

[ ] [ ] can be followed on IG at @parttimeinteresting, although they only updates about once a year. [ ] made their start as a ghostwriter and producer before shifting to more creative exploits. They regrets this decision.

**Simon Christiansen** Simon Christiansen is a writer and indie game designer living in Denmark. His work has appeared in anthologies of Danish science fiction and is forthcoming in the future "Birds" issue of Lackington's Magazine. He has also written several award-winning works of interactive fiction in English. His web page is [www.sichris.com](http://www.sichris.com).

**Shane Ticehurst** Shane is from Perth, Western Australia. This is his first published work and he believes writing silly things is important. You can follow him at @TicehurstShane on Twitter and on Insta at @blamsoor.

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**Judy DeCroce**

Judy DeCroce is a poet / flash fiction writer and avid reader. She has been published in Plato's Cave online, Pilcrow & Dagger, Amethyst Review, The Sunlight Press, and many others. She is a professional storyteller and teacher of that genre, as well as, leading workshops in flash fiction. Judy lives and works in upstate New York with her husband writer/artist Antoni Ooto.

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Fabrice Poussin teaches French and English at Shorter University. Author of novels and poetry, his work has appeared in Kestrel, Symposium, The Chimes, and many other magazines. His photography has been published in The Front Porch Review, the San Pedro River Review as well as other publications.

**Edward Ahern**

Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had over two hundred fifty stories and poems published so far, and five books. Ed works the other side of writing at Bewildering Stories, where he sits on the review board and manages a posse of four review editors.  
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**Josie Columbus**

Josie Columbus is an aspiring author based out of Milwaukee, WI. She has been writing for as long as she can remember, and considers it her passion as well as her favorite pastime. As a trans woman, she is dedicated to increasing diversity by normalizing and celebrating the queer experience in Science Fiction and Fantasy. In her free time, Josie enjoys road trips, cooking, and tabletop games.

**J.L. Moultrie**

J.L Moultrie is a 30 year old poet and fiction writer based in Detroit, Michigan. He fell in love with reading and writing after encountering Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Rainer Maria Rilke and others. His work appears or is forthcoming in *Datura Literary Journal*, *Abstract: Contemporary Expressions*, *Visitant*, *Backchannels*, *The Free Library of the Internet Void* and elsewhere. He is a dog and cat dad and holds an Associate of Arts degree from Wayne County Community College.

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- Klaus Grossman** Klaus is cryptologist and amateur photographer. His upcoming showcase fuses coding and archived photography as a commentary on the invisible system controlling the human experience.
- Annette Gagliardi** After teaching in the Mpls. school district for thirty years, Annette is now volunteering in classrooms to share her love of literacy. She has authored two children's books, several curricula and a host of poems that have appeared in newspapers, online and print magazines and in over forty anthologies.
- Annette has poetry published or forthcoming in the Gideon Poetry Review, OWS Ink LLC, December issue of Moon Magazine, Dreamers Creative Writing Online, Down in the Dirt Online Magazine, the Moccasin, vol. LXXXI, the Poetic Bond VIII, ASPS Sandpiper, Dreamers Creative Writing Year 1 Anthology. She has poetry in and is one of two editors for the anthology, Upon Waking: 8 Voices Speaking Out From The Shadow of Abuse. She teaches poetry at a nearby elementary school as a volunteer. She has won two national and four state awards for her poetry.
- Thomas Zimmerman** Thomas Zimmerman teaches English, directs the Writing Center, and edits *The Big Window Review* <https://thebigwindowsreview.com/> at Washtenaw Community College, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. His poems have appeared recently in *Rune Bear*, *Panoply*, and *Hunnybee*. Tom's website: <https://thomaszimmerman.wordpress.com/>
- Antoni Ooto** Antoni Ooto is a poet and flash fiction writer. He came to writing late after many years working as a well known abstract expressionist artist. Through reading and studying many poets, Antoni found his voice. He has been published in *Front Porch Review*, *Amethyst Review*, *Pilcrow & Dagger*, *Young Ravens Literary Review*, and many others.
- He lives and works in upstate New York with his wife poet/storyteller, Judy DeCroce
- Jim Zola** is a poet and photographer living in North Carolina.

- DJ Domingez** DJ is a classically trained artist and poet but none of that means anything any more.
- John Grey** John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in *That, Dunes Review, Poetry East* and *North Dakota Quarterly* with work upcoming in *Haight-Ashbury Literary Journal, Thin Air, Dalhousie Review* and *failbetter*.
- Joanna Koch** Joanna Koch writes literary horror and surrealist trash. Author of the novella "The Couvade" and other short fiction, their work has been published in journals and anthologies such as *Synth, Fable, Honey & Sulphur*, and *In Darkness Delight: Masters of Midnight*. Consume their monstrous musings at [horrorsong.blog](http://horrorsong.blog). @horrorsong  
[amazon.com/Joanna-Koch](https://amazon.com/Joanna-Koch)
- Denise Chick** Based in the UK, I write for enjoyment. I write on a variety of themes but most recently have been writing more poetry with the occasional flash fiction murder mystery. My blog can be found at [Tuesdaylatte.blog](http://Tuesdaylatte.blog)
- Heather Pagano** Heather grew up in small town Iowa. On family drives around farm country, collapsing barns tickled her imagination, and the abandoned riverside factories downtown gave her an unshakeable love for the decrepit and haunted.
- She went on to study classical trombone in Upstate New York. She's since lived in Italy, New York City, and now lives in Silicon Valley. Her work has appeared in *Aleyone* and *Spank the Carp*. She's excited to have a story in the *Haunted Life Anthology* coming out this Halloween from Alban Lake Publishing.
- You can find Heather online at [heatherpagano.com](http://heatherpagano.com) and @HeatherPagano.
- David X Reiver** David is a writer.



Dear reader:

Why are you still here? No, no, don't get us wrong, it's nice that you are. We didn't want it to end either. A heartfelt thanks for reading all of this and/or skimming all the way to the end. Of all the things you could have done today, you chose to read this, and that's made our day if nothing else.

Thank you,

The team.