

T H E

oddville press



S P R I N G 2 0 1 5

C O V E R A R T

Feather

Katherine Ace

Katherine Ace has an ongoing fascination with both figurative and still life painting. Her work posits, plays with and subverts realism, is deeply involved in contraries and opposites, and has a feminist orientation. She finds inspiration in art from ancient times to the present. Her influences are many and include: Arthur Dove, William Blake, Greek sculpture, Balthus, Da Vinci, Magritte, E. Vigee Lebrun, Varo, Carrington, Fantin-Latour, Emily Carr, Asian Thangkas, Dutch flower painters, and too many contemporary artists to list.

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the oddville press

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D I S C L A I M E R

For some reason, since the nineteenth century, it has been perfectly normal in Western culture to write about murder, violence, cannibalism, drug-taking and other terrifying experiences without putting in a disclaimer. But ordinary, everyday experiences, such as being naked, using swear words or having sexual intercourse, are considered unsuitable for impressionable children. Odd though the Oddville Press has always been, we think it wise to adhere to convention in this case, so parental discretion is advised. The Oddville Press considers a wide variety of literary work. Nothing is included purely for its shock value, but sometimes, good art is a little shocking. This book is aimed at adults. This is not the same as “adult content”: it means content for actual grown-ups who are actually mature. If you aren’t an actual grown-up then please don’t read the Oddville Press, or at least, don’t complain to us if you do.

Thanks for reading,
The Management

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Spooky House

Ron Yates

I NEVER WANTED TO go into that old house, but Jack loved doing shit like that, rummaging through old barns and abandoned shacks just to see what he could find. I'll admit it was fun sometimes, the feeling of intruding on another life, even though that other life had long since departed. And sometimes we did find stuff—knives, old books, bottles, antique car parts, rusty tools—random, cast-off items that were not quite worthless. We didn't think of it as stealing. Jack rationalized, saying, "Nobody wants this junk. It's just sitting here wasting. We can find some use for it." Honestly, though, he was always looking for that rare find, some valuable relic he could sell for a bundle on eBay. I went along for the ride.

We passed the house on our way to our afternoon and Saturday job at the big fireworks store just over the state line. Getting there from campus took thirty minutes over curvy rural roads. It was too far to go for college students working part-time, but the money was good and the work easy. It was much better than the last job I'd had, tossing pizza and serving beer at Gianni's Place in Aaronville. Finding a decent job in a college town can be tough, especially when you have a natural aversion to work.

Getting on at Crazy Bob's Fireworks had been easy because Crazy Bob is my uncle. I grew up in a fireworks family. My father helped start the business with Uncle Bob when I was a kid, right after the interstate opened up through Okatchee, our one-traffic-light town. Jack thought the whole fireworks thing was really interesting. "What do you do in a fireworks store, besides sit around and wait for the Fourth of July and New Year's Eve?" he asked. "How did your family ever get into such a business? How did they make the connections? I mean, is there like a directory of wholesale fireworks suppliers or an association of distributors? Did your dad and uncle attend a marketing seminar? Go to conventions in Vegas every year?"

I'd try to explain that it's like any other business—selling products at a profit and trying to do lots of volume, and that being right off the ramp of a busy interstate just inside the state line that declares a product legal on one side and forbidden on the other didn't hurt. Jack thought the whole thing seemed "improbable"—that he'd end up being roommates with a guy whose uncle Bob sold fireworks on the side of the interstate. When I told him we could both get jobs there, that he could see firsthand

what you do in a fireworks store, he laughed. "How random is that! Sure, I'd love to work at Crazy Bob's." He smiled, looking at something in the distance, probably already imagining how he would update his Facebook profile.

Jack is a pretty cool guy, I'll admit. After all, he came to Aaron-Maslow on a baseball scholarship. And he looks like the frat boy type with his thick, sandy hair, athletic build, and Abercrombie and Fitch clothes. But he's not. Which explains how I met him and how we got to be roommates. I'd decided by the beginning of fall semester to get away from Okatchee and my parents' house. Mom and Dad were happy for me to stay at home and commute to classes each day, but I'd realized that I was missing out on some important aspects of college life, namely being able to drink and party all night. I discovered that there were some old houses for rent off campus that were cheaper than staying in the dorms, especially with a roommate to share expenses. So I put up a few notices on the bulletin boards and an ad in the college paper.

When Jack called, he suggested we meet at Suds and Silk at four in the afternoon: happy hour. This place was an old Victorian house near campus that had been converted into a restaurant and sports bar. I got there first and took a booth in the corner across from the big flatscreen mounted on the wall. The sports announcers were in their fancy studio giving rundowns and showing clips from the week's contests. They showed a crowd of screaming Argentine soccer fans. There had been a shooting before a game, and police in riot gear were trying to control them. Then they shifted to a championship ultimate fighting match. They replayed the clip at least three times of the loser getting kicked in the head and collapsing in a heap. The other guy jumped on top of him and punched him twice more in his

face before the referees pulled him off. I was thinking about what a rough sport that was and how crazy those guys must be when Jack walked in.

We shook hands and said, "Glad to meet you." Then, as soon as he settled into the booth, Jack ordered a pitcher of draft. He seemed incredibly thirsty, drinking about half of his sloppily poured mug in a gulp. Then he started talking and asking a bunch of questions. He didn't know much about the area, this being his first semester. He found it fascinating that I was from a nearby small town, just across the state line, and he wanted to know what it was like growing up in such a rural place. He was from an Atlanta suburb and had attended a high school with about two thousand students. He told me about his baseball team going to state, and how the scouts had recruited him, but it wasn't like he was bragging. In fact, he talked about himself in an offhand way. He was more interested in my life and what we did for entertainment "out in the country."

"Where is the nearest mall?" he asked.

"Thirty or forty miles," I answered, "either east or west, toward Atlanta or Birmingham. Take your pick."

This seemed hard for him to grasp. He'd grown up practically in the middle of shopping malls and skate parks, pizza places with arcades, multi-plex theaters. He shook his head and began to look around the bar, along the walls and up to the ceiling, like he was trying to figure out a riddle. I decided it would be a good time to tell him about cow tipping, how it was a favorite pastime among my old high school buddies. This was a lie of course, cow tipping being more rural myth than an actual practice, but I figured it would play well with this guy who'd probably never been around a real cow.

He answered, "Yeah, right. This sounds

like one of those stories where the wise farmer makes a fool out of the city slicker. I've already tried cow-tipping. Cows sleep lying down. If they're standing there and two or three guys walk toward them, they just move away. Whole thing's a myth. You're gonna have to do better than that."

Impressive. I conceded that we didn't really cow tip, but we did spend lots of time drinking beer and riding around the back roads, which we had plenty of. "Within a few minutes," I said, "I could have you so far out in the sticks, you'd hear banjos playing, like in that old movie *Deliverance*."

"Cool. Let's do it."

"Now?"

"Not right this minute. We've got a pitcher of beer to finish. Then we'll need to look at that house you're interested in renting."

So, that's how it got started. We decided talking to a potential landlord after drinking so much beer would not be a good idea and spent the evening instead cruising through some of the rural areas surrounding Aaronville and the campus. I took him out Hog Liver Road, toward the state line. This winding route provides a shortcut to the interstate, one exit before Crazy Bob's. It also passes by that damned house that should have been bulldozed.

We both had our bellies full of beer and had reached the lethargic stage, but Jack leaned forward and craned his neck as we passed. "Wow!" he said, noticing the black hole on the back side of the roof from the fire and the yellow crime tape still hanging limply around the front porch. "What happened there?"

The story was fresh in my mind, even though several months had passed since the tragedy occurred. It was the kind of thing that stayed with you, especially since it happened so near to where I'd grown up. I even knew

the people—the victims and the perpetrators.

Four old people, the Bledsoe family, had lived together in that farmhouse for years, ever since the brothers, who had never married, were born. The brothers were in their fifties, and Mr. and Mrs. Bledsoe... well, who knew how old they were? They were farm people in the old-fashioned sense—loved and respected in the community. They raised all sorts of animals—everything from goats and pigs to exotic roosters, turkeys, and guinea fowl. They kept bees and sold honey. They also sold vegetables every summer from a large, well-tended garden, and they usually ran thirty or forty head of cattle inside their fenced, rolling pastures.

They possessed skills that most everyone had either forgotten or never learned. The elder Mr. Bledsoe was one of the few left who could re-cane old porch rockers with strips cut from white oak and ash trees. When I was a kid my mom took him a chair to fix, and I remember being amazed at the time he was willing to spend on such a tedious task. It must have taken him the better part of a week to re-weave that old rocker, and he only charged Mom ten bucks. When she pressed a few extra dollars on him, he insisted that we take a jar of honey back with us.

The brothers, Ned and Willard, had skills of their own. When they were young, they got interested in Volkswagens and turned one of the old barns into a repair shop. For about a decade they produced all sorts of souped-up Beetles and dune buggies. They were still taking on the occasional restoration project up until a year or two ago. I remember many times riding by the house with Mom or Dad and seeing a fixed-up Beetle, shining like brand new, sitting under the oak tree in the front yard with a for sale sign in the window. They also restored old John Deere tractors—the ancient, two-cylinder kind that made the thump-thump

exhaust sound.

And motorcycles too. Willard, the younger brother, became a British bike enthusiast, of all things. According to the stories I grew up hearing, he always had a need for more speed than they could get from those old Volkswagens, even the souped-up ones, and he was famous for ripping up and down the winding roads on his Norton 750 Commando. Their collection over the years of motorcycles, VWs, tractors, and parts had accumulated to the point of filling up a couple of old barns and a chicken house on the lower side of the property behind the white, steep-roofed farmhouse. These buildings were visible from the road, and the area residents often speculated about what they contained.

Everyone thought the Bledsoes were rich. That besides the treasure concealed within the barns and outbuildings they had cash stashed inside that old house, up in the attic maybe or buried under the back porch. And, like anywhere else, Okatchee and the surrounding area contained its share of derelicts, drunks, and dope heads. Crimes that had in previous years been unheard of had been on the increase lately. Thefts, burglaries, even a couple of rape cases—and meth labs were springing up everywhere. A county-wide drug task force had been initiated, and the sheriff's department had added a cruiser and a couple of deputies.

My parents and most of the older folks blamed the Mexicans. There had been quite an influx, attributable to the interstate that ran right through the middle of the county. The Okatchee High student population had grown considerably in recent years, and special teachers had been hired to help the Hispanic students learn English. There had been several Mexican kids in my graduating class. One of them, Hector, was involved in the crime. He

wasn't the instigator, though. I knew him from school as a quiet follower, a bit surly, but not the type to plan and carry out something like that. I blame it mostly on that other dude, Edward, who had also been in my class but dropped out in tenth grade.

Edward had always been bad—someone who would take advantage of weaker kids to get what he wanted or just for the fun of it. Back in sixth grade he kept picking on this nerdy kid named Reese who was always carrying around Manga books and Yu-Gi-Oh cards. Reese advertised his fantasy world with a vinyl lunchbox plastered with pictures of characters from the "Shadow Realm." He was an easy target.

Reese got sick of having his precious cards yanked away from him and sailed across the recess yard, and he got tired of having his peanut butter sandwiches and Oreos stolen from that Shadow Realm box. He tried to fight back one day—unfortunately for him—on the back side of the monkey bars, out of sight of Ms. Renfro. Edward made great sport of holding the chubby boy down, twisting his neck to make him squeal. Reese bucked and thrashed trying to get Edward off of him, but soon weakened, lapsing into sobs and minor convulsions. Edward, keeping Reese's arms pinned with his shins, slid down so that his crotch was in the weaker boy's face. He pressed himself against him, making sexual motions, and laughed in a raspy, hissing voice. "Squeal like a pig," he said. "Squeal like a pig." It was disgusting.

I stood and watched, along with several other kids. I wanted to help Reese, but Edward, who had been held back a couple of grades, was bigger and stronger. I was afraid. I didn't want to end up getting Edward's crotch in my face. So I stood there, trying to get up the courage to do something. I tried to at least

look away, to not provide an audience and contribute to Reese's humiliation, but I couldn't even do that. Finally, this lanky girl saw what was happening and ran to get Ms. Renfro. Somebody warned Edward, so there wasn't much for the teacher to see by the time she got there. And none of us—not even Reese—would corroborate the girl's story, so Edward got away with his cruelty as usual. I realize now that this became a pattern in his life that I had contributed to through my weakness. But, what the hell, we can't all be heroes.

I lost track of Edward after he quit school, and I don't know how he got involved with the Bledsoe brothers. The newspapers made it sound like he and Hector targeted them, looking for easy drug money. A rumor went around the community, though, that there was more to it than that. Neighbors had seen Edward's beat-up Camaro in the driveway and him and Hector coming out of the house on several occasions, weeks before the actual crime. Some thought that Willard and Ned had hired the boys to help put up a saw mill on the back side of the property; others thought there was something else going on.

That part of the story never made it into the newspapers. The accounts only focused on how Edward and Hector were captured minutes after leaving the scene of the crime and how the bank teller had tipped off the sheriff's department that something wasn't right after Ned had pulled into the drive-thru looking distressed—with Edward in the truck with him—wanting to withdraw ten-thousand dollars. She made up some excuse about the computers being down and said he would have to come back later. By the time the sheriff got around to checking on the Bledsoes, the fire department had already doused the flames.

The charred, soaked bodies were found piled on top of each other in the back room

where the fire had been started. The investigators found a blackened baseball bat, and each of the four Bledsoes had a cracked skull. The newspaper also reported that the house had been ransacked and that Edward and Hector had large sums of cash in their possession when they were captured.

That was about it, all any of us knew anyway. The last newspaper story reported, "The suspects were charged with felony murder and ordered to be held without bond." The flurry of gossip died down. It seemed that nobody wanted to talk about what had happened to the Bledsoes, but the partially burned farmhouse stood as a reminder to everyone who traveled that country road—including Jack and me, every afternoon on our way to Crazy Bob's Fireworks.

It was a dry autumn, so the leaves bypassed yellow and red, going straight to brown as they turned and fell. Jack and I started poking around in the abandoned barns and farmhouses on our way to work, pulling his Civic or my Ranger over and parking just far enough down a logging road or behind a shed to be out of sight of the light passing traffic. We never saw anybody. He often wondered where the people were who owned the old places. "I don't know," I would answer. "I guess they either died off or moved away to the city."

One old house, only a few miles from the Bledsoe place, was particularly interesting. This one had a faded for sale sign in front, which made Jack even bolder. "If anyone asks what we're doing," he said, "we can act like we're interested in buying the place." Yeah, right, I thought. We look like a couple of real estate tycoons.

It was a small frame house with peeling paint and a flimsy metal carport to one side. The yard and shrubs had been untended for some time. I noticed a dented metal dog food

bowl next to the concrete steps that led to the front porch, and a garden hose lay coiled in a tangle of brown weeds at the corner of the house.

There were three small rectangular windows in the front door, arranged in a stair-step pattern. Jack peered through the middle one. “Wow. There’s all sorts of stuff in there.” He placed his hand on the knob and turned. “Come on,” he said. “It’s open.”

I held back. “I dunno. What if the owners come up, or the sheriff?” But he was already inside. Not wanting to stand around on the porch or wait in the car, I followed.

The place had that smell old people’s houses sometimes get—the shut-up smell of space heaters, cats, and snuff. And Jack was right. There was junk everywhere, most of it piled in various heaps on the floor: blankets, quilts, dresses, books, boxes of dishes, and framed photographs of people in big-collared shirts and leisure suits standing in front of old cars smoking cigarettes. It looked like someone—maybe family members or the real estate people—had started cleaning out the place but got disgusted and quit.

The rooms were small with sticky linoleum on the floor, except for the first room we entered, which had this filthy orange carpet that looked like it had been there since the seventies. The walls were paneled with flimsy, fake woodgrain.

I was moving slowly through the debris when Jack called out from the kitchen, “Hey man, you’ve got to see this!”

When I got there he turned from the counter to face me, holding a big-ass meat cleaver, like something from a George Romero movie. “I’m keeping this,” he said.

It took me a second to recover from the creepy thoughts that popped into my brain. The kitchen smelled rancid and I noticed

several dead roaches on the floor and counter tops. “Why?” I finally asked.

“For one thing, I like the way it feels in my hand, and, who knows, we may need it to defend ourselves against burglars—or zombies.”

“I thought that’s what the baseball bat beside your bed was for.”

“True. The bat is my preferred first line of defense, but I’m sure we could find a use for this fine utensil. Come here and hold it. Just feel how heavy it is.”

“Yeah, great. I’ll take your word for it. Let’s get out of here. This place stinks.”

We finally left after Jack had gone through the kitchen drawers and the bedroom closets. He got excited over an old eight-track tape deck and was going to take it, but left it behind when he discovered half of its guts were hanging out. That meat cleaver, though, he was proud of that thing. Still has it, I guess. But no. When I think about it, I really don’t know what he did with it.

At any rate, it whetted his appetite. His desire was with us each day, hanging there inside whichever vehicle we happened to be in, as we rode by the Bledsoe’s old farmhouse. I felt it more when I was driving, and he was free to look at things. A week or so after the meat cleaver house Jack said, “We’ve got to do it. We’ve got to go in that house where those old people got killed.”

“Hell no,” I said. “I ain’t going in there. That place is creepy.”

I glanced over and saw that he was smiling at me, his opaque eyes reflecting an odd light.

So, I gave in and that’s how I came to be in this situation. The inside of the Bledsoe house has become the most vivid of my memories, and the weirdest part is now I see things in my mind that I didn’t even see that day. We did it a couple of weeks before Christmas break, went inside that place where horrible

deaths had occurred. I followed Jack's suggestion and parked my truck behind the house. Together we mounted the part of the back porch that wasn't burned.

God, I don't even want to describe it, really, or think about it, but I can't help thinking about it. The dreams are the worst part. I wake up sometimes thinking I'm there as it's happening. I hear the bat cracking against skulls, the shrieks, curses, grunts, and moans. It usually takes a few minutes to shake it off, to convince myself that it was a dream. When this happens, I feel blood pulsing in my temples and eyes. It takes effort to separate the real sounds from the sounds in my mind, but eventually, I'll hear Jack's gentle snoring and rhythmic breathing as he sleeps, untroubled by nightmares. Then I know where I am, but the night is ruined, all hope of sleep lost.

During the day when I'm sitting in class trying to concentrate, pictures flash behind my eyelids each time I blink, and I don't mean spring break images of hot chicks in thongs like normal college guys fantasize about. No, I see images of charred baseball bats, even though I didn't actually see such a thing. The baseball bat wasn't there. The police had taken it away as evidence. I wonder, though, where they found it. Part of the floor in that room was burned through. Had the murder weapon fallen to the ground where the hounds slept underneath the house?

The newspaper account didn't provide those kinds of details, the things I really wanted to know. It only said, "The suspected murder weapon, a baseball bat was discovered and collected at the scene along with other evidence." How can people write shit like that? That's another thing that's ruined for me. I was planning to go into journalism next semester and had even talked to the people in the office about getting on the newspaper staff. Now I

can't imagine interviewing people—adults, professors, deans, committee chairmen—about things like the building plans for new dormitories or the renovation of the old auditorium. I mean, who cares about that sort of thing? How can you write about the mundane things of life when you're tortured by things you've seen and haven't seen?

I see Jack in my dreams now, and Edward. Sometimes Jack is Edward and vice-versa. Edward and Hector holding the Bledsoe brothers down, making them squeal like pigs; Jack, heavy and strong, holding me down, his crotch in my face. Sometimes he has that meat cleaver. And those magazine images keep coming back to me.

There was a stack of them in one of the bedroom closets. The roof over most of the house was intact, so everything was preserved just as it had been that day, the day of the crime. The stuff of their lives was dumped out everywhere: shoeboxes filled with cancelled checks, keychains, pocketbooks, pocket knives, horse-show trophies, catalogs, walking sticks, the old woman's walker, medicine bottles, moldy encyclopedias, flashlight batteries, alarm clocks, raincoats... you get the picture. The worst part, though, was that closet. Their clothes were still hanging in there!

Those shirts, overalls, jackets, and boots got Jack really excited. He was deep into the back of the narrow space when he shouted out, "No way! You've got to see this!" I was feeling sick, but once again I was compelled to look. Jack was coming out of the closet, laughing, waving the thing in his hand. He threw it at me, almost in my face. I caught it and immediately noticed the lurid title and picture on the front. The magazine was titled Thrust, and it was filled with photos of naked men engaged in all sorts of bizarre sex acts.

"Sick!" I said, tossing it aside.

Jack grinned. “Looks like there was some kinky shit going on here at the old Bledsoe place. There’s a whole pile of ’em in the back of the closet.”

I was standing in the middle of the room, not knowing what to do or where to look. There were two twin beds, the frames at least. The mattresses and bedclothes had been dumped onto the floor. The room was arranged with a bed and chest of drawers on each side and the shared closet, where Jack was now having so much fun. The furnishings looked like they were from the fifties. Thinking about Ned and Willard living in this same arrangement they had since they were kids made my knees weak. My guts felt like they were boiling.

Jack had completely disappeared inside the closet. I called out to him, “Hey man, let’s go. This place is making me sick.”

A muffled voice came back to me: “Sure, I’m ready when you are.” Then he stepped out.

I stood blinking at what I saw. Jack was leaning against the door wearing a black leather jacket that must have been left over from Willard’s motorcycle days. It looked like part of James Dean’s wardrobe. As he held that

pose, the room began to spin. I remember him saying, “It’s a perfect fit. I think I’ll keep it.” The pile of stuff in the floor was sucking me downward and there was a rushing sound in my ears. After that there are gaps in my mind. I don’t remember leaving the house, but I do remember yelling, “Oh hell no! Take that damn thing off.”

But I don’t think he did. In the dream he still has it on. There’s this one recurring part where he’s grinning and saying, “Come on, let’s do it,” as he holds open the passenger door of a bathtub Porsche like James Dean’s. “Oh hell no! Oh hell no!” I say over and over.

I don’t believe in ghosts. Nothing really happened that doesn’t happen in a normal world. We went back to our little house in town, back to our jobs at Crazy Bob’s Fireworks, back to classes, but none of it works anymore. Nothing seems real now. There’s got to be some kind of help. Surely there are others who suffer like me, who’ve had their worlds turned inside out. I really need a good night’s sleep and some medication to help me function. That’s it—the right prescription and I’ll be fine.

Ron Yates received his MFA from Queens University of Charlotte, where he worked with many fine writers and teachers. His work has appeared in Still: The Journal, Bartleby Snopes, Clapboard House, The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, Rose & Thorn Journal, and Prime Number Magazine. Yates lives in a remote area of east Alabama on the shores of a large hydroelectric impoundment. He has been teaching high school literature, creative writing, and journalism for many years. When not writing, he enjoys hiking, taking pictures, tinkering around with old cars and motorcycles, and playing on the lake.

Buddha on The Marble Coffee Table

Lawrence Syldan

The Buddha seated in classic mode: Here is a high tilted stack of books; here is beyond vaulting dreams. And wherever is forever and never to be seen. There are modes of knowledge that must be believed before they can be known. Yet tonight his smile is wan and fey. A little dozy there, Gautama? Hmm, is that a crack or a wrinkle on the lower left cheek? This thought thinks about that thought; then that thought thinks about this thought. And Each sees in the other the annihilation of both. They hold their distance as half-formed minims. now what is that!... What ails thee, old ancient boy? Is the velocity of space too fast for thee? Are the cracks and crevasses of creation too great for thee? Is the journey from India proving too time-consuming? Do you know yet that the world is a chair of bowlies? Maybe Sara's dirty ashtray next to your flank is bothersome. I myself am old but not ancient. You and I in our own ways are more than a bit wackadoo. Enough with the saints and mages of my boyhood. Well, so long for now. I must attend last night's piles of Sisyphean dishes. Philosophy does indeed begin in wonder, and after thousands of years is wondering still...

A retired teacher and counselor, Lawrence Syldan now devotes most of his hours to three grandchildren, the ocean and woods, and to writing concoctions called poems and vignettes. He has been about the poetry circus for many years and has felt it to be delightful and boring alternately. As Syldan grows even older, the matter of style grows more and more salient to him. Most recently he has placed work in Meridian, Vine Leaves, and Dirty Chai.



Soledad

Mariya Petrova

Mariya Petrova is inspired by the spirit of Spain, and guided by the philosophy of existentialism. The photograph is a means to a freedom achieved through hard work. Her passion for photography was sparked by the knowledge of art acquired throughout life, instilled by parents and teachers of arts and secondly, the influence of her brother Kaloyan Bogdanov-Kalo, a young artist, known for his pictorial wisdom, symbolism and the freedom of his artistic creations. Artistic photography requires patience, deliberation and a clear idea of the image the artist intends to convey.

Commitment

Joseph Powell

ABOUT AN HOUR AFTER DAWN, he stood in the Yakima River, watching the flat water flow along a log. Occasionally, a dimpled swirl broke the surface as a fish slurped an emerger or small fly between the current and the soft water. He could not tell how large the fish was, but the intervals between the dimples suggested one fish feeding leisurely. The water swept lazily along then rolled over submerged branches that buckled the surface tension into small feathery vees. If he were to catch this fish cleanly, Caleb knew he had to keep the fly along the edge of the current well in advance of the branches. And when the fish took it, he would have to lead him immediately into the current. He had room to move along the rocky shore. The spring water was down, leaving a clear passage along the banks. He tied on a size 16 adams with a white parachute so he could see it in the shadows. At any time of the year, the adams was one of the most reliable flies in his flybox, but especially in the early spring.

Last night, the woman he had been dating for five years told him she was getting married. He had not seen her for over two weeks because he had combined a business trip to New Zealand with a week of fishing. He thought they had come to a comfortable understanding about marriage and their relationship. Miriam was a late middle-aged woman who could gut a fish, ride a horse, talk intelligently on almost any subject, and look good in a swimsuit. Each had gone through divorces,

had two children, and had been alone for several years before they met. Miriam worked as a buyer for the Pacific Food Co-op, did some traveling for them, but spent most of her time on the phone and computer. She was knowledgeable about wines which partly explained how they met. This morning's fishing was a way of stepping back into himself to peer at the problem, like looking at sunlight on the waves rather than directly at the sun. His mind would be focused on the water, the fly, the fish, yet images would come at him in glimpses that he could register, contemplate, shelve. His hands knew their work.

To tie on the 5x tippet and then the fly, he carried a pair of reading glasses in a pocket of his fly-fishing vest; they were a smudged, flexible plastic that allowed him to thread the eye of the hook and tie the clinch knot to secure the fly. He applied a dab of floatant to its body and was ready to cast. His first cast was short and drifted too far away from the log, caught the heavier current and spun away from where he'd seen the fish rise. The second one hit the mark but nothing rose to meet it. He couldn't see any insects on the surface; the sun had peeled back the lid on one edge of the river, suffusing the rocks and water and brushline with a rosy glow. A swallowtail butterfly was on a patch of wet sand, its wings opening and closing slowly. The first of the season, it must have been there all night.

Miriam had told him about her engagement

over the phone. Caleb sat and let her explanation flood into every corner of his house. She told him how it happened, how she just couldn't live any more with his lack of commitment, his stubborn silences. He wondered who it was, asked, but she ignored the question. Although he and Miriam had talked about marriage a number of times, he found a familiar comfort in their combined separateness which he thought gave her the freedom to make plans with her children without his assent. It gave him the opportunity to sell his product without negotiating every nuance of their mutual schedules.

His company put in MRI systems whose magnets were from 10,000 to 17,000 pounds; Caleb didn't wholly understand the technology itself but his construction company had moved into this high tech niche which required him to travel, keep up on the latest advances, and move his equipment large distances. Periods of heavy work commitments and lax weeks between projects seemed to fit his fishing needs and his time with Miriam precisely.

Caleb's divorce from his wife fifteen years ago had all the craziness of their marriage squashed and concentrated into deeply intense episodes of accusation, vituperation, and exposure. Aggrieved or severely pissed, she yelled and threw things, though soft things like pillows and slippers and paperbacks. At first, nothing heavy or breakable. She was easily jealous and vindictive. But what she resented most was his ability to walk away, to write a check and walk away. She now had custody, now had to work, had a daily schedule that he did not. She resented his independence, his male detachment that appeared too easy. When he used to pick up his kids for the weekend, she would harangue him with an assortment of rules—what precise hour to return, what each child must eat and when, how they were to dress

with the clothes she packed, how he should not leave them with his flaky friends at any time, how he shouldn't drink in their presence because she knew he liked his wine. Although he respected her fierce motherliness, her commitment to shape and protect the children—no, loved her for that—he also hated what she became, how those early years of intimacy and engagement with the world (travel, fishing weekends, fine dinners out, even folding the damn laundry together) had so morphed into the battle-ready, spit-fire hatred that caused her to move to more breakable things like his antique Chinese chess set, the snapped flyrod, the smashed photo glass and frames. And it was impossible in his mind to separate any relationship from this inevitable trajectory. He felt that any marriage had that same destructive arc, and the longer he dated one woman, the more points he saw plotted on it, knowing full well the end even before the beginning.

So when Miriam told him about her marriage, he felt that ice-pick of sorrow, but it was also the completion of the arc whose endpoint he foreknew. Yet in believing the worst, he also hoped for the best, like a gambler rolling dice—against the odds he hoped this roll would work out, would come up sixes. He knew she wanted to get married, that her upcoming 54th birthday held some talismanic fear for which marriage seemed a cure. He knew her independence was something of a ruse. As he began to scan through all the marriage conversations they had, small things seemed suddenly to have more meaning. The time she pointed out how expensive it was to maintain two homes, that it was a waste of money. When she brought up a discussion of wills two days after her fiftieth birthday. When she was going through travel brochures and said Crete would be a great place to honeymoon. When she said a marzipan cake with orange-tinted white

frosting would make a great wedding cake... He had let them all pass by as just conversation. Why? He knew what she wanted and had deliberately ignored it, deliberately repressed it. Was it meanness or some half-unconscious self-preservation?

He cast again and the fly hit the exact seam the fish was feeding from; it drifted along the edge of the still water. The trout's rise was almost imperceptible, a little pucker in the water that sucked the fly under at a swirl in the current. Caleb set the hook and the fish went into the thick water, racing downstream, peeling line from his reel. He couldn't tell how large the fish was because it wasn't wholly committed to the fight; it was merely escaping with the current. At the end of the pool, it turned back, pursuing the pressure. Caleb had to retrieve line quickly to keep enough tension on it so his barbless hook wouldn't come loose. The fish flashed out in front of him, then jumped a full foot in the air, splashing on its side. He could tell from the slightly yellow sheen that it was a cutthroat, a fat one that had wintered well. It was sixteen, maybe seventeen inches. After its jump, it came in toward him, and Caleb got his net ready, but the fish saw him and exploded across the pool toward the log, peeling line. He knew he had to keep pressure on it to avoid the tree branches, but the fish dove for the safest cover it knew. When the line went taut, he could feel the fish struggling for just a few seconds before the line broke and the leader gracefully arced back toward him like a snapped kite string in a strong wind.

He caught the end of the limp wavering line to tie on another adams. Having only come about a half mile since parking on the Riverbottom road, near the dyke, he decided to continue down-river, fishing the ripples that entered pools and caught several small rain-

bows. Looking for larger fish, he tried nymphing through the pools with stoneflies with prince droppers, but had no luck. He sat on a log to eat his granola bars and watch an osprey work a section of the river below him.

I just called to tell you that I'm getting married. He wondered how many times she had practiced the way she would tell him. Her voice was controlled and casual, like reading a headline in the morning paper. She liked to think of herself as spontaneous, but most things were calculated, factored, divided many times before she made a decision. Like when they went to Mexico: Miriam worried about getting sick, about the heat, sharks in the water, mosquitoes, getting caught in a gang drug war, being kidnapped, the food being too hot, being robbed by the hotel staff. She packed for every contingency. Yet here she had made a decision to get married in two weeks. She wouldn't say whom she was marrying—whether it was a new acquaintance or an old one. He suspected an old one; she was too emotionally well-padded to commit to a new two-week relationship. It had probably been going on for months and he didn't know about it, a newly divorced high school friend or lover. When he thought about his high school self versus his present one, there was almost no comparison. What kind of illusion was she under the spell of? Since high school, both his parents had died of cancer, his brother who had seemed to have some potential was now incapable of doing anything but very prescribed manual labor, his sister was a middle school teacher whose divorce had left her fat, tired, and empty. How much of our old selves stay with us forever? He thought Miriam was in for a big surprise.

The osprey had circled and screeched, lit on a dead cottonwood top. Then it leaped into the air and circled again, holding itself still

amid a fluttering of wings as if it were going to dive, then flew down-river, screeching as it went. Caleb hiked back to his car for it was almost 11:30. He had to drive to Moses Lake to meet with Jack Gilmour, the hospital administrator for Samaritan Hospital, by three o'clock. He knew he would see Miriam this weekend because she was coming over to pick up her things. She lived in Kirkland, but Caleb's house in Ellensburg had become their weekend country retreat. He had two days to compose his own response.

Saturday morning he got up early and cleaned the house. He even put a vase of flowers on the table, in an arrangement she might have done. He sat down to read the paper, got up to do some laundry, sat down again unable to remember which story he had started. When he heard Miriam's car door slam, he folded the paper and went to answer the door which felt odd since normally she would have come in, put down her bags and packages, her purse, as if it were her own house. After five years, one phone call made her a stranger who must knock.

When Miriam came in, she was wearing a yellow silk skirt, a white blouse with discreet ruffles around the neck and sleeve edges. A diaphanous blue scarf that looked like a replica of Monet's waterlilies knotted around her neck, neatly bisecting her breasts. She wore yellow espadrilles, a new diamond ring on her left hand. Her hair had a jaunty new cut that made her look younger. She wore pink lipstick and mascara and a little rouge, yet around Caleb she had worn very little makeup. She seemed to have come dressed as a stranger too.

"I just came to get my stuff, and I hope we don't have any discussion about this. I need to get over the pass for a meeting this afternoon," she said, deliberately looking away.

"I think the pass has been successfully transacted, don't you?"

"How perfectly you. That's just the kind of sneer I was hoping to avoid."

"Okay, fine. But don't you think I deserve some kind of explanation? I mean we've been together for five years."

"I believe that's enough explanation."

"If you were that unhappy, why didn't you say something about it?"

"I tried, a thousand times. You just didn't listen."

"Look, I told you..."

"That was fifteen years ago, Caleb. You've got to move on. Why is commitment so impossible for you?"

"I felt committed. Why is marriage the only measure of commitment? And given the divorce rate, is it a very good one? Why do you find such security and satisfaction in a convention that doesn't work? You could be divorced again in six months; five years is a commitment, whether it's the kind you believe in or not."

"It was all on your terms, Caleb. That's not commitment, it's convenience. You don't know what commitment means, you never really took the time to understand me." She had crossed her arms and stood, facing him.

"So, who's the lucky man?"

"You don't know him. It's somebody I knew a long time ago. He got in touch with me around Christmas time, by email. He moved back to Seattle and we've been seeing each other. I'm finally happy, Caleb." She had clearly decided to dismiss his sarcasm.

They had maintained their separate houses for the children, and when he was out of town she went to her own house, so he knew it was easy enough for her to carry on a relationship without his knowing it. He wondered about his inability to detect it, the blindness of his trust. Her "finally happy" felt like a pose, the sum of

her calculations.

“Well, good for you. Take whatever is yours and whatever things you want that we bought together. If you need help carrying anything, I’ll be in the study, at the computer. You don’t mind if I skip the piecemeal subtraction?”

“Of course not.”

Through the window in his study, he watched her take things out of the house: the two brass lamps, a coffee table she did not ask for help to carry, a painting of sunflowers done by a friend of theirs but one she had wanted so much he bought it for her. As she packed out each box, he knew she was taking her dishes, wineglasses, rain and winter coats from the closet, sweaters, books. He could remember when most of these things came into his house. Thanksgiving two years ago he wanted to have his family over for the weekend, yet didn’t have a pan big enough for a twenty-two pound turkey. She had brought hers over. The boots he bought her to hike into Ingalls Lake. Hers weren’t waterproof and were coming apart at the toes. The insulated raincoat was for salmon fishing in Alaska when they had booked a three day trip with another couple. It was like watching the slow reversal of time, the way one is supposed to click through events on one’s deathbed, sizing up the few meaningful experiences.

When Miriam was done and had come in for the final goodbye, he had already left through the garage door, on a long walk through the neighborhood.

On Sunday morning, he drove up Highway 10 to where Swauk creek enters the river. He ducked under the gate locked by the Northern Pacific Railroad and walked down the steep rocky road to the tracks. Through his Gore-Tex waders, the water felt cold. It was very clear and moved glassily around the boulders along the shore. The motion and

depth of the river, and sunlight on it, were always a quiet restorative, something predictable and present. Its smell was green, and the light refracted or imprisoned was mellow like candlelight. Its motion seemed content, yet it mumbled to itself—little clicking sounds, smooches, a chuckling eagerness to go on. There was direction to its restlessness, a glossy beauty in its ever-journeying presence, its static motion, its latent and deceptive power. It was the lifeblood of this entire valley and the next and had an awesome vitality that seemed to be nourishing even to his own fluctuating turmoil.

The guide at the flyshop told him yellow sallies were being taken regularly in the upper river, so he tied one on. Few insects were flying, though squalas were supposed to be out, and mayflies in the afternoon. The wind had blown strongly Saturday afternoon which left a clear wind-washed sky, a kind of sunlit sparkle on the spring morning. The pastel of young cottonwood leaves, a delicate yellow-green, made the line of trees on both sides of the river seem more tentative and orderly. He watched two cormorants with their black outstretched necks wing down-river, flying in unconscious unison as they followed its curves. Uncommon on this stretch of the river, but common enough too. He threw the fly upstream two or three feet off the shore, letting it float back toward him as he retrieved the line. He worked the boulders, the cuts in the bank, the ripples that led into pools. He caught a couple six to eight inch rainbows and released them by holding the hook and letting them fall into the water. At about 9:30 he saw a squala fly by, and then a few minutes later another one. He sat on a boulder and opened his flybox.

What he liked most about Miriam was her reliable, upbeat attitude. She could get angry or pissed off about something, but it didn’t take long to re-emerge into excitement over buds

on the flowers she had transplanted, a white moth on a window sill, the rich loamy buttery smell of the oyster mushrooms she bought to cook with chicken breasts. They were both good cooks, but she enjoyed the nuances, matching spices and herbs to the various flavors of her dishes. Even something as simple as spaghetti sauce had in it the anis from the sausage, her oregano and thyme, onions and garlic, thick tomato paste mixed with her canned garden tomatoes. He would miss her ready smile, her delighted satisfactions with catching fish, picking berries, cooking, drinking good wine. He wondered how much of that delight was for him, a kind of endearing applause to his efforts to entertain her, his money; certainly her tone had changed since her phone call. "How perfectly you" had not been part of her linguistic repertoire before, nor her pushy impatience. He knew he could be sharply ironic, needling at inopportune times, but he was used to doing what he wanted when he wanted and negotiation bothered him, questioned him, and could even seem like ridicule. He hadn't meant his little jabs as more than flickers of impatience, but she may have read them more deeply.

He had two squalas, a size 8 and a 10. He chose the ten because the ones he had seen flying were not large, besides the green on the body of the 10 seemed more natural as did the black rubbery legs. He moved upstream, reading the water for rises and depth. He saw a cut along the bank where the ripples smoothed into longer waves. His first cast was too far to the outer edge and missed the slot he thought a fish might be in. The second hit the slot at the upper end of the ripple, and the fly floated perfectly through the heavier water. The fish took the fly almost exactly where he thought it would. It was a slow roll and gulp. When he set the hook, the fish charged straight out of the cut and into the open current. It leapt

once, in a high heavy arc, then splashed back into the water. Caleb retrieved line as fast as he could until he finally caught up with it, but the fish now had the momentum of the water with it and suddenly began to take out more line. He worked his way down stream, reeling, letting out line, reeling. He eased the fish into a wide pool. It took off to the other end of it. It made another half-hearted attempt to escape but was pulled back. The net was barely large enough to hold the fish. It must have been eighteen inches and three pounds, one of the biggest fish Caleb had caught on this stretch of the river. He could tell by the prim jaw that it was a hen; its red stripe ran the length of its body and seemed to splash into opalescence around the gill plates. The black speckles that clustered toward the tail and the wavy greens and blacks of its back had the clarity and vividness of robust health. He unhooked the fish, thinking he would like to keep it and eat it, for he hadn't eaten a trout in months. But as it mouthed for oxygen, exhausted, Caleb held it gently in the water, one hand supporting its neck and pectoral fins, the other holding the thin part of the tail. He watched its desperate effort to regain that health; its whole being was concentrated on one breath at a time, one breath at a time. Its eyes had a glazed fixity, its fins were motionless. Finally, he felt a tremor in the tail muscles, a twitch, and then another one. Then its whole body began to slowly move together, his fins and head and gills and muscles moving purposefully, in unison, as she slid back into the current. He didn't know why but each fish had for him a mysterious beauty both in itself and as emblem of the vital and invisible rhythm of the subterranean world, that things below the surface of our consciousness, our understanding, had in them a magnificence and trajectory that were beyond us, yet mysteriously part of us, not in that primordial

sense of our having come from the sea and scaled things, but something deeper, something that kept us alert and spiritually alive, not “whole” as the cliché goes, but giving life and each thing more significance, more potency, more singularity, amplitude. He didn’t know exactly but felt it, as he felt that pulse in the fish’s tail, its recovered charge as it disappeared back into the deeper water.

Caleb stood up, reeled in his line, and caught the gummed and smashed fly. When he made his way to a boulder and sat down, his breathing was heavy and his hands were trembling. The sun on his face was warm. The snapping of twigs to his left made him turn just in time to see a porcupine come to the edge of the water and drink, its needles making a soft clacking sound like a walking hairbrush. Enclosed within its own protection, it moved slowly, methodically, toward the completion of its need, as if it had no sense of time or urgency. He watched it step to the shore and drink without looking to the right or left.

One of his favorite memories of Miriam was when they had stopped to buy some lumber to convert a stall in the barn into storage space for the lawn furniture. His friend owned a small business in town, and while they were talking, she told his friend she’d always wanted to drive one of those things. She was pointing at the yellow forklift. It was at the end of a slow day, most of the help had gone home, so Don walked over, started it up, gave her some preliminary instructions, and told her to have at it. She went around and around the lumberyard as fast as she could, beeping the horn, waving, moving the forks up and down,

a grin as wide as a pumpkin’s across her face. She was so completely and unapologetically in the moment that he envied this childish delight, which he seemed rarely able to achieve. Although he could fit in any social group or conversation and was good at it, he also felt a burdensome reserve, a decorum that inhibited experimentation, that stood like a giant censor over his life, keeping him from acting like a fool. Miriam waded into things, fully in the moment in a way he couldn’t, unless fortified with enough drinks to make the giant disappear.

They had met at one of the Pacific Foods subsidiaries where she was taking inventory of the Walla Walla wines that were selling. He had spoken to her about one of the wines, thinking she actually worked there. She stuck the pencil she was using in the knot of hair pinned to the back of her head, and while they talked he watched the pencil waver like an antenna as she discussed one wine after another. It was something about the pencil, maybe her sudden abandonment of vanity in the thrall of wine, maybe an alert efficiency, or her casual beauty, that made him ask to see her again.

When he got home that evening, he showered, made dinner, watched the news, and poured himself another glass of wine. He went to bed after the third. Just before he closed his eyes, he could smell the river, the tainted sweetness of the dried algae, the sticky perfume of cast cottonwood buds. He saw again the take of the large fish, her run upstream, the leap and splash, felt the twitch and spasm of her exhausted release. She cruised into the current and disappeared.

Joseph Powell has published five books of poetry and a short story collection called Fish Grooming & Other Stories. He lives on a small farm in Ellensburg, Washington with his son, Evan.

Utter a Phrase

Barry Yeoman

Come away young man
before your tent catches fire
and the liquor runs short.
Put elbowgrease into livin'
before it gets taken.
Unexpected as hell
when the hammer rolls.
Ten years gone
then look downhill.
Good luck friend
when winter hits hard.
The atmosphere now
is dungeon gray
and tinrolled wind.
Van Gogh's color went
when leaves hit cement.
All good days
are counted in blood.

Livin' hard just to get by
in the coldest season
the wind never dies.
Gag and gather all you can hold,
rain and snow
don't amount to gold.
Mr. Po Tential,
what a quirky fellow,
imagination to kill a beast
work ethic of a sloth
after eucalyptus.
Chip on the shoulder's best
to start off quick.
So it goes on wasted days,
you'll be back in bed
when all's said and done.
Even the neardead
can utter a phrase.

Barry Yeoman was educated at Bowling Green State Univ., The University of Cincinnati, and The McGregor School of Antioch University in creative writing, world classics, and the humanities. He is originally from Springfield, Ohio and currently lives in London, Ohio. His work has appeared, or is forthcoming in Red Booth Review, Futures Trading, Danse Macabre, Harbinger Asylum, Red Fez, Vine Leaves Literary Journal, Crack the Spine, Burningword Literary Journal, Two Hawks Quarterly, Broad River Review, Soundings Review and The Rusty Nail, among others. Recently, he was a finalist for the 2014 Rash Award in Poetry hosted by Broad River Review. You can read more of his published work at www.redfez.net/member/1168/bookshelf

The Angry Sun

Benn Josef

JHAN SAT BACK in his black leather seat, a cigar in mouth, and a cold Pepsi sweating on his mahogany desk. With an extended finger, he idly traced the lines of condensation on the can. He sighed deeply; even with two fans blowing in his face the office was scorching hot. He could not imagine how the ten thousand bodies, toiling tirelessly below, managed such harsh conditions. They were all a seemingly perfect copy of one another, with bent backs and bony chests, their black skin glistening under the angry red sun.

What was once a lush valley of rolling hills and green vegetation was now a ruined and battered desolation. Greed, Jhan supposed, could be held responsible for such destruction. But such thoughts were beneath him. As foreman of the Galakee mine, his sole responsibility was squeezing as much precious gold from the barren earth as possible. There might have been a time when human beings collapsing from heat stroke and exhaustion would have upset him, but now he found that it made him angry. In fact, anything that kept him from reaching his monthly quota made him angry. The suits had promised him lucrative bonuses

should he exceed last year's production; he would see it done.

The excavations had been going well these past few months. Sure, three workers had died, but the evidence was inconclusive as to whether the cardiac arrests were induced by the working conditions. And if they had been, the right amount of money would be hidden under a cigar box, or beneath a bottle of Johnny Walker Blue, to quiet any dissension. After all, the investors wouldn't let such trivial matters get in the way of production.

Jhan got up and walked towards the large, rectangular window on the far side of his office. The window overlooked an enormous crater that descended into the earth like a staircase to the abyss. Each level was almost identical in width and height, built in such a way so that the miners could track larger veins of gold and adjust the digging logistics. The men called it the pit, and it stretched nearly two miles in diameter and plunged nearly one mile into the ground.

Jhan jumped at the sound of knocking. He realized it was just the door and rolled his eyes. Lately he had been on edge. There was

talk—albeit just rumors—of the workers planning some sort of riot. “Yes-come in,” he said.

Geral strutted into the office, his brow slick with sweat, his pale cheeks flushed red. “Damn it’s hotter than hell out there. You’ve got a cold one?”

Jhan grunted, nodding his head towards the mini fridge. Geral walked over and helped himself to a can of soda. The portly man downed the beverage in seconds, gasping afterward and smacking his lips.

“God I needed that. Anyways—I came up here to ask if you think I should water the crew.”

Jhan raised an eyebrow. “Have they been watered already?”

“Yeah-this morning. Gave em a quick five minute water break. But Jhan—it’s hotter than the devil’s handshake out there. What do you-?”

“If they’ve been watered already,” Jhan interrupted, “then why are you up here wasting my time?” Jhan would let nothing get in the way of his bonus, even if that meant pushing the workers to their limits.

“I-you’re right. I’m sorry boss,” Geral said.

“Close the door behind you,” Jhan said, his tone dismissive.

Geral did as he was told and Jhan was once again alone in his office. The day was still young and he found that he was restless. He paced around his office, stopping every now and then to wipe clean a smidgen of dust from his furniture or to overlook the digging site through his window.

It didn’t matter what hour of the day he looked; the men were constantly moving, and digging, and getting Jhan closer to his quota. The poor bastards were like an army of ants, working like animals to bring home three dollars and twenty-seven cents a day. Jhan made more in one hour than these creatures made in a year. But he supposed that was the way

of the world—some men were born to be served, others to be the servers.

The cigar that he had left burning on his desk had gone out. Jhan considered relighting it, but instead decided to take a short nap on his couch. He was surprisingly tired. It was the heat, he decided. The heat always seemed to make him drowsy.

His sleep was unsatisfying, though, for it seemed he but drifted on the surface, never fully dipping into the full embrace of a deep slumber. What with all that was on his plate, Jhan often had a difficult time sleeping. Even so, it was not long before a creaking noise pulled him from his drowse.

Who would dare disturb him? All who worked for him knew to never bother him when the door was shut. He rubbed his still shut eyes and groaned. “Geral, you’d dare wake me? What is it now?” he snapped, spittle flying from his mouth and landing back on his cheeks.

“Yu a bad mon ser.”

Jhan sprung up from the couch and held an outstretched hand as if to pacify an angry beast. Before him stood one of the workers. The man was emaciated and shirtless, his head shaved, the whites of his eyes starkly contrasting with his ebony skin.

“What-what are you doing up here. Are you lost?” he asked. The door to his office was shut. Why was it shut? Who would dare allow one of the workers into his office? “Jenny!” he yelled, wondering where his secretary was.

“Mah foddah dedd beh-cuz yu not gave us water time. Ashi not stand for dis dem lack o’ joostis no longah. Now yu dedd too. Now Ashi revenge ‘is foddah.”

Jhan could barely understand what the man was saying through his thick accent. But the word ‘dead’ was all he needed to hear. “Alright friend-take it easy now. Say, do you

want a nice cold soda?" He hurried over to his fridge and pulled out a can of Pepsi. "Here you go son. Take it-take it," he said, faking a smile the best he could.

"No-now yu dedd too," the worker replied, pulling a rusted knife from the tattered and soil stained pocket of his jeans.

Jhan yelped and threw the can of soda at the man. The can flew wide, struck his favorite lamp, and burst into a flurry of fizzing soda and ceramic shards. The worker lunged at Jhan, his knife missing by only a hair's breadth. Jhan thrust his shoulder into the gaunt man and managed to throw him off balance. He awkwardly spun away and rushed for his desk, where a loaded revolver-life-would be waiting for him in the top drawer.

His sausage-thick fingers fumbled with the pull as his attacker regained his balance and made for Jhan. A desk flew open. A shot was fired. The man grunted and fell to the floor without a knife that was just in his grasp. Jhan whimpered and fell into his luxurious leather chair, four inches of steel embedded in his chest. He lay there then, bleeding his life's blood away, from a seat in which he had schemed and conspired, using the lives of lesser men for his own twisted agendas. He felt no remorse, and as he choked and gagged his last breaths, he did so with a heart full of hate. He had danced with the devil for too long. There was no turning back.

"Jhan! Wake up—hurry!"

The familiar voice of his secretary-frantic and high pitched-roused him in an instant. Jhan gasped, patting down his body to check for signs of injury. There was none to be found. He sat up and glanced to the right, towards his favorite ceramic lamp, and saw that it was intact. Just a dream then. He sprang to his feet and laughed, taking Jenny in his arms and spinning her in a full circle.

"Just a dream Jenny! We're still in business!"

"Mr. Khorfaki, please you have to—"

"I think," Jhan interrupted, "that I might give you a raise. You do good work and I'm just feeling generous today." He paused, as to not get ahead of himself. "Well maybe we can discuss a possible salary increase at our next board meeting-maybe."

"Mr. Khorfaki!" Jenny shouted, veins bulging through her neck in swollen ridges. "The work site-the men have gone crazy. It's anarchy."

The office was still scorching hot, but Jhan felt as if he were suddenly in the heart of a blizzard. He needed not go to the rectangular window to see what he already knew would be happening. Anarchy indeed. The black-skinned sheep had turned to wolves. The two water trucks were flipped over on their sides, a horde of angry men dispersing the water amongst themselves. Cars were on fire. Priceless, heavy machinery had been cast into the dig site, twisted and bent so that they would never function again.

And then he saw him. Two angry eyes, white against a glistening black face. The man from his dream, the very same man who had called himself Ashi, was glaring at him from far below. The corners of his lips turned upwards into a twisted grin, and he slowly raised a spindly finger, pointing it directly at Jhan.

In that moment Jhan knew that a knife to the chest would be more welcome than what might be in store for him. His blood turned to ice, and he wept, not for the transgressions of his past, nor for the lives he had greedily spent to acquire more wealth, but for his nigh attainment of the quota. In the end it had always come down to the quota, and time. But it seemed he had none of the latter left to spare.

He pulled open the top drawer to his

desk. The revolver, kept only for emergencies, lay within reach. He pulled it out and pulled the barrel up to his mouth. Cold steel clattered

against his teeth. Finally, after only a second's hesitation, he pulled on the trigger. Blackness ensued.

Benn Josef is a fiction writer living in NYC. He is currently enrolled at Southern New Hampshire University, where he is receiving his Master's in English with a fiction writing concentration. Though he aspires to be a novelist, he also dabbles in other forms of writing such as screenwriting and short stories. His interests lie within the realm of fantasy fiction. Some of his influences are Tolkien, Lewis, King, Rothfuss, and Sanderson. To learn more about Benn Josef and to read some of his work, visit his website: www.BennJosef.com

On The Trail to The World's Largest Doug Fir

Lowell Jaeger

we've shed zippered insulated comforts
climbed out of the tent
naked
into the damp coastal fog so thick
we can't find topmost boughs
where these giant firs breathe

both of us hushed
stepping barefoot careful
over rocks and roots and rubble
up our short path
to the icy dribble of mountain stream

then bending to splash and bathe
waking the hairs on our arms
our bodies goosebumped
smiling mute
shivering in the flow

while the wilderness surrounding us listens
knowing what can't be said
knowing all there is to know

Slaughter

Lowell Jaeger

my son ranks a platoon
of plastic infantrymen
and mows them down
with a spray of pretend bullets
hissed from his teeth

prods a lone survivor
at rubber knife point
to climb a couch cushion
and plunges him to cruel demise
face-first in the dog dish

i'm under the eves
napalming bees
after i'd dusted
an impersonal end of everything
to an anthill metropolis

while the cat corners a vole
and a screaming jay swoops to feed
on a swallowtail flitting past
the glittered bug-wings landing at my feet
as if blissfully unhinged

As founding editor of Many Voices Press, Lowell Jaeger compiled Poems Across the Big Sky, an anthology of Montana poets, and New Poets of the American West, an anthology of poets from 11 Western states. His third collection of poems, Suddenly Out of a Long Sleep (Arctos Press) was published in 2009 and was a finalist for the Paterson Award. His fourth collection, WE, (Main Street Rag Press) was published in 2010. He is the recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Montana Arts Council and winner of the Grolier Poetry Peace Prize. Most recently Jaeger was awarded the Montana Governor's Humanities Award for his work in promoting thoughtful civic discourse.

Struldbrugs

William Miller

Gulliver was rescued
by learned men
of Laputa,
the flying island.
He saw many
experiments,
though none made
sense— sunlight
extracted from
cucumbers,
marble softened
for pillows.
The strangest
of all were the men
and women
who lived forever.
Fat, bored, whiney,

they got older but
never died, the scientists'
greatest joy.
Gulliver saw the day
when there was
no death, no need
for a God at all.
And he wondered what
men would live for
when they had time,
nothing but time ...
He left the island in an open boat,
never once looked up.
When the sea got
rough, he thanked
Death for black water,
waves worth fighting.

William Miller is a widely published poet and children's author. His poems have appeared in many journals, including Prairie Schooner, Shenandoah, The Southern Review and The South Carolina Review. He teaches in the summers at Hollins College in their MFA Program in Children's Literature. He lives in the French Quarter of New Orleans.



Drifting Away

Erik Johansson

Beginning in 2005, Erik Johansson studied Computer engineering at Chalmers University of Technology in moved to Gothenburg, Sweden. During his time studying he developed an interest for retouching, using this skill to render imagined images as realistically as possible. After publishing images online, he started to get requests about commissioned work from local advertisement agencies. At that time Johansson finished his studies with a master in Interaction Design. Moving to Norrköping in the eastern part of Sweden, Johansson started working full time as a freelance artist. In 2011, Johansson also started doing photography-based street illusions. In early 2012 he moved to Berlin, Germany, a very artistic city that provided a great deal of inspiration.

Today Johansson works with both personal and commissioned projects. In November 2011 he spoke at the TED conference in London and in May 2013 at the Adobe MAX conference. Johansson's clients include Google, Adobe and Microsoft but the personal work and concepts will always be what's most important to him.

The Village

Luiza Oleszczuk

BOTH MY DAD AND I are plaster men, contractors. We were in the village in '92 or '93. Before that, we'd worked at dozens of similar villages all over the eastern parts of the country, and I never remembered the names of those villages, or the names of the people we'd met, or anything in general about those places. They all looked the same. They all were the same. Even this village looked the same.

I watched the boy during breaks. He was visiting Ms. Teresa daily; she was always sitting on a bench in front of her fence, sunning herself, like old people in the country always do. We were working on the church that happened to be across the street from Ms. Teresa's farm – a job we got after not getting ourselves fired while plastering in a different church, in a different village, further up the valley. I liked watching Ms. Teresa sit there in the sun; she had an unusual air about her that I could hardly describe—kind of detached, kind of otherworldly, as if this place and time didn't quite concern her. People bowed to her politely when passing by, but nobody stopped to chat with her, even though most villagers I've known would never skip an opportunity to stop and chat since there is never much to do in the country. I grew up in the country too, so I should know.

Later, the priest—his name was Leon or Leonard—told us that Ms. Teresa's husband “disappeared” during the war, and I felt bad for her, as it must have been hard to keep up the farm as a woman. Even though there was not much of a farm now left to speak of—the few farm buildings that were still standing had holes in the roof, and the fence around the place has mostly collapsed. The boy would come every day to fetch water from the well for the old woman since she clearly couldn't do that herself anymore.

It was the middle of the summer and we took many breaks from work, drinking beer in the shade of a pear tree next door. The priest wouldn't have any drinking on the church premises of course, so we would move to his neighbor's fence. The neighbor was an old wino who welcomed us with the earnestness of a drunk. From the shade of that pear tree, I could observe Ms. Teresa. Not that old, lonely people would care about that, I imagined.

So the only person I saw visiting the old woman, day in and day out, was that young boy who, you might think—and we did—was deaf or mute or both since he never spoke a word. He would come and fetch the water from the old woman's well twice a day, and then mostly just sit with her, and sometimes listen to the

stories she told. She was all shaky and had a small hump on her back. She wore a kerchief on her head—all old village women did.

The boy was skinny and sickly looking; pale in the middle of the summer. His skinniness made his head seem unnaturally large, especially with the big gray eyes set in it. The priest, who was a talkative man, told us that the boy and his stepfather moved there a few years ago. The man was an unemployed drunk—a carpenter by trade—living off government paychecks and part-time work. Like all of his kind, at least in these parts of the country, he would still somehow always have just enough money to buy cheap wine or vodka, and Russian cigarettes. But not enough money to buy coal for the winter. He didn't seem to care what the boy did or where he went through most of the time unless he needed him to bring the wheelbarrow with empty bottles back to the village convenience store.

"I will tell you this, Baltazar," the priest told me. "One day that man will fall asleep with that cigarette dangling from his mouth, and that ramshackle house of theirs will go up in flames. He will take the poor, innocent child with him." The priest used to say things like that a lot. He further predicted grimly, while we were busily plastering in front of him and couldn't care less, that the boy would die of pneumonia or some disease because he just seemed to have no resistance, no bodily strength. The boy, according to the priest, was showing no satisfaction whatsoever of being alive to begin with.

But none of the priest's predictions came to be. The boy drowned, about a week after we started our job. We were in between breaks, working, when we heard Ms. Teresa yelling something, and we both ran to listen. She was pointing yelling the boy's name, which was Maciek or Marcin.

The boy was found in the river; one leg sticking out of the water. It was all over the regional paper, with the testimony of the witness who found the body, a lone kayaker paddling on the river from Miedzyrzec to Biala Podlaska. He said he thought he saw a shoe, a sneaker, stuck on a branch.

The people of the village shook their heads and recalled how "good" and "nice" and "poor" the boy was, and they even felt bad for his stepfather. And then they went on about how treacherous the Krzna river was, despite its seemingly calm surface. How it had all those double-dens and quick sands and seaweed in which your feet could get entangled. Not to mention the dead. The dead, as I learned, came often for the living of the village and took what they consider theirs. The boy—it was decided—was so close to stepping on to the other side that the good village dead took pity on him and took him without much suffering.

Either the boy's death or the fact that we'd already been in the village for a week made the villagers open up to us more. And so we learned that the village was haunted by all its dead. The village, the river, the woods, and the swamps, were swarming with hundreds of ghosts. Suddenly, every villager had a story to tell about a ghost he or she knew personally. The villagers would refer to things like the smith getting kicked by a horse as "mysterious circumstances" and they would bemoan the "death curse" that lingered upon their village.

There was the little girl, the baker's daughter, who went to fetch wood from the forest one Christmas Eve and was found frozen under a fir tree the next morning. There was young Mariusz, a farmhand, who fell in love with the farmer's wife but broke his neck when galloping through the woods on a horse. Two sisters drowned in the river some ten years ago, if I understood correctly. An altar

boy got lost in the swamps, and although he was found, he caught pneumonia and died.

I also learned Ms. Teresa's story. She moved from Warsaw, one old lady told me, right before the war started because she fell in love with a farmer's boy named Jan. Teresa and Jan got married, and it looked like they were happy for a while. They didn't manage to have any children even by the time the Soviets came. There was a battle nearby and many soldiers died on both sides. Their bodies were believed to be scattered throughout the swamps, throughout the valley. But many survived too, and among them the beautiful soviet soldier, Misha, whom Teresa fell in love with, one year after her wedding.

The Soviets were quartered in farmers' homes and barns at that time. Misha with others was staying in Teresa's husband's barn. Teresa would go out three times a day to fetch water from the well so that Misha could look at her with fire in his eyes. Her husband was watching them too. One night Teresa woke up to screams. It was bright in her room, despite the late hour. She ran out and watched the barn burn, huge orange flames licking the night sky.

The Soviets counted their losses and moved westward. Then back eastward and the Germans came. A year had passed.

One cold, moonless February night, as fog was creeping in from the swamps, there were loud voices and gunshots heard coming from the forest. Some who had the courage to come out of their homes said there were blue lights, like elusive flames, flickering between tree trunks. Teresa was afraid to go out of their house, and she begged Jan to stay, when a few men from the village came and asked him to join them. A few of them had rifles, but the rest of them had pitchforks and clubs and scythes. They walked off into the dark woods

where briefly there were some distant, indistinct noises heard, and then silence.

The men were never seen again. The villagers declared grimly right after that it was divine justice, for Ms. Teresa and her husband. Ms. Teresa never had any children and the farm deteriorated since she could not manage the work by herself.

The boy was buried the day after the accident.

In the villagers' minds, these stories were as timely and relevant as the boy's death. And an undeniable proof that there was a bad aura about their village—one that brought accidents, war and sickness. One that made the ghosts stick around. I asked the priest if he believed that and he said no, yet he seemed just as superstitious as any peasant since he never went into the woods after dark.

Dad and I had a good laugh or two from some of these stories, usually with our wino neighbor who became our best pal for the time. We watched the villagers all summer as they came to the church each Sunday; some of them every day. They made a sign of the cross and walked off to their bottles and television sets, and government paychecks, and ghosts they all had to cherish and remember.

I don't know what people thought about the boy's death. I'm sure they had their wild theories about curses and whatnot. All I know is that Ms. Teresa spent the rest of the summer sitting on the bench in front of her fallen fence. The boy's stepfather was fetching her water now and sometimes the priest, but he would never stay to sit with her to listen to stories.

With autumn, we finished the job in the church, and we left.

Maybe I would have forgotten even that village, who knows. But I can't now even if I tried, because the little bugger—the boy—comes to me in my dreams, regularly.

Those dreams, like all dreams, make very little sense. The boy takes my hand and says strange things like: "Baltazar, have you ever traveled underground?" And when I look at him with a confused face, he takes me by the hand, leads me out of my room in the city, and I am in that village again, I know it, and we are in the woods. And as we are walking on the soft moss, it is dark, yet everything is strangely luminescent, and I can see every tree trunk, every bush, every twig. I can hear hares sleeping underground and squirrels inside the tree trunks. I can feel the thick presence of life in that forest, every single creature. And then, as the boy said, we are traveling underground, passing seamlessly

through the dirt and tree roots. Then I know the woods have ended and we are in the swamps. It's cozy and strangely warm and homey there, and I can feel everyone's presence. The dirt is sparkling and in that "light" I see the multitude of bones scattered through it, as if the earth was transparent. And I know everyone by name. I see what I know are two adult skeletons crouching at the bottom of the swamp, holding a smaller skeleton between them, and I know it is the tailor's family. I can see the bones of the two sisters that drowned in the river.

I don't dream this every night, but the dream always comes back. And each time I feel as if I am coming home.

Luiza Oleszczuk was born in Poland and lives in New York City. Her poetry and fiction were featured in the Apple Valley Review, Futures Trading Literary Journal and Cease, Cows. Her journalistic writing has been published in various media outlets including The Economist and Forbes magazines. She holds an Masters of Literature degree in creative writing from University of St. Andrews in Scotland. Having given up on journalism, Luiza works for an animation studio in New York City and watches a lot of cartoons. www.luizaoleszczuk.com

Consignment

Patrick Erickson

The grounds
are coffee grounds
to be sure

no grounds
for divorce

The coffee percolated
or dripped
into a drip pot

The coffee grounds
the earthworms percolate through

consigned
to the compost heap
out back

And while the coffee steeps
we stew in our juices

without cream or sugar
rhyme or reason.

Garland, TX
May 2014

Daguerreotypes

Patrick Erickson

I seem to recall one
of an ancestor
on my mother's side

Civil War vintage
clad in the telltale gray
of the Confederacy

She was an Okie
my mother
uprooted from Oklahoma
during the Dust Bowl
and transplanted
in northern California

which makes me
a prune picker

no favorite son

And now I too
am a confederate

in federation with
all who are clad
in the telltale gray
of the great gray in between

and no longer black and white.

For Paul

Garland, TX
December 2014

Patrick's avocation goes without saying. As for vocation, he is a parish pastor, a shepherd of sheep, a small flock with no sheep dog and no hang-dog expression. Or he is the sheep dog, a small dog, with the hang-dog expression. Secretariat is his mentor, though he has never been an achiever and has never gained on the competition. He resonates to a friend's definition of change: change coming at us a lot faster because you can punch a whole lot more, a whole lot faster down digital broadband "glass" fiber than an old copper co-axial landline cable.

Of late Patrick's work has appeared or is forthcoming in Assisi; Calliope Poets; A Clean, Well-Lighted Place; Poetry Super Highway; Wilderness House Literary Review; Prairie Wolf Press Review; Poetry Quarterly; Breakwater Review; Cobalt Review; Poetry Pacific; Red Fez; and SubtleTea.



Above The Fog

Roark Nelson

Roark Nelson is a photographer living in eastern Washington. He prefers to shoot primarily outside, traveling and camping as much as possible. His work has been on the National Geographic Photo of the Day, the New York Times Lens Blog, and the Visual Supply Co. Blog.

Tick Tock, The Game Is Locked

Wade Bentley

So, all of a sudden, two new planets?
maybe more? Pluto is out, and these
are in? We come to call, at last, on Pluto—
recently demoted to subplanet status—
in our plucky little spacecraft, close enough
now, at 100 million miles, that its photos,
fresh from their fivehour journey, show Pluto
as blurred pixels, like the blotch of bad cells
in the corner of my TV screen—but
he's there all right. And soon we'll see more
of this heliocentric neighbor, once
attached by thumbtack, the smallest
Styrofoam ball on our fifthgrade scienceclass
mobile, always painted purple (to this day
I think of it that way), our teacher
telling us how cold it would be to live there,
but there it was, connected by twine
and pipecleaner orbits to all the rest,
the family tree of our solar system:
the lucky and blue third planet from the sun,
all the way out to our sad little brother
at the edge of the unknown. Except not
the edge, anymore, these two new brutes
hulking still further out, hiding all this time,
set to crash the party. And where
shall we put them? How do we make room
for more? And if these two can lurk there,
unseen and unaccounted for, upsetting
our apple cart of equipoise and happy
symmetry, what other insidious unknowns
are even now circling in the dark,
with all their mathematical inevitability,
waiting to send my grandchildren scurrying
to keep all the plates spinning, old and new,
all the balls in the air?

Through a Fox, Darkly Smiling

Samuel Clark

SEVENTY-FOUR HOURS and eleven minutes. He was already past the upper limit he'd allowed himself. He sensed thoughts not his own rising out of his subconscious, a sign that he wouldn't be able to hold on much longer. James Dowland, my name is James Dowland, he reminded himself. Another twenty-four hours and he would disappear into the ether, and it wouldn't be long before someone recognised this face and reported it. Maybe they already had.

He hurried to the bus stop; footsteps splashing in the puddles, rain pouring in thick hard clumps, thunder cracking overhead. He flinched at every sound. He shouldn't have taken the bus, he should have walked. The bus driver stared at him with a slight pause and a held look—eyes meeting eyes. That was all it took. His face was all over the news, "Missing person! Suspected consciousness thief!" He tossed coins into the tray and found a seat.

His thoughts were scattered and unruly, decisions didn't come easily. He was running on instinct, fighting against the host's rising subconscious. He needed to find a quiet place with no people, preferably one with an electrical outlet. He had to resist the temptation to sleep. If he slept, it was over. He pulled an amph pill from his pocket and popped it into his mouth with a trembling hand.

Ignoring the stray thought he checked the manila package again to make sure the small, clear plastic box was still there. Only seven soluble chips left. Only seven jumps, seven chances to get it right. He delicately picked out one of the vacuum-sealed chips and slid it in his pocket. He'd begun with fifty and marveled at the thought—he'd been inside forty-three minds not his own, had seen the world from forty-three different perspectives. It was still his consciousness, his thought process, but different somehow. The world re-framed by other people's reactions.

He threw the hood over his head when he caught the eyes of the bus driver glaring at him through the rear view mirror. He glanced away and looked through the window. Orange streetlights streamed past, and it seemed like the bus was going too fast, like everything was moving too fast. As he peered closer—hands cupping his temples, eyes against glass—he saw warehouses and factories and deserted dual carriageways. Must be the industrial estate just outside of town. Not perfect, but good enough, far enough away. He pushed the buzzer and got up from his seat. He hurried along the aisle, hands gripping each pole. The brakes hissed, and the bus ground to a halt. The doors didn't open right away, and he

resisted the urge to glance back at the driver. He kept his eyes fixed on his reflection in the door. Relief came as the doors slid open.

He hopped off the bus and back out into the pouring rain. He picked up his pace, looking all around for a postbox. After a few minutes he saw one. Underneath it, a fox was chewing at some stray food packaging. Sensing his presence, it pricked its head up and locked eyes with him. The light caught the fox's eyes, and they glistened for a brief moment. He'd been seeing foxes all day: this morning, as he left the all night coffee shop, and again when he took a rest on a park bench. Both times the fox stared at him, and both times it had this strange dark, smile on its face. Could it be the same fox? Surely not, probably just a paranoid brain tic. Too many amph pills, too long without sleep. What was it now? Over a hundred days, at least.

Another crack of thunder and the fox ran away. From his backpack he plucked out the flat package containing the rest of microchips and slotted it inside the postbox. The package was addressed to a P.O. Box; if the transfer attempt failed, he would pick it up in the new host's body and try again. He rounded the corner onto the dual carriageway that sliced through the middle of the industrial estate. After walking for several minutes with his hands buried in his pockets, the hood doing little to keep him dry, he saw a neon red sign: *Metro Café*.

He checked his reflection in the rain soaked window. He looked awful: pale, unshaven, eyes bloodshot. Almost a completely different face from the clean, well-manicured one he first inhabited. He couldn't help but wonder if this was a product of his mind, or the three days he'd spent living on the run without sleep. Maybe a little bit of both. He popped another amph pill and went inside.

Taking a brief pause he evaluated the

room. The stale smell of fried food hung thick in the air. The café was empty of customers. Only the waiter sat behind the counter engrossed in a crossword. He checked the grubby walls for wanted posters. He didn't see any, and he hoped the waiter had no knowledge of his wanted status. Aware that his behaviour might be construed as suspicious, he strode over to the counter. The waiter looked up from his puzzle book.

"Serious constricting path," the waiter said.

"Pardon?"

"Sorry, stupid puzzle," he said tossing the book aside. "What can I get ya?"

"Coffee, please. Black and strong, no sugar."

"Long night shift?"

"Something like that," he said with an affected smile and took a seat in a booth toward the rear of the café. "Is there an electrical outlet?" he asked as he took the small laptop out of his backpack.

"Sorry."

"Never mind." He flipped open the laptop. The icon on the screen indicated there was still some power left. He hoped it was enough. He unraveled a sheet of paper from his pocket and went through the list. The blue ink had begun to bleed from the rain, but it was still legible. His next target was Dr. Philip Hoag, and after him, there were only three names left. Seven chances, minus three.

He targeted doctors and nurses, more specifically, those who worked on a maternity ward. He needed close proximity to newborn children. His holy grail. Pure, undeveloped consciousness. A clean slate that he could imprint himself upon and remain undetected forever, a completely new life, a reset button, almost immortality. He'd long rid himself of the guilt, the ethical and moral implications of borrowing someone's consciousness. The

authorities called it theft, but he wasn't stealing it, he was borrowing it, just for a few days. A necessary evil, if his plan was to come to fruition.

Initially the project was a commercial one, a new kind of holiday or mini-break. Instead of spending a weekend in Paris or Rome, you could spend a weekend inside the body of an animal. Experience a day in the life of your cat or your family dog. If you felt particularly adventurous there was even the option of spending the allotted 48 hours inside a wild animal. They weren't truly wild, but kept in a free-range compound; the company didn't want you imprinting your consciousness on a wild gazelle only to be hunted and killed a moment later by a lion. What they hadn't accounted for, and what the vast majority of people hadn't the discipline for, was the hidden fact that Dowland, for whatever reason, could circumvent the process mid-stream. He could free his consciousness from the channel of radio waves.

He picked a small plastic box out of his pocket. He turned the box between his forefinger and thumb, watching the waiter prepare the coffee. There wouldn't be enough time to insert it at the table.

"Just going to the bathroom," he called out in a friendly tone.

"Ah hah! Ernest Hemingway!" The waiter called out, and looked up from the puzzle book toward Dowland.

"Pardon?"

"Serious Constricting Path. Ernest Hemingway."

"Oh," Dowland said and made his way to the bathroom.

He stared at his reflection in the mirror. What was his name again? Dr. John Gillnitz? No, that was the host's name, not his name. His name was James Dowland, he reminded

himself. He hesitated in a futile attempt to put off the inevitable. He'd gone through the transfer process it forty-three times already, but the thought of it, the anticipation of pain, always made him wince. It had to be done, they would catch him and extract his consciousness if he didn't.

He let out a sigh and pushed down on his right nostril. He snorted out three times, then laid the plastic box on the sink unit and clicked it open. He popped the vacuum seal and unwrapped one of the microchips, then delicately clamped it between the tweezer tongs. The chip had to be inserted close to the brain, so bodily functions and his consciousness within the host's body could be maintained just long enough to work the laptop, download the signal, select the new host's number and send.

He took a deep breath and inserted the microchip, twisting and navigating the tweezers through the channel. A thin stream of blood fell onto his lip; he shuddered as a sharp sting rang through his head. Finally, the tweezers found the needed resistance and he loosed them. He prayed the microchip wouldn't drop out and he'd have to start over again. He only had fifteen minutes before his host's consciousness would reclaim his body: five minutes to absorb his consciousness onto the chip, another five for the chip to convert and compress the information into a recognisable phone signal, and then another five before the chip dissolved and trickled out of his nose as a small stream of thick clear mucus.

Those last five minutes were crucial. The residual pain, swelling at the bridge of the nose, and sometimes-blurry vision were difficult to overcome.

He rushed out of the bathroom and hurried back to the booth. Impatiently he tapped the tabletop with his forefinger as the laptop screen flourished with code and numbers.

Converting data, please wait. He checked his watch, five minutes and counting down. Locating server, please wait. He flinched with a start as the waiter placed the coffee cup on his table.

“Looks like complicated work,” the waiter said.

Dowland sipped the coffee. Server found. Connecting, please wait.

“Argh, argh, argh. Erm yes, it’s... not... I...” before he could finish the response, his eye caught the laptop screen. Connected to server, please click send.

“Are you okay, mate?” the waiter asked. “Your nose is bleeding.”

He blinked, darted his eyes about the café, the dingy surroundings slowly resolving themselves.

“Where am I?” Dr. John Gillnitz asked.

Dowland, was already gone.

* * *

There was no sight, no sound, no smell, nothing tangible, nothing to reach out for. There wasn’t even darkness, yet there was a sense of space and time. The transference happened in a matter of nanoseconds, but with some meditation techniques and enough experience you could stop just before the moment of entering the receiving chip and redirect yourself. You had to pull back, sense the shape of the room or the open space, feel the air contracting around you, then sense the occupied space of another body and force yourself toward it. There was usually some initial confusion, the host resisting, fighting against it. But he was experienced and strong willed and he had the upper hand. The host was rarely aware of what was happening until it was too late. Their own thoughts pushed down into the subconscious. Hijacked. With

a new born child there would be no fight, no resistance at all, he hoped, he hadn’t been successful, yet.

He sensed the bounce that marked the halfway point, the signal redirecting off the satellite wings and then the sudden rush downward, back through the Earth’s atmosphere. In the next instant there would be the sense of rooms and walls, enclosed space, followed by the first pangs of absorption. He prepared himself to resist and rip away, but something felt wrong. The enclosed spaces didn’t come. The air suddenly contracted, the sure sign that the radio waves were about to enter the receiving phone. He ripped himself away, no time to evaluate and found himself floating in indefinable open space. The air felt heavy and his consciousness reached out, trying to lock onto occupied space. It felt smaller than usual. Could it be, could he have finally located a newborn? Without a second thought he channelled himself toward it. The air contracted all around, tunnelling to a fine point, and then the transfer process was over.

* * *

His point of view seemed unusual and as he blinked away the initial blurred vision he saw the shapes of the buildings—factories and warehouses—from a low angle. Sounds seemed sharper, smells more distinctive, colours seemed brighter. Every sense was heightened, his thoughts moved from one piece of sensory information to the next.

The rain was still pouring and his fur felt heavy against his back and his hind legs. He sniffed the air. It was full and thick with a variety of aromas: freshly cut grass, the heavy stench of sulphur, and the thinner yeasty smell of stale bread rising up between his spindly forelegs. Panic swelled as he saw the red post

box above. He let out a raspy bark followed by a sustained howl. He scratched at a wet clump of fur. There was no way back, he was stuck. But how? He was sure he entered the doctor's cell phone number correctly. It was inexplicable. He heard the rumble of car tires over wet asphalt and ran for cover in the brush. He hopped over rocks and twigs and tree branches and through long wet grass. He ran until his breath rasped in his new lungs. He slowed to a stop, his tongue lolling over his sharp incisors. Overcome with fatigue he curled up under a nearby tree and dropped his eyes closed. The initial shock began to subside. It couldn't be all bad—at least he wouldn't be on the run any more.

* * *

When he awoke he smelled cigarette smoke and saw the blurry silhouette of a man, backlit by a bright halogen light. The space didn't feel right. The air was stale and claustrophobic, grey/blue metal walls. His vision hadn't righted itself yet. It seemed to be taking longer than normal. He shaped his mouth to speak, but the only sounds he made were slurred groans. The man stepped forward through the thick wafts of smoke, darkly smiling. Dowland couldn't move. He looked down at his legs and arms and didn't recognise the body beneath him. His legs were too skinny, his arms had no muscle tissue, skin stretched taut over bone.

"Forty-three, you almost doubled my record," the man said. "I'd shake your hand, but you won't be able to move yet. Muscle disuse atrophy."

Dowland's eyes widened. He tried to speak again, but all that came out of his mouth were a series of struggled slurs. "My... naaaame? Yooour name? WWWhere?"

The man dropped the cigarette to the

floor and extinguished it with his foot. "Names don't matter, not for us."

"Us?" Dowland asked.

"I say us, but it all depends on your decision. Not much of a choice but still, it is a choice." He paused and ran his palm over his head. "Gets awfully confusing, doesn't it? Free reign head-hopping. Eventually you lose yourself. I've seen it happen, complete loss of identity, no way to frame the world around you. But with us, that won't happen. Well, not as much. You'll never be allowed to leave the compound unless you're on assignment. The fox you kept seeing? That was us, tracking you. The authorities grant us special dispensation to release chipped animals into the city. The fox is perfect. With a dog someone is likely to report it or take it in as a stray. We have another agent, BlueJay, she specialises in birds. Very hard to master. In-the-air tracking. Everyone and everything ignores a fox, at least in the city, and it's better to start on the ground. You used the commercial version of all this, I assume?"

Dowland nodded.

"That's good, won't take too long to get you adjusted." The man lit another cigarette. "Anyway, what was my point again? Oh yeah, 'the choice'." He made quote marks in the air. "You either come work for us, or, you get your day in court and then your lethal injection. Like I said, not much of a choice."

Silence again. The man stared into Dowland's eyes. "Oh and if you try and break free, if you even think about bouncing between public consciousness again..." He ended the sentence with raised eyebrows. "A doctor will be along soon."

* * *

Dowland's body recovered slowly— electrical muscle stimulation, physio therapy, three small

meals a day, gradually increasing in calorie load. It was a month before he could walk, a further month before he could speak with any clarity of mind.

Old memories began clawing their way back. First, a sense of guilt without any specificity. Then came his own Proustian ‘episode of the Madeleine’. His was the episode of the macaroni and cheese. Suddenly it all came back, the thing he had been escaping from all this time. He saw her smiling face in his mind’s eye. His stomach dropped and his thoughts reached out in frustration, clawing at a goal that was truly impossible. He denied the thoughts and concentrated on the food in front of him. Zen like tasks—experience the thing right in front of you in its fullest form, there is only the macaroni and cheese, there is only this small mess hall, there is only the girl in front of him. Bluejay. Her hair was long and almost perfectly straight, black with blue and white highlights.

“Strange. isn’t it?” she said. “When they finally catch you. The muscle wastage. The re-acclimation into your own body.” She fingered a bowl of sunflower seeds. “How many head hops. did you tally. before they caught you?”

“Forty-three,” Dowland said. “Forty-four if you count the fox.”

Her eyes widened. “Wow. your head must be a mess.”

“No, not really,” he said weakly.

“But how?” She gave him a confused expression. “How do you stop. the target’s consciousness. merging with your own?”

“Practice,” He was unwilling to give away his method. “How many before they caught you?”

“Ten. No. Eleven. By the end. I didn’t know who I was. I was relieved they caught me. Put me to work. A purpose in life. A new identity.” Her head jerked as she flicked her

head from one position to the next, never holding it for more than a few seconds. “Well. Two identities. but stable ones.”

“How so?”

“There’s me. and the bird. But it’s all me. really. It all becomes one. Of a piece. so to speak.”

“And what is the point of all this?”

“Surveillance. Following criminals. fraudsters. white collar insider dealing. and what have you. You go out. you find them. and just listen. If you can. if you’re able. you can even jump into their subconsciousness. Bury yourself. Can you do that?”

He shook his head.

“Oh. Well. You’ll just have to listen. for now. You’re not supposed to do the subconscious thing. Violation of your terms. But. as long as you’re inside the animal when it’s time to snap you back. They won’t notice.” She swallowed another handful of sunflower seeds. “Then. you write out a transcript of what you heard. They pass it up the chain. They use it as testimony. And. we find people that used to be. like us. Head hoppers. Few and far between though. BlackCat usually handles that. Like he handled you. and me.”

“Oh,” He said and pushed away the mac and cheese. It tasted plastic and slimy.

“You should eat that. Strong body. Strong mind. Any idea when you’ll be getting your first assignment?”

He shook his head and studied her face. Her nose seemed unusually angular and pointed, and she didn’t so much chew on the seeds as swallow them whole. Her eyes were shrouded in thick black eye-liner and her face had a pale grey/white complexion.

“How does all this work, exactly?” he asked. “I mean a bunch of mob guys are going to notice a bird in the room and chase it out, aren’t they? Never mind a fox.”

"It's easy. you just sit on a window sill. or a tree branch. and listen. As a fox. you'll be doing street work. low level stuff."

"And the transcripts? I'm not sure I'll be able to remember anything word for word."

"Oh they don't expect that. just the general gist. If you can remember it. exactly. Go for it."

"Is there anybody else?"

"How do you. mean?"

"Surely it's not just us."

"We cover the northern area. There are three more. central and southern. I think they hope to expand. But. getting government approval. is difficult. The legality. The ethics. Also. they think if there are too many. People will start getting wise. We're totally underground. at the moment. They want. to keep it that way.

"How did they catch me?"

"Ahhh. The big secret. Crossing signals. Intercepted. They send a constant signal out to the chipped fox. BlackCat rips himself away and swaps your consciousness out. You. go into the fox. He. goes into the signal channel you sent out. Then. they snap both you and him back. It's all a bit complicated. Makes you go nuts. if you're not well trained enough. I think BlackCat is on the downturn. Have you chosen a name yet?"

"I get to choose a name?"

"Sure. You'll need one, to keep you grounded. That is. if you can't remember your original name. You'll be a fox. right?"

He nodded. James Dowland, my name is James Dowland, he reminded himself.

"How about. RedFox?" she suggested, noting the red jump suit he'd been issued.

"Good enough, I suppose."

"Cool." She stood up from the bench and darted four looks around the empty mess hall. "I'll see you. later.." She left, humming and

singing a tune as she did. "Darkly smiling, there are no tickets, and you must pay, as you leave. The man in black goes searching through... doesn't even think of you." He glanced back over his shoulder and watched her skinny frame exit through the cold metal doors. The words seem to hang in the air and he shuddered a little.

* * *

Memories, sparked by the smallest of things, kept flooding back as he searched the back streets in the bleaker districts of the city. A man screaming in Spanish at the end of a dank dark alley—she knew the language and took holidays there almost every year. A number 11 auto-bus rolled past, tires kicking up puddles—she was born on the 11th of the 11th, 2011. A stray Hershey bar wrapper caught in the wind blew past his nose—her favourite. A small village house and a woman joyfully running through long grass bathed in sunshine. It reminded him of when he first met her, walking along that country road he looked up searching for her, and there she was, leaning over the garden gate with a joyful smile. He'd gotten so caught up in burying a host's thoughts he'd forgotten what he was running away from. The memory of Her.

* * *

"How are you. finding the work?" Bluejay asked. "Not as exciting. as you might expect. is it?" He nodded.

"Is something. the matter? You seem. down. Got those. sit down. can't cry. oh Lord gonna die blues?"

He flinched at the poetic phrasing. "Something like that." He picked at his food. "Is there any way out of this, or are we stuck doing this

for the rest of our natural lives?"

BlueJay flitted her eyes around the room, and then nervously tucked the loose blue, black and white strands of hair behind her ear. She addressed him with narrow eyes and leaned in closer. "You're not. thinking about escaping. are you?"

He was always thinking about it. Head hopping becomes an addiction, an obsession. "No. Well. No," he lied.

BlueJay leaned back in her seat with a faint expression of disappointment.

"Have you ever thought about it?" he asked.

"Of course. All the time. I've broken away from the signal channel a few times. felt that big swell before you pop out. But. I've always popped back in. Feels like standing at the top of a skyscraper. looking down at the huge drop below your feet. But you never jump."

"What about when you jump into the people you're watching?"

"That's different. I have. no intention of staying. There's no. permanence. to it." She plucked some sunflower seeds out of the bowl between forefinger and thumb, swallowed them whole and retrained her eyes on his. "So what is it that you're escaping from? Head hoppers. are always escaping something. The ubiquitous dark past. A woman perhaps. A crime?"

"A woman."

"Who. was she?"

"I... I... can't remember."

BlueJay furrowed her brow. "Did she. have a name?"

"Yes," he answered plainly.

They flinched at the metallic sound of the door opening as BlackCat entered the mess hall.

"I have an idea," RedFox whispered.

BlueJay's eyes lit up. "What kind. of idea?"

"I'll tell you later." RedFox stood, and crossed the room. He nodded at BlackCat as he passed him, and then glanced back at BlueJay before he walked out of the mess hall.

* * *

BlueJay tilted her head toward her left shoulder and examined him with her darker than dark blue eyes. "Newborn babies?" she asked, shocked, but not quite appalled.

"Yes, a perfectly clean consciousness," RedFox said, "that is, if we can hijack a signal that runs close to a maternity ward. You just break free and drift in. It's hit and miss, but if you hit, you can hide there forever, live a life all over again."

"I don't know. it feels. wrong."

"No worse than hiding in a fully developed consciousness. It's even better. It's a clean slate. And ultimately it's impossible for them to detect."

BlueJay paused again, flicked her head from side to side, keeping her eyes trained on his. A soul piercing kind of stare. "What. do you need me for. exactly?"

"Two minds would be a lot stronger. We'd be able to stay out for longer, float free for longer, just enough time to find... one."

"One?"

"A baby. One of those guys I've been surveilling, his girl is, was, pregnant. She's still in the maternity ward. If we time it right, we can bounce through each consciousness and make it."

BlueJay studied him with a skeptical glare. "Let me think about it."

He stymied an exasperated groan. "There isn't much time. It has to be Wednesday. It's the only time our schedules coincide. Do you really want to be doing this forever? Listening to all that. Those people. Even when they

catch them, there's always another one waiting to get made. It never ends. I just, it's just... I want to be free of it all. I'm tired of it."

"It could. be a lot worse."

"It could? How?"

"You could be dead. Execution. Remember that?"

"Death or slavery. It's not much of a choice."

"The only way to fly is to die," she said in a tweeting singsong tone of voice. "Take one pill. or the other. It's then. or never?" She flicked her head from side-to-side in time with the clipped sentences she spoke. Despite his frustration at her unwillingness to give a solid answer, he couldn't help but smile.

"I want to get. all this straight. in my head. the plan. what is it?"

"When you're all strapped up in that chair, focus, prepare, get ready to extend, time, feel it. When you feel the air expand, concentrate. Then, when we both hit the same satellite, you feel the bounce, don't you?"

She nodded.

"Right after that moment, push out of the signal channel, jump off the skyscraper, so to speak. Since we're both being jumped at the same time we'll be able to feel each other's presence. We tunnel down, and break out just before reaching the chipped fox, or blue jay, then we bounce all the way free. One head to the other. Until we find a newborn. It's all about feeling. You know it in the present and make for it."

Bluejay arched an eyebrow.

"It's difficult to put into words. It'll become clearer as it happens."

* * *

The transfer room felt strange to Bluejay. It felt different somehow. She had been here

hundreds of times. The technician gave her a sideways glance. Bluejay held her position at the threshold of the door, flinching looks from the chair, to the computer monitors, to the technician. His features were frog-like, with bulging eyes behind thick glasses, and a faint tint of green to his white lab-coat. He hunched over while he prepared the soluble microchip and the local anaesthetic.

"Hey Bluejay," he said. "You all set?"

She stepped forward. "Have you changed something in here?"

"No, same as it ever was."

Bluejay laid back in the seat and gripped the arm rests.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked.

She nodded nervously.

The technician paused and she bristled with paranoia. Did he know somehow? Did he sense it?

He gave a slight shrug and pulled out the needle to begin the transfer. He slid it into Bluejay's temple and she felt a sharp pinch, followed by numbness in the bridge of her nose. He gripped the soluble microchip between the ends of the long shafted tweezers and guided it through her left nostril. All of her anxieties washed away as she felt the chip consume her consciousness. Freed from the confines of her own body, she rose and charged along the channel of binary information carried on radio waves. She remembered what RedFox had said: "Just after the bounce off the satellite, expand time, and break free." He said he would catch her.

The bounce came and she forced herself to the edge of the channel. The air expanded, and was about to break through the edge. It felt like a liquid glass wall. At that point she would always pull back, like standing on the edge of a skyscraper. But instead of stepping back from the edge, she jumped. Conscious-

ness floating free into nothingness. A held moment. Then she felt herself caught in another channel. She felt his presence. A further rush downward, plummeting through air. A combined consciousness free-fall.

* * *

BlueJay tasted sand on her lips and heard waves crashing behind her. The air was thick, and a hollow wind blew across the stone beach. A layer of water rolled under her bare feet and underneath her stomach. She pricked her head up and looked out across the grey sand. Beyond it, the beach stretched to meet the black silhouetted buildings on the horizon. She clambered to her feet. Panicked and frightened, she felt the ethereal presence of forty-three others, lost, wandering aimlessly through the indefinable space. A black cat bounced along the grey beach, the sand shifted in the wind, reshaping the dunes as it went. A frog croaked. BlueJay flicked a look behind her and watched it hop away, disappearing into the sea. A white pier stretched out over the waves following the frog's path. A woman took shape at the end of the pier. Her long

dark hair bristled in the wind over the long white gown she wore.

"Who are you?" BlueJay asked.

Seagulls launched off the railings, wings beating the air in heavy flourishes.

The girl turned and smiled darkly. "I am Her."

BlueJay nervously flinched her head taking in the odd landscape. Her heart pounded, her hands trembled. She was overcome with a sinking feeling of dread. "Where are we?"

"Lost, in his subconscious," the woman replied. "We are fragments. Not whole people. An idea of us." She wiped her eyes and tucked stray strands of hair behind her ears.

"How do we. get out?"

"We can't; we don't. We are only memories; we are what's left behind," she said dreamily.

"Where is he?"

The woman hesitated. The wind ruffled the thin white gown she wore. After a time, she pointed upward.

Murky clouds drifted across the pale blue sky, behind them- city lights and whirring traffic, city noise, a point of view- it glances up and looks at a reflection in a tinted window. A fox, darkly smiling.

Samuel Clark lives and writes in North Lincolnshire, UK. His Gothic novella The Green Fairy, is set for release in September, through Tenebris Books and has a number of novels and short stories available on Kindle. You can follow the weirdness at @SamuelClark3 on twitter.

Kate

Wade Bentley

Kate stood at the pastry shop window pulling apart the lattices of her Linzer Torte and dipping her finger in the plum butter filling. She would make the treat last for almost two hours, during which time she would watch her bus pull up to the stop and leave again, three times. It was a beautiful day, crisp and sunny. Still, she could not make herself go home or go for a walk in the park or even sit down and order coffee. She had the sense that anything she might do would lead to other things, and before she knew it she'd be feeding the pigeons or listening to her husband tell her about his day or putting toothpaste on her grocery list. And then she would feel obligated to use up the tube, daub by pasty daub, and to feather the nest of her little wastebasket with horrid little curls of floss, and to sort toilet paper rolls into the recycling bin because it all just kept coming, didn't it? It could no longer be borne. So when she had carefully unwoven the last two strands of browned and sugared dough, when the sun had moved behind the bank building, when the people began to pour out of the buildings and down the walks, and she could smell, coming in the shop door, their deodorants, the onions they had for lunch, their farts and Camel Lights and foot powder, she realized that she had been crying, felt how the salt had caked her face and her neck, knew she was tasting the last of the plum on her tongue.

Wade Bentley lives, teaches, and writes in Salt Lake City. For a good time, he enjoys wandering the Wasatch Mountains and playing with his grandchildren. His poems have appeared in Green Mountains Review, Cimarron Review, Best New Poets, Western Humanities Review, Subtropics, Rattle, Chicago Quarterly Review, Innisfree Poetry Journal, Concho River Review, Raleigh Review, and Reunion: The Dallas Review, among others. A full-length collection of his poems, What Is Mine, was published by Aldrich Press in early 2015.

Two Strokes of a Pen

Jill Hand

I THINK I KILLED FIVE PEOPLE. In fact, I'm fairly certain I killed five people. I'll never be charged with murder, though, because I did it with two strokes of a pen.

Dr. Lao says that's impossible. You can't kill someone by drawing an X through their name. She tried to put it delicately that I'm delusional. Dr. Lao is the most delicate of women, all dark, soulful eyes and tiny bones, like a bird's.

I've never seen such heart-breakingly beautiful bones. I could write a poem about her clavicle, but she's married and she doesn't care about me except as a patient. Still, she has a lovely clavicle.

When I first told her my story, Dr. Lao gave me a reassuring look and said I was confused. It was a look that psychiatrists probably practice in the bathroom mirror. It's meant to be accepting and encouraging, no matter what kind of crazy shit someone has told them.

"You're making connections between events that are unconnected," she said, looking at me over her steel-rimmed glasses with that professional reassuring gaze. "That's the way the brain works. It's called apophenia, or patternicity. Our brains are always trying to make sense of things, to connect the dots, if you will. But sometimes things just happen randomly

and there is no connection but the brain insists there is"

It sounded good, but I wasn't convinced. That was last week. Today I was back for round two.

There was a little stone fountain that sent water bubbling over smooth black pebbles on the low table between the chair where she sat and the brown leather couch where I reclined. The sound of the endlessly circulating water was soothing, which is why the fountain is there, I suppose. Dr. Lao is not a Freudian, but the couch is there for people who feel like it's not a real visit to a psychiatrist unless they're lying down.

"But five people died. Five people I went to college with," I said, as I lay there staring up at the ceiling, my arms crossed over my chest like an Egyptian mummy. "I drew a black X through their names in the alumni magazine because I was pissed off at them and they died."

Dr. Lao pursed her lips. (Ah, those lips! They were pink and plump, like peony blossoms.) She said, "Look, Richard, you're what? Fifty? You're at the age where your peers are starting to die of what my husband calls the Big Three: cancer, heart attack and stroke. It's very sad, but it happens. There's nothing supernatural about it."

Dr. Lao's husband is a cardiologist. She has a picture of him on her desk in which he's grinning like a maniac and holding onto a snowboard decorated with hideous graphics of skulls and erupting volcanoes. He looked to be in his mid-thirties. I wondered if he'd be so blasé about the Big Three when he got to be my age.

"Tell me what happened again," she said, glancing at the discrete little antique silver clock on the table where the fountain bubbled. We had thirty minutes left, plenty of time.

So I went through it again. Stephen Pierce was the first. Yes, *that* Stephen Pierce, the novelist. He'd already had a book published during our freshman year of college. It was about a love triangle at a fancy-pants boarding school, like the one he'd gone to. Everybody made a big deal about how wonderful and talented he was, but I thought he was a smug jerk.

You see, I was going to be a famous writer. Yes, me, Richard Hinton, who runs a chain of auto-parts stores that were established by my late father. Whoop-dee-do, as we used to say when we were kids.

I wrote a book that I was sure was going to be a best-seller, a spy thriller set in Eastern Europe during the Cold War. It was soundly rejected by a dozen different publishers. My second novel, a science-fiction story about a society run by cruel robots, similarly bombed. Thanks for submitting. Not what we're looking for at the present time. Blah blah blah.

Unlike mine, Stephen Pierce's writing career took off like a rocket. Best-seller after best-seller. He could probably get his grocery list published to riotous acclaim, the smug bastard.

When I read in the alumni magazine that he'd won yet another award, the Man Booker, for Christ's sake, something snapped. The best way I can describe it was that it felt like

being stabbed in the brain with a white-hot icicle of rage and furious envy. I took up a black ballpoint pen and slashed a big X through his name. Take that, big shot!

Three weeks later, he was found dead in his hotel room in Antwerp, where he'd been researching yet another book. It was a heart attack. No more glowing *New York Times* book reviews for old Stevie. Well, maybe a posthumous one, but instead of being feted by a smarmy gang of sycophants, Steve would be the main course at a worm banquet. Or maybe he'd be cremated. Who cares? He was dead and I was glad.

I didn't think anything more of it, other than a small, mean thrill of satisfaction whenever somebody bemoaned the fact that there'd be no more books by Stephen Pierce. I didn't think anything of the next one, either. That was my old girlfriend, Suzanne Farley. I'd had high hopes for seeing her at our class reunion and rekindling our relationship, but when she showed up trailing a husband and three children she barely acknowledged me.

Suzanne and I had spent hours together when we were in school, crammed into her twin bed in the apartment she shared with two other girls, staring wordlessly into each other's eyes. Now all she gave me was a disinterested, "Hi, Rich," before moving on to talk to someone else.

When I read in the class notes section of the alumni magazine that she'd gotten a promotion at the TV network where she worked for creating an awful reality show about a family of dissolute, feuding carnival workers — Carnies it's called, and of course it's a howling success—I slashed a big black X through her name, too.

The next issue of the alumni magazine carried her obituary. Breast cancer. Donations to be made to the American Cancer Society.

Numbers three and four were two guys from Zeta Zeta Tau, a pair of dumb jocks who went on to become fabulously wealthy doing something on Wall Street. They'd made fun of me for the cape I used to wear freshman year. It was made of heavy black wool and had a red satin lining. I thought it made me look dash-ing and romantic, like the highwayman in the poem by Alfred Noyes, but they made cracks about how I looked like a gay vampire. Count Fagula, they called me.

The two of them were into yachting. I read about how one of them, a big cretin named Nick "Buzzer" Soames, had a custom-built yacht that he called *The Odyssey*, of all things. Buzzer Soames couldn't have told you who Homer was if you held a gun to his head, but he had the nerve to call his stupid boat *The Odyssey*.

It sank off Block Island, taking Buzzer to a watery grave, along with his pal, Marty Weissberger, who stuck a "kick-me" sign on my back at a frat party once.

Did I cross out their names in the alumni magazine before they drowned? Need you ask?

Number five was my sophomore year roommate. By now, I was starting to suspect that maybe I was causing my classmates to die by drawing Xs through their names. I tried not to think about it, but the thought was there, nibbling at the back of my brain like a sly little mouse. That's why what I did next fills me with remorse. I shouldn't have done it, but I did.

I read in the class notes that my former roommate Dan's oldest son had been accepted to join the class of 2018. I thought about what had happened between Dan and me, and felt the old, hot shame come bubbling up. Dan didn't want to room with me after sophomore year. I told him I'd been drunk and I hadn't meant anything by it, but he wouldn't even look at me. He didn't want to have any-

thing to do with me.

I imagined Dan driving his son to school and helping him move into his dorm room. I pictured him sitting him down and having a man-to-man talk with him, warning him to watch out for guys who got drunk and tried to climb into bed with him. This little imaginary vignette sent a bolt of fear and rage through me. X went my pen and Dan dropped dead of a stroke before his son was halfway through his first semester. I'm sorry about Dan. He'd been a good guy and I should have let bygones be bygones, but it's too late to take it back now.

I finished recounting the litany of deaths and looked at Dr. Lao. She was gazing pensively at the little stone fountain, where water bubbled endlessly over smooth, black pebbles.

She asked, "Did you bring it?"

I reached into my briefcase and drew out the latest edition of the alumni magazine that had come in the mail, in which Richard Hinton was mentioned in the class notes as having opened yet another location of Hinton Auto Parts, Oil Changes While U Wait. Free coffee and WiFi. Whoop-dee-fucking-doo.

There was a black ballpoint pen among the markers and hi-lighters in a cup on Dr. Lao's desk. I nodded at it and asked, "May I?"

She plucked it out and handed it to me. I found the article and drew an X through my name. My hands were shaking when I handed the pen back to her.

She asked how I felt, and I lied and said I felt fine. She said she was proud of me for taking a step toward disproving what she called my "odd idea." Then she gave me one of her professional, reassuring smiles. Our time was up. We'd talk more at my next appointment.

The chest pains started around midnight. They were deep and glassy and hurt like hell every time I took a breath. I thought, *Oh, shit. I've gone and given myself a heart attack.*

Gripped by pain, I bent over in my La-Z-Boy recliner, giving myself a good view of my new Nikes that would never get scuffed and dirty because I was dying. I waited for the pain to radiate down my left arm and into my jaw, at which point I was pretty sure I'd be a goner. Being a goner seemed like something to be devoutly hoped for at that point, the pain was so bad, but then I belched and what felt like a merciless iron band around my chest loosened and I was able to breathe normally again. It was just heartburn from eating half a pepperoni pizza too fast.

I'm a pig when it comes to pepperoni pizza. I practically inhale it. A couple of Tums and I was fine. I didn't think the magic would work on me, but I hadn't been sure. Believe me, it had been a tense few minutes until the Tums did their work and the pain went away. You never know with magic, especially the kind that kills people. I have no talent for writing but it appears I have a talent of another kind, what they call a wild talent, for want of a better term. It would be a hell of a thing if I'd died before I really got rolling.

Now I got down to business, opening the alumni magazine from the University of Michigan that had played a prominent part in my visit with Dr. Lao earlier that day. I graduated from good old U of M, home of the Wolverines. As fate would have it, so did Benjamin Lao, husband of the lovely Emily Lao. He'd also gone to med school there. She'd told me so herself. Life is full of coincidences.

I hummed the Michigan fight song as I flipped through the pages. *Hail to the victors valiant! Hail to the conquering heroes. Hail, hail to Michigan, the champions of the West!* Well, looky here! On page one hundred and four there was a mention of Benjamin Lao opening a new office of his cardiology practice. I idly wondered, as I pulled the cap from my black pen and prepared to X out his name, how a cardiologist would feel about having a heart attack. Not too swell, I suppose. Or maybe he'd fall off his stupid snowboard and break his neck, or he'd get eaten by a shark. I didn't really care. However he died, I'd be there to console the grieving widow. She has such a lovely clavicle, after all.

Jill Hand is a former newspaper reporter and editor. She lives in New Jersey, just like Snooki from Jersey Shore, and writes speculative fiction, mostly horror and humor, or a mix of the two. Her work has appeared in Aphelion, Bewildering Stories, and Weird New Jersey. Her novel, Rosina and the Travel Agency, about teenagers who escape the clutches of a powerful twenty-fourth-century time travel organization and get up to hijinks in 1947 San Francisco is available as an e-Book from Amazon and Barnes & Noble.



Casa en el Barrio de Carmen

Mariya Petrova

54

The Fluttering of the Robins, the Counting of Their Feathers

Laura Hanna

We never grew used to her,
her frilly lace dresses,
her running panty hose.

We opened the windows
to clear the room of her smell
of sweat masked with
lavender Lady Speed Stick.

We felt the breeze that fluttered
through the newspapers she kept
on the kitchen table
from the year 1943, the year
her husband was shot
and killed in the war,
the year time stopped for her.

The pages flapped open in the wind
like the wings of the robins that haunt us.

Day 49

Laura Hanna

If I could
just sit with you
on the creaking bench
by the azalea tree
one last time,
our coffee steam
white in the cold,
I would tell you
everything I had
always saved for
later because I
thought there would be
more time. I adore
each of your eyelashes,
which I counted
the nights when you
slept and I couldn't.
I memorized the rise
and fall of your chest,
set my own heart's
metronome to yours.
I loved you I love you
and your glory
and even your sins.

Laura Hanna is a graduate student at Auburn University earning a Master of Arts in English with a concentration in literature. She also teaches composition there. Her favorite genre is poetry, especially the elegy.