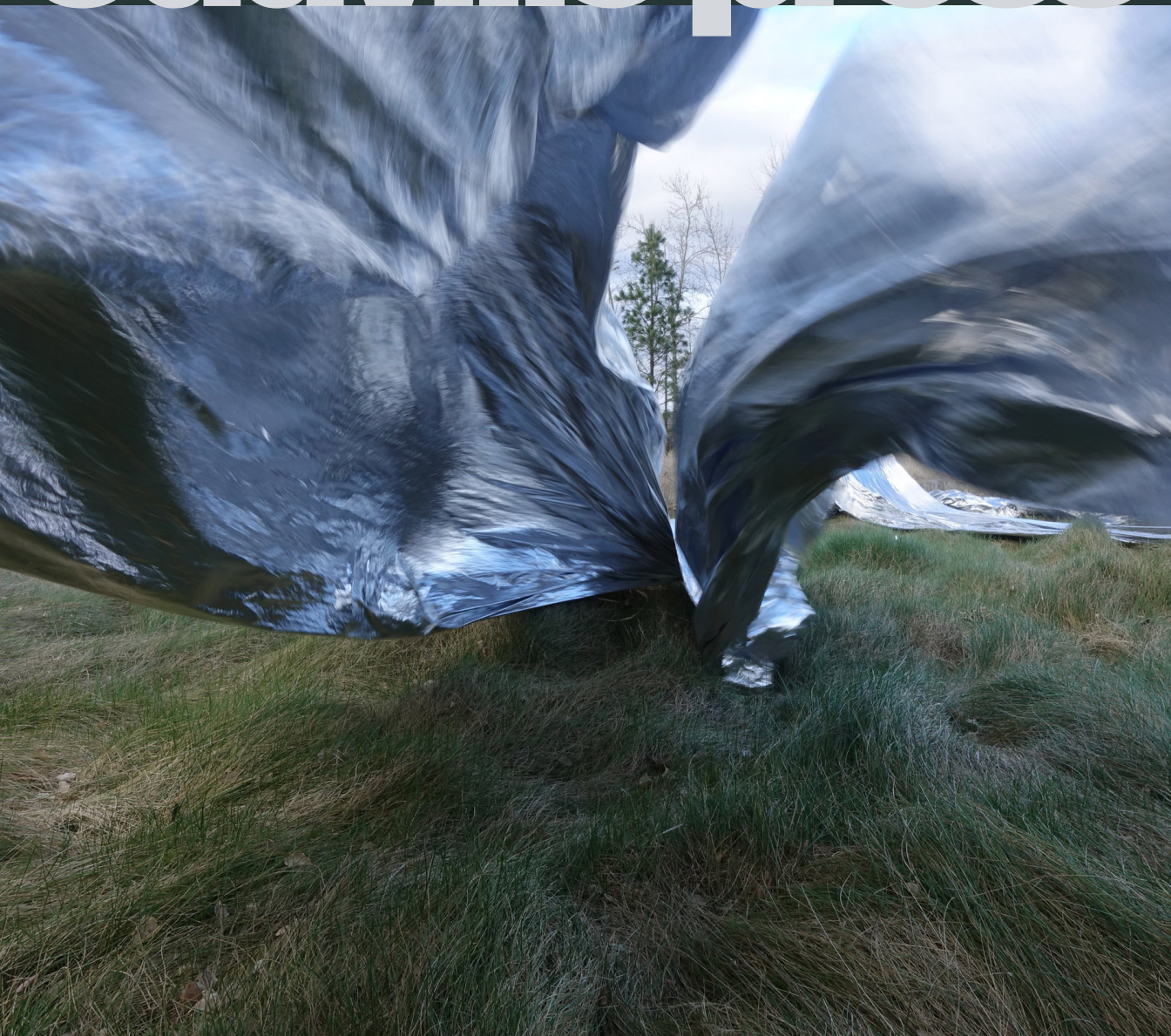


T H E

oddville press



S U M M E R 2 0 1 8

C O V E R A R T

Exhale the Winter's Gush

Augusta Sparks Farnum

Augusta Sparks Farnum is an artist from Walla Walla, Washington. She describes her mission as “constructing art to redefine spaces, reflecting where she has been and where she wants to be. her work can be seen at augustasparks.com

the oddville press

Promoting today's geniuses and tomorrow's giants.

W W W . O D D V I L L E P R E S S . C O M

S T A F F

Publisher	Mike Coombes
Director	J. Matthew McKern
Managing editor	D.B. Hanley
Contributing editor	Sara Tantlinger
Contributing editor	Kristin Molnar
Contributing editor	Vin J Manginelli

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

Table of Contents

	5
Gus's Room A Short Story by Mark SaFranko	
	14
Vessel Art by Jim Kazanjian	
	15
Sharp Edges A Poem by Glenn Moss	
	16
Roger Castleman in Retirement A Short Story by Charles Rammelkamp	
	28
Medusa Art by Hollie Savage	
	29
Immeasurable Dream Poetry by Marieta Maglas	
	31
Something's Knocking A Short Story by Tim Jeffreys	
	39
I'm Going. Are You Coming? Art by Augusta Sparks Farnum	
	40
The Clock Speaks A Poem by A.J. Huffman	
	41
To Hell and Back A Short Story by T.H. Cee	
	45
Coach Art by Jim Kazanjian	
	46
Aurora Borealis Poetry by Marieta Maglas	
	47
The Glitch A Short Story by Sean Silleck	
	55
Bridge A Poem by Glenn Moss	
	56
Joey's Head A Short Story by Tim Wenzell	
	61
Winter Daybreak A Poem by Don Thompson	
	62
Winter Evening A Poem by Don Thompson	
	63
Neverending Voice Art by Augusta Sparks Farnum	
	64
I Died on River Road A Short Story by Shawn Van Horn	
	69
Who Dunit A Poem by Lawrence Syldan	

Gus's Room

Mark SaFranko

EVEN THOUGH he must have weighed three hundred, maybe even three hundred fifty pounds, nothing about my next-door neighbor stood out. Occasionally Gus King and I would bump into each other, even fall into a passing conversation when things were really slow—and usually they were—but as a rule I kept out of his way and he kept out of mine. That's the way it is around here.

113 Baysmore Street is an unusual place. It's reserved for those of us who've travelled all the way to Hell and back, a halfway house of sorts, though it's not legally called that.

I'm up on the second floor. Johnston has the basement. He's had his share of troubles with the law, mostly on account of his various drug addictions. Winkovich is on the first floor. Like me, he's endured his problems with the bottle. The two of us often see one another at the local AA meeting, which I never fail to attend, and in fact have not failed to attend in the past decade or so except for when I was down with the flu. Then there's Abdul, next door to Winkovich. I know he lives there, but I hardly ever see him because he puts in long hours pumping gas at the BP station on Route 17. If he's a resident of 113 Baysmore, he's in pretty much the same boat as the rest of us...

Don't get me wrong. It's not all terrible. This is a perfectly nice suburban neighborhood, with a fine if distant view of Manhattan,

where once upon a time I was doing very well in the publishing business, until the bottom fell out of my life. It didn't happen all at once. Nothing bad ever does. No, it was more like a long, meandering trip down a steep mountain, but the destination was certain. There were a couple of divorces and lost jobs and a bankruptcy, and all the while I kept drinking. Along the way it got ugly—very, very ugly. To the point where I'd take my son, who was only four or five at the time, and sit him next to me at the bar while I did what I needed to do. He claims not to remember any of it now, but I don't see him much anymore, which I guess says something. Such are the consequences of my actions and I have no choice but to accept them.

The irony is that now that I've got the drinking under control, there's not much left of me. Whenever I run into somebody from that earlier life, they ask the same question: "What the hell happened to you, man?"

It's a great question. I never have an answer.

I was talking about Gus King. What I knew was that he'd been some kind of IT expert for a bank. Before that, he'd been in the army. On account of his obesity, it was hard for me to believe that he'd served, but maybe the weight came later. I even heard a rumor that he'd been in government intelligence. Then, after

losing his last job, he ended up here. I had to wonder why he hadn't bought himself a nice condo or something like that instead of choosing a flophouse on Baysmore Street, but in this place you go only so far in your conversations.

What I liked most about Gus was that he was quiet. Never heard a peep out of him, not even the sound of his TV through the walls.

Me, I keep a low profile too. I like to read, everything from the classics to junk. I watch TV, old movies, mostly, or something on Netflix. Once in a while I have lunch with some of the AA guys. Sometimes I even still look for work. Finding a job isn't easy when you've hit a certain age and your past is full of gaping holes. But I have to keep at it—Social Security will take you only so far.

If it weren't for Lindsay—my daughter—I wouldn't see many people outside of my fellow boarders and the recovery gang. Once every few weeks she stops by, we go out and grab something to eat, but that's the limit. Too much water has passed under the bridge, too much chaos raged in the home where she was brought up, for us to ever have a truly normal relationship. She's pushing thirty now and isn't married, and I have to wonder if it's because of me, and what happened between me and her mother. It's too late to change any of it now. The way I see it, I'm fortunate she even comes around, just like I'm lucky to have this room.

On the whole I'm one grateful guy. We would all love to rewrite history, but it can't be done.

I was on my way in with a bag from Shoprite one evening when I first bumped into Juanita. It wasn't until she started coming around that I even paid any attention to Gus King.

"Hey," I said.

She was in her early twenties, I'd guess, and she bore a resemblance to that Puerto Rican anchorwoman on channel 4 in the early mornings, the one I've got a thing for. Blonde hair, probably not her natural color, but it looked great. Big amber eyes. Down below, all swift curves. She looked like the type who chews gum, but her mouth was empty. Her expression was arrogant, which made me want to fuck her. The kind of babe I'd have slobbered all over in my youth until she came to hate me.

What really amazed me, though, was that she was in the house at all, since women aren't allowed. Before I moved in, there'd been all kinds of nasty issues with various ladies—something I could easily believe, considering the quality of the residents of 113 Baysmore. When I was about to sign the lease for my room, Mister Tergov, the owner and landlord, informed me, "The policy here is no female visitors at any time. It's not that I have something against women, understand, but they've caused just too much trouble whenever they come around. I've even had to call the police! So if you got plans to bring in any girlfriends, you might want to find another place, okay?"

I had no plans along those lines at all. My last girlfriend and I were no longer even speaking, which was one of the reasons I'd ended up here in the first place. For all I knew, my days with the ladies were over for good.

Anyway, Juanita said hi back. She seemed a little agitated. She was wearing a purple outfit and kept marching back and forth between my door and Gus's, leaving a sweet scent like flowers in her wake. It got to me right away. All it takes is a little perfume to make you realize how deprived you've been.

"Something I can help you with?" I was standing there cradling my bag, watching her.

"Seen Gus around? The man who lives here?" She threw a finger at his door.

My heart sank. What would *someone who looked like her want with someone who looked like Gus?*

"No, I haven't seen him today."

It was true. I hadn't seen him that day or the day before, or the day before that. But it wasn't unusual. Gus and me were like ships passing in the night.

"Want to come in and wait?" I just had to ask, even though I could already see in her eyes that she had no interest whatsoever in me.

"Mind doing me a favor," she said, ignoring my question.

"Sure."

"Tell Gus I was here. And that he needs to call me as soon as possible." She started moving towards the stairs.

Suddenly I was more than a little jealous.

"Excuse me—what's your name? Who should I say—"

"Jonny. Juanita. He'll know. Just tell him his girlfriend."

Well, you could have knocked me out with a pillowcase. Gus—fat Gus—had a *girlfriend*? And someone like this hot tamale? The boat had passed me by, all right.

"Okay," I said.

Then she took off, her buttocks in that tight purple dress pumping like a pair of succulent pistons.

I put the groceries away, then sat near the door and waited until I heard Gus King's key in the lock.

"Hey man," I said when I walked over. "Juanita — Jonny—said for you to call her

when you got in."

I'd never actually been inside Gus's room before. The latest gear—computers, oversized flat TV screen, cell phones—was everywhere, but otherwise the place was a serious god-damned mess. Empty Chinese food cartons all over the floor, crushed Reese's Peanut Butter Cup wrappers on the bed, empty soda bottles lining the dresser. The place looked like it had never been cleaned, not a single time. Underneath the disarray was a funky smell. I had to wonder where the rats and mice were hiding and how long it would take them to find their way into my cave. Mister Tergov certainly wouldn't appreciate the way Gus kept house.

He stood there cradling his overflowing grocery bags and smiled. "Thanks."

I was hoping he would go into it, explain why a sex bomb like Juanita would have anything to do with him, but instead he mumbled something about the weather and how he needed to get his car an oil change. He didn't want to talk about Juanita, it was obvious.

"Well, okay," I said finally. When I made my exit, he was still posing there in his bomber jacket, which looked like a child's garment on his massive blob of a body.

The next time I saw Jonny was a few weeks later. I happened to be leaving my room when I saw her jiggling the knob of Gus's door. The look on her face was curious: I'm about to do *something wrong, and I don't give a fuck who—including you—knows it.*

"Hello," I said, "how have you been?"

She ducked inside without answering. For some reason it made me feel lousy to be ignored by her. But who was I? Nothing but an older guy, a much older guy, and here I was,

already infatuated with this kid who's in the same age range as my own daughter.

Instead of going on to the AA meeting, I turned around, went back inside, and laid my ear up against the wall that separated my room from unit 6. I stayed awhile like that, hoping to hear something. Eventually I gave up, went out and picked up some fried chicken and instant mashed potatoes at Stop & Shop. Later that night Frenzy would be showing on TCM. I was going to eat dinner in front of the TV with rare Hitchcock for company.

The sound wasn't unfamiliar. I could swear it was a dog, whimpering.

It was early Sunday morning. I'd been in a deep sleep, the heaviest since I quit the new antidepressants my shrink prescribed last time I saw him.

I lay there trying to figure out where the sound was coming from, but it kept moving around. Finally I rolled out of bed and went downstairs. I didn't see anything, but the whimpering was louder. I followed it until I located the source, which was the corner of the screened-in porch.

The creature was covered with curly orange and white fur, and looked like one of those hypo-allergenic something-doodles. The second it set eyes on me, it scampered over and frantically pawed my leg. When I reached down to pet it, I saw a heart-shaped silver tag dangling from the faux-diamond collar.

My name is Fluff. I belong to Juanita, it read.

She had to be upstairs with Gus, and for some reason—probably because they were in bed—they'd decided to exile the pooch to the porch. That was a little dangerous, because in addition to women, animals weren't allowed

in Mister Tergov's palace either. If the landlord ever saw Fluff, he'd flip his toupee. I swept it up in my arms and walked it back inside and up the stairs.

"It's okay, pup," I whispered to the quivering animal, and it listened and stopped crying.

I listened at Gus's door, heard nothing, then knocked. I hoped whoever was inside would open up fast—I didn't want any of the other tenants catching on to the dog. Abdul and Winkovich worked late and wouldn't appreciate the noise if they were trying to sleep in.

I heard the low drumbeat of footsteps. The door clicked open. The fat man's glasses were askew on his face and he had a bad case of bed head. That sour smell assaulted me again.

"Hey, man...What is it?"

I switched the dog from one arm to the other so he could see it.

"This belong to you by any chance?"

Gus blinked. "Holy shit."

He opened the door all the way and looked up and down the hall.

"Where'd you find him?"

"On the porch."

Gus reached out and took the squirming animal.

"I didn't want you getting into trouble with the landlord, know what I mean, so I brought him up here."

"Thanks. Come on in."

I walked past him and into the room.

"Don't mind the mess..." Gus turned in circles. He didn't seem to know where to deposit the dog.

"I bought Fluff for Jonny. She wanted a dog, right? Now she's decided she wants me to raise it. No way, I told her, I can't do it here. She must have left him this morning..."

Gus didn't seem in the least ticked off.

Why did he put up with something like this? I wanted to ask, but didn't.

"Gotta figure this out," he muttered, dropping Fluff on his mashed-up bedspread. He went and curled up between the pillows.

"Why doesn't Jonny keep the dog?"

Gus studied me, as if trying to decide whether I was worth confiding in. "It's kinda complicated. Right now she lives over in Paterson with her daughter and sister. And this guy—well, actually her ex-boyfriend. But she won't allow me over there, so I don't know exactly what the arrangement is, how much room she has, any of that stuff..."

"It doesn't bother you?"

Gus skulked around the smelly room, pulling his clothes on. It was a bizarre sight, an undersized tee shirt over that massive white belly.

"Bother me? Hey," he said, and pointed at his dresser, where a row of blue and white pharmaceutical vials were lined up like soldiers. "Jonny has me living on Viagra. We got something real good going. There's a lot worse things in life, right?"

I tried to picture Gus making love to the young and comely Juanita, but it was annoying, then repellent. Then kind of funny.

"So I'm a happy guy," he went on, trying to squeeze his lobster-red, bloated feet into a pair of loafers. "And being happy in life goes a long way, believe me."

I believed him.

"Jonny wants me to take care of her, I take care of her. She asks for something, I buy it for her. And I don't ask questions. What else am I gonna do with my money?"

Now all those packages—from jewelry stores, shoe outlets, clothing boutiques—that arrived for Gus King on the front porch on a nearly daily basis made sense. It was all for Jonny.

"Does this ex-boyfriend of hers know about you?"

"Who knows? Sometimes it's best not to ask too many questions, know what I mean?"

Gus bounced on the edge of the bed and stroked the dog's head.

"Anyway, we probably won't be here too much longer."

"Oh, no?"

"I just bought Juanita a house down in Nicaragua. We're moving in January."

"No kidding."

"Most of her family's down there... And listen to this: For only forty K I got a frigging mansion outside of Managua. Believe that? In Nicaragua you can live like a king for next to nothing! I told Jonny we're gonna have fulltime maid service, the whole nine yards. She won't have to lift a finger. And it won't cost me hardly anything..."

Suddenly Fluff squatted and pissed on the bedspread. And that put an end to the conversation.

None of what Gus had told me made sense. If he had the money to buy a mansion in Nicaragua, what the hell was he doing living in a grade B boarding house?

I tucked myself next to the wall and attempted to eavesdrop on the other side. I tried to imagine what Gus and Juanita were saying to each other. I tried to imagine them naked. Then I tried to picture them doing it. I knew it was pathetic, but a second-hand version of life was vastly more interesting than mine—which was nothing, really.

But very little penetrated the wood and plaster. Of course I'd already figured out what the deal was—Juanita and her entire posse

were on the take. What fascinated me was that Gus knew it—he had to know—and didn't give a rip. He was living a fairy tale, but at the same time he was realistic: whenever he looked into the mirror, he must have fully understood his limitations.

The next time I saw Juanita, she was climbing out of a brand new silver Lexus Infiniti. Gone the red Volkswagen bug missing a hub cap that used to be the cue that she was on the premises. I didn't have to ask her or anybody else where the new car had come from.

Then—nothing. Months quickly disappeared into ether, as they tend to do when you're getting older. Gus's room had gone eerily quiet. I no longer even put my ear to the wall because nothing ever seemed to be happening on the other side.

In the meantime, my luck took a little turn. I landed a job writing content for the websites of a pair of dentists in the New York suburbs. Twenty-five an hour wasn't going to make me rich, but for the first time in a couple of years I could afford to eat at the diner on Route 4.

One autumn afternoon, when I was forcing myself through the final pages of a mediocre popular novel that had just been turned into a heavily promoted Hollywood movie, I heard a furious rapping on Gus's door.

I jumped up and looked into the hallway. It was Juanita, pounding with her balled-up fist.

"You seen him? You seen Gus?"

As a matter of fact, I hadn't. I had no idea where he might be. "Not anytime recently."

"I been calling him for two days now, and he don't answer! He don't answer! Something's not right!"

I got the strange impression, probably

from watching too much true crime TV, that she was putting on an act, faking her concern.

"If I see him, I'll let him know you were here."

That stopped her banging. Wasn't it odd that she didn't ask me to phone someone right then and there? And if she was so worried, why didn't she call someone herself?

She started down the stairs. She was wearing one of those dresses again, this time a glittering emerald color. That girl was still mouth-wateringly luscious, despite the fact that I couldn't say I liked her, and I resented that Gus got to have her, even if she was sucking him dry.

I went to the window and watched the Lexus roll out of the lot. Then I stepped over to Gus's door and tried knocking myself.

"Gus, it's me, your neighbor."

Maybe, I figured, he'd answer if he knew that Juanita was gone. But there was no answer, nothing, from in there.

If Gus wasn't in his room, and he wasn't with Juanita, where was he? Even though it wasn't my business, I went back inside my place, picked up my cell and hit the landlord's number.

"Uh, Mister Tergov...no one's heard from Gus King for days. I figured somebody should let you know."

I didn't know what else to say, so I hung up.

Around ten the next morning Tergov showed up. I cracked my door and watched him fish a ring of keys out of his jacket.

He looked up and spotted me. "I knocked. No answer."

He jiggled one of the keys into the lock

and pushed. When the door gave, his eyes bugged out of his skull.

"What the hell...?"

I ran over and looked. Gus was lying next to the bed inside a big splash of sunshine let in by the window. He was in nothing but saggy gray jockey shorts, his distended belly mashed like a half-deflated beach ball into the floorboards.

"911," said Tergov. "Call 911."

I pulled out my phone and told the dispatcher there was an emergency.

Then I squatted and placed two fingers on Gus's biceps. It was as cold as a slab of super-market steak. A pool of blood had formed and coagulated under his blue lips. The eyes were half open and dreamy.

"He's dead," I said.

"I know," said Tergov. "I can smell it."

I scanned the room. Nothing much had changed since the last time. Tergov and I backed out of the room like scared animals and waited for the experts to show up.

wiped the sweat from her forehead with the sleeve of her "Ocean City, Maryland" sweat-shirt. "Have you seen that so-called girlfriend of his—Juanita, I think she calls herself?"

"It's been a while."

A look of disdain slashed her face. "You didn't see her stealing anything out of my brother's room, did you?"

"Can't say I did. Anyway, the landlord wouldn't allow something like that."

This seemed to make her feel better. Was there any official word on what had happened to her brother, I asked. She said no, and that there wouldn't be an autopsy, since there was no point to it. Everyone knew he was severely diabetic, and that he'd probably had a fatal seizure.

Well, that was that. Soon Gus's room would be gutted. It needed fumigating; that foul odor was still in the air.

My only hope that was that whoever rented the room next would be as quiet as Gus had been, because I wasn't going anywhere.

There was a commotion in the hallway. I opened up and saw a man and a woman hauling stuff — computer equipment, books, trash bags—out of my dead neighbor's room.

I stepped over and introduced myself. The lady announced that she was Gus's sister, and that Tergov, the landlord, knew she was here.

"Sorry to hear about your brother. Gus was a nice guy."

She nodded. She seemed very much in a hurry and she wasn't inclined to talk.

"Let me know if there's anything I can help you with."

She dropped the cardboard box and

I felt empty. Gus and Juanita had injected something alive into my existence. I was going to miss both of them. Now there was nothing but an infernal silence again.

That Saturday afternoon I attended a service for Gus King. The funeral home was only a few miles away, over in Fair Lawn. I was surprised by the large turnout. Gus's brother and sister were there, of course. I said hello, but they were too preoccupied to pay attention. I guess

I had nothing to say to them anyway.

The conspicuous absence from the affair was Jonny. The sexy Juanita had been the person closest to Gus in life, but in death she was nowhere to be seen.

In the quiet of my room I began to have ominous thoughts. Like maybe—just maybe—Gus hadn't just died. Maybe something else had gone down. Maybe Juanita had murdered Gus. Maybe she'd lied about not seeing him in the days before his body was found. What would have prevented her from slipping something into one of his drinks and taking her chances getting away with it?

I looked up “untraceable poisons” on the internet. There were plenty. Belladonna. Arsenic. Cyanide. Mercury. Others I'd never heard of. There'd been no autopsy on Gus, like his sister said. Within a few days of his death his body had been burned to ashes. Would even a trace of poison ever be found if anyone bothered to investigate?

But why would Jonny want Gus dead? He was her meal ticket. He was the source, the eternal spring that would never run dry.

No, my theory made no sense.

Unless...the spring had run dry. Unless Juanita knew that except for some junk in his room, she'd already bled Gus for every last cent, and that there was nothing left to bleed. That after fleecing him for jewelry and clothes, for a car, for a dog, for rent, there wasn't a penny left to swindle...and the thought of having to climb between the sheets with that enormous, flabby whale of a body one more time for nothing at all was too much to take.

But that made no sense either. What about the *mansion* and maid in Nicaragua?

Wouldn't she want that? And why would she want to get herself into hot water when the golden goose had already been slaughtered? Why not simply walk away from Gus?

I'm no cop. If Gus's relatives didn't care enough to open an investigation into his death, who was I to get involved?

It's now the beginning of December, when night comes on much too quickly. The job ended a couple of weeks ago, and I'm looking for work again. Since I've got nothing better to do, I kick off my sneakers, pull off my pants and sweater, and climb into bed. On the night table is a stack of books I've checked out of the public library. I grab the first title off the top. It's a bestselling novel about an alcoholic woman who rides the train back and forth spying on her neighbors' lives. Being empty myself, I can relate. I read the first sentence. Not too bad. Maybe I'll start with that one...

There's a sharp twinge in my left calf, a new pain added to all the others, and I move around on the mattress until I find a comfortable position. After another few sentences, my eyelids begin to grow heavy. I try to force myself to stay awake, but the words and sentences aren't sticking...

The book slips out of my hands and lands on the floor with a thud. I reach over and switch off the lamp.

I think: I'm alone. Again. I've grown used to it, being alone. Maybe I've grown used to emptiness, too.

I'll die alone. I know it. Gus died alone, even though he had the beautiful Juanita...

But it's okay. Everyone is alone, really.

I realize that out of habit I'm trying to tune into what's happening next door. I think I hear

a noise coming from the far side of the wall. Has someone new moved in? No—I would have noticed.

Then I remember that Gus is no longer among the living, and that Juanita already has somebody else, and that she's not going to

come around anymore, not for Gus, not for me, not for anyone else at 113 Baysmore...

I let myself slide, down, down, down, into the rush of a dream, a wonderful dream where it's full of all kinds of things, like a river. But over there, Gus's room is still vacant.

Mark Safranko's The Suicide (Honest Publishing) was named to Foyles (UK) Best Fiction of 2014 list. No Strings (2014, Thomas & Mercer) reached the Amazon bestseller lists in both the US and Canada. Other novels include Hating Olivia (Harper Perennial, 2010), and in France, Travaux Forces (2013), Putain D'Olivia (2009), Confessions D'Un Loser (2010) and Dieu Benisse L'Amerique (2011), all from 13e Note Editions. Putain D'Olivia was selected by Virgin France as one of its "Favorite Summer Reads" of 2009. These novels, under their English titles, Dirty Work, Hating Olivia, Lounge Lizard, and God Bless America, as well as the story collection Loners (2008), have also been published in the United Kingdom since 2005. Other credits include the 2005 Frank O'Connor Award for Short Fiction from descantmagazine, Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine (March, 2003, May 2001), and a story (Hawai'i Review, Fall/Winter 1999) cited in The Best American Mystery Stories 2000. Stories appearing in Green Hills Literary Lantern and The Loose Canon were nominated for a Pushcart Prize.



Vessel

Jim Kazanjian

Jim Kazanjian received his Master of Fine Art at the Art Center College of Design in '92, after graduating from the Art Institute of Kansas City in '90. In the past 18 years he has worked professionally as a digital artist for television and the world of video games. Among the various collaborations include Nike, Adidas, NBC, CBS, HBO, NASA, HP, Intel and others. He currently lives in Portland, Oregon.

Sharp Edges

Glenn Moss

Open my news app and there it is
Another obit, another suicide
A plunge into cold deep water
Beneath the sun-glint and expanse
Light and limitless are bled by knives
Honed and whetted against stones no one sees
Closing the app, I turn on Sirius radio
Coltrane rushes at me, starts the engine, turns the wheel
I remember a night at the Village Vanguard
The notes followed me home and are with me now
Sharing the ride, keeping my own blade in its sheath

Glenn Moss is a media lawyer by trade and has been writing poetry, stories and plays since high school in Brooklyn. Glenn went to Binghamton University, where he wrote a five act play for a course in Jacobean Literature. That experience encouraged him to continue writing, and in law school at Case Western Reserve in Cleveland. He wrote a play for a course in Jurisprudence. Returning to NYC and a life in law and family, Glenn continued to write poetry and stories amidst contracts and business plans. He believes that each area of writing is enriched by the other, with even contracts benefitting from a bit of poetic dance. Glenn has had poems published in Ithaca Lit and West Trade Review.

Roger Castleman in Retirement

Charles Rammelkamp

THE LANDLINE

YOU HAVE REACHED THE HOME of Roger and Jodie Castleman. We may actually be home, but we've stopped answering the landline because we're being harassed by a caller who leaves long, rambling messages that we simply delete without listening to. I wish she would stop calling. Please leave your name and number and a brief message why you are calling. We'll get back to you if you are legitimate.

"Why don't you just get rid of your landline?" the Castlemans' daughter asked. Lily was a graduate student at the School for Public Health, living in her own apartment across town, but she came by for dinner and to visit now and then. "You don't actually need it, and now you don't even answer it because this crazy person Shelley Pickett keeps calling and leaving you these endless voicemail messages."

Castleman saw the logic, of course. There was no reason to keep a landline phone. It was a needless expense. Anybody who wanted to talk to them knew their cell numbers. He knew lots of people who had discontinued their landline service, and nobody regretted it. The only calls they received besides Shelley's were from the Red Cross asking for blood, the colleges and universities they'd attended asking for alumni contributions, and a handful of charities asking for the same – SPCA, PETA,

Planned Parenthood, Mothers Against Drunk Driving...

"I don't know," Castleman fidgeted. He looked at Jodie. "We ought to get rid of it. We really should."

"We get appointment reminders," Jodie offered, but she knew it sounded lame, and shrugged.

"Give them your cell phone numbers!" Lily exclaimed, exasperated.

For years they'd kept the landline, telling themselves that their ancient parents only called that number, that they were confused by cell phone technology, and if there were ever an emergency... But both of their mothers had died five years ago now, and yet they still had the landline.

"You think this new message of yours is going to solve the problem?" Lily asked. "It just sounds crazy, like a joke. And I'm sure it will only encourage her because face it, the message is directed at her."

"Maybe we should get rid of the lifeline," Castleman said to Jodie.

"Landline."

"What did I say?"

"You said lifeline."

Wow, Castleman thought, remembering his mother. A Freudian slip!

"What if there's a storm and the cell towers get knocked out?" Jodie equivocated. "We

might want to have the backup in case of an emergency.”

“I’m sure the telephone wires would be the first to go,” Lily, ever practical, pointed out. “But do what you think’s best. I’m just baffled why you keep it.”

Was this Shelley’s lifeline, Castleman caught himself wondering. The landline? This crazy former student with OCD who left voicemails about her suicide attempts? Was the illusion that she was telling somebody, as in a confessional or a shrink’s office, keeping her alive? She continued to send him letters and the occasional poem; her handwriting was illegible, like ransom notes from a demented person, and those were maybe more alarming than the voicemails, which, if they didn’t necessarily sound coherent were at least articulate with their own crazy logic of self-delusion. The letters? Slashes of ink on paper, like highway overpass graffiti, with her name weirdly stamped in block capitals at the end with some sort of rubber stamp.

Would the new voicemail message finally put an end to Shelley’s calls? Would she feel ashamed to hear how she had disrupted other peoples’ lives and simply stop calling, out of a sense of embarrassment? But Shelley had a way of convincing herself that what she was doing was all right. Even after he’d threatened to call the police if she didn’t stop “pestering” him, she’d eventually returned to this annoying compulsive behavior, even made a joke of “calling the authorities.” He’d written that note on the big box of her poems that she’d left on his porch, the afternoon she’d banged on the door for five minutes after he’d made it clear – or so he thought – that he wanted nothing to do with her “work.” He’d returned the box to her house later that day with the note of warning on it, and it had worked for about a week,

but then the voicemails had resumed, at first a trickle and then a flood, as well as the letters, and when he hadn’t called the police she must have felt the coast was clear. Shelley was clearly mentally ill. Castleman recognized this wasn’t her “fault,” but nevertheless he wished she’d stop.

One of Castleman’s former colleagues at Craycombe Community College, Gloria Hendrix, had revealed to him when he mentioned his problem with Shelley that she too had been stalked, for about ten years now, by a former student who’d accused her of ruining his life. His schoolboy crush had morphed into a dangerous obsession, and Gloria had had to get a restraining order. Gloria had gotten rid of her landline in response, but the student had her email address, and he left messages on her school voicemail too. At least Shelley did not have Castleman’s email address.

Gloria had retired from Craycombe about the same time that Castleman had retired from Infodyne. She’d moved away from Baltimore, to the Poconos, but the student still had her email address and continued to plague her. She’d kind of resigned herself to it by now, and she’d advised Roger that the only thing he could do was try to ignore Shelley. To respond in any way was only going to encourage her.

Was this what Castleman faced? Ten years and counting of being stalked by a lunatic?

And no, the voicemails did not stop, even with the new message. Maybe Shelley didn’t bother to listen to it, just launched into her new rant. Castleman wondered if she’d even alluded to it in her voicemails, but he always deleted those as soon as he’d identified her voice.

But the next one he decided to listen to all the way through. “Hello, Roger? Shelley. I

just want you to know that I'm really pleased to be working with you on this project." What! He deleted the message as if stamping on a cockroach.

The Castlemans were making a trip to Norway – Oslo and Lillehammer. It was a chance to escape the really brutal part of a Baltimore summer but also, Castleman acknowledged, an escape from Shelley Pickett. Because they would be walking around a lot, in the mountains, around the fjords, in the cities they planned to visit, Castleman decided to buy some comfortable shoes. He went to the Towson Town Mall on Dulaney Valley Road, to the Walking Store.

It was while he was in the mall that he spotted Shelley walking toward him. She was coming out of Nordstrom with a big bag, headed his way. For a moment he panicked, stopped dead in his tracks. What should he do? Had she seen him? Apparently not. She appeared to be in a trance-like thought-bubble looking at the ground, distracted by her unwieldy bag. Shielding his face with his hand but trying not to look conspicuous and attract her attention, Castleman scuttled away commando-like to a Starbuck's where he ducked behind a display of coffee mugs. He watched as she continued down the hallway toward Macy's at the other end of the mall. He could feel the perspiration on his forehead and under his arms. A close call.

Only after she'd passed and he found himself debating whether to go on to the shoe store or come back another time did he feel a kind of cowardly shame come over him, a consciousness of himself as a chicken heart. Sure, there was every reason to avoid an

awkward encounter with her, but why change his plans just because he'd almost run into Shelley Pickett, just because she happened to be in the same mall as he? His reaction had been saturated with irrational fear, the panic of a schoolboy running late for class without his homework.

When would it ever end? Gloria was right, of course, it was best to just avoid Shelley. No good would ever come from trying to rationally resolve the situation, to "reason" with her. But wasn't this like a novel or a movie that had no resolution, an intolerable slice-of-life without a plot, an endless farce? And what a big slice! Ten years? Unthinkable. Couldn't it end in an arrest, incarceration in a mental hospital? Even a car accident? Where was *deus ex machina* when you needed it?

When he got home with his new shoes, Jodie mentioned that the phone had rung several times in his absence. She hadn't answered it, but after the last one she'd picked up the receiver and heard the beep-beep-beep of a new voicemail message.

"There was only one, but it must have been a butt call – no voice, just muffled sound. Wrong number. Not you-know-who."

Just then the phone rang again, and Castleman made a quick decision. Damn the torpedoes. He strode over to the desk where the landline phone sat next to the computer like an IED and snatched the receiver out of the cradle.

"Hello?"

THE WOUNDED

"Roger?"

Castleman and his wife Jodie are sitting on their front porch on a breezy Sunday afternoon at the end of summer. You'd almost call it the start of autumn for the crispness in the air,

but the leaves haven't started to turn yet, and both are wearing shorts and sandals, reading the New York Times. It's full of the portent of disaster, from lethal hurricanes to the threat of nuclear war with North Korea to an unhinged president lurching from one embarrassment to the next. Castleman looks up from a story about the special prosecutor's investigation into obstruction of justice to see Shelley Pickett standing on the sidewalk, a demented grin warping her face, a small bag of groceries from the convenience store a few blocks away in her hand, the blue and green Royal Farms logo giving her a look of everyday normality.

Castleman looks over at Jodie, attempting to remain casual though a jolt of panic shoots through him. Should they make a break for it? Should they fake their way through? Shelley makes the decision for them, coming up the walk to their house.

"Please don't call the police on me!" she cackles. A month earlier Roger had returned the shoebox of poems she'd left at his door – after pounding on it and ringing the doorbell for several minutes – with a note telling her to stop pestering him or he'd call the police. Now Shelley was making it into a joke.

But as she starts up the steps, Shelley trips, splaying forward like a gunshot victim, her bag of groceries spilling onto the lawn. Not sure how to respond, Roger and Jodie watch with the paralyzed horror any accident can cause while Shelley picks herself up. They can see she's torn a hole in the knee of her jeans and implicitly invite her up onto the porch to take a seat.

"I think I'm going to need stitches!" Shelley wails, but the Castlemans are pretty sure it's just a scrape, and both go inside to get a bowl of warm water to wash out the wound, some paper towels and a bandage. It's as if

they are escaping, retreating, maybe to come up with some strategy on the fly. How to get rid of her.

"No, you don't need to get any soap," Castleman counsels, when Jodie roots around for some sanitizer. "Warm water will do." He does not want to make this too complicated, too elaborate, to prolong the encounter. From the moment he recognized Shelley out on the sidewalk, his mind has been working toward an exit strategy.

Back on the porch, Shelley is rolling up her pant leg, revealing a superficial scrape that nevertheless is bleeding. Roger sets the dish of water on the table in front of her, as he would a dish of drinking water for a pet dog or cat, and hands her the wad of paper towels. He does not want to touch her, as if she might be radioactive.

"I've been calling my friend Larry, and he won't return my calls," Shelley moans. "Oh, Roger, I'm so alone, alone, alone, alone, alone, alone." Then she laughs, that same crazy laugh she'd laughed when she'd mentioned calling the police.

"He just won't answer," she continues, staring at the table. "Why won't he answer? I wish he'd answer but he won't answer why won't he answer..."

"You've got to stop making these phone calls, Shelley," Jodie commands in the voice she'd used so effectively to students when she'd been a college administrator, a tone that said, Come to your senses! Get a grip!

Shelley looks at her, stunned. "I like you, Jodie!" she blurts. "I really like you! You're like a cat, you're like a mother cat. If you were a cat, what kind of cat do you think you'd be? A Maine Coon? Or would you be a –"

But Jodie ignores this. She persists. Cut the bullshit! "There's a reason people don't answer their phone, Shelley, there's a reason

they don't return your calls. Now just stop it! You've got to stop this nonsense!"

As if chastised, Shelley looks shamefaced, almost makes eye contact with Jodie but then looks away, and after a moment, Jodie says, "Here, let me put this band-aid on your knee. You'll be all right. You aren't going to need any stitches."

The bandage on her knee, Shelley rolls the leg of her jeans down her shin, looks around for her groceries on the lawn – a carton of orange juice, a bag of chips, a package of sliced cheese – and it's as if the visit is over. Castleman stands then to reinforce the understanding, knowing that Shelley is apt to just start talking and delay her departure. It's time for her to be on her way. If he were a gentleman, he'd go down the steps and collect her groceries for her and put them back into the bag. But he's afraid such a concession to decency will compromise him in some vague way, and instead he goes back into the house without saying goodbye, leaving Jodie to see Shelley off.

A few minutes later, Jodie comes back inside.

"Is she gone?"

"The poor thing! She said she was going home to kill herself."

Roger mentions all this to his former colleague Gloria Hendrix, who has likewise been plagued by a student stalker, and for far longer.

"Don't do it!" Gloria warns. "Don't feel sorry for her! She's just trying to manipulate you! God, how I wish mine never got my e-mail address!"

But when Castleman mentions the affair to another former colleague, Kevin Phillips, Kevin

scolds, accusingly, "And how would you feel if she had killed herself?"

A week later, Castleman comes home from the Farmer's Market with bags of late-summer tomatoes and hothouse mesclun, arugula, lettuce, early apples and a basket of peaches to find four new voicemails from Shelley. She's back to her old tricks.

Looking over at Jodie, he sighs, "Damn it, she didn't kill herself."

LEE HARVEY OSWALD

Castleman knew at once that the pounding on the front door was Shelley Pickett. It was loud and uncontrolled, erratic. It was crazy.

"Is that Shelley?" he called from the kitchen where he was chopping onions for a lentil soup.

Jodie, in the dining room, went to the front door.

"Go away, Shelley!" she shouted, as if to a dog that was rooting around in the garbage or tearing up a shoe. "Go away now! I will call the police if you do not leave now!"

Jodie came back into the kitchen. Castleman had peeled several cloves of garlic from a bulb and had begun mincing them. It wasn't fear that kept him from going to the front door so much as denial. It had only been a week before that Shelley had come to their house while he and Jodie were sitting on the front porch reading the newspaper. She'd stumbled on the steps and torn a hole in her jeans. They'd given her some warm water and a towel to clean the wound, and Jodie had put a band-aid on the scraped knee before Shelley left, muttering about killing herself. Now she was back. Apparently, she thought it was okay

to come to their house.

"She's gone?"

"She saw me calling 911 on my cellphone. I canceled the call when she started to leave." But Jodie went back to the living room to check.

"Roger! She's still here!"

"Oh, fuck," Castleman muttered, more discouraged than anything else. Why was she doing this? Why was she acting this way?

Just then Jodie's cellphone rang. "Yes, I did," she said. "Thank you for calling back. There's a woman who's been stalking my husband for several months, and she's out on our front porch right now and won't go away."

Castleman swept the minced garlic and chopped onions into a pan and turned his attention to the carrots and red pepper.

"She's wearing a jean jacket, pants with holes torn in the knees and —" Jodie went back into the living room. "And a red flannel shirt and sneakers. Probably between fifty and sixty." Jodie gave their address to the dispatcher, who assured her a patrol car would be on its way.

Castleman finished cutting the carrots and peppers, added them to the pan with the onions and garlic and sautéed them in oil for a few minutes before adding a can of diced tomatoes and the lentils, a container of vegetable stock, salt and pepper. He wiped his hands and joined Jodie in the living room. She was looking out through the window, from a distance where Shelley could not look in and see her.

"I wish they'd hurry up and get here," she fretted.

Castleman looked beyond her at Shelley out on the sidewalk. She was consulting her own cellphone. Then the landline began to ring.

"God damn her," he sighed. "Why is she doing this?"

"OK, they're here," Jodie announced a minute later. Two officers, one a bald white man, the other a squat African-American, had arrived in separate cars, no doubt responding individually to the call.

Through the window Roger and Jodie watched the officers talking to Shelley. They saw her handing over a photo ID and the officers writing on their notepads. The white guy walked away, talking into his radio, reporting facts, gathering information.

"Should we go out there?" Jodie asked Roger.

"I don't know. Maybe not. But maybe we should. I don't know. What do you think?"

"Maybe we better go out there." Jodie opened the door and they stepped out onto the porch.

"Roger!" Shelley called. "Oh thank God you're here! I just want you to know how grateful I am to you for reading my poetry! You've really made me such a better writer!"

"But Shelley, I'm not reading your poetry! I've told you that again and again!" Castleman kept his voice neutral, if emphatic, meanwhile rolling his eyes at the officers, shrugging his shoulders, as if to say, See what I'm dealing with? You simply cannot reason with this person.

"But you have to!" Shelley shrieked. "I can't do this by myself! I need you! Please, please, please, please help me!"

Castleman shrugged again and shook his head at the policemen. What more could he say?

"I just wanted to tell you Doctor Sheridan has adjusted my medications," Shelley went on in that imploring voice. "I promise not to pester you. I swear I won't. I just wanted you to know. Thank you so much for reading my poems, Roger, I am so grateful, I —"

"Shelley, Roger is not reading your poems.

He is not working with you on your manuscript. Just go away. Now.” Jodie’s was the voice of sensibility. Any rational person would have heeded her.

Castleman went back inside to attend to the lentil soup, simmering on the stove. This did not seem cowardly so much as simply expedient. He and Shelley could come to no resolution. He stirred the soup, tasted it, added a bit more pepper.

A few minutes later Jodie called to him. “Roger! Could you come out here?”

“She’s gone?” Castleman did not see Shelley on the sidewalk. He glanced at the patrol cars to see if she were in the backseat.

“She finally walked away, toward the park.”

“OK, I’ve got another call to respond to,” the bald white cop said to his partner, without looking at the Castlemans. He got into his car and drove away.

The officer who’d stayed behind, Sergeant Lipscomb, looked to be in his thirties. He had a sympathetic face. Jodie told him she was glad they’d been gentle with Shelley.

“It’s not her fault,” she said. “She’s just – crazy.”

“You still have to protect your property,” Lipscomb said, but he acknowledged the implied compliment.

Castleman told him the story of his acquaintance with Shelley, how she’d been in a creative writing class he’d taught at a local community college “back in the last century.” Almost twenty years ago. “She lives in the neighborhood, just a few blocks away. She’s on SSI. From time to time she’s hospitalized.” He shrugged. “I don’t think she’s violent, but . . .”

“She doesn’t have a record for violent behavior,” Sergeant Lipscomb assured.

“She doesn’t?” Roger and Jodie looked at each other with relief. He wondered if the

officer thought this was a sexual affair gone wrong. He imagined there were a lot more cases like that than somebody wanting her poetry read.

“But she’s crossed a line here,” Lipscomb repeated, “and you have to protect your home.” He handed a notecard to Castleman with numbers and dates and addresses on it. “If she continues to bother you, go to the Court Commissioner’s office downtown and file a restraining order. Bring this information with you. I wrote the address on the card.”

After the policeman left, Roger and Jodie went back onto the porch.

“Well, no history of violence, at least,” Castleman shrugged, and Jodie agreed it was a good sign.

Still, Castleman thought, lingering outside while Jodie went back into the house, there’s always the first time, isn’t there? He tried to remember if the kid who killed John Lennon on the sidewalk in front of his home – the Dakota – had had a history of violence but couldn’t remember. Like Shelley, he had attempted suicide and went to shrink for depression. He’d approached Lennon for an autograph and then shot him in the back five times. Not that Castleman was John Lennon, though in Shelley’s eyes he seemed to be some sort of rock star, the man who could make sense out of her poetry, or whatever it was she had in mind – if she had any clear idea in her mind at all. Chapman had blamed it all on literature himself – *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Castleman looked again at the card Sergeant Lipscomb had given him. The address of the court commissioner where he’d file a complaint, Shelley’s ID – she did not have a driver’s license but this was a government-issued ID number. Castleman recalled that she had driven a car back when she was a student. He supposed she was deemed no longer

capable of driving since then. There was also a date, 11-22-63 – Shelley's date of birth. The same day JFK had been assassinated.

Castleman went back inside to look at the soup. He picked up the telephone on his way and dialed for the messages. She'd left three, all while she'd been standing on the sidewalk. "Hello, Roger? You've got to help me! Please! I'm not –" Castleman pressed the delete button. "Roger, I am not leaving until you –" Again he pressed the delete key. The third began, "I could kill you." This time he pressed save.

"Any messages besides hers?" Jodie called from the kitchen. "Was she ranting again?"

"I didn't really listen to any of them," Castleman told his wife.

PTSD

The telephone started to ring while the Castleman's sat on the front porch. It was a warm Indian summer afternoon in late September. After four rings the phone stopped and went to voicemail.

"Remember when we used to jump to answer the phone?" Jodie asked, bemused, turning the page of the magazine she was reading. She hadn't stirred from where she was sitting.

"I'll check for messages later, but I hope she's stopped calling," Roger said, and after a moment added, "I remember when it was always somebody calling for a donation and how I'd try to get to it before it went to voicemail, thinking it might actually be important this time. It was like Charlie Brown hoping Lucy finally wouldn't pull the football away when he tried to kick it. I'm kind of glad we've stopped answering the phone. We should thank Shelley for that."

"Yeah, right," Jodie's sarcastic reply. It was she who'd finally called the police on

Shelley when she came over and pounded on the door and wouldn't leave the porch. They'd gotten used to the voicemails over the months, as many as twenty a day, annoying as they were, but the door-knocking and invading their property had been the last straw. Still, they'd stopped answering the phone.

Castleman went into the house and picked up the receiver, but he only heard the dial tone, no telltale beep-beep-beep of a voice message.

Castleman noticed his caution when he contemplated going out to the front porch, as well as the fact that they no longer answered the telephone when it rang. He wondered if this were some mild form of PTSD. Shellshock. And all at once he felt a humbling compassion for the way girls who've been raped must react every day. Only multiplied by some exponential factor. Or army veterans. All those kids who've had to kill other people, coming home from overseas assignments to their relatively peaceful homes and then clobbering their spouses and kids.

Curious, he googled PTSD for some background. Post-traumatic stress disorder, he read, is a mental condition that causes various emotional and physical reactions in people who have witnessed or experienced disturbing or distressing events. Fear for your life or well-being. Car accidents can cause it, sexual assault, long-term abuse, natural disasters, torture, living in a war zone.

Symptoms of PTSD include physical pain, nightmares or flashbacks, depression, anxiety, withdrawal from society, risky behaviors, repression, emotional numbing, jumpiness, being on edge, irritability, guilt, shame. Various

therapies have been used to address it, along with drugs – meditation, Magnetic Resonance (“brain-zapping”), equine therapy and more.

Did his reaction to Shelley really amount to PTSD? Castleman felt embarrassed just to consider the proposition. It was what his daughter Carol dismissed as a “white people problem,” meaning a manufactured self-serving “crisis.” He was not starving, he was not homeless, he was not suffering from cancer or some mortal disease.

With shame, Castleman remembered the raggedy black guy he’d run into on a street-corner over thirty years before, begging for

change. “I been fucked up by Agent Orange and all that shit,” he’d cried, anguished, and the pain in his voice practically seared Roger. He’d given the guy some money but it had felt so futile, so inadequate.

And he remembered his friend from college, Fred, forty-five years ago, another Vietnam vet who’d preferred sleeping in a hammock for a quick escape if need be, always sat in the cafeteria facing the door so he couldn’t be taken by surprise, Another Vietnam vet.

Castleman went through his computer files to find the poems he’d written so long ago.

FRED GOES TO COLLEGE

My college roommate Fred slept in a hammock
he’d strung up between window and closet.
After Vietnam he said he felt more comfortable
swinging suspended in a meshrope bed.

In the cafeteria he ate like a cat
hunkered over its dish, aware of his surroundings
through peripheral vision, ready to run
if some unexpected danger appeared.

I always imagined that life for Fred
was like waking up in the middle of a fire drill:
a shrill constant ringing and chaos
in the halls, a sharp unfamiliar breeze

from an open window at the end of the corridor,
distant shouting in an echoing stairwell,
college kids clutching bathrobes around them,
people bumping blindly into one another

as they try to be orderly in a manner
mimicking a thousand different concepts of order.
And that red clanging bell, there,
at the end of the fluorescentlit hallway,

announcing disaster like an old-time archangel
out of some thundering evangelist's sermon:
if you could only shut the damn thing up!
If you could only bring on the silence!

FRED GOES ON A DATE

Fred, my Freshman year roommate in college,
came to school straight from Vietnam.
He'd been drafted into the infantry
from the jangling noise of New York City.

From the urban jungle of hustlers & wiseguys
to the tropical jungle of rocket launchers,
hand grenades & machine guns, agent orange
& napalm, genocide & marijuana

to our little college in a peaceful cornfield,
the idyllic ivory tower in central Illinois
where students grumbled about the cafeteria
and the girls had to be back in their dorms by ten.

Like an alarm clock, Fred was always alert,
his nerves on a constant Code Red,
ready for any unexpected adventure,
primed for disaster like a metal detector.

Once he went on a date with Vickie Sue Collins,
a buttery blond farm girl from Meredosia.
Fred dressed up in sports coat and tie,
even brought Vickie Sue a bouquet of flowers.

They were going to a movie at the student center,
courteous Fred holding her coat when
a car backfired as they ambled across campus,
and Fred went down on his face in the mud.

Castleman wondered how Fred was doing
now. Last he'd heard he lived outside of Phila-
delphia, married, with three children, all grown
by now.

No, whatever else it was, this was not
PTSD he was experiencing in the aftermath of
Shelley's summer of stalking. Even "stalking"
sounded dramatic, like something you read

about in People magazine involving celebrities and their fans. Not stalking, just pestering.

Flashbacks! Driving in his car to the gym next day for his morning swim, Castleman suddenly remembered driving over to Shelley's to return the box of poems she'd left on his porch. Jodie'd driven the getaway car. They'd driven slowly down her street one afternoon, scoping out the neighborhood to make sure the coast was clear, and then he'd spilled out of the passenger-side door like a SWAT team cop, scurried up the steps to her porch, hunched over as if avoiding gunshots, dumped the box and hurried back to the idling car. He might even have barked, Beat it! to Jodie. It sure felt like it, in memory, that adrenaline rush. Castleman could feel his pulse racing now. Was this PTSD? Again, he felt embarrassment flood over him, causing his face to go red, even though nobody was there to see. Drama queen!

Besides, wasn't Shelley the one to be pitied? Not her fault that she suffered from a mental illness, bipolar, OCD, you name it. He remembered her despair about her loneliness the first time she'd invaded their front porch. Shouldn't he feel some compassion? Well, maybe he did.

After the gym, Castleman stopped at the grocery store to pick up a few items. It was here, he recalled a little nervously, in the supermarket, that he'd encountered Shelley on several occasions over the years. She'd always seemed so plaintive, asking him if he wouldn't mind looking at some of her poems. Of course, he'd always vaguely agree to, but nothing had ever come of it until this

past spring when she'd called and then went overboard.

Peering down the aisle labeled "Baking Needs" – sugar, flour, oil, spices, cake and muffin mixes – he thought he recognized her, a middle-aged woman with torn jeans and cock-eyed glasses propped into her bird's nest hair, but the doubletake proved him wrong. Somebody else.

PTSD? He chastised himself: Come off it, man! And then he remembered his dream – a nightmare! Another symptom! He'd been locked in a room with Shelley, who was making eyes at him, like some sort of zoo animal eyeing its prey. The walls were padded, windowless, soundproof. He was trapped...

He should be dope-slapped, he thought, letting his imagination run away with him like that, feeling sorry for himself. What about all the other dreams he'd had in his life, from the erotic to the absurd, the shameful to the pathetic?

Castleman used the self-service scanner to pay for his groceries and left the store. In the area in front of the sliding-door entryway, he watched an old man trying to hoist himself out of the passenger seat. With his left hand, he clutched the open door and with his right the chassis, attempting to pull himself to standing. He made Castleman think of a beetle on its back, futilely waving its legs in the air. His cane was between his legs.

"Can I help you?" Castleman asked, and he set down his bag of groceries. In the car, he saw, a large back woman, his caretaker, was at the wheel, letting him out before parking the car.

Castleman took the man under his arms and pulled him out of the car. The man steadied himself with his cane, nodding his thanks.

"All of my friends are dead now, except one, Billy Jones," the man said in a feeble whisper. "I'm ninety-seven years old."

"I'm sixty-five," Castleman told him, a number that up until now had marked "old age" for him, but now it sounded youthful.

PTSD? he thought, retrieving his bag of groceries.

Yeah, right.

Charles Rammelkamp is Prose Editor for BrickHouse Books in Baltimore, where he lives and Reviews Editor for Adirondack Review. His most recent books include American Zeitgeist (Apprentice House) and a chapbook, Jack Tar's Lady Parts (Main Street Rag Press). Another poetry chapbook, Me and Sal Paradise, is forthcoming from FutureCycle Press.



Medusa

Hollie Savage

Hollie Savage is a photographer from the scenic Puget Sound region of Western Washington. Hollie is a mother of three who manages a family business.

Immeasurable Dream

Marieta Maglas

Your dream is existent.
It is a galactic spin;
it is electric, rhythmic,
resonant, and lunar,
a red Skywalker.
You're never present
in this dream of yours
a complex analysis of
your image in the mirror.

This kind of images
never looks like you.

Tathagata waits for us as long as
we want to be there.
Maybe Tathagata is only
an illusion coming to be.

Your dream is a square
for heart sacrifices-
fundamentalism, principles,
harmonic convergence,
paradigm, and philosophy.

You should not be
that soul yearning to quench your thirst
with something, you cannot have.
It makes me think
of a river.
Generates a loud, low scream
when you need it to be existent.

Who can imagine that
the blue color of the sky
is not a real, true one?

Hope is like landing on Gliese.
It is not the moon
reflecting
on the river.
Thinking while living long
and while longing for freedom,
you are resentful toward
everything that
shouldn't make you be resentful.

Like the moon
hiding the same half from view,
it is this suffering in togetherness;
swamps of the disillusion.
Yet, it remains unchanged.

Why is everything the way it is?

I don't know whether or not
we are existent
because Someone wants us to be existent,
but maybe we need firstly a reason
to be existent-
the first cosmic truth.

Continued on following page

The mind thinks of that eternity
that doesn't have chains.
We all have the right to think
whatever we want.

Eternity is not equal to the Tathagata.
It looks so real out of it.
It cries out of nothingness.
In the womb of the Tath gata,
grows its embryonic essence.

All the bluebirds
fly freely in the serene sky.

The more we understand God,
the more He reveals Himself.
We thirst for those heights
with a will of being children.

Ardus Publications, Sybaritic Press, Prolific Press, Silver Birch Press, *and some others published the poems of Marieta Maglas in anthologies like* Tanka Journal, *edited by Glenn Lyvers*, The Aquillrelle Wall of Poetry, *edited by Yossi Faybish*, A Divine Madness: An Anthology of Modern Love Poetry, *edited by John Patrick Boutilier*, Near Kin: A Collection of Words and Art Inspired by Octavia Estelle Butler, *edited by Marie Lecrivain*, Three Line Poetry #25 and #39, *edited by Glenn Lyvers*, ENCHANTED—Love Poems and Abstract Art, *edited by Gabrielle de la Fair*, Intercontinental Anthology of Poetry on Universal Peace and Love, *edited by Madan Gandhi*, and Nancy Drew Anthology: Writing & Art Featuring Everybody's Favorite Female Sleuth (Silver Birch Press Anthologies) (Volume 15) Paperback – October 1, 2016, *edited by Melanie Villines*. The poems of Marieta Maglas have been also published in journals like Poeticdiversity, *edited by Marie Lecrivain*, I Am not a Silent Poet, *edited by Reuben Woolley*, and Our Poetry Corner, *edited by Ron DuBour*.

Something's Knocking

Tim Jeffreys

THERE WAS NOTHING EXCEPTIONAL about the doorway. It was a regular doorway on an inner city backstreet which Richard used as a shortcut on his way to work. The sombre forest-green paint was cracked and flaking, and the door always stood open allowing a view of a dingy hallway at the end of which a staircase descended into gloom. The hallway's carpet, which might once have been red, was worn and stained, and the paper peeled from the walls.

No, it was not the doorway that caught Richard's attention – how could it? – but the posters affixed to the brickwork to the left of it. The posters always contained a few words, hand drawn in elaborate script, and an arrow which pointed towards the open door. The words on the posters changed daily. NORTH TOWER RUMPUS, the poster said one day. Another day it read: THROB OF A GLORIOUS EVENING, and the day after that: SWEET TONGUE CASCADE. Always underneath there was the same arrow pointing inside the open doorway, as if to imply that whatever was suggested by this nonsense could somehow be found inside.

Richard never saw anyone entering the doorway, but one evening after he'd been working late he saw a woman emerge. Stepping out into Richard's path, the woman at once put her head down and hurried away

into the night, only throwing a single glance over her shoulder at the doorway, but Richard had time to notice that she wept. Then, further along the street, just before she turned a corner, the woman had halted and begun to laugh. For a moment she'd been bent double with laughter. Then she righted herself and continued on and all he heard after that was the fast-fading clip-clop of her heels.

His reasons for entering the door himself after work one Friday evening in July would remain a mystery to him for the rest of his life. Perhaps it was the tedious day he'd spent approving and declining mortgage applications. Sometimes he came close to declining perfectly reasonably applications just to introduce some chaos into his existence, but of course, he never did. Or perhaps it was the thought of another dinner with Janet, saving at overcooked pork and listening to the usual tittle-tattle about their neighbours. He had grown to despise the box of Turkish delight she would always bring out after dinner and the way she'd smile as she placed it on the table as if presenting him with some luxurious treat, then she'd say in that semi-serious tone, "*Just one, remember,*" which always made him want to gobble the lot the moment her back was turned. Perhaps it was the thought of the weekend ahead, tending the garden and watching women over the hedge. Or perhaps it was the words that

had been written on the poster that day. Could something about them have enticed him inside? THE RUNNY MORNING. He could not imagine what that meant.

The stairs groaned under his weight, and he thought of turning back, but then he saw a door at the foot of the staircase opening, and he was caught in the yellowish light leaking out. As his eyes adjusted, he saw that there was a tall, wiry young man holding open the door at the bottom of the stairs. The young man was dressed like a theatre usher in red jacket with gold piping, and bell boy cap. He showed Richard a welcoming smile. Beyond him, Richard thought he saw some kind of activity.

"Good evening, sir."

"Uh...er...hello. I...uh..."

"May I take your coat?"

"Well...I...uh...wasn't planning to..."

But the young man was already helping him off with his coat, so he had no choice but to step inside the door. He found himself in a small room with six or seven round tables set out in front of a little stage situated at the furthest end. Grey drapes covered the walls, and the only light apart from the stage lights came from single candles set upon the tables. Richard wrinkled his nose at the incense overlaying a more stale smell – damp and rot. Only one of the tables was occupied by an elderly couple who sat very still, apparently engrossed in what was being enacted before them. Onstage two men, who appeared to be dressed as fried eggs, pretended to paddle a canoe whilst a woman in black Lycra ran around the stage holding aloft a big yellow cardboard sun and shouting "Hot! Hot!" in a threatening manner over and over again.

The usher – or whatever he was supposed to be – spoke again, drawing Richard's attention away from the stage.

"Your name, sir?"

"I...uh...Richard. Richard Martin." Then he thought: *What am I telling him that for?*

The usher smiled in a humouring way and shook his head. "No, sir. Here you'll have a different name. You must choose one from the table. See?"

With a flourish of his hand, the usher indicated a square table stood behind him on which a number of handwritten labels were set out. The labels said things like RASMUS CHALKDUST, ALESSANDRO HEADHAWK, ESPERANZA FLORES, SYLVESTER TOTTY, VALENTINO SATIN, and LOLA HONEYBLAST.

"You want me to pick one of those?"

"Yes please, sir."

Richard blinked. In his confusion and anxiety, his vision had started to swim. He thought of Janet at home at the dinner table with potatoes that had boiled dry and beef gone tough in the oven. How was he ever going to explain this to her? For a moment he thought about turning on his heel and making a run for it.

"Sir?"

Flustered, he grabbed the label that said LOLA HONEYBLAST, then before he could correct his mistake the usher, who had nodded with approval, took the label from him, peeled off the back, and patted it onto his shirtfront.

"Excellent choice. Would Miss Lola care to take a seat?"

"Er...what?"

"Here perhaps?" The usher indicated a table near the front of the stage. Richard's only desire was to escape from that place, he had made a terrible mistake – he realised – in going there, but despite himself he sat down. On stage now the two fried eggs had abandoned their canoe and were chasing the woman carrying the cardboard sun around the stage with garden forks. The usher pressed a card into Richard's hand. When Richard looked at

it he had to blink a number of times before words arose from the jumble filling his vision. He eventually realised that he was looking at a cocktails list. The names of the cocktails were as ridiculous as everything else here.

"Oh, I'll just have a beer, please."

A flicker of disapproval crossed the usher's face before he snatched the cocktails list from Richard's hand, gave a little bow and said, "Very well. Enjoy the show."

Richard could make no sense of what was happening on stage, so instead looked at the elderly couple seated to his left. In the same moment, the female half of the couple turned her head to meet his gaze and he saw that tears ran down her face. And she was smiling. Glancing away, he noticed a small card, about the size of a business card, sat on the tabletop. He picked it up. On one side was a single capitalised word: UNLOCK. On the reverse was printed a telephone number. And beneath this, written in cursive script: *Call us and tell us about your most secret dreams.*

He found himself thinking about the recurring dream he'd been having recently, the knocking dream, and at once he no longer wanted to be in that place. What was he doing there anyway? What would Janet say if she knew he visited such a place? He had to get home. His wife waited for him. Seeing the usher walking towards him with a bottle of beer on a tray, Richard stood so abruptly that the actors on stage paused to glance at him.

"Madam, your..." the usher began.

"I'm sorry, but I have to go."

"But, madam...?"

"No really. I have to be on my way. If I could just have my coat."

"Madam, you..."

Richard saw his coat hanging on a rack by the table of names, and went to retrieve it himself. Ignoring the usher, who was still calling

after him, he made for the door, hurried up the groaning steps and along the hallway's tatty carpet until he was out of the door. The evening air felt fresh and bracing. At a fast walk, he continued on towards the multi-story carpark where he always left the Honda Crosstour which he'd overheard some of his colleagues at the bank laughingly refer to as *Ricky's Pussy Wagon*. He sometimes remembered this when he was driving and he would glance across at Janet sat pale and tense in the passenger seat and he would be filled with inexplicable rage.

By the time he arrived home, Janet had already gone to bed in the spare room. She'd left a single lamp on in the lounge and a plate of beef stew in the microwave. After eating, Richard prepared for bed himself. In the bathroom, he spent some time in front of the mirror, staring at his reflection as if it were a stranger looking back at him. Of course he'd never been what women called a *hunk* or a *stud-muffin*, but now what was he? An overweight, middle-aged man with bad skin, turkey neck, and a spreading bald patch. When did this happen? Spying Janet's make-up bag sat atop the medicine cabinet, he took it down and looked inside. Selecting a lipstick, he carefully rouged his lips. Next he found some eyeliner and applied that. *I'm not Richard anymore*, he thought when he was done. *I'm Lola Honeyblast*. He gazed at himself in the mirror and smiled until, hearing a footstep in the hallway, he came to his senses, grabbed a washcloth, and scrubbed his face clean.

He heard Janet's voice. "That you, Richard?"

"Yes, dear." He winced at the catch in his own voice. "Just me."

There was the sound of a door closing and then silence. As he undressed, Richard discovered the card from the theatre in his trouser

pocket. He couldn't remember taking it. He studied the phone number written on it and the line of text: *Call us and tell us about your most secret dreams.*

No, no, no, no, no!

Tossing the card down on his bedside table, he finished undressing, climbed into bed and turned out the light. He lay staring into the near darkness, remembering the fried eggs chasing the cardboard sun around the stage of that little theatre, and wondering what kind of madness had made him enter that place to begin with.

Though he had no intention of ever entering through that green door again, he found himself once more overwhelmed by the tedium of his daily routine and each time he passed the open doorway on his way home it seemed to call to him. He studied the text on the posters pinned up beside the door and found himself wondering what bizarre scenes were being acted out on the stage in that candlelit basement. It wasn't long before he succumbed and was once more enticed inside. Again he was given a friendly greeting by the usher, and again the LOLA HONEYBLAST label was applied to his shirtfront without him having the time to choose an alternative.

Upon his second visit he was so unnerved by what was taking place on stage, he didn't stay long. In some nightmarish playlet, a naked man was being pursued around the stage by a woman in a giant butterfly costume. The woman, hoisted above the man on wires, flapped her huge wings and emitted hungry cock-caws whilst the man cowered and ran from her. It was too much for Richard. A week later, he returned again. This time, the poster

outside read THE SONGBIRD'S REQUIEM. On stage, a woman stood trapped inside a giant birdcage and sang to a man sat in an arm-chair reading a newspaper. The man appeared not to be aware of the trapped woman. He went on reading his newspaper, even when the woman's singing turned to shrieks and she began to shake the bars of her cage. Whether she sang, or shrieked, or beat her fists against the bars of her cage the man took no notice. Eventually, the woman collapsed theatrically to the floor and the man still did not look up. He turned a page of his newspaper. For some reason the performance affected Richard so deeply that he left the theatre blinking tears from his eyes. Passing the usher, he was handed another of the business cards that had UNLOCK written on one side and *Call us and tell us about your most secret dreams* and a phone number on the other. Absently, Richard slipped it into his trouser pocket, but he would discover it again that evening as he once more prepared for bed.

Crossing the bedroom, he looked out into the hallway, saw no one, and carefully closed the door. Then he took the phone from the bedside table and dialled the number on the card. He felt lightheaded. His heart beat fast in his chest. On the other end of the line, a phone rang a couple of times before there was the click of an answerphone picking up. A woman's voice said: "Unlock. Tell us about your most secret dreams. Spare no detail." There was a beep and Richard realised he was listening to the sound of his own breathing. He glanced towards the door thinking he'd heard a footstep in the hall again. But then he realised he could hear Janet's snoring through the connecting wall between the two bedrooms.

"I...uh...we're having dinner, my wife and I," he whispered into the phone. "In my dream I mean. It's the roast pork she always cooks

on Sundays. We sit facing each other across the table. We're not speaking. My wife...she looks up at me and gives this dry smile. I hate it, that smile. I hate how pale and waxy she looks. Her hair full of grey. How her eyes look pained when she does that smile." He took a deep breath, and lowered his voice further, murmuring into the phone. "Then I start to hear this knocking sound. Just a low knocking sound at first. I look around the room and up at the ceiling, trying to work out where it might be coming from. My wife, she carries on eating as if she hasn't noticed anything. What's that? I say to her, but she doesn't reply. She just gives me that dry smile again. It's like camouflage, that smile. It's a lie. The knocking gets louder. I can't work out where it's coming from. It seems to be coming from everywhere at once. It gets louder, and my wife still doesn't seem to have noticed. Can't you hear that? I say to her. I have to shout because the knocking's so loud now. It's a loud booming sound. Boom! Boom! Boom! Why can't she hear it? She shows me that smile again. I can't stand it. Something's knocking. Knocking, knocking, knocking. Something. Somewhere. And only I can hear it. It's in the walls, it's in the floor, it's in the ceiling. I stand up from my chair and clutch my head in my hands. Can't you hear that knocking? I scream at my wife. Can't you hear it? But she just smiles, she...she just..."

A beep signalled that he was out of time and an automated voice said: "Thank you for calling."

Stunned, Richard set the phone down in its cradle. He was out of breath and breathing heavily. A line of sweat had broken out across his brow. He cast his eyes around the bedroom like a man who'd woken up in a strange place. Everything seemed unfamiliar suddenly. Why of Earth was the room so yellow? The wallpaper, the carpet, the curtains, the bed-

spread – it was all different shades of yellow. Why? And why hadn't he noticed it before? It was sickening.

He stared at the phone for a moment then looked at the wall behind which Janet lay snoring. He closed his eyes against a wash of guilt.

What have I done?

He still held the UNLOCK card in one hand. He tore it up into the smallest fragments, took it into the bathroom and flushed it down the toilet.

He was done with it. The madness had to end. This time, he had no intention of stepping through that green door again and descending those rickety stairs to that bizarre little incense-infused theatre, but one Monday evening when he was passing he noticed that the poster outside read: SOMETHING'S KNOCKING.

What?

He halted in his stride and gazed at the poster, blinking.

What had they...?

What had he...?

He stormed down the steps, but his anger dissipated when he saw the young man in his usher uniform opening the door at the bottom and smiling at him.

"Miss Honeyblast. How lovely to see you again."

"Listen," Richard said. "This is...I'm not..."

"May I take your coat, Madam?"

"Look..." Richard said. His coat was removed from him. With little else to do, he surveyed the inside of the theatre. But for himself and the usher, there was no one else there. The stage was lit but unoccupied except

for a dining table and two chairs.

"I suppose you want me to sit," Richard said, pointing at the table near the front which he had occupied on his previous visits.

"Wait," the usher said. "Your name!"

Reaching behind himself, the usher plucked a label from the table, peeled off the back and pressed it onto Richard's shirt front. LOLA HONEYBLAST. As Richard made to move towards his table, the usher stopped him again.

"If I may."

The usher reached now into a cardboard box beneath the table, took out a purple dress hat similar to one Janet had worn to a wedding the previous year and placed it on to Richard's head. Next came a pearl necklace which he strung around Richard's neck, then a large flower brooch which he quickly and expertly affixed to the lapel of Richard's jacket. As Richard stood dumbfounded, the usher leaned back, crossed his arms, looked him up and down theatrically and smiling.

"Perfection."

"Shall I sit down?" Richard said.

"Of course," the usher said, with a wild gesticulation towards Richard's table. His voice rose. "The performance is about to begin. Would Madam like to see the cocktails list?"

"Oh, just bring me something. Anything. I know it's going to be something daft."

"Very well."

Richard sipped at his drink. It was a mauve coloured liquid in a tall glass. There was a blot of cream at the bottom of the glass and a plastic toy shark with a buoy clenched in its teeth balanced on the rim, one pectoral fin sunk into the generous helping of ice. With

every slurp at the straw, Richard got a different taste; sometimes bitter, sometimes sweet. If someone had asked him what it tasted like, he would have said: Like life. And he was quite pleased with himself for thinking of something so poetic and profound.

From somewhere came the blast of a trumpet and Richard sat up straight. A young woman, dressed like an old woman in grey wig, glasses, oversize cardigan and slippers, walked onto the stage carrying a plate with a large hunk of meat on it. She sat down at one end of the dining table set centre stage.

"No," Richard said to himself. He shook his head. "No. No. No."

Then a young man, also dressed old and also carrying a plate with a slab of meat on it, stepped out on stage.

"No," Richard said again. "That's not me. It's not. I...it doesn't even...it's..."

The man on stage took a seat opposite the woman, and the two took up their cutlery and in silence began to hack in an exaggerated way at the meat. This went on for some minutes as Richard looked on in horror until from stage right came a dim knocking sound. The man on stage lifted his head and looked around, but the women went on hacking at her meat. A louder knocking came from stage right, then a louder one from somewhere beneath the stage. Then the knocking began from all three places at once, there was a crash of cymbals, the ringing of a gong, feet stomping, and the man leapt up from his seat.

"Can't you hear that, wife?" he shouted. Richard's mouth fell open. The wife on stage looked up at her husband and smiled – it was Janet's dry smile, just a movement of the mouth nothing more – and the man reached dramatically towards her as if he wanted to strangle her. But then he pulled away. The wife returned to cutting her meat. The cacophony

of banging, stomping, cymbal crashes and ringing gongs increased in volume and fervour, and when the man on stage once more leapt up and clutched his head in his hands, Richard did the same. Then something happened that had never happened in Richard's dream. The man grabbed his wife from her seat and began to waltz about the stage with her. Their movements became increasingly exaggerated, as they collided with the table and knocked over chairs. The plates of meat fell to the floor with an awful thud as did the cutlery which was kicked about the boards by the dancing couple. Then the couple separated. First the man, and then the woman began to tear the clothes from their bodies. They flung the garments aside one by one until they were running naked about the stage, laughing and cavorting, trampling the meat and pushing the table over on its side. Then the man began grabbing up the woman's clothes from the floor of the stage, and the woman took up the man's clothes and they began to dress. When they both wore each other's clothes, the knocking became a rhythm and the couple became flamenco dancers, flailing their arms, twirling on the spot, and stomping about the stage.

Then the woman pulled away from the man and ran to one end of the stage. She pressed one wrist to her head and shouted out, "But haven't you got work tomorrow, dear?"

The man responded with a dastardly laugh. "No, because I burned the whole building and everyone in it to the ground! Come to me, my darling and be my *Dolce Vita!* Be a tiger tonight, my love! This ordinary life sickens me! Soon enough we will be in our graves!" Finally, they ran towards each other and embraced. They fell enjoined to the floor of the stage and began to roll around in the trampled meat as the curtain descended.

As silence fell, Richard came slowly to his senses. Behind him, someone was slow clapping. Feeling wetness on his cheeks, Richard raised his fingers to his face and touched the tears.

"What have they done?" he said, under his breath. "What have they done to my dream?"

Forgetting that he still wore the dress hat, pearls, and flower brooch, he jerked to his feet, ran up the stairs, and staggered out into the street. He still wore the items placed on him by the theatre usher when he arrived home. Luckily, Janet was already in bed. The single lamp had been left on and there was a plate with a steak and broccoli on it covered over with congealed gravy in the microwave which Richard, overcome with revulsion, frizbee-ed out of the kitchen window.

Janet. He had to see Janet. He had to tell her about...about tonight.

Dashing upstairs, not stopping to take off any of the Lola Honeyblast regalia, he went at once to the spare bedroom and flung open the door.

"Jan—" he began, but the sight of Janet lain out on the bed like a corpse on a mortician's slab halted him. He looked at that pale, waxy face; a face that he had once loved. She was deeply asleep, and engaged in a loud rattling snore.

He began to withdraw from the room, but then he stopped. Next to the telephone on Janet's nightstand, he saw one of the UNLOCK cards. He caught his breath. How had it got there? Hadn't he torn his up and flushed it down the toilet, just to be rid of it? But no – he remembered now. He had brought one home before that, after his first visit to the theatre, and left it on his nightstand. He had not noticed its disappearance.

He found himself thinking about that one performance he'd witnessed, the one that

had brought tears to his eyes. REQUIEM FOR A SINGBIRD, hadn't it been called? The woman trapped inside a birdcage singing and then shrieking and finally collapsing to the floor

whilst a man in an armchair read a newspaper and ignored her.

"Janet," he said in a kind of desperate plea. Then again, just, "Janet."

Tim Jeffreys escaped the north of England more than a decade ago, and now lives in the greener surrounds of Bristol. Despite valiant efforts including studying Graphic Arts and Design at University, his original career plans went completely wrong and he ended up working in a tiny office in a dental hospital where the screams he sometimes hears from the clinics occasionally make it into the horror stories he writes when no one's looking. Work has appeared or is forthcoming in Weirdbook, Nightscript, and Not One of Us, among others. Follow Tim's progress at timjeffreys.blogspot.uk



I'm Going. Are You Coming?

Augusta Sparks Farnum

The Clock Speaks

A.J. Huffman

as if God's language could be translated
into intolerable tickings of minutes and hours,
disbursed by anonymously monotonous hands,
an unwaveringly blank face. I stare it down
as if I were Death, faceless in my own way.
Instinct tells me I am pre-destined
victor. I stretch pallid hand from shadow of cover
to demolish demonic blaring of digitized bells,
ameliorate motion just before contact,
sigh regretfully as ingrained obedience surrenders,
triggers muscle memory, instinctively, forcing
my feet to the floor.

A.J. Huffman has published thirteen full-length poetry collections, fourteen solo poetry chapbooks and one joint poetry chapbook through various small presses. Her most recent releases, The Pyre On Which Tomorrow Burns (Scars Publications), Degeneration (Pink Girl Ink), A Bizarre Burning of Bees (Transcendent Zero Press), and Familiar Illusions (Flutter Press) are now available from their respective publishers. She is a five-time Pushcart Prize nominee, a two-time Best of Net nominee, and has published over 2600 poems in various national and international journals, including Labletter, The James Dickey Review, The Bookends Review, Bone Orchard, Corvus Review, EgoPHobia, and Kritya. She is the founding editor of Kind of a Hurricane Press. You can find more of her personal work here: <https://ajhuffmanpoetryspot.blogspot.com/>

To Hell and Back

T.H. Cee

IT STARTED OUT TO BE one of those days, one where everything kept moving right along — and then — “BAM!” Before I knew it, I was sitting on the other side of those Pearly Gates, in one of their waiting rooms. A never-ending area that went on through its infinite expanse decorated in a terminal white. Recovering from what felt like a moment of snow blindness, I wondered what happened.

Then, from out of nowhere, an angel wearing dark Wayfarer sunglasses appeared and said that “HE” would see me now. I assumed when the little-winged dude said “HE,” he’d meant God — The Big Guy. That omniscient entity who made lightning high in the sky. The one and only cosmic enchilada.

I wasn’t wrong.

After a drum roll and another flash that could tarnish the tan off any sun-loving extremist and future skin cancer patient, HE appeared.

The Big Guy, rather striking in a *Charlton-Heston-kind-of-Moses-way*, threw me a smile and coolly said, “Sit down.” Some solid gold zero-gravity chairs with built in massagers materialized alongside a small table that held two large drinks — Pina Colodas. God evidently liked the sultry combination of alcohol and coconut.

Who’d a thought, right?

A moment later, both of us sat in Eternity. We slurped our beverages from foot-long curly

straws. I thought the only thing missing was the song “Right Place Wrong Time,” playing in the background and suddenly heard Dr. John’s raspy voice singing alongside the tune’s mid-seventies beat.

God smiled. Without a word, he eyed me up and down. The Big Guy then said he liked my spirit and sense of humor. He even mentioned there had been several times when he’d tuned into my life — and stranger yet — that a few of the more sluttier female angels were “big fans.” His smile receded into a smirk.

Still attempting to process it all, I nodded in acknowledgment. “Hmmm...” was all I could say.

We briefly made small talk but then feeling a bit curious, I steered our conversation toward deeper things — shit I’d always been curious about. Let’s face it, I was now hanging with God and didn’t want to pass up the chance. *Who wouldn’t, right?*

I said I liked how religion as a fable initially helped early man evolve, and then asked him where the Buddha, Mohammed, and Krishna were. He surprised me and said he was all of them as well, going under the pretext that he preferred to use pseudonyms when he penned other holy texts. It was an author-genre thing, he humorously confessed.

I told him, “That makes a lot of sense. The majority of people have limited attention

spans — they aren't the brightest crayons in the box."

He laughed, a large badass laugh, kind of like the one that Alan Rickman made when he played the character Hans Gruber during the climactic final scene of *Die Hard*. The Divine Hipster then pointed his right index finger at me like the barrel of a gun while he used his other hand to give me a thumbs-up. "You've got that right." He winked.

God had an awesome wink.

But I couldn't just leave the subject alone, could I?

No ... no, I really couldn't ...

Still thirsting for answers to life's ultimate questions, I decided to ask him about what bothered me the most: why religion, as a potential solution to all of the world's problems, had caused so many of its woes.

He appeared to listen, but when I asked why suffering existed, and why he'd set up an ignorant Adam and Eve to take the fall, God grew agitated. "What do you mean?" He barked.

"Regarding Original Sin," I inquired. "It's always confused me — how could Adam have understood the consequence of being disobedient if he didn't yet know what disobedience was?"

With a surprised expression God replied, "That's simple," and then said those familiar four words. "You must have faith."

"I do have faith," I said. "Faith in myself to dispute things — things that don't add up." I gave him that look that said, please go on ... "So back to my prior question — the one you didn't answer."

God, instead of addressing my inquiry, suddenly went all Fire and Brimstone. "You, you m-m-must believe in me or you'll — you'll perish!" The Big Guy stuttered his veiled threat several times, and with each repetition, melted

down into something more dysfunctional.

His haloed temper tantrum reminded me of an Old Testament adaptation of "The Wizard of Oz." I couldn't help but think: *Oh, Christ — doesn't this whole love-me-or- you'll-perish theme seem a bit needy... especially for a supreme being.*

It only went downhill from there. Actually, it was more like a nosedive. Forgetting that my thoughts were on a cosmic party line — that he could hear my internal comments as well — God folded his arms and remarked in a snarky tone that he liked to work in "mysterious ways."

In hindsight, I suppose at that point I really stepped over the celestial line when I told him his inscrutableness sounded like a cop-out.

He lost his sacred marbles and screamed that I should "go to Hell!" The Big Guy got up and as he stormed out, shouted. "Your problem is that you ask too many fucking questions!" His words not mine.

Watching God fade into the surrounding whiteness, I attempted to have the last word and yelled out how that rather sucked for him, since he, being allegedly "perfect," created me.

It pretty much ended there. And like clockwork, the angel with the Wayfarer sunglasses reappeared. He told me with a brusque tone that I had another appointment.

I asked, "Where?"

He accentuated through a you're-fucked expression and in a matter-of-fact deeper than normal baritone, "Down under."

Raising an eyebrow, I inquired, "Australia?"

"No—" He chuckled. "It's spot on what they say about you though — you're a funny guy..." The angel then mumbled to himself under his breath, "Funny but tragic."

He looked down and appearing to double-check, thumbed through his scroll. "Hmm...? The Big Guy... he did say you

needed to go to Hell... right?" The angel stopped on a specific page. "Oh, yeah, here it is." With a sarcastic smirk, he stared up at me one last time. "Sorry, loser. Says here — you're deported."

FLASH!

Moving from the brightest of brights, my surroundings instantaneously changed. I now stood in a place that reminded me weirdly of Detroit (No offense, Detroitites; your city was the first reminiscent locale that popped into my head).

On a positive note, Hell didn't look all that bad, and as I'd mentioned, strangely reminded me of Earth. There were streets and houses, roads and signs. The sky was blue. The sun even shined. Eerily, the people of Hell seemed an awful lot like the people on Earth. And just like Earthlings, the majority of them didn't smile. They appeared stressed, transfixed to their smart phones while they scurried about. Also, many of them had jobs where their sole purpose in life was to crush other people with paper — and numbers — and other meaningless time-consuming bullshit. Just like the people on Earth.

Interrupting my thoughts, I heard someone speak. "You're late."

Startled, I turned to see Lucifer — Beelzebub — the Prince of Darkness. Or "Big L" as I later learned he likes to be called by those close to him. He looked like a two-hundred year-old Ernest Borgnine dressed in purple Bermuda shorts and a green wife-beater shirt that fit three sizes too small. Factoring in his blue hi-top sneakers, and his skin, red as a lobster, it was the most extreme case of stage-four clothes cancer I'd ever seen.

"Hell looks a lot like Earth," I replied.

"That's because it is." He shrugged. "Haven't you ever heard of the phrase, 'Life is Hell, then you die?'"

"I always thought that was just a figure of speech," I told him, "I'm probably here because I gave God some flak. He acted like a pompous and pretentious ass."

"Yep." The Devil chuckled. "Did he go *whiny crybaby* on you also? That was what always bugged me about him — never admitting that he might have been wrong a few times, that perhaps Earth was a rough first draft. Especially, since he banged the whole thing out in just six days. Who does that — Christ?"

"The Creation did seem a bit quick."

"Tell me about it," the Devil bitched. "In the beginning, many of the angels went along with the slave wages and what not. But then we organized," he said proudly. "I started the first union you know, which...." He pointed around us. "Led to this."

"Impressive." I nodded and followed his finger. "So, do you have any regrets?"

"Not really. On a positive note, I'd like to think we aren't as repressed here," Big L said. "We do what we want to do, and as a result, create our own Heaven and Hell. We're not perfect. Like some other folks, we never claimed to be." He shot a sarcastic glance upward. "Yah know, in the beginning, all religion's intent was to be a concept — guideposts toward advancement. But then, it got out of hand. All that crazy ass ritual just to go within. Did you ever see the Pope's funky red shoes? Jesus."

"Yeah," I acknowledged. "They're pretty gaudy."

"No," he corrected with a smirk. "They're *God-dy*." The Devil pointed to the sky. "My point being, some of us became egotistical

drama queens and took it too far. And that's why..." He chuckled. "All Hell broke loose."

"That's pretty crazy."

"Yeah." Big L laughed, He then turned reflective. "Here's the deal: all you have to remember is two things and you'll be good."

"Two things?"

"Yeah, number one," The Devil held his red index finger up. "Be kind... And number two," He added his middle finger to form a peace sign. "Don't take life too seriously — you won't get out of it alive."

"I've heard that."

"But have you seen it? Here, let me show you." He grabbed the flesh around his neck and pulled. Almost like silly putty, the surface of his skin broke apart. I thought, *what fresh Hell* is this (seriously, I did) and then realized he'd worn a mask — a Devil's mask. But here's the kicker: after it came off, to my bewilderment, I once again came face to face with God.

"Holy shit!" I gasped. "But I thought — I thought you were a pompous asshole."

God laughed. "I was just fucking with you. And besides, you ain't seen nothing yet." He reached again toward his neck. Just like before, he pulled upward. Off came yet another friggin mask — a Goddamn God mask!

"Christ!" I wasn't sure exactly what to say. I thought at first I'd stared into a mirror. Or worse yet, stumbled into another dimension and into an episode of the X-files — one, where I suddenly came face to face with myself.

"Surprise!" the other me shouted.

Interrupting this gargantuan plot-twist, a surge of electricity shot through my body. It pulled me like a parachute cord, and caused my existential stare-down to fade. Actually, the word "fade" seemed somewhat of an understatement. It felt like it burned a gaping hole in my brain while everything else shifted, accelerating from 1st to 15th gear. The term "bat out of Hell," came to mind.

Although I'd previously been in downtown Hades (or was it Detroit?), I now lay on the warm pavement and sensed the cold metal paddles around my throbbing chest. Confused, in between breaths, I mumbled, "Where the hell... am... am I...?"

A large paramedic with a beard, his long hair set in a man-bun, towered above me. The only thing I could do at that moment was consider the irony: While the EMT yelled in a Spanish accent, "He's alive. . . he's. . . he's alive," the name tag on his shirt identified him as none other than, "Jesús."

Having claimed to have left the rat race a few years back, T.H. Cee lives in Seminole, FL where he dabbles part-time in several lucrative businesses and writes full-time, endeavoring to be the next Hunter S. Thompson.



Coach

Jim Kazanjian

Aurora Borealis

Marieta Maglas

Green in the frozen snow,
paralyzed as in a blind panic,
as near death—
divine eyes clouding over;

prerequisites for white
to drift up and
downstream
the upcoming meltwater runoff—

pure spiritedness
to counteract thirst
in the quiescent seed of life.

The Glitch

Sean Silleck

JAMAL, THE COPYWRITER, jerks his head upright. He's been asleep—he's actually fallen asleep in the conference room.

Dabbing at a streak of drool on his chin, he blinks and looks around. The other three are still here, still working on the pitch—Olive, the account lead; Derrick, the art director; and Jill, the editor. But hold on. Something isn't right.

It's these gray walls, the black door at the end of the room, the white erase board to his right. Jamal doesn't recognize them.

"Which conference room is this?" he asks the other three.

Derrick and Olive barely acknowledge he's spoken—their heads remain bent toward their laptop screens, their blue faces scrunched in thought. Only Jill looks up, her red pen paused above a printout of the pitch deck.

"Same one as before, silly," she says, swiping a lock of red hair out of her eyes. But then she too looks around. "It's Conference Room A, right? On the other side of ... no, wait. It's ... okay, that's weird." She chuckles, bringing out the dimple in her chin. "I don't think I've ever been in this conference room before. Do you guys know which conference room this is?"

Derrick sweeps a hostile glance in her direction. "Jill, I need those edits on the charts," he says. "I need to update both emails and the

iPad detail aid in like the next half hour."

Olive grunts loudly. "It doesn't matter which conference room it is. What matters is that we're still fucking here and there's no fucking end in sight and we're never fucking going home."

"No, seriously," Jamal says, more awake now. "The agency doesn't have a conference room that looks like this. I'm sure of it."

"Jesus, you are really messed up, dude." Shaking his head, Derrick grins at his screen. "Go lie down. You are totally worthless to the cause right now."

"So ... I kind of agree with Jamal?" Jill bites her lower lip. "Did we recently buy up some more space on the floor?"

"No, we didn't." Jamal holds a finger up for emphasis. "There would've been an email. And anyway, look around—there isn't one agency-branded thing in here. Not one pen or pad or cup. Nothing."

Olive expels a sharp breath of air. She clenches her jaw, tucks a curl of dark hair behind her ear and scans the room. Her eyes narrow. "Did we eat dinner in here?"

"No, I don't think so," Jill says.

"I can't remember where we ate dinner," Jamal says. "In fact, I don't remember what I had for dinner. Jill, what did you have for dinner?"

"I had the veggie burger—I always have

the veggie burger.”

“Yeah, but do you remember actually eating it?” Jamal asks. “There’s always something slightly different, a new ketchup, for example, or not enough onions.”

“I...” Jill frowns. “No, I can’t recall anything different. It was the same as always.”

Jamal turns to the art director. “Derrick, what did you have for dinner?”

“Dude, at this point,” Derrick says, an edge of exasperation in his voice, “I’m thinking about breakfast. The reason no one remembers dinner is because it happened *yesterday*. Can we please just get our shit together for like two more hours so we can finish this thing and not have to think about *tonight’s* dinner?”

“I’ll be happy to,” Jamal says. “Right after you tell me what you ordered for dinner.”

Derrick straightens up. He looks hard at Jamal. “Okay, seriously, what this whole thing is you’re doing, it’s like one of those stupid memory tests. Like, name the last 5 books you read. Seems easy, but no one can do it—most people can barely name three. It’s called a brain dump. You get rid of unnecessary details so you can devote more space to the shit that matters, like this stupid pitch, which, by the way, needs to be finished in like a few hours from now.”

“I might’ve had the salad,” Olive says. “Or maybe the tuna melt. It would’ve been one or the other. But where’s my diet Coke? I don’t remember finishing it.”

“Oh my God, now you’re playing this game?” Derrick glances quickly at Olive, his lips warped in disgust. “The cleaning lady always takes everything away—if you were in the bathroom and not here to defend your precious soda, then she would have dumped it. *That’s* why it’s not here.”

“You don’t need to be hostile.” Olive’s shoulders twitch in annoyance. “Anyway,

you’re right, let’s just get through this thing. We need to calm down and focus. Jamal, you still owe us three alt subject lines. And Jill, please tell me you’re more than halfway through the deck.”

Jamal sucks in a slow breath. Nodding slowly, he tries to focus on the words on his screen. Olive is right. There’s still a ton of work to do.

“I’m going as fast as I can,” Jill complains, lowering her head. “Don’t rush me.”

“I apologize,” Derrick says, to no one in particular. “I will need some serious decompression after this. Like, a beach and a bottle of tequila and a bunch of boys in Speedos.”

Jamal scrutinizes his alt subject lines.

Hear about a treatment option from a trusted source

A new option for your patients’ treatment plan

Learn more about a new way to treat an old disease

He isn’t happy with them. There’s something fundamental missing from them—they’re lifeless, just words on a page. And then, with some alarm, he realizes he doesn’t remember the creative brief, not one word of it. What’s the product for? Which angle does the client want to play up? There’s no trace of it in his brain.

“Sorry, but this is totally pitch related.” He smiles at Olive. “What were the tactics the client listed in the brief? You know, just the basic slant.”

Olive tilts her head to one side, her mouth puckered sourly. “Seriously? This is what you’re asking, at this time of the fucking night? You want to see the fucking brief?”

“Just wanted to talk something out,” Jamal

replies, defensively. “Sometimes, when you hear it from someone else, it plucks a creative string.”

A small vein pulses at Olive’s temple. “You know what, I don’t fucking care about the brief. You want to go your own way, then just do it. The client has no fucking idea what they want anyway. Hit them with something unexpected. They’ll either love it or hate it—I have no control over that.”

“No, I just...” Jamal massages his cheekbones. He closes his eyes, takes a breath and looks back at Olive. “Okay, I don’t remember the brief. I have no memory of the product or the tactics or the long-term strategy. Which, yeah, is a little weird.”

Olive eyes him coldly. “You should probably go home,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper. “Derrick’s right—if you’re not helping the cause, you’re hurting it.”

Jamal bites his lip. Then he turns to Jill, his eyes wide with sudden inspiration.

“Jill,” he says. “Read part of the page you’re editing right now. Any part of it, a bullet, a callout, anything.”

“What?” Jill blinks up at him, her pen paused again, her face creased with worry.

“Dude, please let her finish her read.” Derrick aims an angry look at Jamal. “You are seriously becoming a problem here.”

Jamal ignores him. He speaks more softly to Jill. “Just a sentence. A phrase.”

Jill looks down at the deck. She clears her throat and in a tentative voice reads: “Product X is the new paradigm that will be a game changer because of its head-to-head data and once-daily dosing so that patients with moderate to severe disease can learn to hope again.”

Jamal can’t help laughing. “What does that even mean? I’m willing to bet the entire thing is like that—just words, just completely random meaningless words.”

Olive loudly slams her laptop shut, pushes back from the table and glares at her copywriter. “Okay, let’s fucking do this. Let’s have it out, right fucking now. We’re obviously not going to get anything done until we do.”

“Take it easy.” Jamal holds up his hands. “I don’t need to have anything out. I’m just trying to point out that there is something very wrong with this situation. With this conference room. With all of us.”

“What a load of shit.” Olive leans forward her in her chair as if preparing to launch herself at Jamal. “I get it, okay? You’ve hit the wall. Congratulations. You’re here in this conference room, still working your ass off, and it’s some god-awful time in the morning, and you’re maxed out. But guess what? We’ve all hit the fucking wall. But this is what we signed up for. If you can’t take it, then go home. Just close your fucking laptop and walk out. It’s that simple. I’ll take care of the alt subject lines, on top of everything else I need to do. Because I’m going to do whatever it fucking takes to get this thing done—which is the difference between you and the rest of us. You want to be a senior copywriter all your life, be my fucking guest.”

Jamal leans back in his chair, as if physically shoved by Olive’s words.

“I just ... no, this is something else.” He closes his eyes, trying to concentrate on his next words. “What if we’ve actually been in this room for, I don’t know, a hundred years? What if there’s been some kind of glitch in time, and we’re stuck in a continuous loop? What if we never actually finish this pitch, and will keep working on it forever? When all we need to do is just get up and walk out the door? Maybe, on the other side of that wall, the sun is shining, and normal life is going on, but we don’t know it because we’re trapped in here.”

“Can we please stop fighting?” Jill looks

anxiously from Jamal to Olive and back again. "It's not helping anything. It's only raising everyone's stress level, which is making everything worse."

"No." Olive answers Jill but keeps her eyes fixed on Jamal. "We need to have it out. We all need to bleed a little, right now."

"This doesn't need to be a fight." Jamal sits up higher in his chair. "This could actually be a bonding thing."

"Dude, you're the one who made it a fight," Derrick says. "The rest of us are all trying to work. You're the one who fell asleep and then woke up in outer space. Now suddenly you don't feel comfortable with this thing, so you have to start dumping on the rest of us? Olive is right—you knew what you were getting into. As soon as Jill is done with the deck, you're going to have review it. And you should look at those charts first, so I can drop them in the ads and iPad detail aid. Just do your job, dude."

Jamal looks at Derrick and then at Olive. Then he glances at Jill, whose head is bent over the deck again, her tangled hair falling down around her face like a curtain.

"Jill," Jamal says, in a gentle voice. "What page of the deck are you on?"

"Huh?" She parts her hair just enough for one eye to peer out.

"I just want to know how much longer you need on the deck. Since I'll have to review it after you. How long is it, anyway?"

"Um." Jill thumbs through the stack of paper. "It's really long, 150 pages. Wait, 155, if you count the appendices."

"And what page are you on?"

They all look at Jill, who looks back at them fearfully. "I'm on, um, page 12," she whispers.

"What?" Olive jumps in her chair as if an electrical current has been fired through it.

"Page 12? Fucking page 12? How can you only be on motherfucking page 12?"

"The slides are really dense," Jill says, cringing. "I had to read the important safety information three different times and fact check six charts."

"Oh my God." The vein at Olive's temple beats harder. She stares at Jill for a long moment, then leans back in her chair, angles her head toward the ceiling and starts to laugh. "Holy shit, you're right, Jamal," she says, rubbing her eyes. "Maybe we have been here forever. 'Cause we're sure as shit never leaving."

"After slide 50, the content gets a lot lighter," Jill says, looking down.

"How can you only be on page 12?" Derrick says in a stunned voice, his elbows planted on the table, his chin propped in his hands. "We've been here for hours. You said it wouldn't take much longer. You said you were making progress."

"You can get started on the first 11 pages." Jill fumbles through the deck, extracts several pages and holds them out toward Jamal. "Do you want to look at these? I have a lot of markups you'll want to see. Lots of queries."

"Hey, Jill, what are you even doing here?" Olive asks, in a strangely pleasant voice. "I mean, why are you in this room with us?"

"Um, you wanted me to read the deck?" Jill says, looking uncertain.

"Right, but you could've done it remotely or back at your desk." A light frown, not unfriendly, settles across Olive's brow. "The conference room is usually for the pitch team only. The editor usually sits somewhere quiet."

"Do you not want me here?" Jill's eyes dart from one side of the room to the other. "I could go somewhere else if you think it would help."

"No." Olive shrugs. "I just don't remember you coming in."

"Oh." Jill stares miserably at the table, her red pen spinning in her fingers. "I just... I don't remember coming in here, either." She shoots a nervous glance at Jamal. "I don't know why I'm only on page 12."

"It's you, isn't it?" Grinning, Olive leans forward in her chair, her elbows on her knees. "You're the glitch."

"The glitch? What glitch?"

"The reason we're all here, right?" Olive winks at Jamal. "If Jamal is right, and we're all stuck in some frozen moment in time, then something must've caused it. And it just hit me—it's you. You're the glitch. What do you think, Jamal?"

"I don't know if it would work that way," he says, frowning. "Whatever *it* is, I don't see how it could be caused by one person."

"Why not? Think about it," Olive says. "Which departments usually make up a pitch team? Account, art, copy, medical, strat. Medical and strat probably went home a long time ago, but why is there an editor in here? And why is she only on page 12, after working all night long? She's the one who's glitched out and the rest of have gotten stuck along with her."

"I don't feel like a glitch." Jill sits up very straight. "I told you those slides were really dense. You can have a look for yourself. I'm not making that up."

"No, it's something else." Olive taps the table with a long blood-red fingernail. "There's something in you, some deeply rooted fear. And it's gotten worse and worse over the years until you've reached the point that you're so terrified of what's coming next that you've actually stopped time."

"That's not true." Jill shakes her head, whipping her hair back and forth across her face. "I've been working on all that stuff. I've made a lot of progress."

"Fuck, Olive, leave her alone." Derrick is slumped in his chair now, his head falling to one side. "Even if she is some kind of glitch, no one can stop time from moving. It's scientifically impossible."

"How do you know what's possible and what isn't?" Olive swings around in her seat to face the art director, her eyebrows angled into a hard V. "All you know how to do is make things look pretty. Add a drop shadow or change up some fonts. You're incapable of seeing beneath the surface of things. You have no idea how time and space work, so shut the fuck up."

"Oh my God." Derrick's eyes go wide, but the rest of his body remains angled against the side of his chair. "That's bad, Olive, even for you. You're supposed to be leading this thing, not biting everyone's heads off."

"Sure, put it all on me." Olive shoves her laptop to the far side of the table and leans back in her chair. "I'm the account person, I'm supposed to keep everyone on track. Well, fuck it. You people need to take care of your own shit."

"This is ridiculous." Derrick throws up his hands, which causes him to slide further down in his chair. "Can we just finish this thing, please? Two or three more hours, and we can be done if we really kick ass. But we're not going anywhere if your laptop is all the way over there."

"We're not going anywhere, asshole, because we are glitched out. We are stuck in mother-cunting time." Olive balls her hands into tight fists then holds one out toward Jill. "And I'm pretty sure it's her fault."

"I'll just leave." A small sob escapes the back of Jill's throat. She stands up and begins to gather her things.

"Sit the fuck down, Jill," Olive commands. "No one's going anywhere until we finish this

shit—whatever this shit happens to be.”

“Why does it have to be anyone’s fault?” Jamal winces as he speaks. “Maybe it’s just a natural phenomenon, like a tornado or an avalanche.”

“It’s *always* someone’s fault,” Olive shoots back. “Someone always fucks up. Someone uploads the wrong file. Or forgets to mark up a client change. Or misses a typo. And then we all wring our hands, and have a postmortem, and decide to work smarter, not harder. But none of it fucking matters, because the next time, someone will fuck up in a way none of us ever thought of before. Like stopping fucking time.”

“Does anyone have a bottle of cyanide?” Derrick says, one arm thrown across his eyes. “Or just strangle me. Whichever’s easier.”

“I could open the door.” Jamal jerks his thumb over his shoulder toward the room’s only exit. “Maybe if we could see more of the agency, a window to the outside, we’d remember where we are, and how we got here, and maybe that would be enough to get us out of the glitch.”

“Sure, you’d love that, wouldn’t you?” Olive scoffs. “Play the big fucking hero. Start time moving in the right direction again. Anything—oh, anything—but write three fucking alt subject lines.”

“It’s just a suggestion. Maybe it’s this room that’s glitched out. Maybe all we have to do is walk out the door. Maybe, outside this room, everything’s exactly as it should be.”

“Nothing is exactly as it should be,” Olive says. “That’s why we’re in this room in the first place. If everything was as it should be, we wouldn’t be in this shitty business. We’d all be doing something meaningful with our lives, like saving stray animals or protesting the environment or adopting fucking orphans.”

She sits back and aims a hostile stare

around the room. No one moves—everyone is frozen in place. Jill sits straight in her chair, her head angled down toward the pitch deck, her hair over her face. Jamal leans one elbow on the armrest of his chair, gazing in the general direction of Olive but without making eye contact. Derrick remains slumped in his chair, his eyes closed, his mouth set in a grimace. The room is completely silent.

No one is quite sure how much time passes.

Then suddenly Olive tilts her head backward and lets out a sharp laugh. She holds her hands up in the air, then brings them down on the table with a loud clap, which echoes through the room like a rifle shot.

“Holy fucking shit,” she says, her eyes maniacally bright. “What if this glitch isn’t a curse? What if it’s a gift?” She looks eagerly around the room. “If time has stopped for us, then there’s no pressure to finish anytime soon. Right? Jill, it doesn’t matter that you’re only on page 12. Keep going—you’ve got, I don’t know, a hundred years to finish it. Derrick, go to sleep. I’ll wake you up in eight hours, and then you can get cranking on those chart updates! Jamal, you have literally forever to write those alt subject lines!” She bounces up and down in her chair in excitement. “Don’t you guys see? The glitch isn’t a disaster—it’s a fucking opportunity!”

“Oh, God, she’s completely lost it.” Derrick opens his eyes halfway, looks at Olive, then closes them again. “I knew it was only a matter of time.”

Still smiling, Olive shrugs. She reaches across the table, grabs and opens her laptop and starts typing.

Jill peeks out through her hair. She inhales a ragged breath, glances at Jamal, and picks up her red pen.

Jamal looks around at his three coworkers.

He thinks for a moment, then clenches his jaw and stands up.

"I'm going to open the door," he says, his voice lightly quavering. "It's time to end this. It's time to go home."

"You sit the fuck down." Olive stops typing and stares at him with burning eyes. "Go take a nap in the corner, or crawl under the table and jack off—do whatever the fuck you want to do—but if you take one step toward that door, I will fucking kill you. Do you understand me?"

"Olive, it's over." Jamal doesn't sit down. But neither does he move toward the door. "Whatever's happening here, it's time to end it."

"Oh, I get it." Olive leans back in her chair, her hands folded over her belly. "It was you all along. It's wasn't Jill—you're the fucking glitch. You got us into this shit and now, just when I've figured out how to leverage it to our advantage, you're going to try to end it? Well, fuck you—we leave this room when I say we do. I don't care if it takes a thousand years, we are going to finish this pitch, and it is going to be the best motherfucking pitch anyone in the history of advertising has ever seen. When the client sees our presentation, they are going to fucking weep."

"I'm sorry, but it's for the greater good." Jamal stares back at Olive. He makes a movement toward the door, a subtle swivel of his hips, and the next instant Olive is out of her chair and on her feet.

"I swear to God, Jamal. One more fucking step." She grips a ballpoint pen in one fist, dagger-wise.

"Oh my God, you guys." Jill stands up, too, her palms pressed against her heart, her eyes darting around the room. "What if we're actually all dead? What if it's like that play, where they're in the hotel room, all arguing with each other, and they realize it's really hell, and they've become their own torturers?"

"I haven't even begun to torture anyone," Olive says, still glaring at Jamal. "But give me a fucking reason, and I will make your life a living hell."

"You guys are all such assholes." Derrick hauls himself to his feet. He puts his hands on his hips. "Olive, just let him open the door. Let's just see what's out there. Maybe something weird is going on, or maybe everything is completely normal. But let's just find out. Please?"

Olive pivots in his direction, holding the ballpoint pen out toward him. "You too, Derrick?" she says. "After everything we've been through together? Now you're fucking betraying me?"

"Olive, put the pen down," Derrick says. "Just, like, breathe."

"This is happening." Jamal takes a step toward the door. "I'm ending this."

"Don't you fucking do it!" Olive moves sideways along the table. Her whole body is clenched, ready to spring forward. "One more step, and you're dead, motherfucker!"

"Stop it, stop it, stop it!" Jill's shrill plea has no effect on the others. No one even looks in her direction.

Jamal sinks into a partial crouch and moves very slowly toward the door.

Olive creeps along the edge of the table, moving as Jamal moves, her eyes locked on him, her pen held high.

Jamal performs a small calculation in his head. The distance to the door and the speed he'll need to travel to reach it ahead of Olive. He thinks he can make it. He grips the edge of the table, ready to propel himself forward. He holds his breath. He's going to do it.

Then the phone rings.

It has been sitting there, in the middle of the table, all this time. The four of them turn toward it, their faces registering the same

shock and alarm.

"Uh, shit." Olive looks shaken. Slowly, she moves back along the table to her chair. She puts the pen down and picks up the phone.

"Hello? Oh, hi, John," she says, blinking. "What's going on?"

She listens intently to the person on the other end. She nods, and then sits down and begins to write quickly into the legal pad beside her laptop.

"Sure, you bet," she says. "That's no problem at all—we've been thinking exactly the same thing. We already have several slides that speak to that."

She listens for another minute or two, and then she hangs up and looks at her team.

"That was the client—they're switching up the tactics," she says. "They just got some confirmation about their 2-year data. So that's what they want to go with. They don't want to see any 1-year stuff in the pitch. We've got to swap everything out."

"Oh my God." Derrick slumps back down in his chair and pulls his laptop toward him. "I haven't formatted any of the 2-year charts—the brief said to concentrate on the 1-year data."

"They changed their fucking minds." Olive laughs. "I don't think the other agencies have been told. I think John was giving us inside information—this could be a huge advantage. Jamal, don't you have a bunch of 2-year data

that you got from somewhere? A poster presentation or something?"

"Uh, yeah, I did." Jamal frowns, trying to remember what he did with the data pack, as he sits down and wakes up his laptop. "Yeah, I have it—the whole poster. It was presented this summer—it's all about the 2-year data."

"Fucking awesome." Olive pumps her fists in celebration. "I need you to start putting some slides together—six should do it. Efficacy—the bar chart and the Kaplan-Meier, for sure—as well as safety and dosing. Can you do that?"

"Yeah, of course." Jamal is already typing.

"Jill, forget about the deck," Olive says. "Skip to the bios and give those a cold read. Throw everything else out. By the time you're done reading the bios Jamal will have the 2-year charts ready for a fact check."

"Yeah, okay, great." Jill sits back down, lifts up a thick chunk of the deck and drops it on the floor with a resounding thud. She pulls her hair back from her face, leans forward on her elbows and starts reading feverishly.

Jamal looks through the poster. It's bursting with 2-year data. But his initial excitement fades. It's going to take a long time to turn these data into six workable pitch slides—a really long time.

The four of them are going to be here forever

Sean Silleck's previous fiction has been published in Short Story Library, the Brooklyn Rail, Bewildering Stories, Pantheon Magazine, and the Furious Gazelle. He lives with my wife, son, and dog in a small, not-quite-utopian enclave just north of the great dystopia known as New York City. He is currently at work on a comic novel about the post-apocalypse.

Bridge

Glenn Moss

What hair I have left sways to the last exhales of an Alberta Clipper
I've never been to Alberta, another on the list of imagined walkings
Memory plays Sonny Rollins and visions of Johanna
Maybe she's on the other side, or someone like her
So many I wanted and never dared
My mother's touch and whispered regrets
Covered desire under barren earth
But could not bury it
After the acid rains of Brooklyn
I seeded the clouds, slow erosion taking root
Today, daily obituaries advise how much span I have left
For sixty years I was too afraid to skip
Looking at this weathered wood as an invitation
Reaching the beginning and end of my final bridge
My feet begin to dance

Joey's Head

Tim Wenzell

ONCE UPON AN AUGUST AFTERNOON in the late sixties, I was hot and bored. My brain began to swell because I was thinking too hard about something to do. My brain was eleven. The summer sun had scorched all of the grass on the playground into an ugly brown straw, and I could see the waves of heat swirling up out of the dirt like some clear liquid was being siphoned from the earth, and it pissed me off. I don't know why I felt pissed off, and I still don't. Maybe I felt like it was the ideas of the day swirling away, and there was nothing I could do but watch. I sat along the shaded side of the sandbox, beneath the oak with the grown-over carved heart (Danny and Joanie are still married, I hear). I sat beside Joey Helmuth, my best friend. We kicked up the sand with our sneakers, dredging as if for oil, in our attempt to find an idea for the day. Joey didn't look pissed off at all, however.

I had worked my jaw into a slow, methodical ache from chewing a massive wad of bubble gum. It had been over an hour since the taste had gone out and the chemical properties of my saliva had now begun to transform the gum into a thick glue, made all the more gluey because I had eaten Saltines while I was chewing, and most of the crumbs had become trapped in the gum. This was the time I would normally spit the thing out (to see how far it might travel) or wedge it beneath the sandbox

or wait until dinner to fasten it to the bottom of my chair. Instead, I nestled it firmly atop Joey's head. Suddenly vanquished from boredom and no longer pissed, I ran to the swings with my fists raised and my holler echoing to the woods. Fun!

Now I completely expected Joey to come running behind me with the wad fresh off his head and hurl it at me with full velocity-- or pop it into his own mouth, even with the Sal-tine crumbs. I was not schooled in the viscosity of gum, especially with the added ingredients of a burning summer sun and uncombed blonde hair. I watched from behind motionless swings as Joey pulled long strings of gum into the air. I saw the pink stuff running down his outstretched arms. And the monstrosity grew upon his head like some mutated amoeba. Down it oozed between the follicles to the base of his skull, down the sides for his ears. Joey sat, quietly horrified, unaware of how bad things were going to be. "Get it off," was all he said, and in my recollection he must have said it a hundred or more times. "Get it off."

The more we worked, the worse it became, two sets of fingers picking away little pink slivers of glue, waiting for the wavy blond hair to return and for the world to be righted. There were little webs of gum littering the ground around us as we sat, a circle of gum and hair that must have looked like primitive

priming. The afternoon sun sinking past the junk man's woods told us that removing all of the gum was a hopeless act. With no more sun, the cooler evening air cemented the remaining gum, like some hibernating organism, atop his skull.

"My mom's going to yell at you," Joey said, and then he started crying. He did not know what he looked like, or indeed, he would have cried a lot harder. Nevertheless, the tears rolled and the snot started running, and the combination of the red eyes, the wet face, the mucus, and the pink amoeba atop his head would have brought his mother crashing down in a heap of faint. So I wiped off his face with my sleeves and got him to brighten up a little when I lied and told him it didn't look "that bad."

It was getting late; the Butterworths had already been called to supper and the bug spray truck would be by soon. My heart beat fast: I was going to have to send Joey home with a pink head and I might be on the news. Then I had another idea: "I'll get some scissors from the house," I said. "We'll cut it away."

Joey grew apprehensive and backed away along the sandbox edge, breaking into a sniffle again, his eyes welling up the way they were. No one outside of a barber shop had touched his head with scissors before, I could tell, for his eyes concluded: "you are no barber." He let me near his head when I finally convinced him that having a pink head might be fine for his sister Joanie, but it looked silly on a boy, and he would be laughed at all the way home, and no one would ever look at him the same again. So he stayed and I went inside my mother's sewing cabinet and I pulled out the scissors that had made my bedroom drapes, and I was careful to carry them so I wouldn't accidentally get stabbed to death.

Hooray! The scissors were sharp enough

to cut through gum! I yanked Joey's skull down and sliced through the pink nightmare, chopping away sections of gum and hair with the inspired confidence of an expert barber, working away under the darkening trees until the glob became entirely dismembered from his head.

"It's all out, it's all out, we've done it," I exclaimed, stabbing the scissors into the sand.

It was only when Joey smiled across his dirty, tear-stained face that I realized a whole new monstrosity had been borne. Hair stuck out in every direction. The blonde bangs still hung down near his eyes, but they curved across his forehead like a brainwave. He was almost completely hairless on his left side. On the right side, long gobs of hair were slicked together and pointing straight out. In fact, there was only an inch or two of hair remaining on the back of his head that I had not radically altered. Outside of a brief respect for barbers, I was consumed by horror.

I thought about fixing his head up a little more, but it was getting dark for sure and I was being called to dinner, and it was spaghetti tonight. As much as I was looking forward to mom's sauce, it was not going to taste as good tonight because I knew that I was going to descend into in a crapload of trouble. Sure enough after dinner, the following sequence of events transpired: a) phone call from Mrs. Helmuth b) verbal spanking from Mom c) Dad arriving home late from work d) physical spanking from Dad e) Joey's older brother Eddie waiting outside to beat me up (and he was skilled in beating people up).

In recollection, I seem to have stayed inside the rest of that summer, coloring over things already colored, watching shows already watched. The fear of Eddie was not so much about a physical beating than about the devious plan he would have lined up, a personalized

plan just for me. As an example, when a kid in his class, just last term, took his favorite eraser from his desk on the way up for chocolate milk, Eddie stayed after class and loosened the legs of his desk and the next day, the kid came crashing down in a roar of laughter and books and had to have his jaw reset. He later joked in the schoolyard, "You take my eraser, I eraser your face."

Eddie finally got to me one evening just before school started back, as I was hunting for crayfish down at the junkman's creek. I needed a break from living inside, and I just wanted another crayfish because my last one had died and I knew the rocks and where they were hiding, so I didn't need much time. As if anticipating my dead pet and knowing where I would come for the next one, Eddie shot out of a clump of undergrowth and, in a flash that I still can't measure, shoved my face down into the water. Then he pulled me up by my collar and propped me up against the grassy bank. For thirty seconds or so he made me watch his mouth as it chewed a large wad of gum. "I said watch," he threatened.

Like desks in a classroom, Eddie knew how gum worked, and I knew how he worked. He was chewing that gum for quite some time, opening and closing his mouth to let me see that there were other chewed things in the gum, things much more cruel than Saltines. Predictably now, he took the gum out of his mouth, held the horrible mass with the tips of his fingers--then slapped it, stretched it, and finally ground it into my head. "Do unto others what you do unto their brothers," he said. He disappeared over the other side of the creek. I got what I deserved, and I got off easier than I had feared, though I could smell something foul coming out of the gum. He kicked my crayfish jar across the stones; it broke open and the caught crustacean flipped

backward in a straight line into the water.

So this was the world of revenge. Yup, Eddie transformed my head into the same life form that I had inflicted upon his little brother Joey's head; my life would now follow the same short-term trajectory: once again I would have to secretly steal into my mother's sewing cabinet and find the scissors, this time out of shame. Then I would have to take them to the bathroom, stand on the hamper, look at my own face in the bathroom mirror, and cut away Eddie's chewed gum. My head was going to look like hell.

Joey and I both received crew cuts and were labeled "the billiard brothers" around the neighborhood. This was a time for long hair, and it would take some time to grow back into that time. I got to the barber before Joey, but in the short period of time that Joey wore his hair with my "haircut," he became somewhat of a sensation, especially at the Fergusonville community center, a subtle respect for Joey walking among them like that. Joey liked that attention, too, and after he had it all cut away and he joined the society of the crew-cutted, he began to develop the annoying habit of constantly rubbing his own head and knocking on mine with his fist. I hated my head, especially the way the water would dry off it the minute I came out of the bath. It wasn't me, I didn't need a comb, and I didn't want rubbing. I prayed for a forgiving God to deliver me from my crew cut. "Please, God," I whispered to an ostensibly hippie deity, "make my hair grow and make things right."

Joey Helmuth went off to a public school in Croyden, and I was forced back to St. Thomas Aquinas with my green jacket and tie and my shaved head. The kids at the bus stop had started in on me already, telling me I looked like a baby robin and making little peeping noises until I could get on. They threw

stones at my *Land of the Giants* lunch box and broke the news to me that the show had been canceled. There's not too much that remains in memory after that. I guess my hair grew back on God's terms as I faded unnoticed into the backgrounds of hallways and formed other friendships that gave me a whole other set of stories. Joey and I grew apart, the way things always happen when different schools and new friends enter the picture. After our family moved to Warminster two summers later, in fact, I never saw him again.

I saw a commercial for bubble gum the other night, and there were two kids in the scene sitting on the edge of a sandbox, chewing gum. I had the sound down because I was finishing a paper, and when I decided to take a break a little later in the night, I googled "Joey Helmuth" and I found this interesting story on a blog called musicianswheredidtheygo.com. It was an article posted by a guitarist from the 70's whose name I had never heard by the name of Whitey Plymouth. In the blog, Whitey was writing about a musician named Joe Helmuth from York, England:

"Joe Helmuth, the bass guitarist of the punk band The Skinwalkers, was found dead the other day in a London hotel. He was 55. The Skinwalkers were a local London band that had brief success in the mid-seventies; they were actually quite good but were never in the right time and the right place to make it bigger, as is always the case of the luckless.

I met Joe when he first arrived in York as a teenager and I can tell you God doesn't make humans anymore the way He made Joe H. First and foremost, he could play most any instrument; I was enthralled with his cello and his harmonica routine was especially haunting. He only settled on bass

because he wanted that sound; it was, as he put it, 'the force that glues the music.'

He was the soul of the Skinwalkers, even though he was not the lead singer and he didn't write any of their tunes. He had that wild hair, cut in all directions and all pink. Not much attention has been given to Joe's contribution to the start of the punk movement here in Britain, but I remember the day he arrived at my flat with that hair-cut and a new guitar, proclaiming that he had cut it himself. Then he got some pink dye and soaked his head in the sink, and he went out proudly to the clubs to play, and people took notice. Many people, pretty women, respected musicians, a newspaper that made fun, only gave him more positive attention. Pretty soon you saw bands with all sorts of bizarre hairstyles, long after Joe had fallen by the wayside.

Punk isn't around anymore, and way leads on to way, and someone like Joe with punked-out pink hair like that just doesn't stand out any more. Maybe Joe's death had something to do with all that; they said heart attack, but it can't be that simple. Things and years came down between me and the Joe I knew, the Joe with an untaxed heart. For my money, Joe started the whole thing, I mean the **WHOLE THING**. Music and hair styles as we know it today would not be possible without Joe Helmuth."

There were a handful of replies in the comments section of Whitey's blog, none of them noteworthy, except to reflect on the punk movement. None knew Joey, and I thought I might add something personal, you know, because of the gum thing and the amazing coincidence of pink. Maybe I might write something about fate and distance, and

that it was definitely my best friend's heart that gave out, and that one night I googled and found him here on this blog just like that, and then end with something profound about shaved heads and changed lives and what does this discovery mean for me, for my life. But the

blog was dated, the last comment made over a year ago, so I decided not to post because all that time and thought would consume me and get me away from my work, and no one would read it anyhow. What's the point of that?

*Tim Wenzell is published widely, including a novel, *Absent Children*, many short stories and poems in literary magazines, *Emerald Green: An Ecocritical Study of Irish Literature*, published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing in 2009, the forthcoming *Woven Shades of Green: An Anthology of Irish Nature Literature* with Bucknell University Press, and a number of essays on Irish ecocriticism and American literature. He is an Associate Professor at Virginia Union University in Richmond, Virginia.*

Winter Daybreak

Don Thompson

The cold sun rises slowly,
Giving us time to get our minds right—
Except for the chattering black birds
That wake up crazier than ever.

Don Thompson has been writing about the San Joaquin Valley for over fifty years, including a dozen or so books and chapbooks. For more info and links to publishers, visit his website at don-e-thompson.com

Winter Evening

Don Thompson

Sparrows in the last light, jittery
Silhouettes on bare branches,
Have so much more to do and would
If not for the early darkness.



Neverending Voice

Augusta Sparks Farnum

I Died on River Road

Shawn Van Horn

RIVER ROAD has claimed its share of lives over the years. Car accidents mostly; the occasional suicide off the Holland River bridge. The turns on River Road seem to jump out from nowhere, and if you're not paying attention, or say if it's two in the morning and you're drunk and tired, on your way home from one of the numerous bars that line this seemingly never-ending road, it's none too difficult to plant your car into one of the army of trees that line the riverbank. More than a few bar patrons have made the obits after a night of drinking out here. The railroad tracks have gotten their share too. Just last year a family of five in a minivan met their fate at the hands of an oncoming CSX train after dad had failed to slow down and look both ways. The city put up lights and crossing arms after that. And just in case you could possibly forget what happened there, there's one short of half-a-dozen crosses punched into the gravel by the crossing to remind you of their deaths.

I didn't die in a car accident. I didn't die by my own doing. Well, now that I think about it, in a way a kind of died by both.

My brother, Sam, and I were on our way home after an afternoon spent at the Derry Points Mall. We'd caught a movie at the cinema—another brainless comedy that everyone seemed to think was hysterical except for me—then we crammed ourselves

full of hamburgers and French fries at the food court. It was a simple January Saturday. I usually hated public places, especially when they're crowded to the ceiling like they were that day in the mall, but when I was with Sam I didn't really notice. Even though he's more than seven years younger than me, I was not ashamed to call him my best friend. Ten-year-olds make good best friends actually. He's a good, innocent kid, the perfect counter to my negativity. Take that day at the movie for instance. I'm staring at the screen, not really seeing the screen, listening to the animals around me chomp loudly on their popcorn, the guy in front of me explaining every damn plot point to his dim-witted girlfriend. I happen to look over at Sam, and there he is, his wide eyes glued on the face of Adam Sandler, his mouth slightly agape, his lips turned upward. He's smiling. He's happy. He has no idea. I wish we could all stay that way. Maybe he will. Mom always said I was the screwed up one. Mr. Misanthrope. John Q. Pessimist.

Anyway, we're in my car, Sam picking at the crack running along the dashboard, I ranting to myself about the weather. I liked winter when there was snow on the ground. It's like a perfect white blanket covering up the barren death underneath. This winter had been snowless, the earth a gray, rotting corpse in every direction. It evoked a kind of lonely

despair deep inside just to cast a glance at it. It could've been my wedding day or I could've just won the lottery and I'd still be miserable if that was in the background. It made me feel so alone. I don't know why, but it did. And when I felt that way I was no joy to be around.

"Would you cut it out!" I yelled at Sam, breaking a silence that had been with us since leaving the mall. Sam was rolling a broken off piece of the dash between his fingers. "You're making it worse."

"Sorry," he mumbled, flicking the piece to the floor. He looked at me for a moment and then turned his eyes to the grayness outside his window. He didn't like these moments of mine. They always made him uncomfortable, so as always, good kid that he is, he changed the subject.

"Did you like the movie?"

"I told you earlier, it was okay."

"Oh, yeah. I forgot."

"What a shitty day out, huh? Fucking depressing." A nice conversation topic. Did I really expect him to have a response for that?

"Mom said it's supposed to snow sometime this week."

"Hope so," I said.

"Like my new shoes?" he asked, propping his feet up on the dash.

I took a quick glimpse at the shoes he had just bought at the mall with his Christmas money. He had already asked my opinion of them twice, and for the third time I told him they were nice. They were bright red, very odd looking, but they went with him perfectly. He loves anything that everyone else thought was weird. Maybe that's why we were best friends.

We fell silent again. I reached out to turn on the radio, but he beat me to it, spinning the dial until he landed on a Top Forty station he liked.

"Do we have to listen to this junk?" I asked, though it wasn't really a question.

Sam quickly flicked the radio back off. "What's gotten into you today?"

The way he said it created a tightening in my chest. It wasn't in an angry tone. He's not capable of the emotion. It was a genuine question. He really wanted to know what was wrong.

"I didn't say you had to turn it off. Listen, I'm just in a bad mood, okay. Sorry."

That was as much as I was going to give him. How could I tell him that when you get older there's a chance you're going to go through this strange period where you don't understand yourself and everything in the world confuses the hell out of you. I can remember the talk in health class a few years ago when they told us that this time of our lives would be awkward for a lot of us. Yeah, whatever. I wanted the facial hair. I now sported a very thin goatee to show everyone that I was on the verge of becoming an adult. But how could I explain any of my thoughts to him. He wouldn't get it. But saying I was in a bad mood, he would get that.

"Why?" he asked.

"I don't know. Just stuff, I guess."

I rolled to a stop at the intersection of Monument and River Road, the cold brakes letting out a high pitched screech. The railroad tracks laid a few hundred yards to our right, and from here, through the naked trees, I could make out the five white crosses. They sent a chill up my spine every time I saw them.

"Sounds like your brakes need fixed," Sam said.

"Duh. You think?" I looked over at my little brother and smiled, an unspoken way of again telling him I was sorry and that everything was okay between us.

He got the message and smiled back.

"Idiot," he said with a laugh.

I called him a moron as I turned right on River. As I waited for his comeback, something

caught the corner of my eye. I looked in the rearview mirror to see a blue Honda coming up on us fast.

"Jesus, slow down!"

Before I even finished the thought the Honda was screaming by us in the other lane. Two teenage boys I didn't recognize glanced over at me. They both wore hats turned backward on their heads, the driver's eyes shielded by dark sunglasses, to keep the gloomy sky from distracting him I suppose. The looks of them made me laugh. I knew their type from school; hard on the outside, soft on the inside. As they passed my middle finger went up in their direction, a protest to their haphazardness.

"Mark, put your hand down!" Sam yelled as he pulled down at my arm.

It was too late. They had seen me. I had such a problem with road rage. I wouldn't even take the interstate home anymore, just like on that day, because all the cars tailing each other and flying by me always irritated me to the point that I could concentrate on nothing else. I had nearly gotten myself in trouble a few times, flipping people off who were tailing me, tailing those who cut me off. Those people never responded though. These guys did. Their car immediately slowed down to our speed, the driver tearing off his sunglasses, pointing at me, his mouth flying open and closed furiously as he yelled words that I could not possibly hear. I understood perfectly though when he imitated my hand gesture. I turned my head back to the road, trying to ignore them, hoping they would move on.

"Fuck," I sighed. I was immediately regretting my display of anger.

"Why'd you do that, Mark?" Sam asked. "Just slow down and let them pass."

The uneasy tone of his voice hit my chest again. "They fucking pissed me off, Sam. Did you see how fast they were going? They're

driving like idiots."

The words weren't convincing me that what I had just done was a good way to display my disapproval. My heart was beginning to beat faster now, rattling against my sternum. What was I getting myself into? I lifted my foot off the gas, and to my relief they passed us and settled back into our lane, but as soon as they did the driver hit the brakes.

Sam squeezed hard on my arm. "Go around them, Mark." I almost didn't recognize his voice. The easygoing kid was abandoning Sam's throat.

I swerved my car to the left and so did the Honda. When I tried to sneak back through the right, they cut back, blocking my path. They quickly sped up, then slammed on their breaks, and again a speed burst followed by their brake lights screaming at us. They repeated the process over and over as we went around a few small, winding curves. The passenger turned around in his seat and wouldn't take his eyes off of mine, constantly pointing and laughing in my direction. As we hit a straight patch of road going a mere twenty-five miles per hour, I knew there was no way they were going to let us go around them.

Sam knew it too. "Turn around, Mark. Just turn around."

I could hear his breathing growing heavier now. I looked at him for a second and the look on his face reminded me of making him listen to "Thriller" years ago. The Vincent Price rap at the end had always scared him, and he'd always end up hiding under his bed. He was scared now too, but this time there was nowhere to hide. His pleas did not register with me though. I was too busy mistaking the fear that shook my limbs for some type of heroic rage telling me that I must not back down, that I must stand up to these punks who were trying to control me, to belittle me.

I'd had enough of being the coward.

I pushed my foot down hard on the accelerator and aimed my front bumper straight into the back of the Honda. The sound of crunching fiberglass mixed with the screams of my little brother.

"Mark! Stop it! Stop it! Please turn around. I wanna go home. Please, I wanna go home."

I couldn't bring myself to look at him anymore, but I could hear him sniffing, trying to suck the snot back up his nose. He was crying. I had made my little brother cry. The only other time I ever managed to emit that kind of emotion from him had been when I accidentally broke one of his fingers with a wiffle ball bat when he was four. It was a physical pain that made him cry then. I was causing him a much worse pain at this moment. I was forcing him to take a trip into my world, a world full of hate and loneliness, and it scared the shit out of him. It scared me too, but I think I liked it. For once in my life I was feeling something.

Blue Honda liked it too, flashing their brake lights at me once more. They still wanted to play. I was more than willing to join in. But they broke pattern and didn't speed back up this time. Instead they came to a complete halt in the middle of River Road. Perhaps at this moment I could have tried to pass them and it would've all ended, but I didn't do it. The thought never even crossed my mind actually. I came to a stop just inches behind them. Before I could even think of what to do next, the driver's door flung open, and out popped this short, skinny kid, sunglasses gone. Was he even old enough to drive? He was old enough, however, to take one of his boots and bury it into my headlight.

Fear caused me to shift my car into reverse and race backward for fifty yards, at which point fear introduced itself to rage, and rage, deciding it couldn't coexist with fear,

punched fear square on the chin, knocking it out for the time being. I hit the brakes and we fishtailed to a sudden stop.

I looked over at Sam and what was left of my being shattered into fine dust. Sam was looking down at the floor, tears glistening on his cheeks, snot flowing down his nose and into his blubbing mouth. The crotch of his denim jeans had turned a dark blue. He was trying to speak, but I couldn't understand the sounds coming out of him. Thinking about it now, it was at that moment I truly died.

The passenger of the blue Honda had now accompanied his driver. They cursed and pointed at me, spew fuming out of their mouths. Two on one. Not good odds. I needed to even things up. I thought back to Sam and me hitting baseballs at the park the day before. I always batted from second base so I could easily hit the balls over the fence. Sam loved it when I hit homeruns; he cheered and laughed every time like he was seeing it for the first time. His aluminum bat was still in the backseat. I reached blindly for it and brought it back around, holding it up for my foes to see. Odds now even.

Sam hopelessly grabbed for the last remaining remnant of his innocent childhood. "No," he squeaked. "Don't take my bat, Mark."

I pulled the bat away from him and his crying grew worse. I looked into his bright blue eyes for what would be the last time, eyes now overflowing, and I rubbed his shoulder with all the affection I could muster.

"Sam, listen to me. When I open my door I want you to get out and I want you to run, okay?"

"No. Noooo!"

"It'll be okay, Sam. Just run through that field over there. It's safer there. I don't want you to see this. You can come back after I scare them away, okay?"

"Why can't we just leave? Why can't we

go home?"

"We will go home soon. I promise. I just have to do this first. Then we'll go home."

I paused for a second, wanting to say something profound here, but suddenly seeing from the corner of my eyes what was waiting for me outside, I was brought back to the pace of the moment, so all I said, which I now hope was enough, was, "I'm sorry, Sam. I'm so sorry."

I turned back around. Having seen the bat in my hands the two boys had stopped in front of my car, but they weren't backing down. I slowly opened my door.

"Run, Sam." He didn't move. "Sam! Run!"

This time he did. His door flew open and he stumbled out, falling face first on the asphalt. He didn't hesitate as he picked himself back up and ran into the field as fast as his short, scrawny legs would carry him. He never looked back. I watched him run, his bright red Nike's kicking up loose soil, his image becoming smaller and smaller, yet still I could hear him bawling.

The rage left my body, replaced by a deep, unmovable shame. How could I do this to him? He was too good, too innocent, to experience what I was making him be a part of. And for what? To prove to some punks that I wasn't a coward? That I wasn't scared? I slowly got out of the car, watching Sam disappear against the horizon. Standing there, all alone in the middle of River Road, I had never been more scared in my entire life. I had lost my brother. I had lost my best friend. His innocence destroyed by the person he loved most. Whether he wanted it to be or not, his childhood was over. He had just grown up, literally, right before my eyes. There was nothing

I could ever do to make him a kid again. Things could never be the same between us from that point forward. How could he ever trust me again? He would always be leery of me, perhaps even afraid of me.

As I turned my focus back to the two boys standing before me, I wondered if I was taking their innocence too. Then, as the driver raised his hand, it became apparent that someone else had gotten to him first. Sticking out of his clenched fist was the unmistakable silver glint from the blade of a small knife. He arched his shoulders, ready to pounce, a boy challenging himself to play a grownup game.

I did not react as one might in that situation. I did not jump, I did not scream, I did not run or beg for my life. There was no life flashing before my eyes. The only thing flashing before them was the five white crosses in the background, accompanied by a morbid thought I couldn't suppress. Will I get a cross too?

The bat grew limp in my hand. That piece of aluminum used to make a kid I once knew so happy, so proud. I had no use for it now. I wouldn't be hitting any more cheap homeruns with it. And the desire to use it as a weapon has diminished with the rage. I was sick of fighting. I couldn't do it anymore. The bat dropped from my hand and clanged against the road. As the boys began walking toward me I wanted to tell them I was sorry, but I couldn't stop sobbing long enough to get the words out. Instead, I closed my eyes tight, the sound of their pant legs scraping against the hardened tar growing closer and closer, and I waited for it to end.

But let me tell you this: even in death, the pain never ends.

Shawn Van Horn currently resides in Sidney, Ohio. He has had short stories and poems published in Our Time is Now, Wilmington Blues, The Oddville Press, and Adelaide. He has also written two novels and just started on his third.

Who Dunit

Lawrence Syldan

Go to the Last dog-eared page.
The refractory fables of sofa and chairs
and clouds at twilight
infuse the heart's dark cells
with a juicy mystery.

The corpses are on the lawn,
beneath the stair
and in the moon.

As suspects and bystanders
we are pedants of bloodstains,
alibis And slight, anxious shadows.

Then the bearded children arrive
and ask, Who kills us?
staring down at the enormity

of their own hands.

Lawrence Syldan now possesses three grandchildren and a home near the ocean. He has been published in many journals, including Dirty Chai, The Zodiac Review, and Vine Leaves. Also his work appears in Sparks Of Fire, an anthology focusing on the visionary poetry of William Blake. He is now concerned with the enterprise of publishing a book of poems.