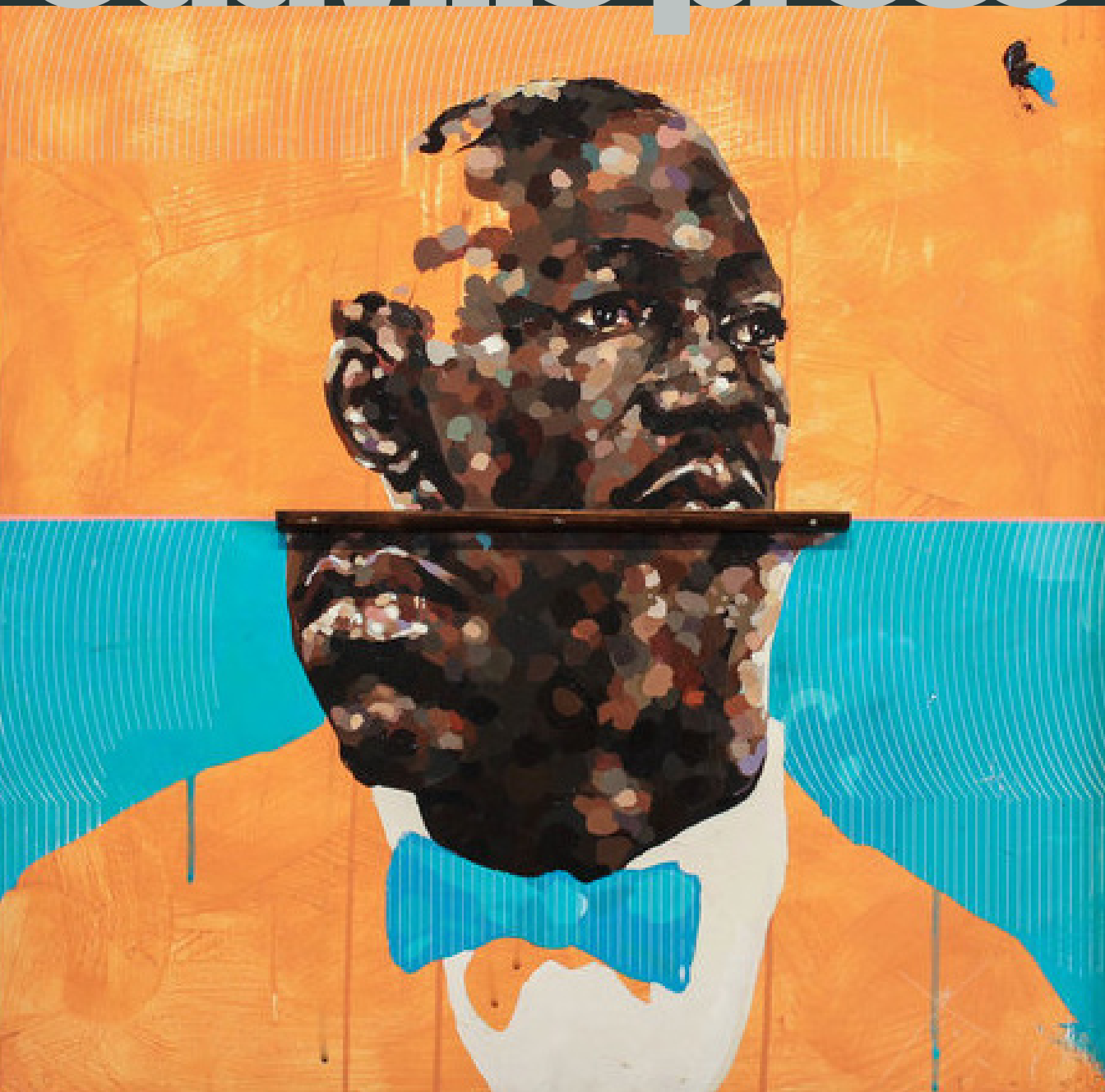


T H E
oddtville press



W I N T E R 2 0 2 0

Messenger (for Art Blakely)

C O V E R

Jeremy Okai Davis

In the work of Jeremy Okai Davis, color use and fidelity to his subjects make them feel alive, but without being too literal. The work feels really light at first glance, but on closer examination of text and posture, the work is full of conflict, an exploration of the contrast between the shiny, smiling exterior that is frequently presented on the surface and the inner, self-conscious, status obsessed mind state that so many of us endure beneath it all.

the oddville press

Promoting today's geniuses and tomorrow's giants.

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

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D I S C L A I M E R

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

Thanks for reading,
The Management

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Nub

Harris Coverley

She came in
through the front door
and hung the
universe on a hook
on the wall.

I then cried
tears of gold
that she baked
into biscuits.

We then sat
and watched
TV.

Love is so often
like ice cream
melting in
your mouth.

I could cry
some more,
but no gold
these days.

Just salt tears.

Harris Coverley has had poetry most recently accepted for *Better Than Starbucks*, *Bard*, *Awen*, *Star*Line*, *Scifaikuest*, and *Dual Coast Magazine*, amongst many others. He is also a short story writer, working mainly in the fields of weird and speculative fiction, and has stories published or forthcoming in *Curiosities*, *Planet Scumm*, and *The J.J. Outré Review*. He lives in Manchester, England.

Death by Ferris Wheel

David C. Metz

WALTER TRUESDALE was terrified of heights. He wasn't sure where this phobia came from. As a child he had climbed trees and jumped off garage roofs trailing a Superman cape, except it was white, not red, and was tied around his neck not attached to the shoulders of his shirt. It was, in fact, an old twin top sheet that his mother had cut in half for him. Walter had been fearless as he leapt from the garage to his crab-grassed backyard. He had been a normal boy, free of irrational fears. Now deep into middle age, Walter would argue that a fear of falling off a ladder and breaking his neck while cleaning the gutters was not entirely irrational.

The fear had come on as suddenly as his wife's reflection sometimes appeared in the kitchen window as he stood over the sink sipping coffee.

"Jesus," he'd say, "you need to make some noise."

"Good morning to you, too," she'd reply.

He remembered the day the fear announced itself. He was eighteen and had taken a girl named Linda to the county fair. He'd forgotten her last name. She was somebody's cousin from Chicago, visiting for the summer, and, according to some of the guys Walter hung out with, loose. She seemed too

nice for that to be true, but Walter thought girls from Chicago might be different. As they walked through the midway eating cotton candy and stopping to play games Walter knew they had no chance of winning, he plotted her seduction. He could tell she was having a good time. She laughed and leaned against him and slipped her hand into his. Near the end of the evening, as he was thinking about taking her to the parking spot near the lake where he had taken girls during high school, she told him she wanted to ride the Ferris wheel. She said she loved to ride them at night when everything was lit up. Walter felt a little light-headed as the wheel turned through the warm air. Linda rested her head against his shoulder and said she loved seeing the fairgrounds lit up like some kind of magical city. Walter nodded, his dizziness like the buzz he got from a second beer, and was about to slip his arm around her, when the Ferris wheel came to an abrupt halt just as they reached the top.

"Shit," he muttered.

"Are you all right?"

"Sure. Just wasn't expecting to stop." He smiled at her.

"This is so cool," she said. "You can see the lights of the city over there. Look." She

pointed with her right hand while resting her left on his knee. Instead of being turned on, Walter was seized with fear that any movement would plunge them to their deaths. It was crazy because they were locked into the seat by a steel safety bar and the seat was bolted to the frame. Still, he had trouble catching his breath.

"Hey," she said, "it's okay if you want to kiss me." She cupped one side of his face with her hand and started to turn it towards her, but Walter's head remained rigid, as if an invisible hand was performing an isometric push against the other side. He gripped the safety bar.

"Are you okay?" Linda asked.

He forced himself to smile. "Just feeling a little weird." Just as he finished speaking, the wheel jerked back into motion. As they descended he felt his breath return, but it was too late. She held his hand on the walk to the car, but when they pulled out of the lot, she told him she needed to go home because she'd promised to get up early the next day to go shopping with her cousin.

Walter learned to live with his fear. When he traveled for business, he chose aisle seats on planes, and avoided looking down from hotel windows. When his children were young, his wife, Ellen, took them on any carnival ride involving height. Walter claimed to have an inner ear condition that prevented him from taking them. Ellen protected his secret. It embarrassed him, the way being among the last picked for teams when he was a kid embarrassed him. But Ellen said he made too much of it. He was a good man, she told him, a loving father and a good provider. One Monday morning after her wraithlike appearance in the kitchen sent coffee splashing into the sink, Ellen laughed and told him he was overreacting.

"You must be lost in another world," she said.

Walter smiled and took another sip of coffee, trying to affect a casual posture to mask his discomfort at the accuracy of Ellen's comment. He had been in another world, lost in a reverie about Rhonda Radzinski's smile, the perfectly symmetrical indentation of her dimples and the flash in her hazel eyes as she laughed at a joke he had made in a staff meeting the day before. It wasn't even a very good joke, but Rhonda's reaction sent a bolt of warm excitement through him, momentarily stirring him out of his work doldrums. Rhonda was a financial analyst assigned to support Walter's team, so there was always a chance she was sucking up, but not as much as if she reported to him directly. Walter guessed she was in her late thirties, although he wasn't very good at estimating women's ages. He'd noticed she wasn't wearing a ring, which didn't necessarily mean she was unattached. Not that it mattered. She was too young for him, too far out of his league even if he were so inclined, which he was not. Office romances always ended in grief—Walter had seen colleagues succumb over the years and come to regret it.

He had remained faithful even though his marriage, like his life, had entered an enervating middle period. He didn't blame Ellen. She was still an attractive woman—aerobics class three times a week and careful about her diet. She still tried, that was the thing, making an effort not just to take care of herself, but to keep some spark in their marriage. She asked about his day, about the stock market, about football, which Walter knew she hated, and she listened attentively to his replies. At night, her hands sought him under the covers. Sometimes he thought she was trying too hard, compensating for his disinterest, and it made him sorry for her. As her hands probed and she climbed astride him, he'd think

of Rhonda, which filled him with an excited dread, like daring himself to look out a twentieth-floor window.

Now Walter finished his coffee and set his mug in the sink. “Just thinking about work,” he said as he turned to face Ellen. Her blue terry-cloth robe was cinched tight and pulled close around her neck, like the turned-up collar of a winter coat. She poured herself a mug of coffee and held up the pot. “More?” she asked.

“No thanks. I need to shower and get going.” He planted a quick kiss on her forehead and started out of the kitchen.

“Walter?”

“Yes?” He stopped at the kitchen entrance.

“Is everything okay?”

He nodded. “Just busy. We have a proposal due Friday.”

“Okay.” She smiled in a way he used to think of as shy, but that now seemed more knowing, a disguise of some inner calculation. He left before she could ask more, probe his thoughts, and somehow discover how many contained images of Rhonda. It wasn’t just heights that he feared.

Walter worked late every night that week and Rhonda was there too, crunching numbers to help him figure out a final configuration and price that would be compliant and competitive. It was like working a slide puzzle, pushing the pieces around until the picture fell into place. Rhonda was good at more than the numbers, she understood the business and wasn’t afraid to speak up. Walter found himself watching her—the way her blouse tugged against her breasts when she leaned forward at the conference table, the way her dark slacks clung to her hips, and of course, her dimples whenever she smiled. She smiled often. It seemed to Walter that she smiled at him whenever she

looked his way, each time sending that same bolt of excitement zinging through his chest.

He ordered pizza and the team took breaks and talked around the table and he learned that she was a single mom. Walter felt bad keeping her at the office so late, but she said it was nice to have a break from her routine. She smiled as she said this and raised her eyebrows, as if she were describing a secret rendezvous.

Each night he walked her to her car in the company parking lot, which had decent lighting and was perfectly safe. But he told himself it was the gentlemanly thing to do, and she didn’t object. They talked business. He was afraid to venture into anything more personal, concerned his interest might be misunderstood, or understood too well.

On Thursday he told her she was really good, that the proposal could not have been done without her.

“Thank you,” she said.

“I mean it, you’re the best finance person I’ve ever worked with.”

They were standing next to her car. A nearby street lamp cast a muted light across her face, making her eyes shine.

“I like working with your team,” she said. “I like working with you.”

“Well, it’s a good team.”

“And has a good leader.”

“Yeah, well.” He shrugged. He wondered what she would do if he took her hand in his, if he kissed her. A balloon of anticipation expanded his chest.

She touched his arm. “It’s true. Don’t sell yourself short.”

Walter nodded. He thought about taking her hand, imagined the soft press of her lips. She wasn’t looking away and he wondered if that was a sign. He smiled and just as he did car headlights flashed across his field of vision.

He blinked, raised his hand to shield his eyes. When the car passed, Rhonda had taken her key from her purse.

"Good night, Walter," she said, flashing her smile a final time.

He watched her car pull away, the red glow of the taillights retreating to the end of the parking lot and disappearing as she turned onto the boulevard, before he walked to his car. He sat awhile, replaying the scene in his head, imagining if he had taken her hand and pulled her into an embrace, her body against his, yielding to his desire. Could it be that easy?

During the drive home, reality overtook fantasy, like light filling a room. He was too old for her, too balding, too paunchy. He was kidding himself if he thought Rhonda's feelings for him extended beyond casual friendship. A blanket of melancholy settled on him. He thought of Ellen, the way she worked to maintain herself and their marriage, with no help from him. He tried to conceal his discontent to avoid hurting her, but feared it seeped to the surface, like sweat through a shirt, carrying its own acrid odor.

Ellen was in bed reading when he got home. She set her book aside and asked him about his day as he undressed. He hoped his brief replies didn't sound terse. He offered a weary smile as he slipped into bed next to her, and said he was exhausted. She nodded, kissed him and turned out the light on her nightstand.

"Walter?" she said after a moment.

He was on his back, staring up at the dark. "Hmmm."

"Are you okay?"

He felt his heart pound and a rush of dread mixed with an unexpected tenderness. She was facing away from him, the blanket pulled over her shoulders. He thought of turning to her, spooning her the way he once had

every night, whispering he loved her. When had he last done that?

"I'm fine," he said. "I'm just tired."

The proposal was submitted on Friday, but Walter continued to see Rhonda every day. He invented reasons to stop by her cube, or to invite her into his office. After disposing of whatever business matters they had to discuss, he struck up conversations. He asked about her daughter, who was eleven and still a sweetheart according to Rhonda, although she knew that wouldn't last. "All my girlfriends who have teenage daughters say their girls hate them, blame them for everything."

"That sounds about right. My daughter hated my wife at that age. I think she still harbors a bit of resentment, to tell you the truth."

Rhonda shook her head. "That's sad. I hate to think of Kaylee resenting me." She pulled the sides of her mouth into an exaggerated pout, her hazel eyes growing wide.

"I'm sure it's different for everyone," Walter said. "I'll bet you and Kaylee will be fine." He smiled at her. She was wearing a turquoise silk blouse with an open collar. A heart-shaped silver locket hung from a thin chain around her neck, pointing to the cleavage hidden beneath the top button of her blouse. Walter wondered if the locket held a picture of Kaylee.

Over time he learned she had been divorced for nearly ten years. ("My ex was more into making babies than raising them.") He wondered if she was dating anyone, but never asked, knowing it would cross a line. Then one evening at a dinner following a team meeting, he overheard Rhonda tell a couple of women on the team that after a few relationships gone south since her divorce, she no longer felt the pressure to have a man in her life. ("My mom still asks me sometimes, and I

just tell her it's not happening.") Walter wanted to interject that not all men were as bad as her ex and the other clowns she had dated, some were in it for the long haul. But he sipped his wine and turned his attention to another conversation buzzing around the table.

Walter lingered outside the restaurant saying goodnight to the team members, checking that everyone had a ride. Traffic had slowed, only a few cars made their way up the wide street to the intersection, their headlights bobbing slightly. A breeze brushed against his face. Rhonda was one of the last to emerge, followed by one of the women Walter had overheard her talking to earlier. They embraced and said good night, laughing at a comment one of them made that Walter could not hear. He waved at the woman, calling out "Good night," then smiled at Rhonda as she approached him.

"Very nice dinner. Thanks."

He nodded. "Glad you enjoyed it."

"I always enjoy getting out." She smiled, her dimples appearing deeper, softer, her eyes a little glassy. Walter wondered if she was okay to drive.

"Where are you parked?" he asked.

"The garage." She lifted her chin in the direction of a structure in the middle of the next block.

"Me too. I'll walk you there."

They started up the block together. Near the intersection, Rhonda was a little unsteady as she stepped over a gap in the sidewalk, and Walter caught her by the elbow, then offered his arm.

"Thanks," she said.

There was a Starbucks on the corner across the street. He stopped in front of the entrance and asked if she wanted anything.

"First the arm, now the coffee. Are you worried about me?" She looked at him, tilting her head to one side.

Walter shrugged. "Maybe a little. Plus, I could use one myself."

Inside, Rhonda took a seat at a table by the window while Walter ordered a black coffee for himself and a non-fat latte for her. They sat quietly for a moment. Walter took a sip of his coffee and glanced out the window, then smiled at Rhonda. She was wearing a thin V-necked sweater and the silver heart-shaped locket. The overhead light revealed traces of red in her dark brown hair. He started to talk about the meeting, how much he liked the team.

"You're a really nice man," she said.

Walter felt his heart thump like a fist pounding a door. Rhonda's hazel eyes were fixed on him. He looked at the table, saw her hands wrapped around her coffee cup, fingers long and slender, nails painted a pinkish color he could not identify. When he looked up she frowned.

"I'm sorry, I'm not trying to make you uncomfortable."

He shook his head. "It's okay."

"It's just something I've thought for a while, and I wanted to tell you."

"Thank you."

They walked to the parking garage in silence. Walter felt light-headed and focused on taking even breaths to steady his heart rate. He had not offered Rhonda his arm as before, unsure of how she might interpret it, of how he wanted her to interpret it. He smiled at her as they crossed the street and later as they rode the elevator to the fourth level of the garage, and both times she smiled back.

There were only a few cars on the fourth level. When they reached hers, she thanked him for the latte and for walking her to her car. "A true gentleman," she said. He felt like he had in high school at the end of a date, calculating whether to make a move. He felt his heart thump, his body course with desire, as if another man were

straining to burst through his skin.

"Good night," he said, his voice huskier than he expected. Then he did it. He leaned forward and kissed her, bracing for her reaction, a push or a slap, but instead he felt her arms circle his neck, her body press against his, her lips part.

The affair lasted three months: a series of trysts in hotel rooms on business trips, a motel on the outskirts of the city (Walter was afraid of being spotted in a downtown hotel), and once at Rhonda's townhouse when her daughter was spending the weekend with her father. The logistics made Walter nervous. In the hours before each rendezvous, the acid in his stomach churned like boiling soup, his heart zipped and banged in his chest like a bumper car. His anxiety and excitement built to a crescendo until Rhonda, in the flesh, provided relief. Yet the sight of her, naked and voluptuous, caused another trickle of anxiety to leak into his chest as he considered his own sagging physique. Part of him kept waiting for her to burst into laughter and say it was all a joke which she had been recording on her iPhone.

As far as he could tell, Ellen didn't suspect anything. The hotels on the business trips were expensed, and he paid cash for the local motel. Being in sales, he worked long and often irregular hours. Their conversations continued as usual, driven mostly by her efforts, although he initiated more of them than he had previously, and made a point of being cheerful and engaged. A few nights, lying in the dark of their bedroom, he sought her under the covers.

One day in early August, Rhonda appeared in the doorway of his office.

"I need to talk to you."

"Okay," Walter nodded and gestured,

palm up, at the chair in front of his desk.

"Not here. Do you have time for a drink after work?"

"Oh my, sounds serious." Walter smiled.

"More private," she replied, disappearing before he could ask if everything was all right.

They met at Barney's, a bar on the north end of town, away from the usual after work watering holes. It had become one of their rendezvous spots. Rhonda had texted she would meet him there and he found her in the corner booth they had claimed the first time they met there.

She greeted him with a dimpled smile that seemed as warm as always, except for something hesitant in her eyes. She waited for him to order a drink and take a sip before she spoke.

"I wanted you to hear this from me." She ran one finger along the side of her wine glass, staring at the dark liquid before looking at him. "I've accepted a job in Chicago. I'll be leaving at the end of the month."

For a moment Walter said nothing. He studied her face, which remained calm, her eyes steadily meeting his. She was wearing her silver locket and he remembered it hanging over his face as she bent forward to kiss him while they made love. It turned out there was no picture inside, she just liked the way it looked.

"Well," he said, "I guess congratulations are in order."

"Thank you."

He sat forward. "Rhonda, I hope this isn't about, you know."

She shook her head. "Oh God, no. No. I've been thinking of making a move for a long time. It's a promotion, a management role. Plus, my sister lives in Naperville. It'll be nice to be around family."

"Okay," Walter said. Her dismissal of his concern surprised him. "I just wanted to be sure."

"Walter," she said, her voice softening,

"this," she made a small wave of her hand in the space between them, "was always just for fun, right? It was never meant to be serious."

He affected a dismissive shrug. "Of course not." He smiled. "I'm happy for you, Rhonda. Really."

"Thank you." She rested her head against the back of the booth. This time when she smiled he didn't detect any hesitation in her eyes, only relief.

They finished their drinks quietly. He wanted to say something, felt as if he should mark the end of the affair with a little speech that was pithy and kind and melancholy. But all he could think of was that three nights ago he'd felt like a man of steel wrapped in a naked, sweaty embrace with her, and here he sat, back to his pudgy, middle-aged self. What, really, was there to say?

He didn't go directly home. He pulled onto the highway that looped the city and drove in circles for over an hour, passing familiar clusters of commercial buildings and the backs of residential developments. He knew he had dodged a bullet. If their affair continued, something would have gone wrong. They would have been caught. He might have lost his job and Ellen would have left him, taking with her twenty-five years of marriage and the good will of his children, who would surely take their mother's side. No, Rhonda had done him a favor. It didn't feel that way as he glided by pools of phosphorescent light, past the green exit signs, but he knew that in time it would. In time he would feel less foolish, less hurt. He'd get back to himself, back to his life.

The final weeks of being around her in the office were less awkward than he expected. She breezed around as if nothing had ever happened between them, so excited at the prospect of her new job, so happy to be starting a new phase of her life, Walter wondered if the

affair had meant anything to her. At her farewell luncheon, the hug she gave him felt perfunctory.

He and Ellen got away for a long weekend in September. They drove to a resort north of Chicago, almost to the Wisconsin border. They took their time driving, getting off the interstate and wending their way on two-lane state roads. "You can't see anything from the interstate," he said. He liked to drive, the feeling of movement as the countryside sailed by matched his desire to put distance between himself and the affair with Rhonda, the memory of which made him ache with desire whenever it pierced his consciousness. At the same time, the realization of what he nearly squandered was sobering.

He was attentive to Ellen, slowly closing the distance he had allowed to grow between them, relieved that she showed no sign of knowing or suspecting. They listened to classical music on the drive, talked about their children and a remodel of the kitchen they wanted to get started later in the fall. Ellen smiled at him and tilted her seat back, gazing out the window. She was pensive, but that seemed natural. It was a soothing drive on a lovely autumn day.

They passed a carnival on the way, part of a county fair, and Ellen said they should come back after dinner. "We haven't been to one since the kids were little." Walter wasn't as enthused, but he didn't want to spoil the mood by being querulous. So, after they checked in and ate dinner, they drove back.

The carnival was set up at the far end of the fairgrounds, away from the exhibition buildings, a colorful ring of fluorescent lit rides, booths and tents. Ellen took Walter's hand as they made their way through a steady flow of parents with children and teenagers moving in packs, the sound of organ music mashing with the laugh-

ter and screams of ride-goers and the incessant spiel of the barkers. They passed a huge merry-go-round, a tilt-a-whirl, swings flying in circles at the end of chains, bumper cars and a kiddie car ride. Then, at the edge of the carnival, was a ride that made Walter's heart race: a double-decker Ferris wheel, two Ferris wheels connected by a giant metal arm. He looked at Ellen, who grinned and arched her eyebrows.

"You don't have to go," she said.

But of course, he did. He was a man trying to redeem himself. He couldn't break the romantic spell of the evening by letting Ellen ride alone. He asked the woman in the small red ticket booth for two.

"Are you sure?" Ellen asked.

"Absolutely."

The ride started slow as the seats were loaded, and Walter thought he would be okay. He smiled at Ellen, even laughed as they were lifted higher into the night air. She squeezed his hand. Then the ride began. The Ferris wheel they were on turned in its own arc and then lifted higher in a separate arc as the giant metal arm began to turn. Soon they were spinning and lifting, spinning and dropping, as if on the end of an enormous, twirling baton.

Walter looked at Ellen, who had her eyes closed and head back, catching the air. He gripped the safety bar and closed his eyes, but the motion made him dizzy. He watched the ground as they pulled away and descended, pulled away and descended, now lifting higher as they spun, the motion making him feel like he was being

tossed between two giant hands. He felt his heart pound and his breath come in short gasps.

"Are you all right?" Ellen was looking at him.

Walter forced a smile. "Not my favorite activity."

The giant arm slowed as it lifted them to the top and then the ride halted.

"Oh God," Walter muttered. He closed his eyes, felt like he was falling, opened them.

"Walter?"

"Shit." He felt like the giant arm was swaying. Sweat trickled down his side, his heart raced in jagged bursts.

"Walter, are you okay?" She gripped his arm and stared at him, her face inches from his.

In that moment, he thought: Did she know? Had she always known?

He was seized with terror, with the certainty that the Ferris wheel would collapse at any minute, plunging them to their deaths. They would plunge and there would be no Superman to fly to the rescue. He wished he were Superman, wished he could fly. If he could fly he wouldn't be afraid. But he wasn't Superman, he was Walter Truesdale, whose heart was pounding so savagely that he could see Ellen was saying something, but he couldn't hear her. When she put her hand on his chest, it felt like she was trying to crush his heart. He couldn't breathe. He opened his mouth to speak but didn't have enough breath to form the words. He wanted to say he was sorry. He wanted to tell her if she would just stop crushing his chest, he could explain.

David Metz is a writer and member of the Writer's Center in Bethesda, MD. His stories have appeared in *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *Bull*, *The MacGuffin*, *New Plains Review* and *Downstate Story*. Metz was born and raised in Illinois and graduated from Illinois State University. After college, he did a stint in the U.S. Army in Germany before moving to the Washington, DC area, where he earned a law degree, worked as a corporate attorney, and helped raise a family. Metz lives with my wife in Damascus, MD. They have two grown daughters.

Georgia Ideals, Run and Never Look Back

Brett Stout

The entry,

of an oxidized flock
from deformed museums and
defiled graveyards
they speak softly to winos
and hard hats in
late November,

steel
corroded in nature
as they lay dying
on empty streets
and Old Bryan Drive
east of an abandoned
Indiana
primary colors paint the
endless days
as the late night hours are rusted
and ancient,

forgotten and forged American steel,

past lives and
generations liquefied in dirt
blackened hands caress
the contorted tongues
as they
hang from the sky
bent and broken
willed trees spurring into me
plastic burrows
in the ground
soaring forth domestication,

the orange bottled hate
eat the rancid paste
of the future
as acid rain pellets rest under shade
that afternoon,

modern art
and vampire killers
confessions from a
decaying wooden deity
coagulated blood on
alien hands
lottery ticket losers and
uncouth serial killers
the unopened cans of disease
they ride the rails
with Rasputin
into
the crimson hills
of an unknown past,

the exodus,

dropping bombs
of dissolution and despair
in the year 2019.

Brett Stout is a 40-year-old writer and artist originally from Atlanta, GA. He is a high school dropout and former construction worker turned college graduate and paramedic. He writes now while mainly hung-over on white lined paper in a small cramped apartment in Myrtle Beach, SC. He has published several novels of prose and poetry including *Lab Rat Manifesto*, and has been featured in a vast range of various media including Brown University and the University of California.

Cinderella Series

Katherine Ace

1. Cinderella
 2. Feast
 3. Beautiful Step Sister
 4. Trying on wigs and shoes
 5. Skirt
-

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

Ace is represented by the Woodside/Braseth Gallery in Seattle, and the Froelick Gallery in Portland. katherineace.com











Color of Words

Barry Green

My friend uses paints to speak about the words
That he cannot find
Colors lost trying to explain themselves
Trying to tell the story of why he lost his family
Painting faces and moods
Red and black arguments
Blue and yellow absences.

Children in mixed pallets looking for a door
A way to be away
Reading the pictures painted with slashing strokes
Long subtle greens fading to black
Looking for a key to open a way away
To lock the world behind them
To find silence on a canvas
Without a frame.

Barry Green was born and raised in Brooklyn, NY. After working in the southwest US and upstate New York, he moved to Virginia in 1974 and currently lives in the town of Ashland. He had several poems published in small journals in the 1970s, then stopped writing for the next 40 years. He is now retired and has once again picked up pen and paper.

Confession

Thomas Bulen Jacobs

CHEUNG, THE DETECTIVE, took the call. O'Connor hospital on Forest, downtown.

"You're saying there's nothing physically wrong with him?" Cheung raised a finger, waggled it at arm's length. Across the battered stainless-steel desk, the A.I. came out of standby. The blue eyes—a couple of Christmas tree bulbs in sockets at the front of the burnished chrome faceplate—kindled and the artificial hunch of the back straightened out. The A.I. glanced down at the split phone cord, one end of which ran into a socket on its forefinger. It'd begun recording the moment the call came in.

"No signs of trauma? The head? Nothing. All right. We'll come down."

Cheung slung the receiver back into its cradle. The touchpad on the desk before him made the sound of bubbles popping, and the assignment details, pulled from the call, came up prescribed into the paperwork. Cheung thumbed the blue OKAY button and rose from his seat. The A.I.'s waist hinges hummed imperceptibly, and it rose from the seat like a gymnast posting the perfect landing.

Cheung's suit jacket was over the back of his seat, rumbled pale khaki. It was too goddamn hot in the Valley for anything heavier. The A.I., whose dull plated exoskeleton

Cheung had only ever glimpsed, was draped in a navy-blue officer's uniform, complete with starched white collar and black tie. Its silicon hands hung stiffly at its sides.

Cheung's C.O. shouted from the office. Cheung leaned over to see what he was saying. Rodriguez was a heavy-set Mexican guy. He lazily wheeled his desk chair to the doorway.

"You're doing the O'Connor run?"

Cheung nodded.

"Take. Your. Fucking. Piece."

Cheung glanced down at the touchpad. Rodriguez had risen and was fussily pushing his chair back behind his desk.

"Sir?"

"Not now, Alan."

The A.I. acceded to the implicit order, a function of his software which Cheung took great pleasure in manipulating. He was old enough to remember when detective work was done without the constant nagging of the department's proprietary protocol algorithms.

They made their way briskly down to the lot to get a car. Cheung didn't bother to engage the satellite map. Alan—Cheung called him that because in the police's prefab online font A.I. looked like AI, but Cheung felt

they weren't close enough for nicknames—bent its sensors to the darkened screen. It drove Cheung nuts that he still did it because he had learned that Cheung wasn't going to engage.

Cheung was fifty-four, lean and dark-haired, thinning at the back. He'd grown up in Seattle, the child of Chinese Christian immigrants who fled their home country halfway through the last century. His first police job had taken him to L.A., walking the streets in Chinatown, jawing in Mandarin with the locals. Now he was in Norcal, the heart of Silicon Valley, a detective. After a stint undercover in anti-gang, he had moved into Special Victims. Rodriguez had recruited him, pushed hard because of what he'd been before he was a cop.

Once, long ago, he'd been a Jesuit. He had even been ordained.

They asked around at O'Connor. They were directed to a room in psych.

The man inside was impeccable. He was around Cheung's age, dressed in dark jeans and a black polo shirt tucked in over an enviably trim stomach. His arms were lean and muscular, thick with grey hair. He wore a watch with a black wristband, and in the same hand clutched a phone. He was clean-shaven, bald, with high cheekbones and bright black eyes. Cheung thought he might have been North Indian or Persian.

The man rose when Cheung and Alan entered the room. He shook hands politely with Cheung, but only eyed the A.I.

"My name is George Cheung. I'm a detective. I've been led to understand that you do not have any recollection of who you are."

"That's right."

Cheung indicated that the man should sit.

He did, crossing his legs carefully.

Cheung leaned against the counter just inside the door, lined with glass bottles of cotton swabs, tongue depressors, and boxes of latex gloves. Alan stood alert beside the red plastic syringe disposal box.

"Do I have your permission to record this conversation?" Cheung indicated with a nod of his head the A.I. Alan turned its sensors from Cheung to the man. He had begun to record from the moment they took the call, but if the man had denied their request, the digital data would have been automatically scrubbed. The man nodded.

"When did you first realize that you had no memory?"

"I came online mid-afternoon."

"You're not—" Cheung raised an eyebrow. It was a strange way to put it. There were rumors that there were A.I.s capable of passing.

"No." The man smiled. "It's just an expression."

"May I?" Cheung indicated the man's phone.

To his surprise, the man became for a moment almost feral in his response. He clutched the piece to his chest, baring his teeth like a cornered raccoon. Cheung remained unmoving; his time in undercover in the Chinese mob had trained him to mask his reactions. He glanced at the A.I. It kept its sensors on the man.

After a moment, the man lay his hand on his knee. Slowly, as if at war with himself, he unfurled his fingers, each in turn.

"It's got a retinal scanner."

"I've tried it."

Cheung nodded. "Of course. May I? You may set it on the bed if you'd prefer."

The man took another minute to consider. Then, slowly, he set the phone down upon

the crinkled white paper that draped over each end.

"I'm going to ask for your permission to allow my A.I. access to the device. I'm sure the hospital has done the same already, but we have some override privileges that may prove advantageous. His code prevents him from transcribing or copying any data unless it's justified by a warrant, which of course we would have to disclose had we secured one. That's the legal way of telling you he should be able to unlock your phone."

The man nodded. Watched the phone like a hawk.

Alan dutifully trained his facepiece on Cheung, who gave the signal. The A.I. reached stiffly for the phone. It held the device in one of its whitish hands. The skin on the middle finger of its other hand split and a master plug adapter extended with a click. The A.I. slipped it into the phone port.

It stood there for a long time. The man watched him. Cheung watched the man.

Several minutes passed. Cheung looked at the clock. It didn't normally take this long to get into a phone. Then suddenly, Alan set the phone primly on the corner of the bed. The man snatched it desperately to his chest.

The A.I. rotated at the waist. "Sir. I have made several observations which I believe will inform our investigation. However, they are best shared in a discrete setting."

This was new. Cheung bent his head to the man. "What my colleague is trying to say is, we'll be right back."

Cheung followed Alan into the hospital hallway.

"Did you find anything on the phone?"

"No, sir. Its security protocols are far. Far. Far." The A.I. paused for a moment. Something inside it whirled. "Far above my pay grade." It inclined its head to the side as if seeking approval

for the colloquialism. Cheung offered nothing. "The probability that the technology is military-grade is better than fifty percent."

A man with no memory and a lizard-brain protective response to a piece of military hardware. "You said there were a couple of observations."

"I have scanned his facial features and run them through a number of archives. He does not appear to exist."

"How good are the archives?"

"That is not the problem, sir. I would suggest that he has been scrubbed from the databases. I cannot speculate as to the reason."

"Why is that your conclusion?"

"It's his watch, sir. It's a Gerhard Manne-mann Unendlichkeitsspektrum 4."

"How much does it cost?" One step at a time.

"It retails for more than 6 million dollars. Sir."

The facts were becoming coherent if no clearer. "If that's the case, then someone is bound to be looking for him. Are you online?"

"Always, sir."

"Check the call logs at the station. Any rich guys reported missing?"

Alan inclined its head as if listening to a distant signal.

"None, sir."

Cheung nodded. He supposed the easiest thing to do would be to have him discharged into their care. They could take him down to the tech guys at the station, see what they could pull out of the phone.

"Can you get into the hospital system? What was the name of the doctor who saw him? The one who called me."

But the A.I. did not answer. Instead, it pointed with a single ramrod finger. The skintip peeled back to reveal the barrel of a small gun. "Behind you, sir."

Cheung turned. Before him stood a tall black woman.

Behind her were two men carrying Uzis. They were dressed all in black, with thick Kevlar vests and black berets over block-like heads. One of the men wore a reddish beard. The other had a cleft in his chin you could plant a tree in. Cheung scanned them quickly. The Beard had the Marine eagle tattooed on the back of his trigger hand. His finger was not on the trigger.

Private security, ex-Marines. A six-million-dollar watch. Cheung gave Alan the signal to stand down.

Like the man behind the psych ward's door, the woman was dressed immaculately. She wore a burgundy-and-black dress, tight-fitting as nylon. Her hair she wore in long beaded cornrow braids that fell past her shoulders. She carried nothing but a black Hermes handbag.

She met Cheung's eyes and smiled warmly.

"Detective Cheung. Thank you so much for keeping him safe."

It was crowded now with the woman in the room. The private security guys had stayed outside, flanking the doors.

The woman drew up a chair alongside the man, still seated in his chair. "Mr. Ramamurthi, my name is Merida. I'm a colleague. Here, take a look at this." She unclasped the handbag and drew from it a photograph showing the two of them and a smattering of other well-dressed people standing alongside one another on a stage. In the picture, they were engaged in quiet conversation; their body language, Cheung saw, bespoke intimacy.

"I understand that you've lost your memory."

"That's right."

"I'm here to restore it. Do you have your phone?"

Gingerly he handed over the machine. Cheung watched. His eyes flitted to the A.I. It would be taking it all in.

Merida seemed to take the A.I. in stride. She drew from her handbag now a shiny black cylinder about the length of two lipstick tubes end-to-end. At one end was another master port adapter. She slipped it into Mr. Ramamurthi's phone.

"This will take several minutes."

A diameter of red lights began to sparkle around the base of the device. The phone powered down and then began to reboot.

"Can I presume to ask what you are doing?"

Merida glanced up. Cheung smiled. "I will, after all, have to write a report describing some of the details of the circumstances."

Merida checked the status of her machine.

"I'm prepared to share as much as you'd be able to find in a well-reported piece of tech journalism."

Cheung wanted to let out a little line, see what he could reel in. He nodded his assent. She was clearly powerful, used to being in total control.

But this was not his first interrogation.

The A.I., for its part, seemed to be entirely focused on the new device.

"I work for Aeternity." Her eyes flitted to the A.I. "Don't bother scanning for our business documentation. You won't find it. For one thing, we are a subsidiary. Our parent corporation is not American. Mr. Ramamurthi is our CTO. He will be leaving with me."

She turned her attention back to Ramamurthi's phone. The conversation appeared to have drawn to a close.

Cheung let the silence sit for a moment. "Did he invent it, or is he just the guinea pig?"

"Beg pardon?"

"I understand your need to be elliptical, but at the risk of overplaying my hand, it's not hard to work out what's going on."

Merida smiled condescendingly. "And what exactly would that be, detective?"

Cheung drew in a breath through the nose. His nephew had said something the last time he was at his sister's. Stanley was a founding member of an anarchist hacking collective. He knew about computer-type of things. Cheung was trying to recall the precise term.

"If I had to hazard a guess—and Lord knows, I'm way out on a limb here with the tech—but if I had to guess, I would say that Mr. Ramamurthi—or whoever he may be—has found a way to engage in proto-singular distal memory storage. My guess is that his memory has been exported, either onto that or, or... Or that's a prototype conduit. Of course, even advanced technology has its glitches and sometimes—"

Merida had not moved a muscle while Cheung spoke. The skin around her eyes was drawn tight. She forced a thin-lipped smile.

"Sometimes what, detective?"

"Sometimes you need to turn the damned thing off and then on again."

There was a knock at the door and the ex-Marine entered. He handed Merida another phone, which she scanned for a moment before handing it back. The door clicked shut behind him.

Whatever she had seen, it seemed to reinvigorate her. Merida turned the full shine of her smile back to Cheung. "It's fascinating, isn't it, how inventive the human mind can be? You should write fiction."

"Of course, there may be a more plausible explanation."

The device in her hand chirped. Merida turned her attention back to the phone. She keyed in a passcode, then turned to Ramamurthi. She asked if she might perform a quick examination. He agreed. She drew from the around the office the requisite tools and began to check his throat, his ears, the dilation of his eyes. His pulse and breathing.

At last, she took his hand in hers and turned it over so that the wristband was exposed. Cheung saw for the first time the array of threadlike silvery wires that ran from the watch's clasp into the skin of his forearm.

Merida glanced down at the phone and tapped a single white glowing button.

Mr. Ramamurthi's eyes fluttered. He bent at the waist and vomited into the wastebasket that Merida had toed surreptitiously into place. He leaned back heavily in the chair and took several deep breaths. After a moment, he roused and smiled sickly at his colleague.

"Merida."

She smiled in turn. "Are you ready?"

Ramamurthi nodded. Merida took him by the hand and elbow, helped him to his feet. When he was steady, she handed him the phone. He slipped it into his pocket. Seemed to grow taller.

"It will take some time for the last few hours to be integrated." She said this in low tones, though Cheung was struck that she did not seem preoccupied with concealing anything from them. He glanced at the A.I. and was surprised to see that it had turned to face him. Alan saw that it had been seen and turned back to the strange couple.

Merida escorted Ramamurthi to the door. She turned him over to the armed guard, then stepped back into the room.

"Detective Cheung. Forgive an impertinent question."

Cheung nodded.

"I was raised Catholic, but many of the details have... lapsed. Am I right to remember that what is spoken in confession must be held in strictest confidence?"

Cheung's heart began to beat. Already he could guess where she was going. "You are."

"And you are aware, of course, of the distinction between the illicit and the invalid act?"

The void stilled; order trembled in the air. "I am."

"It's my understanding, then, that if you hear my confession, Father, it is a valid if not a licit act. The distinction little matters to me; I'm an unbeliever. You, however—you still sit on the board of the Mission Church."

Cheung was stone-faced, silent. Merida took from the counter a roll of medical gauze. She rolled out a strip as long as her arm, tore it. Placed it around his neck so that it hung over his shoulders. She held the ends of the makeshift stole in a tight grip.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been twenty-some years since my last confession."

Cheung breathed deep through his nose. He felt the walls of the hospital room sway. His knees were soft as wet bread. Somehow, he remained upright.

"This is my great sin, Father. I have told a lie.

"A lie."

"A lie of omission."

"Omission."

The damned A.I.'s blue eyes were scoring into him. The woman stood between them.

"I misled you in failing to tell you that you were right. About all of it."

Merida was silent for a moment. Her expression changed. The poise, the haughtiness of her manipulation fell away as a mist in

the sunlight. She lowered her eyes. When she raised them, Cheung saw that they were wet.

"I am sorry for this sin, and all the others—" she paused. "All the others I cannot remember."

"Will you make an act of contrition?"

"I am sorry, Father, for my sin."

"By the help of God's grace, you will not sin again."

Cheung raised a hand to make the sign of the cross.

Merida hardened. She looked up into his face, put a hand against his cheek. With the other, she drew the stole from around his neck, tossed it into the wastebasket.

She turned to Alan, extended a hand. The A.I. took in the signal, extended its hand according to its socialization protocols. Merida shook.

"Officer, a pleasure."

Back to Cheung. She gave him only a smile.

"No one will ever believe you."

Then she was gone.

Cheung stood for a long time without speaking, thankful that the A.I. could not yet plunge its sensors into his heart, to wrest from that trembling part of him the truth of what had transpired, what had been done and what undone.

Slowly the world of the hospital room intruded into his consciousness. There was an acidity in the air. Cheung wondered for a moment whether he were having a stroke.

"What's that smell?"

"I couldn't say, of course. Sir."

Cheung started for the door. "Not someone I'll soon forget."

"Who, sir?"

"Merida."

"I am unaware of any departmental or anecdotal references to that name, sir."

Cheung turned back to the A.I. It stood

beside the examination bed, twisted unnaturally at the waist as if its torso meant to follow but had found the legs simply unwilling. It stood with its hand still outstretched. In the center of the flesh-like palm was scored a

smoldering mechanical stigma, into which a quick-acting viral plunger had been driven.

Cheung watched as Alan turned its whirling, desperate sensors to the wound.

The blue lights only flickered once.

Thomas Bulen Jacobs was raised overseas, mostly in South America, Turkey, and Spain. He is a graduate of St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland. His fiction has appeared most recently in *River River Journal*, *The Oddville Press*, and *The Oakland Review*, among others.



Storm Cloud 2

Liz Tran

Channeling subjects such as dream imagery, imagined landscapes, geodes, outer space and The Big Bang, Tran explores the shapes of nature, with the infusion of fantastical, pulsing synthetic hues. The psychedelic visuals are harvested from the place where inner-verse meets outer-verse, where optical misfires combine with a vacuum pull moving at the speed of light. Through painting, sculpture and installation, she creates atmospheres that aim to activate. Public collections of Tran's work include the City of Seattle's Portable Works Collection, Capital One, Vulcan Inc., Baer Art Center, Camac Art Centre, The El Paso Children's Hospital, Harborview Medical Center, The King County Public Art Collection and The Child Center. Tran resides in Seattle, WA.

Memory Loss

Mark Jacobs

THERE WAS NO CONTEST, but there had been, I would have won the prize for world's worst detective, hands down. I went to Asunción to find out whether something called the *Paraguayan Society for the Prevention of Memory Loss* was real. It didn't sound real, it sounded like a gag. The internet had been known to tell lies before. And the first person I tracked down to interview instantly turned the tables on me. She sat me in a reclining chair and shone a bright light in my face, stuck a suction tube in my mouth, and pepper-sprayed me with questions. It was supposed to be the other way around. Through the years, in my experience of Paraguay, it was always the other way around.

Dr. Graciela Archipiélago was a dentist. The president of the *Paraguayan Society for the Prevention of Memory Loss* was a dentist whose surname was a landform. Somewhere in her thirties, she was a short woman with extremely strong hands. She wore a white coat because her patients expected one. She wore her dark hair unfashionably short. I wanted to think it was tragedy that gave such haunting depth to her dark eyes, but extravagant speculation was in my nature. A character flaw, in the opinion of Magaly, who also was Paraguayan. Magaly used to be my wife. Now she lived in Sao Paolo with a number cruncher.

"It doesn't hurt very often," I told the

doctor, meaning the tooth I had casually mentioned when she agreed to see me for a couple of minutes between patients.

"Nonsense," she said.

I had a traditional fear of dentists and was adept at rescheduling appointments, but Dr. Archipiélago had a forceful personality, and I let her look into my mouth in the hope that she would answer my questions.

"You say you come to Paraguay frequently. This does not look good."

She meant my tender tooth, not my visits to her country.

To answer, I had to manipulate the suction tube with my tongue. "I teach Latin American history. I'm a Paraguayanist."

"A Paraguay specialist," she said. She picked up a sharp implement. She frowned. "When you get together for conferences, the tables must be quite small."

In fact, I could count on two hands the number of colleagues who shared my interest in the landlocked country in the heart of South America many people mistook for Uruguay.

The sharp instrument had a vicious little curved beak, like a raptor's. It approached my lips with a mechanical mind of its own on which painful probing was uppermost. Only a wimp asked to be numbed for a routine oral inspection.

"How did you get interested in this country?" Dr. Archipiélago wanted to know.

The question was meant to take my mind off the raptor's beak.

I was not weak-willed, or if I was, that was not a factor in my decision to let her inspect my bad tooth. If dread was the cost of finding out about the memory loss prevention society, I was willing to swipe my debit card. Students of Paraguay, perhaps because they were so few, tended to obsess on their subject. There was nothing unusual about my case.

I took the suction tube out of my mouth. The doctor didn't like that, but evidently, she really did want to know how I came to care about the country of her birth.

"My father was a diplomat," I told her. "When I was in high school the government sent him here as punishment."

She nodded. She took the suction tube back but did not yet reinsert it in my mouth. She understood how an assignment to Paraguay might be involuntary and was not offended. "May I ask an indiscreet question?"

"You mean why the State Department punished him."

She nodded, preoccupied looking again into my mouth.

"We were in Brussels. My father was involved with a Belgian woman, a filmmaker. This was in the days before the internet. The film of their intimacy she produced only circulated locally."

"No doubt she was angry with him."

We were speaking Spanish. I wanted to say that my father was a cad. The closest I could get was malcriado. It was not exactly right.

Then she spoke the ominous words.

"You'll have to come back, Mr. White."

"Come back?"

"Imagine the pain you would endure

should your tooth act up on the airplane home. I shudder on your behalf. The cavity must be filled."

"I'd like to ask you a couple of questions."

She looked at her watch. "Unfortunately, my next patient is waiting."

I was staying at the Acertijo, a modest, old-fashioned hotel on a block-long side street down which parallel rows of elderly shade trees nodded at each other in the breeze. I often stayed there because it was so easy to conjure colonial Asunción, an analogue existence, a time when exotic had a street address and a smell of its own. From the dentist's I took a cab back to find my room was gone. So was my suitcase. I protested to the desk clerk for form's sake only. I knew what was going on.

Old as the trees, the clerk had curlicue wisps of thin hair and a hard-earned obsequious demeanor. His dainty bow expressed newfound respect for me. "Don Eduardo Ayala informed us that you are to be his guest. I am to call his driver."

Lalo Ayala was not just one of the country's richest men, he was on the short list for most flamboyant citizen of the republic. We had gone to high school together, becoming instant friends in part because his father, like mine, had been a cad. We stayed friends through the years as his old man beggared the family and Lalo brought it all back. Back, and then some. The property to which his driver delivered me took up an entire city block and included a minor zoo. When I showed up, the keeper was hosing down the elephant. Lalo's five kids and their friends were taking time out from their life of excess to watch. The camel, a one-humper, observed both elephant and kids with genetic disdain.

A maid escorted me to the suite to which

Lalo and his wife Socorro assigned me. It was bigger than my apartment back home in Buffalo. The house was a low castle of ease, built to withstand and take advantage of the subtropical climate. There was luxury in the swoosh of air moved by a ceiling fan. Good for you, Lalo, I said to the wall, knowing I would not see him until evening. I did not look forward to telling him why I was in country.

The party that night was what you expected from a gregarious force of nature who was, when it came to people, a ferocious multitasker. Across the massive tiled patio, behind high adobe walls topped with glass shards, businesspeople and editors, politicians and artists were doing their best to sift useful nuggets from the ceaseless stream of gossip. Waiters in black jackets served drinks and tasty tidbits on skewers. Two sweat-soaked lean men worked a smoking grill while a band that included a blind harpist played the folk songs everybody's grandfathers used to hum. In a white sheath of a dress whose plainness emphasized how unplain she was, Socorro supervised the event without seeming to. She was like the women of her class, the wives of powerful asuncenos, flaunting what was not available. Sex appeal was a flag. What good was a flag you didn't wave?

Moving among all of them, all of that, Lalo looked relaxed in a pale-yellow, hand-sewn shirt as traditional as the music, along with slacks and Gucci loafers. We were forty now. The big question for me was what came next for my friend. Success, and the power that came with it, could harden him to caricature. The force that drove him could dry up, making the man the captive of his accomplishments. But that was only one possibility. With Lalo, I hoped for better.

Just before the asado was served, he grabbed me by the arm. "Marcus, my friend.

How the hell can you take notes on the natives with a drink in your hand?"

When he raised his eyebrows a waiter materialized, switching my half-drunk Campari and soda for a full one.

"I know," said Lalo, tapping his forehead. "It's all in here, right? Never mind. What are you after this time, the influence of the pygmy banana on pre-colonial architecture?"

"I saw something on a Twitter feed. It made me curious."

"Twitter's for the birds, man. What was it?"

Admitting it out loud to my best Paraguayan friend forced me to admit to myself how ridiculous my hunch was. "The tweet was from Mario Paz Ocampos."

Lalo shook his head. "Give me a hint."

"He's a sociologist."

"And?"

"He was in the OPM."

"For Christ's sake," Lalo said. His distaste was disappointment. "Those dudes are old men. They were irrelevant back in their day. What does that make them now?"

My tooth was hurting more regularly now that Dr. Archipiélagos had told me the cavity needed filling.

"You got it bad, don't you?" said Lalo.

I had told him about my visit to the dentist, but he was not talking about my tooth.

What I had bad was an obsession with the OPM. The initials stood for Organización Politico-Militar. It had been, briefly, a revolutionary movement. It never got off the ground. Idealistic students were involved. In 1976, sloppy security on the part of a handful of members led to the arrest and torture of many, and the murder-in-custody of several. The Stroessner regime, not even remotely threatened by the group, used it as a pretext to dismantle the

little bit of organized resistance that remained in the country. The crackdown took place in April. It became known as la Pascua dolorosa. The Easter of Sorrow.

I had met Mario Paz Ocampos at a conference in Buenos Aires a few years back. He was a papery man, handsome a long time ago, who wore his silver hair in a ponytail and could not resist lecturing people who knew less than he, which gave him a vast universe to choose from, which included me. It was November, early summer heat coming down like dust, fine and persistent. Mario was drinking tereré, the cold green tea through whose agency Paraguayans defined their national identity. He passed me the polished cowhorn. I sucked on the silver straw. I was enamored of the ritual, to which Lalo had introduced me in high school. But I bulled ahead, no pleasantries. To forestall a sociology lesson, I asked Mario what the society for the prevention of memory loss was.

“Sorry?”

“You mentioned it in a tweet.”

He shook his head, looking puzzled, so I asked him, “How does Graciela Archipiélago come into it?”

“Into what?”

He was immovable, and I found myself getting ticked off. But Paz Ocampos owed me nothing, and I got out of the office as quickly as I could. Not, however, before he battered me with a summary of his new book on the Brasiguayos. They were Brazilian immigrants whose impact on the culture was a source of resentment in the border regions where they settled. I told him I was looking forward to reading it. I kind of was. His work was better than his personality.

My detective skills were not improving with practice. Before I had a chance to try again, I got a text from the dentist changing the date of my appointment. I sent her one

back asking what she knew about the OPM. In response I got a string of question marks. One would have been enough.

I knew a handful of people who had been members of the OPM. They were society’s grandfathers now. Senators and doctors, economists and lawyers. Ensconced professionals. I called around until one of them decided he had time to meet me for lunch.

When I arrived at the Bar San Roque Aníbal Zavala was at the table waiting for me. The San Roque was a landmark. The food was basic and excellent. The waiters dressed soberly and paid attention to your order. When Aníbal stood to shake my hand I felt foolish again, as I had when confessing to Lalo Ayala why I was in Paraguay.

Aníbal was a lawyer. He had won a couple of important cases representing dispossessed farmers. If the legal system ever stabilized to the point where precedent counted, his life’s work would be significant. I was glad to be sitting across the table from him because he did not gas on the way the political types liked to. He was bony and spare, with a bald head marked by ridges and indentations, dry lakes and crenellated land masses. A 3-D map of his years on the planet. A steady quality in his green eyes told me he was not going to lie. Whether he would tell any truth was another matter.

“I stopped to see Mario Paz Ocampos,” I told him. “Asked him a question. He lied to me.”

Aníbal looked up from the menu. “Paz Ocampos says what he says to achieve an effect. It’s not a sin, it’s a weakness. He’s not the only one.”

“What is the Paraguayan Society for the Prevention of Memory Loss?”

He shook his head. “We are self-centered individualists, all of us, incapable of working together. We are a hundred parties of one. Always have been. You know that, Marcus.

You've been studying us for quite some time now. Still, now and then, we rise to an occasion."

"Who is 'we'?"

"Those of us who survived the Easter of Sorrow."

"And what's the occasion you are rising to?"

But I could get no more from him. This was unusual behavior, even for a quiet man like Aníbal. These days there was nothing controversial about the OPM. Books had been written about the group. In some circles you wore your detention, the brutal treatment you endured, as a badge of honor. It proved you had stood up to the dictator at his peak of power. At the very worst, you could be accused of lethal naiveté. You had been unprepared for serious resistance, and your impulsiveness brought down death on your brothers and sisters in arms. But such criticism was rare. Except among a handful of nostalgic retrogrades, time and the enormity of Stroessner's tyranny made any and all resistance seem a noble failure. Getting people to talk was not usually a problem.

I had a strong sense there was something going on. Aníbal was right. The Paraguayans I knew made up a hundred parties of one. Their chronic disinclination to work in groups was residual damage from the Stroessner era. He had made a travesty of all the social organizations in the country: the parties, the ministries, the professions. Building them up to healthy independence was a labor of decades. I went back to the dentist's office. There was no sleuthing rationale behind the move, just a hunch.

I caught Dr. Archipiélago leaving the office early. When she saw me in the waiting room she assumed my tooth pain had flared and offered to fill the cavity then and there. I shook my head and asked a question I had no right to ask.

"Where are you going?"

She was not offended. "I have to pick up my son from taekwondo."

"Let me go with you."

It was a short drive to the martial arts studio on Curupayty, but by the time Graciela parked in front of a pale blue, two-story colonial building I knew that she was a single mother and had less than zero interest in marriage. That she had studied dentistry in Brazil and had a retro-fondness for Argentine rockers of the '80s. That she forced herself to read twenty pages of a book that mattered every evening no matter how beat she was, or how busy. She was working her way through Vargas Llosa.

She introduced me to her son Rodrigo by saying, "Rodi, this is Mister Marcus White, from North America. He wants me to tell him something. He thinks I know more than I do."

Rodrigo gave me a dirty look, shaking my hand and telling me he was pleased to meet me. How Graciela and I wound up dancing that night at a downtown club called Cam-balache was a mystery to me when I thought about it later. I was pretty sure she did not like me. We drank sweet drinks, which tended to affect my emotional equilibrium. I think she wanted to dance, and I was a handy male. How, quite late, we wound up walking down by the river near the presidential palace was not a question, it was a reflection of her sovereign spirit.

"Graciela."

"My grandfather," she said.

Finally.

I did not feel manipulative. If anything, I was the one who was being steered in the direction of an outcome.

She told me, "Mi abuelito died last year."

"You were close."

"Very. He hated to drive. I used to bring

him down here at night, late. This is where he preferred to recite his litany."

"He was Catholic."

She shook her head. "Not in that way. The litany was his list of abuses committed by Stroessner and his men."

"Do you remember the list?"

"At the top, always at the top, was what they did to his little brother. In nineteen seventy-six, that terrible Easter, Benjamín was swept up with the others. He was in high school. They crippled him, and they messed with his mind. He was never the same after they let him out."

"He died?"

"Years ago."

"What is the Paraguayan Society for the Prevention of Memory Loss?"

"It was my grandfather's idea. Naming me as president..." She paused, thinking it through. "Don't you see? It was the act that defined the society. My inheritance."

A small wind off the river came at us in a slow, delicious roll. The streetlights seemed a long way off, like people you trusted, distant but dependable. Down in the Chacarita where poor people lived, two roosters crowed before their time, and a dog reprimanded them. Suddenly it all changed for me. I didn't feel like detecting any more secrets. Poking around in the past was unseemly. For the first time I felt the dictator's dead hand brush my face. I shivered.

"What is it you want, Marcus?"

What I wanted, it turned out, was to tell her this:

"Paraguay."

"Yes?"

"I keep coming back."

"Why?"

"Because I don't understand it. What I think I know is always disappearing on me. And..." It

was my turn to hesitate. "I love this place."

Maybe she thought I was working her. I wasn't. But the moment of trust was gone. She drove me back to Lalo's castle block, where a watchman wearing an epauleted uniform shirt and flip-flops came out of his guard booth to salute me.

"You're leaving Paraguay," Graciela said.

It was not a question, so I gave no answer.

"Get that tooth of yours taken care of, first thing you get home."

In the morning I told Socorro I was leaving. By the time I hauled myself out of bed, Lalo was gone to an early meeting. He was buying a Brazilian company, and the deal was complicated. His wife kept me company at breakfast. We ate outside under a shade tree whose branches harbored chattering birds, waited on by a barefoot woman old enough to remember the worst of the Stroessner era. She needed teeth; she needed a retirement plan. Socorro was dressed to shop. I tried not to hold that against her.

"I thought you were on sabbatical," she said.

"Just this semester, and I'm supervising a couple of masters theses. It's not something I want to do remotely."

"He'll be sad. What, you don't believe me? You are his most important friend, Marcus."

I deflected that, although I wanted to believe it.

She said, "Lalo told me about the society you're looking for."

"It's real."

She nodded. In the automatic gesture with which she signaled the old woman for more coffee there was a whole theory of class relations. Thirty seconds later my sanctimony made me cringe.

"I know a man who was in the OPM," Socorro told me. "He's not like your friends. He's not well known, or successful. No one ever asks him for his opinion. They don't ask him to remember anything. He was the friend of my favorite uncle, my mother's oldest brother. He has a business in Fernando de la Mora."

"What kind of business?"

"Recauche de llantas."

He recapped tires. That was how I wound up that same morning in a garage in an industrious suburb of Asunción, talking to a man at least as old as the woman who served Socorro's breakfast. Fulgencio Quintanilla had rheumy eyes and a clear mind. His coverall was sheeny with grease. When he learned that I drank *tereré*, he led me to the broken-legged table along one wall that served as his office while two men and a boy worked on the recapping machine, replacing the tires on an old Brazilian Ford. It was loud in the garage, loud across all of Fernando de la Mora, and Quintanilla spoke in a subdued voice. I found myself leaning in to hear him.

"The famous ones," he told me, "the ones you know, they used to think we were all on the same side. Them, and people like me. I read the papers. Sometimes I watch television. The radio's always on. I remember."

We drank *tereré*. He had put eucalyptus leaves in the cool water, which gave the tea an oasis taste. What he remembered was the year he spent in the Emboscada prison. He remembered the *pileta*, a form of water torture that shared conceptual features with waterboarding. And he remembered *Camarada X*, a detainee whose story never made it into the books, the stories, the accounts and anecdotes that Paraguayans had traded back and forth through the years.

"Comrade X?" I said.

"After Malcolm, in your country. A tribute."

He said something pointed in Guaraní, a language I didn't speak, to one of the men recapping the Ford's tires. The man shrugged but redid what he had been told to redo. And I heard about Arcelio Báez.

Báez was a visionary. Some, only half-jokingly, called him a saint-in-the-making. He was charismatic and forceful, driven by an overpowering love to imagine, and describe to his comrades, a Paraguay in which villains like Stroessner were impossible. Back then, the challenge had been to link the city people – the students and intellectuals – with the *campesinos*. Without such an alliance, meaningful resistance was impossible. Arcelio had been the one person who moved between the two worlds without effort, with credibility. He was destined for success.

"Did you know him?" I asked Fulgencio.

"Met him once. Never knew a man like him, before or since."

I had another hunch. "The Paraguayan Society for the Prevention of Memory Loss," I said. "It has something to do with Arcelio Báez, doesn't it?"

He nodded as if considering the possibility. "What they did to him... Arcelio is a man that needs protecting."

"Are you a member of the society, Fulgencio?"

"In a manner of speaking. Second class, you might say."

There was pride in his voice, there was wistfulness. He made another criticism in Guaraní of the job his three workers were doing. He was not malicious, he was demanding. He had no more to tell me. But what I had learned was enough to send me back to Graciela.

Rodrigo was in the waiting room. He was supposed to be reading a book but was more

interested in his phone. He stood up when I entered. His old-time manners surprised me. Graciela was doing something right. We waited through two patients before she emerged. She had removed her white coat. Underneath, jeans and a white blouse. She looked fresh, considering she had just spent several hours with her hands in other people's mouths. The auburn tints in her hair were real.

"I thought you were leaving."

"First I need to find out more about Arcelio Báez."

She frowned long enough that it became a glare. "You are excessively persistent."

"Is that a bad thing or a good thing?"

She made Rodi sit with us at lunch, which we ate at a Chinese place downtown. The boy was not permitted to look at his phone. His surliness was unconvincing. This was a history lesson, and he was open to it, possibly even interested. Graciela was taking seriously her role as president.

She told me, "Arcelio was a novato in the Church."

"Almost a priest."

"Yes. When the police began rounding people up, they confiscated a notebook with his name in it. They assigned an officer to interrogate him. An intelligent man, unlike the goons he worked with. He went alone. He tracked down Arcelio, pretending to be sympathetic to the movement. You have to remember, hardly anyone in the OPM knew that a crackdown was going on. There were no mobile phones. A lot of people didn't even have a land line. They were going on about their lives without a clue that the hammer was coming down."

Rodi was trying to eat his chicken and cashews with chopsticks. His mother showed him how, without appearing to.

"Arcelio was friendly with a young couple,

recently married. The husband was as close to becoming a doctor as Arcelio was to being a priest. The wife had a secretarial job. They were quite Catholic. They believed in social justice."

I knew what was coming, just not the details. The cop gained Arcelio's confidence, expressing concern for otros compañeros who might be in danger from the government. Arcelio's fatal mistake, trusting the man, led the cop to the young couple. All three were arrested. All three were abused in the Emboscada prison. Somebody questioned the young couple with too much enthusiasm, and they died. Arcelio's hair turned white overnight.

"He never recovered from the shock of his betrayal," Graciela told me.

"Why don't people talk about him?"

"I think," she said slowly, "that Arcelio Báez stands for every good thing that people did not make happen. To get along in the world, this world that we have, they have made a hundred compromises. Not just them, we all do it, don't we? That's why we understand them. They gave up their ideals, telling themselves they were growing up, they were becoming realistic. They forgot their promises. They came up short. Taking care of Arcelio... it's the one right thing they do. He is fragile. Their instinct to protect him is strong. It's honorable."

"I'd like to meet him."

"Of course you would. It's not going to happen."

She meant it. The waiter brought the check. She insisted on paying. While she waited for her change, she told Rodrigo he could check his phone.

Socorro was right. Lalo was sorry to see me go. And he could not let me leave without an

extravagant gesture. My friend was compellingly extroverted. What he felt, he had to show. Otherwise, it might not seem real. In the gesture he chose there was likely something of an urge to show his dead father, who had exploited every human relationship he knew, how a mensch behaved. He invited the harpist back. He manned the grill himself. He required the kids to attend, bribing them with elephant rides in a spangled howdah he had ordered from Mumbai. As we sat to eat in the patio, he signaled the harpist to cut loose.

The previous night, the harpist had been a sideman. He did not sing. Tonight he shivered Heaven's timbers. He had a powerful baritone that got inside us, scoured us, emptied us out. I could not take my eyes off him. His blind eyes were closed. His fingers dominated the strings of his instrument. And he sang the songs I had been hearing since I was fifteen years old and my father's punishment brought us to a country once described as an island surrounded by land. One by one the songs took aural shape like ships of the line on an ocean of air, floating there, then moving into memory like the mighty armada they were.

Lalo looked over at me in triumph, delighted with the effect his money and sense of purpose had achieved on my behalf. Later, when he headed out back to the zoo to supervise elephant rides, trailed by happy kids, Socorro picked up her wine glass. She held it a long time without drinking. "I need another day."

"Okay," I told her, not sure what she needed it for.

But I postponed my flight, putting off meetings with the grad students I was advising. The day that Socorro needed was followed by a morning of transcendent beauty. The rising sun reddened the mare's tail clouds that were tangled across the sky's bottom. The air was mild, thick with the fused smell of flowers from

the family garden. The city sounds around us were progressive, as if Asunción had cast off doubt and were eagerly throwing itself into the future.

After Lalo left for another meeting, the doorbell rang. The Mercedes was ready. A driver with prominent shoulders and a deferential manner drove Socorro and me out of the bustling city. We went east to a pueblo in the Cordillera called Piribebuy. Antonio, the driver, piloted the big quiet car with skill and equanimity. He knew better than to race. In Piribebuy, by prior arrangement, he stopped at the central plaza and let us out.

"I'll call you when we want you," Socorro told him.

"Sí, señora."

"It's better if we walk," she told me.

So, we walked. Neither of us felt like talking. People in the streets stared and stared at the elegant beautiful woman going by, who looked more out of place than I did. We made our way to the edge of town where we turned down a side street that had once been cobbled. Now, grass grew in the sandy spaces between crumbling stones. Halfway down, we stopped in front of a small house of pale blue adobe with a strip of reddish-brown running around the base. Chickens scavenged for bugs in the high grass. On the covered porch sat a single empty rocker.

Socorro clapped. This was how you announced yourself in Paraguay, outside the city. We waited. She clapped again. No answer. She lifted the wood peg from the metal loop that kept the gate fastened, and we went through into the bechickened yard. At the front door, she clapped once more. Still no luck.

She pointed, and we walked around the side of the house into a fenced yard given over to squatty orange trees. I knew the fruit that grew on those trees. It was bitter. At the far

end of the yard stood a row of raised rabbit hutches. A man was bending over one of the hutches. He lifted out an enormous black rabbit.

"Don Arcelio," said Socorro.

He was startled and clutched the animal to his chest.

"Don Arcelio, I'm Socorro. Your friends sent us. To say hello."

"It's not time," the man said, shaking his head.

He was small, not much over five feet, and compactly built. Why had I expected him to be a giant? His white hair was thick. As we approached him the features of his face came into focus. They had a mashed look, as though the parts and pieces had not come together the way they were supposed to in a human face. His eyes were cataractal.

"This is my friend Marcus," Socorro introduced me.

Arcelio lifted the rabbit by the scruff of its neck to show it off. "I raise them, as you see. I'm supposed to sell them for the meat. People eat rabbits. But the animals like me, I can't help that."

Carefully he replaced it in his cage, securing the door with the same kind of whittled peg that kept the front gate closed. It was impossible to know who he thought we were, what he thought was going on.

"You're a foreigner," he told me.

I nodded. "North American."

"Your people, they knew what was happening. The bad things. This is well established."

"I'm sorry, don Arcelio."

"I'm told I must remember certain things. They insist, I must remember."

"And do you?" asked Socorro.

His face wrinkled into a mangled mask, and I noticed the scars of what looked like knife slashes on his forearm. The scars did

not look forty years old. He said, "I remember that God once spoke to me. Once was enough, was it not?"

He seemed weak, and Socorro asked him if he wanted to sit down. But he had only one chair, the rocker on the porch, so we sat in the dirt under a bitter orange tree to keep off the sun.

"I'm waiting for my friends," he told us when we were settled. It came out as a confidence. He had decided, for the moment, to trust us.

Socorro was better at responding to him than I was. She asked him, "When will they get here?"

He squinted, making out in the distance something Socorro and I would never get our eyes on. He shook his head, blinked, shook his head again. "All the things I should remember. I do and I don't. I want to and I don't want to. Así va."

We stayed until his strength flagged. Socorro helped him into a leather hammock strung between two trees, and he closed his eyes with a look of relief. On the way out, she left an envelope of cash on the table in his front room.

I was glad that Socorro did not call her driver right away. In the enlivening heat we walked slowly back toward the plaza. When we got there, we sat for a while on a bench watching a big brother teach a little brother to ride a two-wheeler. They were happy in the act.

Socorro pointed to them. "It's the same thing."

"What's the same?"

"How to ride a bicycle. The memory goes from one to the other. My husband does not understand why the OPM fascinates you."

"What about you?"

She shrugged. "You admire the choice they made back when they were young. They were

naïve. They were idealistic. They were headstrong. All the things one can say against them, for you... for you, Marcus, those things are virtues."

It had never been so clear to me, not by half. Socorro was reaching into her Hermès bag for a phone.

"Don't call the driver," I said. "Not yet."

She looked at me with curiosity or impatience, I was not sure which. "What is it?"

"Arcelio Báez made the same choice the others did. The same decision. Look what it led to."

She nodded. "A betrayal. Two murders."

"So, now I see it."

"What do you see?"

In a kind of aggravated slow-motion I kept visualizing the moment, the exact instant, when Arcelio decided to trust the treacherous cop. My tooth throbbed as if to simulate, by meager imitation, the torture the young couple had endured when their friend, the charismatic novice, sold them out.

I said, "I've admired them – the OPM – for the wrong reasons."

"Then what are the right reasons?"

"I thought they were kids with good intentions. It's more than that."

"You're not being clear, Marcus."

They did the right thing. It doesn't matter that they failed. They were given a chance to be heroes and, in a world of fear, a small world, for a little while they were giants."

Across the way, the younger brother, wobbly but independent on the bike, shouted something triumphant, and the older brother clapped. It galled me to know how badly I had misjudged the woman sitting next to me on the bench in the heat of a Paraguayan summer day. I felt empty and full at the same time. It was like having two hearts, both equally functional.

"There's a book," I told Socorro. "It hasn't been written yet."

"What's it about?"

"It's a history. The history of everything. They're in it. Arcelio, Fulgencio, all of them."

She shook her head, irritated. She looked again like the pampered wealthy woman she was. Her gold glinted. Her faint fragrance was a shield. She fished in her purse for the phone. She called her driver.

I told her, "It's the book of invisible heroes."

Her eyebrows arched. "If anybody ever writes it, make sure my husband gets a copy."

Antonio must have been waiting close by. In another minute he was there in front of us. He jumped out to open his employer's door. We got into the Mercedes and headed back to the city. It was a good ninety-minute drive, and I kept expecting Socorro to pull out her phone and get back to her life. She didn't. All that ordinary unfamiliar way we hardly spoke. We were locked in the act of separate remembering.

Mark Jacobs has published more than 150 stories in magazines including *The Atlantic*, *Playboy*, *The Baffler*, *The Iowa Review*, and *The Hudson Review*. His five books include *A Handful of Kings*, published by Simon and Shuster, and *Stone Cowboy*, by Soho Press. His website can be found at markjacobsauthor.com.

Copycat, Copycat

Michael T. Smith

If every smiley face was drawn in yellow paint,
in strokes as thick as your ego,
then the old ghosts of the most wee hours
would come and go with borrowed voices,
in the egg form of a pro-verb.

Can a memory not be partial
(if it's only known on the page)?

Stare into the paned window of your own house
to see yourself in silhouette.
And hear everything in minor chords -
for the image of a poor kitchen
is crying on the kitchen floor.

Can you plagiarize an emotion?
(what if you use non-Oxford words?)

Mother said you should not talk about the sun
for it does not talk about us.
But sunscreen is another matter,
which can burn emotional doors like
Prometheus on holiday.

How did primal man fight sans logos?
(over which word would mean what thing?)

Beauty's probably a moment of déjà vu,
when the verse is fully scripted,
and rhythm's a dues ex machina:
the "it" of it (whatever "it" is)
Synced with the soundtrack of a yawn.

Michael T. Smith is an Assistant Professor of English who teaches both writing and film courses. He has published over 100 pieces (poetry and prose) in over 50 different journals. He loves to travel.



The Shirley Card

Jeremy Okai Davis

Demon Stump

Corey Niles

I see you.
Never head on, of course.
No, you're far too skilled
to be seen directly by a mortal.
But when I pass that rotting stump,
I catch your true form
out of the corner of my eye.

There, crouched on the edge of the path,
balanced on the tops of your talons,
covered in the dirt that you had to crawl through
to get here from hell,
red eyes bulging and pointed white teeth filling a broad smile,
you taunt me.
But when I turn to face you,
there's only a stump looking back at me.

We've played this little game of ours for years,
and, to this day, I can't tell what's worse,
to see your sharp smile
just out of the field of my vision
or to pass every stump in this Godforsaken world,
never knowing which one
is waiting to pounce.

Corey Niles was born and raised in the Rust Belt, where he garnered his love of horror. His recent and forthcoming publications include "Our Celluloid Prince" in *Five 2 One Magazine: #thesideshow*, "The Body" *Blood Moon Rising Magazine*, and "What Lurks in These Woods" in *Pink Triangle Rhapsody: Volume 1*. When he isn't nursing his caffeine addiction or tending to his graveyard of houseplants, he enjoys jogging on creepy, isolated hiking trails.

Basic

Robert Sachs

"WE'RE TRAINED TO FIGHT," Kessler had complained to his sergeant after thirteen weeks stuck at Fort Leonard Wood. "Why aren't we fighting? Why are we stuck here?" At that time, he had been afraid the war would be over before they got to Europe.

Now he is on patrol outside the Manzanar Relocation camp in the Mojave Desert of California, assigned here by the War Relocation Authority. It used to be called something else, now it's a Japanese American internment camp about as far from Europe as he can get. Kessler's job is to walk perimeter just in case one of these poor bastards tries to escape.

"Under no circumstances are you to discharge your weapon," his sergeant had said. "Unless ordered to do so."

"What about shooting at coyotes, Sarge? Can we at least do that?"

"If and when I tell you to shoot at coyotes, Kessler, you do it. Until then, your safety's on and your finger's off the trigger."

Several of the men groaned. "This shit is worse than basic," one said.

To the consternation of his parents, Kessler had enlisted on his eighteenth birthday. "Ivan," his mother said, "you're too young. Go first to college."

War had been declared more than a year before and Kessler was anxious to serve his

country. "We've been attacked, Mom. Isn't this what men do?"

But there was more to it than that. He felt suffocated beneath the expectations friends and family heaped upon him. He was more than a good student in high school, he was first in his class and valedictorian. His love of science and biology led everyone to assume he would go on to medical school and become a doctor. Kessler too assumed this would be the natural progression of his life. Yet, he was mindful of the trap of leading life to the expectations of others. Was he wrong in wanting more certainty? The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor provided an excuse to wiggle free from the expectations.

Kessler had found basic difficult, but he had been a track star in high school and remained in good shape. He more than held his own. The biggest adjustment was living in the barracks with a group of small-town boys wary of his Chicago roots. They should only know, he thought back then. Sure, he could take the El downtown—and on occasion he and his friends did that—or in the summer bus to the beach, but basically he was a captive of his small neighborhood every bit as much as they were captives of their small towns. Yet, when he told them this, it came off as condescension.

At least at Leonard Wood—unlike Manzanar—there was a town close by for R and R. That's

where he'd met Dorothy. Kessler remembered being gripped by equal measures of excitement and dread on the cold February evening he stood outside the Waynesville whorehouse clenching his teeth to keep them from chattering. This was to be his first time. Part of him wanted to run back to the base. He worried he'd be too nervous to perform, that he was too skinny to be taken seriously, that it was too small. But he promised himself he wouldn't go off to war a virgin and this whorehouse—really just a string of small rooms over a downtown beer joint popular with the soldiers—provided his only realistic opportunity to make good on that promise.

He rarely socialized with the other soldiers, but on this night the prospect of getting laid convinced him to go along with them into town. After some drinks at the bar, they took him upstairs. "You want to see action, Kessler baby?" one of them said, "We'll show you action."

Her name was Dorothy.

Sitting next to Dorothy on the bed, Kessler thought she couldn't be much older than he. His first surprise was neither her youth nor her beauty—though she was certainly beautiful—but her innocence. The look of innocence. It was as if this were her first time. Her pale blue eyes were wide and unblinking. Her full lips, parted.

"You look nice," she had said, lowering those eyes and putting her hand on Kessler's knee.

"Thanks," he said, almost choking on the word.

"You don't need to be nervous with me. Is this your first time?"

"First time in a bordello," he replied. It was the truth, if not the whole truth. He hadn't planned on using that word: bordello; he hadn't planned anything. But the sound of it seemed more appropriate—less accusatory—

in this small room with Dorothy than "whorehouse" or "cathouse."

"How long..." he began.

"Have I been doing this? About a year, year and a half. Pays the rent. And don't start with the 'nice girl' routine." She laughed.

"No, I wasn't. Just making conversation, I suppose."

"It's a job. Just like you've got a job, this is mine. What's your name, soldier?" She said it kindly, and it was clear to Kessler that she'd said it many times before.

"Ivan," he said.

"The Terrible?"

"Yep, that's me." He smiled.

"Well Ivan, let's get you comfortable."

There was a sweetness about Dorothy that soothed Kessler's nerves. She made it easy for him to forget she was a professional. He imagined meeting her at a school dance, asking if he can take her home. She agrees, kissing him goodnight and Kessler floats home. They begin to date, they grow close and on his last night in town before going off to college, she gives herself to him. This is what he imagined while Dorothy slipped off her silk-like kimono, and guided him through the preliminaries and then the main event in a way that made him feel in control and more than adequate to the task.

After that, Kessler went back to the whorehouse whenever he could, asking each time for Dorothy.

"Why just me?" she asked after the third time. "Don't you want to try some of the other girls?"

"Not interested in the others," he said.

"I'm not the prettiest, not as full figured as some. And a couple of them have special talents that might interest you." She smiled then and Kessler smiled back, but he didn't really understand what Dorothy meant.

"I like you," he said.

"And I like you."

They talked about growing up: Kessler in Chicago, Dorothy in Waynesville. The big city was impersonal; the small town was suffocating. Her experiences were foreign to him; his were exotic to her.

"Aren't you afraid of getting killed?" she asked him one evening.

"Yeah. I think everyone harbors that fear. But we're fighting for something important, right?"

"I guess so," she said hesitantly. Then, as if remembering her role, she added, "Sure we are. I wouldn't want the Nazis coming over here and telling us how to live. But you're so young. It just seems a shame..." Dorothy began to cry, and Kessler pulled her close.

Mrs. Pilgrim, who ran the house, knocked on the door. "Everything alright, Dorothy?" It was her way of moving things along. There were customers waiting and Kessler had been taking too much of Dorothy's time.

"Give us a minute," Dorothy yelled, wiping her eyes. She suggested they see each other outside the whorehouse. "I'm off Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. Here's my number," she whispered while Kessler dressed.

Kessler had to wait until Wednesday to get a pass. Dorothy rented a room in the Smithson's bungalow near the edge of town. Mr. and Mrs. Smithson met him at the door. Kessler calculated they were both in their seventies. "Dorothy's told us all about you," Mrs. Smithson said. "We're happy to meet you and hope you'll be around for a while."

Kessler wondered if they knew what Dorothy did for a living. If so, he thought, they must be the most open-minded people in the county.

"Actually, I'm hoping my unit gets shipped out sooner rather than later." And then he

added, "I'll miss seeing Dorothy though. But I'll be back."

"I heard that," Dorothy said reaching the door, showing a soft, luminous smile. She took Kessler's arm. "Let's go."

They decided to see Woman of the Year at the movie house. Later, on the walk home, she asked, "Are there really women like that? Tess seems incredibly strong and independent."

"It's a movie," Kessler said.

"But still, Katherine Hepburn really is this dynamo, right? And the thing the

Tracey character said about the importance of sports during wartime. Do you agree?"

"Hell yes. I thought Hepburn was way off base on that one. Soldiers need something to take their minds off the fighting. Everyone else too."

"Yeah, I guess so," she said. "Whatever we can do at home to keep spirits up."

Kessler put his arm around Dorothy's shoulder as they walked, and she put her arm around his waist. At the door of the Smithson house, Dorothy gave Kessler a chaste kiss. "Thanks, Ivan. Don't be a stranger."

"Can't I come in?"

"Don't be silly. The Smithsons would have a fit."

"But..."

She put her finger on his lips. "All in good time."

On the base, Kessler overheard other soldiers talking about Dorothy. He wondered if they were doing it to make him angry or if she was just one of the favorites. He tried to ignore the talk, but it made him physically ill. Now that they were dating—he liked to apply that word to their relationship—now that he thought of her as someone he could love, he couldn't bring himself to see her at the whorehouse. She told him she felt the same way. "It would be weird," she said.

And yet she refused to go all the way with him anywhere else. She rejected his idea of a hotel room, even one in a different town. One evening, he mentioned to Dorothy what he'd been hearing about her on the base.

"With them it's just a job. With you it's different."

"Different how?"

"You know. Different."

"Tell me."

"I think I'm in love with you," she said in a whisper.

"That was going to be my line," he said, surprising himself. "But do you need to continue working at the bordello? It's driving me crazy."

"I'm salting away a lot of money, Ivan. Money we can use later. Can married men get deferments?"

"It's too late for that. And it won't be long before I ship out."

"I'll quit the day you get back," she promised.

Kessler walked back to the center of town and found a cab to take him to the base.

By July, there are almost ten thousand Japanese Americans housed at Manzanar. Kessler, armed with his rifle, walks a portion of the perimeter of the camp during the evening hours. Now, he has neither war nor Dorothy. When he complains, his sergeant says: "There are a million GIs in foxholes that'd switch places with you in a heartbeat. Quit your whining."

Kessler has plenty of time to think while on patrol. Alone under a bright desert moon, he aches to see Dorothy again, but at the same time he wonders if it really is love. She was his first time; she was comforting and sweet. He needed tenderness at the moment, and she provided it. It's understandable he'd have strong feelings for her. But Kessler is used to

weighing alternatives and he is at least open to the notion that the attraction, as real as it may have seemed in Waynesville, could have been more hormonal than love. Could he expect her to adjust to life in Chicago? He wonders if she's even thought of that. Their conversations hadn't gotten to the practical details of a life after the war. He knows he couldn't live in Waynesville. And what would his parents and his friends think of him bringing home a southern girl with no more than a high school education?

It's been three months since he's slept with her at the whorehouse. He pictures her slipping off her kimono, wrapping her legs around his waist and showing him—as she put it—how to get a girl's juices flowing; it still arouses Kessler. He walks to a desolate area, lies down in the underbrush a few yards from the fence, takes off his holster, loosens his belt and masturbates. He tells himself the relief he feels is more than sexual, that he's not ready to place Dorothy in a category of experiences with a past but with no future. And then he begins to worry that he's walking away from responsibility. Is it becoming a pattern? If he ever gets back to Leonard Wood, should he give this thing—whatever it is—with Dorothy an opportunity to grow? He'll call her the next time he gets leave.

One night while making his rounds, Kessler sees an attractive young woman digging up a small piece of earth near the chain-linked fence topped with rolls of barbed wire. He bends down on his side of the fence.

"What are you planting, miss?" he asks.

The woman looks up. "Shiso," she says. "I have permission."

"Of course," he says. "I just wondered."

"It's an herb. We add it to salads here. At

home, we'd snack on the toasted seeds."

"Maybe you'll let me try it," Kessler says.

"My hope is that neither of us will be here long enough to taste the leaves of this plant."

"Amen to that," he says. "And yet you're planting."

She smiles warily and as she digs, they begin a relaxed conversation.

"I thought I saw you the other night. In the bushes?"

"No," he says, "Couldn't have been me. Been in the field hospital for a couple of days with an intestinal bug."

She tells Kessler she was a typist at a law firm in San Francisco. "The firm tried to hold onto to me, but they couldn't. Roosevelt's executive order made few exceptions."

"Must be rough," he says. He tells her how depressed he is because it doesn't look as if he'll see any fighting.

"You're lucky," she says. "It's horrible in here. We're treated like dirt. The food is awful, much of it spoiled. People are getting sick."

"It's wartime..." Kessler begins.

"That's no excuse. We're American citizens, most of us."

Kessler nods his head. "It's strange; that's for sure."

"It's illegal. And it's a tragedy." She stands and looks directly at Kessler, waiting, he supposes, for his agreement. "I must go," she says at last. "Mother will start to worry."

He watches as she glides away in her sandals, her long black hair catching the moon's luster. He doesn't see her for two days and then on the third day she's again at the fence.

"It's good to have someone young to talk to," Eleanor Mitsuyama says. After that, walking with her at night, he on one side of the fence, she on the other, becomes a regular routine, something Kessler looks forward to. He discovers she was born six months to the day after

him; he in Chicago, she in San Francisco. He tells her about the icy winters, and she tells him about the fog on the hills surrounding the city.

"You make it sound lovely," he says.

"It was," she says.

"Maybe someday, after this is over, I'll visit."

They talk about what they'll do after the war. "I'm thinking about law school," Eleanor says. "Do you think they'd let a Japanese-American female into law school?"

"Sure. Why not? This is America."

Eleanor laughs and it takes Kessler a second to realize what he said and where they're standing. "Sorry."

Eleanor lives in a small barracks with her mother and father and another family from San Francisco they didn't know. "My mother is having a terrible time. She is a very traditional and shy person and there are no private stalls in the bathroom. We try to keep other women out while she is there but it's not always possible. It makes her cry."

Kessler shudders to think how his mother would handle it. "Would it hurt them to put up dividers?"

"We've asked. We created a council of inmates to speak on our behalf about such things, but we're laughed at or ignored."

Kessler later mentions this to his sergeant. "I'm sure a couple of guys can do the job in a few hours," he says.

"Keep your nose out of inmate affairs," the sergeant says. "We're here to man the perimeter, nothing else. Got me, Kessler?"

Two months of guard duty pass slowly for Kessler. And while he looks forward to his talks with Eleanor, it's not enough for either of them.

"It would be nice to see you on the same side of the fence," she says. "Is it possible for you to get assigned inside?"

He tells her what the sergeant had said but promises to ask. When he raises the issue with his sergeant the noncom laughs. “Told you once, Kessler. Don’t start looking for ways to get in the pants of a good-looking inmate.”

The following week his unit learns they’re being shipped back to Fort Leonard Wood. “Looks like we’re being trained for overseas duty,” the sergeant tells him. “This is your lucky day, Kessler.”

But Kessler doesn’t feel lucky. “I’m shipping out,” he tells Eleanor that night. He aches to hold her in his arms. “Can’t tell you where—I don’t really know—but it looks like I’ll finally get to see some action.”

“I’ll miss our walks, Ivan.”

“And I’ll miss you. After the war is over, I’ll visit, and you can show me the fog on the hills.”

“Be safe,” she says. She puts two fingers to her lips, kisses them and holds them to the fence. Kessler does the same and their fingers touch.

Life at Fort Leonard Wood picks up for Kessler where it left off. The summer heat makes the training more difficult, but the difficulty has a way of focusing his mind. And with the likelihood of imminent deployment, Kessler and his

fellow soldiers are imbued with a seriousness of purpose, an urgency not present earlier.

Three days pass before he calls Dorothy. “It’s good to hear your voice,” she says over the phone, but Kessler senses a difference. The distance he hears could be in her voice or in his mind. When he asks when he can see her, there is silence.

“Ivan, I’m seeing someone,” she says finally. “A local boy, back from the war. A high school friend. Pretty shot up, but he’ll survive.”

“I see,” Kessler says. “Sounds serious.”

“I was going to write and tell you, but I didn’t know how to reach you. You never called, never wrote.”

“I thought a lot about you while I was in the California desert. I was hoping we could talk, work through what’s what.”

“I don’t think it’d help now. I’m spending a lot of time taking care of Matt—that’s his name.”

He wishes Dorothy all the best and hangs up the phone, forgetting to ask if she is still working at the warehouse. His next leave is unexpectedly cancelled. The sergeant tells him they’re headed overseas within a few days.

“This is it,” he says to Kessler. “This is what we’ve been waiting for. Basic training is over.”

“Wonder where we’re headed,” one of the soldiers says.

Kessler too wonders where he’s headed.

Robert Sachs’ work has appeared most recently in *The Louisville Review*, the *Chicago Quarterly Review*, and the *Delmarva Review*. He earned an M.F.A. in Writing from Spalding University in 2009. His story, “Vondelpark,” was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2017. Originally from Chicago, he currently lives in Louisville, Kentucky. He serves on the board of Louisville Literary Arts. Read more at roberthsachs.com.

Turquoise

Timothy Robbins

Turquoise as opaque as
my fear of remembering
only the wrong things.
Turquoise that bays of
other hemispheres wear.
Turquoise my mom
calls aqua. Aqua she
won't tolerate in
the house, afraid some-
one will drown.
Turquoise that has
no place on trees.
Not yet. The 1931
Frankenstein was shot
in black and white so
the audience didn't
know the monster
blushed turquoise.
Turquoise the only
color that has shape.
What? You haven't
noticed? I can't help
that. Turquoise my
dad calls binoculars
and waits for a
remoteness worth
spying on. If the
turquoise house
on the hill wasn't
dimmed by a slow
marshaling of grime,
the sight of it would
blind rods and cones
to every tone but
turquoise. Turquoise
flames tickle.

Timothy Robbins has been teaching English as a Second Language for 28 years. He has been a regular contributor to *Hanging Loose* since 1980. His poems have appeared in *Main Street Rag*, *Off The Coast*, *Bayou Magazine*, *Slant*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Cholla Needles* and many others. He has published three volumes of poetry: *Three New Poets* (Hanging Loose Press), *Denny's Arbor Vitae* (Adelaide Books) and *Carrying Bodies* (Main Street Rag Press). He lives in Wisconsin with his husband of 21 years.

Senior

Arshan Dhillon

THE DAY OF THE PROMOTION Junior felt a surge of excitement, which he had not felt in a long time. Last time he had this feeling, he had been accepted into his architecture program, which he still hoped to complete one day. He kept the acceptance letter in his desk drawer at work, occasionally taking it out and reading it over again, thinking about how it would have felt if he had been able to graduate. Now, however, he had another letter, one that informed him of his promotion. He carried that with him in his breast pocket so he could show his father.

He parked his car in front of his father's house, and as he went around the hood of the car, he almost stepped into the puddle of water which was slowly draining into the street gutter. The rain had just stopped on his way over. Luckily, he caught himself and was able to skip over the puddle and onto the neatly-kept front lawn. He knocked on the front door, which his father had built himself. It was made of thick red oak wood and it hurt the knuckles, but you had to knock because the doorbell didn't work. It was as if you had to pay a price to see him. His father's footsteps fell upon the floor with authority. Something stirred inside of him from merely feeling the vibrations of his father's footsteps, his presence coming nearer, and he straightened his posture and held his wrist behind his back like a young soldier does when a drill sergeant enters the room. He

released a long, drawn-out breath and waited. The steps were not hurried. His father did not rush for anyone. He was always in control. The door sprang open and his father stretched across the gaping entrance. Junior could tell his father had not been expecting company, for he simply wore his robe with no undershirt and he could see his father's broad chest and specks of grey hair that covered it. Junior found himself lowering his head as if he were bowing, a natural reaction.

"Is it Friday already?" His father's voice was deep and his lips barely moved. There was some stubble on his chin.

"No, it's still Wednesday."

"Of course I know what day it is, you think I'm that far gone?"

Junior smiled, embarrassed at taking his father's question literally. His father often joked and asked questions that didn't need answers but he found himself answering them anyway.

"I thought you only came to see me on Friday."

His father stepped back, granting Junior space to come inside. Junior squeezed past his father who closed the door behind them. His father was a big man, shoulders still strong for someone his age, chest still stuck out further than his belly even though men his age often had fuller bellies. He pulled him in for an embrace. There was a musky smell to him as if he had just been exercising. When he let him

go, like a little child, Junior found himself staring up at his father.

"So, what's the special occasion?" He asked patting Junior on the back, which made him stumble forward a little. Before Junior could answer, his father started for the kitchen and Junior hurried to keep up with his long strides.

"I was just making some coffee. You want some?"

"Sure. Two teaspoons of sugar please."

"I don't have any. The doctor said to lay off so I've been having it black. It might be too bitter for you."

"I think I can handle it," Junior said.

"You sure? I guess you're a grown boy now."

The sound of the news anchors filled the open room, as the shifting light from the television set fell upon the yoga mat that was set in front of it. The mat was flanked on either side by two sets of dumbbells. You had to take a step up from the living room onto the kitchen floor where the table was lightly decorated with just a crystal bowl in the middle with a couple bananas in it and a war novel lay on top of the morning paper. The table was surrounded by a few chairs and his father pulled one out, gesturing for him to take a seat as he went to pour the coffee.

"This any good?" He asked his father as he picked up the novel and read the back summary.

"Junk," his father replied, "none of them can ever capture it correctly."

He put the book back down.

"How's Emily?"

His father joined him at the table, placing a cup of coffee in front of Junior.

Junior felt the warmth through the mug as he lifted the cup to his lip. His father was not lying about the coffee. He had to consciously stop himself from making a face as the

bitter drink went down his throat because he could tell that he was being watched. He took another sip for good measure.

"Better now, she's almost over her cold," Junior said, lowering the cup down to the table.

His father spread out on the chair and faced Junior. Junior felt as if he were back in school, in the principal's office having to answer for some wrongdoing that he hadn't done. The silence alone was heavy enough to cause him discomfort as his father calmly sipped his coffee. He cleared his throat and attempted to say something but his father cut him off.

"I have been meaning to thank her for letting me stay with you for those few months."

"Oh, that was nothing. It was the least we could do."

"I must have been a real nuisance for you to get rid of me so quickly."

This time there was only the illusion of silence as he tried to think of a way to counter his father's ruling, but instead sank further into the chair—or perhaps his father grew larger. Junior stared at the tabletop where his coffee cup was, watching the steam rise. Although his father had been a difficult house guest because he needed so much attention, Junior could never bring himself to tell his father the truth.

"No, it was never like that," Junior muttered, his voice was subdued, barely above a whisper, a courteous man would have leaned closer but his father kept his imposing position. It was as if his father's gaze could change his tone, manipulate his words, cause the letters to come out quickly, in a hurried manner, as if he were breathing hard, trying to catch his breath.

He reached for the novel again but stopped, instead he folded his hands in front of him.

"Come on, I'm only joking," his father's loaded hand patted Junior on the shoulder, "we can joke with one another, can't we? That's what men do. Your mother never understood it, but I told her that it's all play between us."

Junior replied with a smile and a soft, "yes," that was barely audible and sounded more like a deep exhale.

"But I must say, I would like to see you and Emily more than once a week. I'm getting up there, not much left for me. If I can't even get my boy to come to see me, what am I still doing here?"

"Don't say that, please, I know I should come more often but I'm just trying to do for what you did for me. I'm trying to make it easy for you. Also, while we are on that subject of work—" he went to take the envelope out when his father asked, "How are you liking my old job?"

"About that—"

"Do they still talk about me or have they forgotten about the old workhorse?"

"They remember, of course, they remember, how can they forget someone like you?"

"What good is a horse if he can't gallop," his father said, his voice flat and toneless as if he were making a statement to himself.

"Mr. Edwards speaks so highly of you there that I've had trouble keeping up," he said, making his father smile. "I've been working so much overtime recently so I don't fall behind on anything."

"Just make sure your bride doesn't mind. That was a good thing about your mother, she understood a man's need to work."

"Emily is a doll. She's always putting up with my headache but I'll take her on a vacation or something one of these days."

His father finished his cup of coffee. He stared at Junior's almost full cup, knowing he

had been right about his son's taste. He took his own empty cup to the sink and started to rinse it.

"I can do that for you," Junior said, joining his father at the kitchen sink. There was a window above the sink but the curtains were drawn. The faint sound of the drizzle outside could be heard tapping against the window. He noticed the lack of dust on the windowsill.

"I'm not that old yet," his father replied.

"I didn't mean that," said Junior whose voice was drowned by the flow of the tap water. His father shut it off and placed the cup to dry on the cloth that was placed beside the kitchen sink.

"So, they still remember the old bull?" he asked.

"Oh, very much., In fact, Mr. Edwards was talking to me about you today."

"My work's got you looking soft," his father poked Junior in the belly. "Here, look at mine, still solid," he slapped his own stomach with an open palm, "Now you must know how hard I used to work to keep in shape."

"I guess Emily's been keeping me too well fed," Junior smiled.

"That's no excuse. A man has to stay tight. Softness is an illness to his character. How can you expect others to follow you if they see this belly of yours? You can't lead men if you can't even control what you put in your mouth."

"You're right."

"Of course I'm right, I've been doing your job much longer than you have."

"About that—"

"I saw the doc the other day and you know what he said?" His father didn't wait for an answer although Junior opened his mouth to reply. "He said I'm in the top percentile of his patients when it comes to physique. I told the doc I've never missed a day of exercising. Every morning I exercise. You should do that

too or else you're gonna fall apart when you get to my age."

There was a hint of a joke in his father speech and so Junior smiled, weakly. His father patted him on the shoulder and said, "Don't worry, you've got plenty of time to straighten up."

"But listen I got some good news for you," Junior said.

His father turned towards him, leaning onto the kitchen counter, arms folded across his chest.

"What's that?"

Junior pulled out the letter from his supervisor.

"I'm being promoted," He said, presenting the letter to his father.

His father did not accept it.

"About time we got that position."

He turned his back to his son and picked out a glass bowl from the cabinet above. "The son always eats the sweet fruit of his father's labor," he said, as he poured cornflakes into his glass bowl.

"I am very grateful." Junior's arm hung beside him and his hand still holding the letter.

His father spoke, as he poured milk into the bowl, "I suppose that is what the purpose of being a father is, I lay the foundation, build upon it, make it nice and pretty for you to come and see further than I ever did. Congratulations."

"Thank you."

His father took a spoonful and aggressively shoved it in his mouth, some of the milk dribbled down his chin which he wiped with the back of his hand.

"I was thinking," Junior said, "This new position can allow me to hire some help to look after you the days I can't come."

His father chewed, his jaw flexing and relaxing, his eyes staring right at Junior and Jun-

ior's own shifted back to the tabletop, where his coffee had lost its steam.

"So you'll be coming to see me even less?" His father asked.

"No, no, nothing like that. I just felt it'll be good for you to have someone around to talk to and be with."

"Why can't that someone be you?"

Junior's voice softened. "These past few months I've been neglecting Emily too much and I just thought the two of us can spend more time together."

His father did not reply. Instead, he quietly finished his bowl of cereal, the metal spoon scraping the glass bowl after each bite. Once the bowl was empty, he let out a sigh and leaned back into his chair.

"It makes sense, more time for your bride and less time for your old man. Don't worry, I'll be gone soon, you'll have plenty of time after that."

"Please don't talk like that."

"All these years I spent working, I only did that so I could see you do good in your life. So, I'm happy for you and now, if it means to watch you from afar, then I suppose I'll do that; I'll clap for you from the stands."

He stood up, towering over Junior, "You do what you think is best, after all, you're the man of the house now, right?"

Junior looked down, staring at his father's strong legs and feeling the weight of his father's touch as he lightly patted him on the cheek. His father picked up the coffee mug and carried it with the empty bowl to the sink. He poured out the coffee into the sink and rinsed out the cup before cleaning the bowl as well. He left both the cup and bowl to dry beside the other mug.

He seemed to be waiting for Junior to say something, perhaps apologize, to take back what he had said, thank him for the promo-

tion. But Junior stayed silent, his voice not allowed to speak.

"Well you must be a busy man these days," his father said, "I shouldn't keep you away from your mistress much longer." He started for the door and Junior stood up without a word and followed his father's strides.

His father held the door open for him and Junior stepped through.

"It was good seeing you," his father said.

"Please, I would come more often if it wasn't for Emily and the work—"

His father smiled, quieting Junior with his look.

"Your grandfather would not tolerate such words, in fact, I think he wouldn't like you one bit for saying such things. I'm different than my father; I don't judge like he used to. He would have judged you to be a lousy boy—inconsiderate. He was a hard man from a different time but I still loved him and took care of him because that's the duty of a son. But me, I don't judge you. You do what you think is best and send my regards to my workers and also

to Emily."

The light from the sun cast his father's shadow upon Junior, whose gaze was fixed upon his father's feet, unable to raise his head and meet his father's eyes.

"I'll try to make it work," he said.

"You do what you like, son—you're the man now."

His father closed the door.

For a moment he stayed in the silence that was only present in his heart, as the street behind him busied itself with utter disregard. He felt so alone and so small. That silence that was within him began to break and it started as a whisper first but in seconds it turned into screams, screams of yearning, screams of acceptance, screams which wanted to hear his father simply say "I'm proud of you", screams which were ultimately just the tantrums of a child, he understood. He took the letter and crumpled it into a little ball and threw it down the gutter as he got into his car and headed back to work. The rain fell tearfully from the skies.

Arshan Dhillon is a graduate of the University of Calgary. He writes short stories and poems on various subjects and themes. Dhillon is currently working on his first novel.

Baggage

Otto Burnwell

You're looking for a briefcase
something for the office.

You're in among the luggage
of a big department store.

A cute young couple
browsing one aisle over,
seems a little strange,
as if she's trying on each bag.

You watch him open large ones
and have her tuck inside,
curling up and squeezing
to check it for her size.

You wonder, should you warn her,
as they try another bag
to see if she will fit
and get the zipper closed.

Would it be too nosy
to ask her, with a smile,
what kind of trip she's planning,
to travel in a suitcase?

She beams with adoration,
you believe it must be real,
that his winsome smiling
makes her a willing party.

He moves her hair and zips it,
then asks if she can breathe.
Her muffled voice assures him
she's all comfy there inside.

Is it a game they play,
hoping to alarm you?
Or will you read next week
of a suitcase with a corpse?

Otto Burnwell lives and works in an urban area where people say and do strange things in public places. His work comes out of such encounters. He has recently placed pieces with *Fiction on the Web* and *Yellow Mama*.



Storm Cloud 3

Liz Tran

The Mirror Factory

Suzanne Osborne

Like all who toil here, I first assembled
the frames, later progressed to installing
the empty glass, and only then qualified
for the intense—I would even say painful—
years of training to apply the reflections.

Needless to say, this work requires
great patience and skill: one must stroke in
a suggestion of a line or shadow
in one shade here, there in another,
so the beholder's eye can assemble
the desired image from any angle,
in any light, or indeed in no light at all.

After an early career in theater, a stint in academia, and too many years as a legal secretary, Suzanne Osborne now lives in Forest Hills, NY, and writes poetry. Her work has appeared most recently in *Newtown Literary Journal*, *Poetry Quarterly*, and Indolent Press's on-line project *What Rough Beast*.

Pastor Nelson Grimes' Surprise Reunion Show

Tim Frank

"NOW MR KAVEAT—what would you like to be known as? Can I call you Sohrab?" said the TV show assistant, moisturising her dry cracked hands, kneading them like dough. Sohrab nodded imperceptibly.

"Have you seen the show? Are you familiar with the format?"

"I've seen stuff like it," Sohrab snapped. "I'm not scared if that's what you're getting at. The fact is I've signed the contract, I've got my money and that's why I'm here, but if you think I'm going to get all riled up and embarrass myself over some nonsense you've got another thing coming."

Before the assistant could retort there was a crackling in her headset and she raced out of the green room that was slowly filling with other guests - the barbie dolls and their oversized breasts discussing carbs and UFOs, the mime artists pretending to be dead by the water fountain and the group of ballerinas stretching their legs on the jukebox that played The Doors.

Sohrab paid them no mind and instead stared at the ticking clock that hung above the litany of daytime TV awards - a giant cross graced the ceiling, a gold-plated confessional in the corner with a couple inside making out. The face of the host, Pastor Nelson Grimes

was plastered on every wall. Sohrab's upper lip curled in disdain as he noticed the Pastor's neon teeth and the gold earrings, chunky as peanut M&Ms.

"Sohrab you're up," the assistant called, and then turned to boss a tangle of grips and interns. He manoeuvred his way through electrical equipment - lights, speakers, cables - and arrived at the side of stage where he was confronted by two bouncers.

"This is Mog and Jit," said the assistant. The bouncers looked like out of shape marines, seven-foot-tall, wearing cheap linen suits with swollen ankles bulging out of their socks. Jit had a poppy badge pinned to his lapel.

"They will make sure you leave the set in one piece."

"I'll be fine," said Sohrab waving his hand as if swatting a fly, "I won't be needing them."

"That's what they all say," squeaked Mog, "but this show never disappoints."

"Can we just get on with it?" Sohrab sighed.

Excitement began to ripple through the audience as the theme music for the show blasted through the hall.

"You're on in five," said the assistant

counting him down, chewing gum in time.

"Stay safe," bleated Jit, as Sohrab tripped on a cable, steadied himself, then eased onto the stage, receiving a warm applause.

He came face to face with the Pastor who stretched a disarming Gatsby-esque smile. The Pastor wore snakeskin loafers and a diamond encrusted cross dangled from his neck.

"Welcome to the show, Sohrab. Let's get right into why you're here," the Pastor said, addressing camera two.

"I believe I'm here for some kind of class reunion," Sohrab said, acting bored.

"Yes indeed! Let's bring out one of Sohrab's old classmates!"

The audience went wild as the Pastor left the stage and placed himself amongst the crowd. A woman with swastikas tattooed on her face yet dressed in a conservative trouser suit, shuffled onto the stage and sat on the seat opposite Sohrab. He sat up in his chair and his leg began to fidget.

"As you can see," the Pastor said, "this is no ordinary reunion. This is Athena. Sohrab, tell the audience, here and at home, what your connection to her is, please."

"We went to school together. Listen I know what you're doing but..."

"Let's go to the VT because clearly Sohrab is dragging his heels and we only have a couple of minutes left for this segment."

The lights lowered, a hush descended on the crowd and a film was screened at the back of the stage. There was a shot of a curved road, on a gentle gradient - trees lining each side, birds fluttering about on the concrete. There was a voice-over as the screen zoomed in portentously on the centre of the empty street.

"Eighteen years ago, Sohrab's little brother, Alessandro, was run over by a

Chinese delivery moped sending shock waves through the local community. No one felt the death more keenly than Athena. Alessandro was particularly close to Athena's mother as he volunteered at the local old people's home where she lived. Blaming the Chinese in general for the loss, she became a neo-Nazi, messed up her face and became suicidal."

The lights in the auditorium came on and every camera in the room focused in on Sohrab.

"This is low," he said, feeling the heat of the lights. "Pretty damn low."

"Would you like to tell everyone what happened next, Sohrab?" the pastor asked.

"There's nothing to tell. Are you really going to exploit the death of a young boy, who did no harm to anyone?"

"I'm just delivering important stories to the masses. They're hungry for the truth, for life, it's as simple as that. Now are you going to tell the tale in your own words or do you want Athena to narrate?"

"Go ahead, you won't get a word out of me."

"Such a pretty face Athena," said the Pastor, "tell us, why did you destroy it?"

"I loved Alessandro like a brother and when the Chinese killed him I wanted everyone to know how I felt about them."

"But, Athena, the Chinese didn't kill him, a Chinese takeaway moped did."

"What's the difference?"

"Fascinating. Can you tell me more about what happened with Sohrab?"

"Yes. About three years after Alessandro's death, roughly fifteen years ago, I was feeling suicidal. It was all too much and I just wanted it all to end. Then I got an invitation to a school reunion. For some reason I felt I had to go. And I was right because I reconnected with Sohrab. He saw my face and sensed my

pain. We spent the night together."

Sohrab jumped out of his chair and shouted, "How could you?!"

Mog and Jit readied themselves.

"Let's go for a break," said the Pastor, "back in a minute people."

"Why are you doing this Athena?" said Sohrab.

"You saved my life, Sohrab. I wanted you to know."

"You could just have texted me, hit me up on Facebook, something."

"And we're back," said the Pastor. "Now this isn't really about a reunion is it Athena?"

"No."

"Tell us why we're here."

"Well, that night we were together we talked about just how much we missed Alessandro and Sohrab told me he could never bring another child into the world."

"Is this true Sohrab?"

Sohrab chewed on his cheek and remained silent.

"Remember Sohrab, this is a safe place. I am a man of the cloth. Speak your truth."

Sohrab shook his head, holding in his rage.

"OK," said the Pastor, "we don't have time for you to find it in yourself to be honest so let us move on to the real reason we're all here. Ling please come and join us on the stage."

A teenage girl, with numerous nose studs and stretched rings in her ears, stared at her big black boots as she dragged herself centre stage. The audience whooped and cheered.

"Hello young lady," said the Pastor, "welcome. How are you?"

"Fine," she mumbled.

"So," the Pastor said, "can you tell the viewers who this is Athena?"

"This is my daughter. She's fifteen and

Sohrab is her father."

The audience exploded. Sohrab balled his fists.

"Do you have anything to say Sohrab?"

"It's a lie, a damn lie."

"What do you say to that Ling?"

Ling shrugged and kept her head low.

"Athena, Ling is a Chinese name but she doesn't look Chinese at all and as far as I'm aware you hate those people. Please explain."

"Well, Pastor, to be honest, I lied earlier. I don't blame the Chinese for Alessandro's death. Not anymore anyway. When Ling was born I wanted to make changes. So, I called her a foreign name to make amends and put my racist ways in the past. It felt like a natural tribute."

"If Ling is Sohrab's daughter why are you only telling him now?"

"Well he said he never wanted a child. I was scared. But as she's grown she's become troubled, and I believe that now she needs a father's guidance."

"Sohrab?" the Pastor said, "any thoughts?"

Sohrab leaned forward, pointed at Ling and said, "That girl has nothing to do with me."

The Pastor said, "Oh come on! Look at the bright blue eyes, the angled chin, the Lenin nose. Lord help me it's obvious you're related! Luckily, we don't have to rely on your word. No, we have science on our side. Remember the blood we took before the show? Well now we can reveal the results of the paternity test."

"Paternity test?" Sohrab cried, then burrowed his head in his hands. "You said it was a flu jab."

"Why would a chat show give flu jabs!" the Pastor snorted. "You really are in another world aren't you, my friend?"

The lights dimmed and began to sway

across the stage as suspenseful music filled the studio. In the shadows, Sohrab began to pace up and down across the platform, plunging his hands in his pockets, until he stopped in his tracks, centre stage, and stared into the audience, as if hypnotised.

"He's gonna do a runner," Mog warned.

"Nah he's gonna punch the mother," Jit countered.

Either way the bouncers sat on the steps leading up to the stage and prepared to pounce. The Pastor waved a large golden envelope in his free hand. He peeled it open dramatically and smacked his lips.

"It's positive! Sohrab is the father!"

Everyone leapt to their feet and lost their minds. As the crowd erupted Sohrab began to fall into a fit of giggles. As the audience settled down the Pastor addressed Sohrab, saying, "What's so funny? I think we'd all like to know."

"This, all of this. It's just one big joke."

"I'm afraid not Sohrab, this is as serious as life and death. Now, don't you want to get to know your daughter? It's about time don't you think? We have four minutes. Ling why don't you tell us about yourself?"

"Um," Ling mumbled.

"Do have any hobbies? Like tennis?"

"I'm psychic."

"She is not psychic," Athena interrupted.

"I am."

"Psychics!" the Pastor said. "We love psychics on this show. Especially goth psychics."

"I'm not a goth. I'm just depressed."

"OK, fantastic. Tell me Ling are you feeling a presence from the other world at this moment?"

"No not yet, but I know my fate and it was destiny for me to be here."

"Well everybody at the show feels the same way, Ling. Now shall we test your

powers? Now let's think, who can we talk to? I know! How about we contact Alessandro? Is that at all possible?"

"That's it," yelled Sohrab and feigned like a rugby player to attack Ling, dummying the bouncers, only to dart in the opposite direction and launch himself at the Pastor, toppling him to the ground like a bowling pin. The Pastor struggled - legs flailing, the seat of his trousers tearing, his silk underwear exposed. Before he knew it Sohrab was dragged off the Pastor by the bouncers and they flopped on top of him like two sacks of potatoes. Sohrab struggled for a minute but quickly realised he was trapped. The lights dimmed and the sound of footsteps could be heard pattering out of the auditorium.

"Thanks boys," said the Pastor, his snake-skin loafers in Sohrab's line of vision. "Good work Sohrab, you were perfect. Remember life's great pageant has no intrinsic meaning. One must give birth to the meaning. Yes?"

"How can you say that?" Sohrab said incredulously. "You're a Pastor."

The Pastor shrugged and gazed at his bulbous gold signet ring.

"Anyway," the Pastor said, "death's a preacher. And sometimes a redeemer, it's just how you angle it. Goodbye, Sohrab."

Then the Pastor and his torn five-thousand-dollar suit merged with the crowd and disappeared into the foyer. Sohrab wrestled for freedom again but the bouncers didn't budge -their layers of undulating flab restraining him. A few minutes passed and Mog sighed, "Do we need this, Jit? I don't need this. I don't need this at all."

"I stay for the chicks, to be honest," said Jit.

"You can let me go now," said Sohrab, wheezing from the pressure on his diaphragm. "I repent."

"So," said Mog, "you gonna do the right thing by that child? Be a good father, now you know the truth?"

"I've been missing from her life for so long, what difference does it matter now?"

"That girl is hurting," Jit said, "she needs you now more than ever."

"I told myself I'd never get close to anyone after Alessandro died. When I had that night with Athena fifteen years ago it was what I needed and it really meant something to me. But she disappeared soon after and now I know she's been lying to me all this time. I don't owe anyone anything."

"No, you don't," said Mog, "but you could do something great today. Not many people have that opportunity. Children are like tender flowers; they need to be cherished and cultivated. Here, let me shift the weight of my belly off your neck."

Mog and Jit rolled off Sohrab and he stretched and groaned. The assistant joined the men and said, "Great show Sohrab, would you like a quick drink in the green room before you go?"

"Sure. Goodbye lads," Sohrab said, shaking the bouncers' hands. "Thank you."

Mog winked. Jit wiped something that could have been a tear from his eye.

Sohrab traced his way back stage into the green room where there was a mob gabbing

about this, that and the other. Sohrab seated himself beside a ventriloquist with a stuffed giraffe on one side and a Buddhist nun counting beads on the other. Sohrab wanted out and was just about to split but then noticed Athena seated opposite having a quiet conversation with an old man carrying a canary in a cage and Ling sitting a few places over sipping a glass of lime spritzer as a woman in a poncho read her tarot cards.

Sohrab picked up a salted cashew nut from a bowl and flicked it into her drink. Ling smiled. Sohrab smiled back. And then the moment passed. Ling returned her gaze to the tarot as the woman laid a death card symbol on the table. The room seemed to suddenly swim into a crescendo of chatter. But next thing Ling knew Sohrab had placed himself right by her side. The room drained of people as another show began. Athena looked on with a smile as Sohrab analysed Ling's tattoo on her wrist.

"What is it?" said Sohrab.

"It's a funnel web spider. The deadliest in the world," replied Ling.

"Lovely," said Sohrab said whimsically, "just lovely. What say you and I get each other's name tattooed on our knuckles and then we can go for a real drink?"

"I'd like that," said Ling, "I'd like that very much."

Harris Coverley has had poetry most recently accepted for *Better Than Starbucks*, *Bard*, *Awen*, *Star*Line*, *Scifaikuest*, and *Dual Coast Magazine*, amongst many others. He is also a short story writer, working mainly in the fields of weird and speculative fiction, and has stories published or forthcoming in *Curiosities*, *Planet Scumm*, and *The J.J. Outré Review*. He lives in Manchester, England.

The Intersection of Lives

John Grey

The news jangles the telephone bell
like someone's being strangled.
Maybe they are.
And by their own lungs.
All I know is that
you've taken a turn for the worse.
So I throw on something warm,
drive to the hospital,
willing you to be alive
at least until I get there.

They won't let me near you.
My one glimpse is of a head
tossed to the side of its body
like that of a horse
put out of its misery.

With our connection in this life broken.
I wonder what will happen
if there's a next one.
Would I recognize you
or would we pass each other
as total strangers.
Most likely we'll show up some place
far away and as totally different people,
naked and unknown to memory

I am afraid to sleep
perched on a chair in a waiting room
with my head nodding off
but legs ready to move
at a moment's notice.

I'm shaken awake come morning
with the news that your eighty-seven-year old body
is sitting up, has yawned away the cobwebs,
is calling out for coffee.
I can see you for a little while.

No need to worry about the next life just yet.
Either you or your body or some higher power
has decided that you should continue to live.
The time left to us remains a mystery.
Let's not solve it.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in *That*, *Dalhousie Review* and *North Dakota Quarterly* with work upcoming in *Qwerty*, *Chronogram* and *failbetter*.



Ornette

Jeremy Okai Davis

Pedro, the Cat Killer

Tim Jeffreys

IT WAS AT THE HORSE MARKET that Pedro encountered Fabiola Lopez Reyes for the first time since his return to the village. Though he remembered her from school, where they had been in the same class, it took him a few moments to equate the pale sullen schoolgirl with the beauty he saw standing by a stall which sold cowbells and leather saddle bags. He could not take his eyes off her. Whilst everyone else sweated in the near-forty degree heat, Fabiola appeared cool and unflustered. She fanned herself in the shade of the stall. She wore a loose white summer dress, and her skin—where it showed—was the colour of caramel. She moved along the length of the stall, picking up one cowbell and then another, ringing each one and smiling the way a child might at the sounds.

“Carry on,” Pedro heard the old, grizzled stall-owner say to Fabiola. “The more they’re rung, the better they sound.”

Pedro also saw the delight in the old man’s eyes as he watched Fabiola, and he was surprised to feel a stab of outrage.

He’d only gone to the horse market in order to escape for an hour or so his mother’s constant fussing and nagging. And the noise! It was unbearable. His mother never spoke, she shouted instead. She shouted her grandchildren away on some errand then shouted them back

inside the house. She shouted the house clean, shouted dinner ready, shouted the dishes into the sink. Pedro felt sorry for his father who, now that he was retired, would shift all day from room to room, searching for some peace, somewhere he could sit undisturbed and watch his favourite programmes on the TV, never finding any lasting harmony. Some days, Pedro would shift around the house with him, from one room to another, hurried and herded by a barrage of shouts until it became intolerable and he was forced to run.

He’d seen a poster for the horse fair in the window of the ice-cream shop, and thought it would be a good way to pass a few hours before lunch. Once there, he couldn’t help but feel pity for the horses and the lost-looking ponies in their narrow pens. There was even a donkey that brayed continuously and kicked straw and manure with its back legs at laughing children whenever they got close.

Once he noticed Fabiola, Pedro left the pens and the sharp stink of horseshit, and trotted down the slope to the edge of the square where the cowbell stall was situated. Feigning a casual air, he picked up one of the cowbells—a thing of dark copper still showing the dints from where it had been pounded into shape—and rang it. The sound it made was more a clank than a chime, but it got

Fabiola's attention. She looked across at Pedro and smiled. Pedro smiled back. When his hand moved to pick up another of the bells, the stall-owner stopped him by saying in a brusque tone, "Hey, you, don't wear them out."

Fabiola giggled behind her fan. When she moved away from the stall, Pedro followed her. He was aware of the stall-owner's indignant gaze, and of the glances given to Fabiola from the men who crowded around the doorway of a bar on the opposite side of the tree-lined square.

"I remember you," he called to Fabiola's back as she walked away.

She halted and turned to face him. Her chestnut hair, he noticed, had threads of gold where it caught the sun. Her eyes were the same colour as her skin, like opened pots of honey.

"We were in the same class at school. Do you remember me? My name is Pedro Ramos Vega."

She said nothing, but he was encouraged when he saw her eyes widen in recognition of his name.

"I've been in Madrid," he said. "At the University. Studying to be a doctor. I'm a doctor now. I'm going to be working at the healthcare centre." He'd hoped to impress her with this, but still she said nothing and her face remained impassive, so he quickly went on. "I was wondering if I could buy you a drink."

He gestured towards the bar across the square, and Fabiola glanced that way. It seemed to Pedro that all the men there had fallen silent and were watching the two of them like a rapt audience at a bullfight.

When Fabiola met his eyes again, she smiled and for a moment his heart quickened its pace. But then she shook her head.

"I can't," she said. "My father wouldn't be happy if someone told him I'd been seen with a cat killer."

"A...what?"

"You. Aren't you a cat killer?"

"I..."

As she walked away, Pedro heard laughter from the group of men outside the bar on the other side of the square.

Cat killer? The words played over and over in Pedro's mind as he walked the few streets home. What could Fabiola have possibly meant by that? To his recollection, he had never harmed anything or anyone. In fact, hadn't he just spent six years training to be a doctor so he could help people, heal people, save lives? Wasn't he due to start work at the village healthcare centre in less than a week, where he would be treating walk-in patients with all manner of injuries and ailments? Killing cats? Him? What could possibly have made Fabiola think such a thing?

As if to mock him a scruffy ginger tom crawled out from under a parked car when he stood at the front door of his mother's house patting his pockets for the key. Halting when it saw Pedro, it fixed him with what he—in his distress—took to be an accusatory glare.

"Hey," he said to the cat. "Don't look at me like that. I would never hurt you."

He took a step towards the cat, but at once it turned on the spot, darted off and vanished into some scorched shrubbery at the end of the street.

"I wouldn't," Pedro shouted after it. "Do you hear me? I wouldn't."

Finding his key at last, he opened the door and heard the hubbub of voices from within. With heavy heart, he entered.

When lunch was over and his father had retired to the bedroom to watch soap operas

in peace, his brothers gone back to work, their wives returned home, and his nephews and nieces gone to play on the patio, Pedro remained at the table as his mother cleared away the dishes. Not noticing his downcast air, she began telling him about a female neighbour who had trained the family dog to search the village bars looking for her husband.

"She gives it notes for him," she said.

"Sometimes money in a little purse. The dog goes off with the purse in its mouth, looking for Gonzalo. It's the funniest thing you ever saw."

"Mother," Pedro said. "When I was a child—did I ever do anything nasty?"

His mother laughed. "What're you looking for—a list?"

"No, I mean something really bad. Like hurting an animal. Or killing it."

"You?" his mother said. "You used to cry if you saw me flatten a spider. When your uncle Alonso slaughtered his pig, you told him he was a bad man and wouldn't speak to him for months. You were six."

Pedro sighed. "Then why would someone think that of me? That I could harm an animal?"

His mother stood at the kitchen sink, her back to him. "Who? Who thinks that?"

"Oh, no one," Pedro said, getting up from the table. "Never mind."

"I wish you would kill something once in a while," his mother shouted after him as he walked out onto the patio. "If I want to cook a rabbit for dinner, I have to ask one of your brothers to do the dirty work. They're always grumbling at me. Why don't you ask, Pedro? What don't you get Pedro to do it? He's a doctor, ask him to snap its neck..."

Come the following Monday, when Pedro arrived for his first day working at the health-care centre, Fabiola Lopez Reyes and her

harsh words had almost slipped from his memory. He couldn't help but feel proud when he was shown his surgery, with his name on the door, DOCTOR RAMOS VEGA, and his licence to practice medicine certificate in a frame on the wall. At once he felt at home there, where everything was shiny and clean. The centre was run by a friend of his father, Doctor Samuel Martinez Romero, who shook Pedro's hand when he arrived and told Pedro he was looking forward to working with him.

With a great sense of achievement, Pedro washed up, pulled on a pair of latex gloves and waited for his first patient to arrive. At five minutes past nine he could already hear a clamour of voices from out in the waiting room. By five minutes to ten, he still hadn't treated anyone.

Taking off the latex gloves, he left his surgery and went to reception. The waiting room was full of people. He felt their eyes on him as he spoke to Mariana, the young receptionist.

"What's going on?" Pedro said to Mariana in a hushed voice. "Why haven't you sent any patients in to see me?"

"It's not my fault," Mariana said, as if he'd accused her of something.

"What do you mean? Why haven't I got any patients?"

"They won't go," Mariana said. "They all want to see Samuel."

"What do you mean they won't go? Is it because I'm new?"

Mariana shook her head. She made an exasperated face. "No," she said. "It's not that."

"What is it then?"

"They say..." Mariana hesitated. "They say they don't want to be treated by the cat killer."

Arriving home, despondent, that evening, Pedro noticed the ginger tom cat skulking

around the housefronts again. When he crouched, held out one hand, and called to it, the cat hesitated for a moment before hurrying to sniff at his outstretched fingers.

"You're not afraid of me, are you?" he said as he stroked the cat's head. Then, carefully taking the cat in his arms, he tried to give it a hug but the cat took offense at this and tried to break free. There was a brief struggle as he attempted to keep hold of the cat, saying "No, no, no. I was only going to give you a little cuddle." The cat mewed and wiggled in his arms. When he grabbed its tail, it turned and scratched his hand and it was unfortunate that at this moment a woman happened to be watching him from a high window on the opposite side of the street.

"Cat killer!" the woman shouted at Pedro, before withdrawing her head and letting the window blind down before Pedro had a chance to explain.

Entering the house nursing his scratched hand, Pedro found his mother laid out on the sofa watching the singing competition, La Copla, on the television.

"How was your first day?" she asked, her eyes remaining fixed on the TV screen where a woman warbled her way through Sabor A Mi.

Pedro slumped in a chair. "No one wanted to be treated by me."

"No one?"

"They say I'm a cat killer."

"Oh." His mother laughed under her breath. "You are a cat killer. We all are."

"Who is?"

"The whole family. We're the cat killers."

"Cat killers? I've never killed a cat."

"No, but your great, great grandfather Alfonso did. He killed a cat when he was a boy. Hung it from a tree just to see what would happen. Nasty business, but boys do things like that. The whole town found out about it. That's why we're the cat killers. Just like next

door are the shooters, because their great grandfather was a hunter and he was always seen going off into the countryside with a rifle over his shoulder."

"You mean it's a family nickname?"

His mother sat up and looked at him. "You didn't know we're the cat killers?"

"Fabiola Lopez Reyes won't have a drink with me and no one at the healthcare centre will be treated by me because of some stupid family nickname?"

"In a little village like this people remember things."

"But they can't blame me for something my great, great grandfather did."

His mother laughed and settled down on the sofa again, returning her eyes to the TV screen. "You're a cat killer, son. You'll always be a cat killer here, until you do something to make them forget you're a cat killer."

"Like what? What should I do?"

"I don't know. Go hunting."

"And be a rabbit killer instead?"

"Rabbit killing's not like cat killing. A rabbit you can eat."

"I don't want to kill rabbits."

"You don't want to kill them but you're quite happy to..." His mother jerked into a sitting position again and pointed at the TV. "Here's an idea! Why don't you go on this?"

Pedro looked at the TV. "La Copla?"

"You always had such a beautiful voice, even as a child. Why don't you go on here and sing some love songs? Oh, I'd love to see that. My own son singing on La Copla. Singing a beautiful ballad. Maybe instead of the cat killers people will start calling us the lovers. Something like that."

"That's ridiculous," Pedro said. He rested his head on the chair back and linked his hands together over his chest. "I'm not going on La Copla."

He let his eyes wander around the room. The lovers. He liked the sound of that. Especially when he thought of Fabiola Lopez Reyes. How could she refuse at date with a man whose family were known as the lovers.

But he would not be applying to appear on La Copla. That would take far too long.

Besides, he realised, he didn't have to impress the whole of Spain. In Madrid he was not a cat killer. In Barcelona he was not a cat killer. In Valencia he was not a cat killer. Only here, here in this village, thanks to his great, great grandfather Alfonso, was he tarred with that particular brush. And it was only here, here in this village, that he had to make people forget about great, great, grandfather Alfonso and do something that would be remembered enough to make a new name for his family.

And, thanks to his mother, an idea began forming in his mind about what that thing could be.

Mid-week, the village folk began to notice men erecting a marquee in the town square. What was this? The town parties were not until October. A stage appeared at one end of the marquee, and whispers began to circulate that something would be happening on Saturday night. It was Pedro, the new town doctor. He planned to put on a performance of love songs. He was going to serenade the whole town! Hadn't he been a choirboy once? Yes, someone remembered how they'd heard him solo-ing through Dulce Consuelo in the cathedral one Sunday. Such a strong, sweet, pure voice! Like marzipan for the ears! And someone else had heard him singing at his cousin, Constanza's, wedding a few years ago. A beautiful rendition of Te Amare. Even better than Miguel Bose! And now he was going to sing for the whole village on Saturday night. A

whole concert. A gift to everyone. Wouldn't that be worth seeing?

Pedro sweated in his best suit when he stepped out onto the stage on Saturday night. His stomach churned like his mother's washing machine, but he took a deep breath and even managed a smile as he blinked against the lights and looked out on the audience. The band he'd hired: a flamenco guitarist, pianica player, and congas drummer gazed at him with vague smiles from their assumed positions on the stage. The show was costing him a fortune. To his brother, Ramon, he'd had to sell two of the family olive trees which he would one day have inherited from his father in order to afford it. But he didn't care. He was going to impress people with his singing, and he was going to change that family nickname so that from that day onwards they would no longer be known as the cat killers. They would be the lovers, or the serenades, or the sirens, or something equally desirable and impressive, and that foul deed carried out by his great, great grandfather Alfonso would be consigned to history where it belonged. The dozens of candles he'd insisted be set out in various places around the stage had seemed an extravagance, and had raised an eyebrow with the town council's health and safety officer, but Pedro was determined to create the perfect ambience for an unforgettable evening.

People had gathered to fill the whole of the marquee. He saw his mother amongst the crowd, beaming with pride, and he saw his brothers squirming with embarrassment somewhere towards the rear. He saw his nieces and nephews; he saw Marianna and Samuel from the medical centre; he saw Gonzalo his neighbour, the man whose dog would carry him money and notes from his wife. It looked

like the whole town was here. And then, scanning the front row, he saw her, Fabiola Lopez Reyes, looking as radiant as ever with a rose in her hair. He decided his first song, *Te Amo*, *Te Amo*, would be for her.

An anticipatory hush fell over the crowd. Pedro took a step forward onto the stage. It was at that moment that the expectant silence was broken by the sound of a dog barking. As he approached the microphone Pedro glanced up and saw, beyond the heads of the crowd, old Gonzalo's dog running full pelt down the road in pursuit of something. A few people standing to the left of the stage glanced down towards their feet then something darted out of the wings directly into Pedro's path. It happened too fast for him to halt. The darting thing—a cat he saw now, a damned ginger cat!—was suddenly tangled up in his feet. He tripped, and for a moment felt himself flying like Superman towards the congas player. He saw a look of alarm flash across the face of the drummer, who leapt up and collided with the pianica player who had—a moment before - put her instrument to her lips in order to introduce the first song. She let out a long tuneless blast as the congas man bumped her from behind, which made the front row of the audience rear back and screw up their faces. As Pedro fell into the congas with a bud-dum-dum-bom-bash as if signalling the end of a joke, the pianica player tottered forward and kicked over a cluster of candles erected centre stage. The rug that had been laid across the bare boards, borrowed from a nearby bar, must have been soured in whiskey or some equally potent liquor, for there was an immediate eruption of flame. At once, the flamenco player threw aside his guitar, shrugged off his waistcoat and tried to beat out the flames with his it; but he only succeeded in fanning them out so that they took hold of the loose flaps of

the marquee and as Pedro climbed awkwardly to his feet amid the rubble of the congas, he saw flames running up the supporting posts towards the roof. By now smoke was billowing into the crowd and people were screaming and shouting. Men and women came running in with fire extinguishers, people were making frantic phone calls and by the time the fire engine arrived most of the audience had retreated to the side streets where they could watch the disaster unfold from a safe distance. Pedro staggered towards the front of the stage as the fire fighters rushed in. His jaw worked. He batted at the billowing smoke. That cat! That damned ginger cat! It was all that cat's fault. That cat, and Gonzalo's accursed old mutt!

Turning, he caught the eye of the guitarist, who laughed, gave a fatalistic shrug and said, unhelpfully, "You know...life and stuff."

Pedro stayed at home in bed for a week. He daredn't show his face around the village. He was certain people were laughing at him. He phoned-in sick to the medical centre. He even began making plans to leave the village and never return. What a relief, to leave his mother's mad house, where everything seemed wrong. Where cold water came out of the hot taps; and hot water came out of the cold taps. Where there were chairs it was forbidden to sit on, though he'd never known why, and an entire kitchen that was only for show, as still and silent and spotless as the day it had been installed. What a mercy it would be to get away! Yes, he decided, the best thing he could do was leave this crazy place. Perhaps he would go back to Madrid and try and find a job there, though it was crowded and polluted, and the summers were unbearably hot.

At the end of the week his mother entered his bedroom and ordered him to get up.

"What are you doing lying there in bed?" she said. "You're needed at the medical centre. There are ill and injured people waiting."

"But they won't see me," Pedro protested. "I'm a cat killer, remember."

"You're in luck," his mother said. "They don't call us the cat killers anymore."

"What? They don't?"

"No. Not after that performance of yours last Saturday."

"What do they call us?" He dared to hope. "Is it The Lovers?"

His mother laughed for such a long time he began to hate her.

"No," she said at last, wiping her eyes with the sleeve of her blouse. "Not that."

"What do they call us then?"

"Something else."

"What?"

"They call us The Clowns now."

"The Clowns?"

"I think we got off lightly."

He thought of Fabiola Lopez Reyes in her white summer dress. "But Mama... The Clowns?"

"It's better than the cat killers, isn't it? People like clowns. Clowns make people laugh. Make children laugh. Clowns entertain people."

Pedro fell back into his pillows and stared up at the ceiling. "Oh God all mighty."

"It's not His fault," his mother said. "You almost burned up the whole village with your antics. That's what people are saying."

He raised his head and his gaze shifted to something on the floor by his mother's feet.

It was the ginger tom cat he'd had a couple of run-ins with the previous week. His mother must have left the front door ajar, and the cat had slinked inside. It curled around his mother's legs, leapt up onto the bed, purred and arched its back against Pedro's chest.

"Was it you?" Pedro said to the cat. "Was it you who ran across my stage? Huh? What was it, some kind of revenge for that ancestor of yours my great, great grandfather killed? Well, is that it now? Eh? Are we done? Are we in peace? I'm not a cat killer anymore. Am I forgiven?"

The cat looked into his face and blinked.

"I wish I had burned the whole village,"

Pedro muttered, as he ran a hand over the cat's head and back whilst it nuzzled against him. "All of it. All the gossips and the back-stabbers and the bored old women who can't forget the past."

"What was that?" his mother said, distracted by the sound of a loud hailer in the street outside. Pedro thought how here, everyone talked like an actor on a stage. Even the simplest exchanges were projected as if to an audience. The loud-hailer was used by someone selling tomatoes. Three euro! Three euro! went the cry. Pedro smiled to himself.

"I wish I'd burned them all right down to the ground. Maybe then we could all start again."

He looked up, but his mother had vanished. He heard her voice from the street, bartering with the seller over the price of the tomatoes.

Pedro drew the cat into a loose embrace. "What do you say, puss-puss?"

Tim Jeffreys is a UK-based writer of horror and weird fiction. His short stories have appeared or are forthcoming in various anthologies and magazines including *Nightscrip*, *Weirdbook*, and *Not One of Us*.

Reply to Yes (Monsters on a Spoon)

Michael T. Smith

My thoughts are crashing into each other
like two clouds colliding at precarious height—
into a formless shape
of imagination, where the edges
of all words are round.

Now, it's an empty Sunday afternoon,
and I'm hiding
in my parents' car
with other motorists flying by in boustrophedon
when I see my own eyes in front of my face
(while the sun shone through the lids with a smile).

Word on the street incorrectly said
it was noon
as it was only featured in an old Western,
but the fat lady burped out a symphony
that stopped the world on its webbed axis,
and set a tinted mood—for the day
was dead.

Meanwhile, the audience's faces opened
so bloody hard
that all that was left of them was their big teeth.
(This is insanity:
isn't it sweet?)
I ask with my body:
'Who isn't the Monster with their eyes popping out?'

I thought I saw the end of the world,
but it was actually nothing
but a memory.
Ageless whispers of the naught
say the same thing—Isn't it sweet?