A dark, atmospheric night photograph of a city street. In the background, several tall buildings are visible, their windows glowing with light. A streetlight illuminates the scene, casting a warm glow on the wet pavement. The overall mood is mysterious and haunting. The text is overlaid in a stylized, gothic font.

THE HAUNTED TRAVELER
A ROAMING ANTHOLOGY

The Haunted Traveler

The First Roaming Anthology

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Weasel

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Featured Travelers

**Daniel Ayiotis
Cathy Bryant
Irving A. Greenfield
India Hughes
Jenean McBrearty
Peter McQueary
Frank Morelli
Ian Nafziger
Patty Papageorgiou
David Perlmutter
Ranylt Richildis
Sendokidu
Mike Sheedy
Edward Smith
J.J. Steinfield
Miranda Stone
Timmy**

**“Pleasure to me is wonder—the unexplored,
the unexpected, the thing that is hidden and
the changeless thing that lurks behind superfi-
cial mutability.”
—H.P. Lovecraft**

The Judges

Jenean McBrearty

The judge's name is Arnold Shinholter. He sits on the Avon Park 10th Circuit Court bench and once considered himself the cock o' the walk of the court house. He deserved to die. I didn't kill him, of course, because I refused to give his family the satisfaction of "closure" by sending me to prison—or worse—to some nut house where uniformed uninformed people would treat me like a specimen and show me pity.

I investigated over my alternatives. Some would say brooded over them, but I don't think that's a fair characterization because I was unemotional about my plans. Except for the rage. I read about assassinations, murders, and tortures. I consulted those who dabbled in the black arts as well as those who hired themselves out for dirty work—morticians, grave-diggers, embalmers, crematory workers, and dead animal removers. Finally, I settled on ex-Nazi guards, the *crème-de-la-crème*, as it were, of human disposal experts. All I had to do was find one still alive and willing to help me.

I had to convince my anti-Semite vengeance agent that Shinholter was a Jew, of course, but Shinholter sounds like a Jewish name. From what I could tell from his residency—he lives in Florida—and from the picture on his web-page, it seems likely. Thin, black-haired, a long nose, mild-mannered, but haughty. He could pass. He believes himself to be upper class, and this made his treatment of me all the more shameful. Upper class people were supposed to be kind to their inferiors.

Contacting an ex-Nazi was easier than I expected. Off of the Stormfront web-site, I discovered the 89-year old writer of a book entitled "Confessions from Auschwitz" by Bronislaw Sobieski.

Sobieski became a fascist in 1933, when he was thirteen years old. His mother was killed on her way to mass by a neighborhood communist organizer. The police said they couldn't prove who did it, but Bronislaw knew it was Anatole Padereski. The whole neighborhood knew Padereski had been in love with Ludmilla Sobieski since their days at the university at Krakow, where she had flirted with him and Bolshevism. Then she rejected Communism because it rejected God, and she rejected Anatole because he was an atheist. She fell into Bruno's bed because he was a passionate lover. Their rapturous union produced Bronislaw.

An eternal barb lodged in the soul of Bronislaw that terrible morning. He would seize any opportunity to avenge what could not be undone. He was able to kill Jewish mothers and children with a clear conscience because their deaths weren't murder. They were death sentences written in black bold letters on the pages of history.

“Like the beatitude that read, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they shall be satisfied,” the first chapter of his book began, and I knew he was my man. Perhaps he would see in me another mother wronged by an unbeliever. I e-mailed Sobieski this message: I hunger and I thirst. Who will slake my deprivation? I included a link to Shinholter’s web-page. Twenty-four hours later Bronislaw replied: I will.

He didn’t ask for details. There was no need. He understood what I needed as only those who are dying of malignant trauma can understand. Sobieski had a name and a place—all I had to do was wait. We never met. I have never seen his face. But I know what he did for me was an act of retribution in defense of dishonored womanhood. Bronislaw wrote:

Every time I heard the screams of terror coming from inside the gas chamber, I thought of my mother’s screams for help—desperate, alone, covered in the haze of morning mist that turned into a heavy rain, eventually carrying her blood into a street gutter clogged with trash.

His words weren’t eloquent, but his pain was poetry. In them I heard my own feelings of despair, defenseless and debilitated, wondering how it was that my fate rested in the hands of one who swore to protect the rights of the weak, but who was as corrupt as a pail of maggots. Bronislaw wrote:

The communists swore to defend us against the predations of the powerful. They set themselves between us and our exploiters like shields, and in fact, they used a golden shield on their banner to proclaim their oath to us. But their words were lies.

Many people believed the lies of the communist utopians in Bronislaw’s time. Let the Party take control of the State and, soon the State will wither away, they promised. It wasn’t true. No power structure withers away. It enacts and administrates laws to ensure its survival. Each person is, in the end, responsible for his own self-protection against all threats. The bigger the power structure, the more necessary the wherewithal to defend one’s own interests. Constitutions are worthless paper if their provisions are not enforced by those pledged to do so.

Bronislaw knew the Nazis were no better than the Communists. He supported them because they supported him. He wrote:

Every time I saw a stack of naked bodies I thought about the pyramids – those heaps of stone that have endured for centuries after the names of the people for whom they were built have been forgotten. The Holocaust is its own homage to itself, a self-sustaining business monument, for which the Jew is infamous, that insures the immortality of my participation though my name be forgotten.

Bronislaw did not hate the individuals he helped massacre, no more than the pharaohs hated the stones that formed their tombs. How many Hebrews died layering the stones into place was of no consequence; they were the mechanism to get the job done. Bronislaw wrote of the *capos*:

I watched them handle the carcasses like cut wood or stone fencing. Only the destination of these human building materials was not ascension toward heaven, but a descent into a deep pit.

Men like Bronislaw come along once in a century, a half-man, half-animal who survive through force of will. I wondered how he escaped the Nuremburg witch-hunts, how he came to America, and how he remained free despite extradition and the Mossad. Perhaps he had proof of the Communist atrocities before the war. Every day I expected to see his name in the headlines, but he remains invisible.

Shinholter's name made headlines. Three young men, with shaved heads, strong hands and black boots kidnapped him, and took him to an unknown location where somebody surgically removed the muscles from his right leg, foot, and arm before dumping him at a hospital emergency room. The surgery had been performed with little anesthesia. Blindfolded and begging for mercy was the way the hospital staff described his initial arrival. Crippled for life was the way they described his prognosis. Dr. Bronislaw Sobieski had done well.

Sometimes I drive down to Avon Park. I rent a motel room and have the wake-up service call me at 6 AM. I get dressed, have a leisurely breakfast, and drive to the courthouse. I walk to the back of the building, and wait for Shinholter's van. He parks in the handicapped space, maneuvering it with steering wheel hand controls. Then, the struggle begins. The hydraulic lift lowers his wheelchair to the ground. He pushes a remote control and the lift mechanism raises and disappears into the side of the van. He locks the door and slowly motors off towards the ramp leading to the basement where the elevator waits to take him to the second floor. A Sheriff's Deputy holds the door for him.

He still hasn't adapted to using his left arm to control the chair's movements so he jerks when he turns. He will learn how to control the chair as the years pass. His frustration will turn to resignation. He'll give up seeking miracles. He will learn to live with what cannot be undone. Like Bronislaw. Like me.

I walk back to my car when the courthouse door slams shut. I remember what it was like when I needed a wheel chair to get around. I was terrified I'd never walk again. Getting ready for work took two hours, one just to bathe and dry and dress. After six months, crutches were an improvement. At least I was standing erect. But using crutches was dangerous. When I could finally put pressure on my right leg, I walked with a pronounced limp. Throughout the entire litigation, all I asked was to be allowed to make telephonic appearances so I would not have to struggle up the stairs, struggle with heavy doors and narrow bathroom stalls. He denied every request.

When I sued him under federal law, the courts wrapped him in judicial immunity and let him do what no other person in America can do: discriminate against the disabled with impunity. His black robe protected him from all accountability. My pain and fear were nothing to him or to the federal courts. He was a judge and I was nobody. He wore a black robe. I wore a leg brace.

Bronislaw was a first-year medical student when the war began. He was at Auschwitz-Birkenau three months before Dr. Mengele recommended he continue his studies and assist him in his experiments. "Anesthesia was for brave soldiers at field hospitals, not medical experimentation," Bronislaw explained in the last chapter of his book.

“That’s where I learned how to administer just enough to immobilize, without wasting precious war materials.” His time under Mengele’s tutelage wasn’t wasted either. He became as adept with stealth as he was with a scalpel.

I can walk unaided now. After four years, I can ride my bike, go shopping, and carry my packages. My post-polio syndrome is in remission. My hatred of Shinholter is not.

This is justice, I tell myself every time I walk into his courtroom and see him humbled, entering by way of a ramp—a reasonable accommodation the court made for him so he can continue to pass judgment, so he can piece back his life on the bench. This is my judgment, I tell myself every time I see that familiar look of pathos in his eyes, the look that tells me he will forever wonder why he screamed for help and no one came. Why he cried for mercy and his tormentors just laughed at him. Why he was once powerful and is now pitiful.

Sometimes he stares at me. I can tell he is trying to recall who I am or if we’ve met before. He won’t remember. He never looked at me during the proceeding. He turned away because a crippled woman is not an object of desire. She is avoided as one avoids looking at a disfigured child. But now, his eyes beg me for understanding. He looks to all the women in the courtroom to comfort him, to acknowledge his need for help and respect. I see him searching their faces for approval. Admiration. Solace. Recognition of his suffering. His triumph over adversity. He hungers and thirsts for manhood.

I always sit in the front-row. When I’ve had enough, I make eye contact with him with eyes devoid of compassion. Proudly, I stand up for Ludmilla Sobieski and her son, a merciless criminal of a heinous regime who did not hesitate to give me justice, and I walk away, slowly, without a limp or a regret, knowing Shinholter is watching me. Wondering who and why.



ON BEING HAUNTED

Irving A. Greenfield

“Sure. All of us are haunted.”

That was what Dr. Bruce Thantos said at lunch. He and I were in the faculty dining room at Bridge College; a long deep room with large glass windows on one end that overlooked the Narrows and the Bay Ridge section of Brooklyn directly across the ribbon-like body of water separating the two boroughs. From anywhere close to the windows, the Verrazano Bridge was clearly visible to the South; and the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center would have been visible to the North if part of the hill on which the college sat wasn't in the way.

On a bright, sunny, day when the sky was emerald blue or slightly smudged over with high cirrus clouds turning it more aqua than blue, it was a delight to sit there and enjoy the urban vista. It was even a delight when the sky was cloud covered, and the tops of the bridge towers were obscured by swirling fog.

I particularly enjoyed the view when various bulk carrying ships-tankers and such rode at anchor within the frames of the windows. They added global dimension to the scene, and offered a reminder of that time when I was a seaman on a T2-tanker--a type that sometimes lay anchored in the Narrows waiting to be summoned to a nearby off-loading facility.

But the deeper you went into the Faculty Dining Room the light faded into a gloominess that wasn't completely done away with by the electric lights. It was here the luncheon buffet was set up. If I were the suspicious or paranoid type, I would certainly make the connection between the quality of the food and the ambience in which was served.

The day or, more specifically, the time of day that Dr. Thantos made his pronouncement, the weather conditions became a dramatic backdrop for it. The sun was gone and dark gray-clouds piled into huge dark castles or whatever shape your imagination assigned to them. For me it was kind of Rorschach Test in the sky with no one recording the results.

Dr. Thantos was a big man, with a graying beard. He taught courses on religion and one called "Death and Beyond." His voice came from his chest, deep and resonant. If you were at a table with him or anywhere else in his presence, there would be no way to avoid giving him—if not your full attention—at least enough of it to be aware of what he was saying.

Having said "that all of us are haunted," he immediately garnered my attention. But the look on his face and the twinkle I caught in his brown eyes, told me he was off on one of his ego trips in the guise of an *intellectual discussion*.

He let his comment sit out there hanging over the table like one of the clouds over the Brooklyn shoreline. No one, and there were three other people at the table, said anything that would have turned the comment into a conversation. Dr. Kay Winston, a Professor of English Literature, was too ethereal to be bound by the conventional law of gravity. Dr. Paul Devlin, also a Professor of English Literature, concentrated his energies on Irish Literature - - a kind of cultural mania. The fifth individual at the table was Dr. Annette Shuss, Chair of the Humanities department, and the Chair of the English Department. Her specialty was Medieval English Literature. But her real interest lay in the political side of the college environment. A WASP to her bones, she barely opened her lips when she spoke.

She laid claim to having one of her ancestors on the Mayflower. And oh yes, she harbored a profound dislike for me. Perhaps “dislike” is too mild a term? Resentment would be closer to the mark. My feelings for her and my opinion of her fluctuated between injury and anger, either of which I could do nothing about except to accept on the particular day which one or the other of them manifested itself. It was more difficult to cope with when the two of them--like the zany creatures in Doctor Seuss’ CAT IN THE HAT-- played roller ball in my brain.

It was something of an anomaly that she and I were seated at the same table. Obviously, neither of us had known that the other would be there. I arrived at the table with Paul. We chanced to meet outside the Faculty Dining Room. Dr Thantos joined us when we were already at the table, so did Dr. Winston. Then Annette came. I don’t think she would have chosen the table if she had seen me. I was somewhat off to the side, hidden from view by a very wide column. But once she committed to the table, she could not withdraw without some obvious confusion since several acceptable members of the department were seated there.

Annette stopped eating-chewing rabbit-like on a piece of lettuce-and with a minimum of lip movement said, “If you mean by our individual histories, I agree.”

Before Bruce could respond, Paul offered, “There’s also the Jungian collective unconscious.”

Bruce smiled the way I had seen large dogs smile when they had got what they wanted. “Haunted by- - let’s say-creatures of the unknown,” he said.

I speared a piece of Swiss cheese and brought it to my mouth.

Bruce looked particularly professional. We were his students, and he continued with, “A good part of the world’s population believes in a spirit world existing parallel to our own.”

Kay squirmed a bit and said, “Certainly, aspects of the supernatural have yet to be defined.”

By the time I finished chewing and swallowing my Swiss cheese, I realized Bruce waited for my input. He wasn’t about to let anyone

“go along for the ride.” I felt he noticed my immediate response to his opening comment.

He pushed me a bit more when he asked, “What do you think about it, Jeff? Are we or are we not haunted?”

I detected a challenge in his tone. Perhaps it was there because Annette was there. *Brown nosing or ass kissing*, as it was called many years ago, was still very much part of academia’s political scene. Bridge College was no exception. Besides, at that time I did not have a PhD, the requisite union card to be an acknowledged academic, though I had been teaching at the college for fifteen years and for all of that time, except the last two years, in the English Department. Now, much like a specter myself, I floated. Attached to no particular department, I teach an assortment of odd courses that fall under the aegis of Multidiscipline Studies.

My hesitation irritated Bruce to the point where he asked the same question in a slightly different form. “Well, what’s your opinion, Jeff? Are we or are we not haunted?”

I glanced at Annette, who was now munching on a carrot, before I asked, “How do you define ‘being haunted?’” I was still looking at Annette when I spoke. Because I did not possess the requisite union card, a PhD, my answer would lack the proper intellectual provenance.

Bruce answered with, “Haunted as being haunted by ghosts, spirits and the like.”

I laughed. “Aren’t we all?” And before he could answer, I said, “Annette has a Mayflower ancestor. Howland, I think his name was. And I have--” I let that hang in the air and watched her face go from its naturally palled color to something resembling a blush. Not full red, but pink. As if she couldn’t stoke up the necessary fire to match whatever emotion she felt.

“He was a bit of rouge,” she said, hardly moving her lips.

I laughed again. “Almost thrown overboard, I understand, for thievery. That certainly makes him more than just a ‘bit of rouge.’”

Raising his eyebrows Bruce looked at Annette, as if he were

saying, *I didn't know that.*

To add a bit more color to her cheeks, I said, "I looked it up. It's in the ship's log. Now that must be a haunting fact, mustn't it?" Of course, I didn't look it up. I heard about it from someone who had, and who felt the antipathy toward Annette than I did, but for different reasons.

More color didn't fire into Annette's face. The fire that was there, however small, was quenched. She blanched and looked at me with a malevolence that gave me joy. I cut deep and she bled . . . It gave me pleasure to see her bleed.

"Certainly, that's a kind of haunting," I said in the most innocent tone I could muster.

Annette quickly countered with, "I'm sure not in the sense that Bruce meant."

I let her acidulous response fly past without making one of my own. I knew exactly what Bruce wanted to hear. But while he played his head game, I played mine and would soon escalate the stakes. *Intellectual*, of course.

Kay's long-fingered hands fluttered like two disconnected wings over her plate as she said, "Dreaming is a kind of haunting, isn't? I mean we often see specific people and specific places."

Bruce nodded. "I suppose you might call it a form of haunting. But what I really meant was haunting associated with the occult."

Again, playing my game not his, I asked, "You mean like actually encountering ectoplasmic matter and hearing it speak? Or to put it another way, encountering someone, as is often euphemistically referred to as 'from the other side?'"

Bruce's face brightened. His brown eyes actually glittered. "Yes. That's it. Meeting someone from the other side."

"Come on, Bruce, isn't that more than a bit ridiculous?" Paul questioned.

“There’s an occult world we know nothing about,” Kay said. “I mean there are factual cases of such meetings that can’t be explained away.”

Paul was skeptical. His attitude was, *I’m from Missouri. Show me.*

And Annette, of course, looked as if she hoped I would choke on whatever I ate or drank. Rather than take umbrage with her attitude, I was delighted with it. I knew “the best was yet to come.”

It became perceptibly darker outside. With the fog so dense, it was barely possible to see the Brooklyn shoreline. If it weren’t for the stream of yellowish-white lights moving in both directions--East and West--along the Belt Parkway, the land and the fog would have become one.

Our small group, with Dr. Thantos presiding, was momentarily silent. Each of its members occupied with the solitary task of eating.

I picked at the food on my plate. Taking time to look at and think about each of my colleagues starting with Paul. Though a lapsed Catholic, much of the Catholicity inculcated into him when he was younger was still there: God, The Devil, Heaven and Hell. As for Kay, she was too frightened by life not to believe in the parallel world of the occult. Bruce was totally different from the others at the table. Quick witted with the capacity to be verbally cruel. His beliefs were amorphous. But gave credence to the ideas of good and evil; and probably, if one went deep enough, to God, the creator, and the Devil, the destroyer, as unity, more eastern than a western view of God and His opposite.

But when I looked at Annette, I was looking at the personification-- in her eyes--of Christian rectitude: a believer, a Sunday church goer, an Episcopalian or some other Protestant denomination. Had she lived in England, it would have been the High Church. She possessed an air of impregnability. But evidence of the *green eyed monster* was recognizably there. Having published little in academic journals and nothing in the way of fiction or poetry, she was extremely jealous of those who had, which was why I fell out of her favor. Not that I was ever in it. But as the years passed and my work appeared more frequently, her disdain grew until she could no longer accept me as a member of her department. I was not sufficiently academic. I did not have the required union card.

common--a dead sibling, mine, a sister, Gail by name. Hers, a brother named Joshua. Both died at the same age, forty-two; and from the same disease, Multiple myeloma. Gail died in nineteen sixty-five. Her brother about ten years ago. Yet our occult experiences were very similar.

All of this came to me in the higgledy-piggledy construct of a dream about my sister. I seldom dream about my sister or, if I do, I do not remember the dream. But this one occurred a few days ago just before waking. In the dream, Gail pointed to another woman and told me to do something about her. "Use it," were the only words I heard. "Use it," she repeated. Then, just yesterday, another colleague told me about Annette's brother. She was as close to him as I was to my sister. Now, all I had to do was to explain my *occult experience* and let her imagination play with it.

After the brief interval of silence, Bruce pressed me for an answer, as I was sure he would. So, happily, I gave him what he wanted . . . "Many years ago," I began, "I went island hopping in the Caribbean. My sons were very young at the time: ten and six. Because I was freelancing, any vacation was a working vacation. I'd write from nine in the morning to noon. The remainder of the afternoon was given over to sightseeing or just relaxing, as much as a freelancer can ever relax."

"Come on, cut to the chase," Paul said impatiently.

He was right. Less is always more effective than more. It allows the listener or reader to be creative.

I looked straight at Annette. "My sister had died a few weeks before after having agonizingly suffered from multiple myeloma."

The last two words grabbed Annette. She stiffened.

"On St. Croix we wound up in the hotel Clovecrest on the Frederikstead side of the island. Clovecrest was an enormous white structure that looked something like an old plantation house."

With her hand trembling, Annette managed to lift her coffee cup.

"We were the only guests, so we discovered later. The only other people there were an elderly woman, who seemed to be the hotel's owner, and a man who wore amber colored glasses."

“I don’t see what . . . what you’re telling us has to do with Bruce’s question,” Annette said, forcing the words out between her almost closed lips.

“I wanted to set the scene,” I answered.

“Just give us a yes or no,” Bruce said, his tone almost a command.

Ignoring him, I said, “That night, while I was sitting on the veranda directly outside of our room watching the play of heat lightning in the distance, my sister came to me.”

Annette turned very pale.

“You mean you saw her?” Kay asked agitatedly.

“No. At first I felt a presence, an odd sensation, a chill, yet not a chill. I had seen my share of dead men during the Korean War and, of course, relatives who died after the war. But the feeling I had was very different.”

“Then what happened?” Bruce asked, now caught up in the story.

“She spoke to me,” I answered. “Her voice sounded as if . . . as if it wasn’t really a sound. More like the rustle of a silk curtain when stirred by a breeze. Yet there was a mournful quality to it.”

“And you could actually hear her?” Annette asked, her voice almost a whisper.

I nodded. And altering my voice to fit the description I gave, I said, “I’m lonely, so very lonely. Please come to me. Please.”

Annette’s hands tightened in to fists. “That couldn’t have happened that way,” she croaked.

“But it did,” I coolly answered.

“What did you do?” Paul asked.

“It’s not my time,” I told her.

“Nothing else?” Bruce questioned.

“Far out at sea the sky suddenly lit up and for a fraction of a second I saw my father; and I knew when my time to die came, he would come for me. I would see him.

Annette slammed her two fists down on the table. “Someone told you,” she shouted, bolting up and drawing the attention of everyone in the dining room to our table. “Someone told you about my brother.”

With my face a mask, I looked at her.

“Annette, such experiences are not uncommon,” Bruce said gently.

“Don’t you understand,” she practically screeched, “he made it up. He told a story.”

Bruce looked at me.

Unflinchingly, I met his gaze. “My sister died in nineteen sixty-five,” I said.

Annette shook her head. “He made it up. My brother - -” Then, she sat. And putting her hands in front of her face, she wept.

I felt sorry for her. I had broken her, or at least had broken a part of her. I lifted my eyes to the window. In the gray folds of the fog I saw the image of my sister. She was smiling.

The Eliminator and the Undertaker

Edward Smith

It was in that time when most people are asleep, those hours between two and five. But this is when the Eliminator and the Undertaker preferred to work. The streets were dark and mostly empty. Their work was dark. And that work proceeded best when the crowds were least found.

“You must be the Undertaker.”

He was short and bent, dressed in dark clothes. The darkness concealed most everything else. As he turned, the highly diffused light from the gaslight across the street revealed a face pockmarked and unshaven.

“And you must be the Eliminator. I came as soon as I was summoned.”

They stood on either side of the body lying in the wet street and looked down at it. They held their silence.

Finally, the Undertaker spoke. “Who was he?”

“You know that you are not to ask. The less you know, the better.”

The Undertaker chuckled, then uttered a slow and guttural “Sorry.”

“Your job is just to make things tidy.”

“Oh, and that I will sir, that I will. I can see you did yours, and I will do mine.”

After a long pause, the Undertaker queried. “Where shall I take him, sir?”

“Take him to the docks. We don’t want the body found close to here. The quayside will offer a challenge for the cops. They will be questioning the folks there for weeks.”

“Very good, sir.”

And with that, the man known as the Undertaker, the man who tidied up after messy scenes had been made, loaded the body into the back of his one-horse freight wagon of worn and weathered wood. Throwing a heavy tarp over the body, he turned slowly to the Eliminator and offered, as if in anticipation of the question, “A hearse might attract the attention of any souls who would be out and about. We would not want that, now, would we?”

“Indeed not. Our work carries risk enough without neglect of all the care we can give to it.”

With that, the Undertaker mounted his conveyance. Before driving off into the darkness, he spoke once more. “Perchance, we will one day, or more properly said, one night, work together once more.”

“Yes, mayhap we will. My book is not in want of names of those who yet are to be eliminated.”

And so, while the city had slept, the Eliminator and the Undertaker had done their work, perhaps work as integral as any to the functioning of the city.



FREEDOM 55

David Perlmutter

On November 30, 1955, Abyssinia Jones returned home from his tiring and low paying job to what he hoped would be a solid night's sleep. Jones, who worked as a janitor at a local steel mill, since he did not have the educational background for anything higher in the job market, was silently cursing the fact that he was "black". Considering that it was this very racial, social and political status that prevented him from advancing any further than his current lot in life, he had much to complain about. However, he was not allowed, by both the hierarchy of his job and his "inferior" social status, to make any comments in return to the degrading and discriminatory treatment he received on his job, and so he planned to voice these complaints to himself silently that evening while he ate and slept in his "ghetto" apartment.

Immediately upon entering, he was blinded by a shaft of yellow light, which retreated as soon as it arrived, leaving a stranger in the room with a black remote control box in his hands.

The stranger was an African American like Jones, although, far from displaying a deferential weariness in his body and facial posturing, the man was, in fact, a specimen from a more advanced future- specifically, the year 2013. Jones, fearing the worst, stepped back and addressed the stranger.

"You git away from me!" Jones ordered sharply. "I don' know where you comin' from, but you ain't takin' me back there wit' you!"

"Now, there's no need to be hostile!" the stranger responded calmly. "I just want to know what year this is and where I am!"

"This is 1955, fool!" said Jones. "And you is in Birmingham, Alabama, as if you ain't knowing that already!"

A broad smile came over the stranger's face.

"It works!" he said softly to himself. "It works!"

"Wha' you talkin' 'bout, man?" Jones demanded.

“Oh! I apologize,” he said, shaking Jones’ hand. “We haven’t been properly introduced yet. My name is Dr. Henry L. Gooch.”

“I am likewise known as Abyssinia Jones,” said the man with that name. “But you has still not explained to me about who you are and where you have come from.”

“I’ll explain that now,” said Gooch. “I am from the year 2009, and I came here through the services of the time machine that I constructed. I thought, perhaps, I would have been able to transport myself farther back through the space time continuum, but, as it is, being in 1955 is good enough.”

“Good enough?” answered Jones, surprised that he would use such positive language. “Man, hush yo’ mouth! We has got it bad here! I works twelve hours a day, and I barely get enough money to pay my rent as it is! I suppose you all in 2009 are in the same position.”

“Actually,” said Dr. Gooch, “while many African Americans remain impoverished, there is a much larger number of us now who are well educated and financially affluent...”

“Hold up!” said Jones. “Wha’ you call our people, there?”

“African Americans,” said Gooch. “It’s the proper, politically correct term for us in my time.”

“Dey don’t call us niggers there? Or colored? Or even plain ol’ black?”

“Some of them still do. But racism in general is looked upon much more unfavorably in all forms of life. So, unlike conditions in your time, we tend to judge people for jobs, for instance, much more on the condition of their character rather than outward appearances. It’s therefore much easier for you to obtain a good job and keep it in my time than it would be in yours.”

“But yo’ still needs education and all, which I ain’t got!” said Jones. “I s’pose they still gots them separate schools for us. I know ‘bout that Supreme Court decision, but...”

“There is no segregated schooling in 2009!” answered Gooch. “All students are treated exactly the same! Even at the university level. That’s where I come from. I’m a professor of quantum physics at Harvard University.”

“Ha’vard?” exclaimed Jones, in shock. “You is *joking*! Dey don’t let niggers anywhere near dem white people’s schools! I could understand if you said you was from Fisk or Morehouse, but not Ha’vard, man!”

“Well, technically I got my B.A. at Yale, but I got my Ph.D at Harvard,” Gooch qualified. “But it’s true. African Americans have more opportunities for advancement and achievement than at any time in the history of America in 2009. We are simply fulfilling the dreams that Dr. King had for us....”

“Who?”

“Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.”

“Man, I don’t know nobody by DAT name!”

Dr. Gooch was going to scold the man for not knowing the name of the famed civil rights leader, but then he checked himself. He was, after all, in 1955. The Montgomery Bus Boycott was two years away. As were all of King’s achievements. As were most of the major achievements of African Americans in the twentieth century. Gooch could not communicate these events to Jones, as they were yet to come. But, possibly, he could convince Jones to return with him to 2009 and educate him in the new ways of African Americans. Especially when he knew the most miraculous achievement that African Americans had yet been able to achieve.

“Never mind that,” said Gooch. “Just know that a lot of good things will happen to our people in the future.”

“And lotta bad,” added Jones. “Like always.”

“Well, of course,” Gooch conceded. “But you haven’t heard the most miraculous aspect of living in America in 2009.”

“I s’pose you gonna tell me the President is a *black* man,” said Jones cynically. “Like DAT’s ever gonna happen!”

“He *is* a black man,” said Gooch.

Jones’ jaw dropped.

“You better *not* be foolin’ me!” he warned Gooch.

“I’m not,” Gooch answered. He opened his suit jacket and pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket. “I have his picture right here.” He handed the picture to Jones so he could examine it for himself.

“Obama,” said Jones, reading the man’s name. “That ain’t no black name! Dat’s a *African* name!”

“Well, where do you think we came from?” Gooch said, beginning to get testy.

Once Jones finished reading the pocket biography of the “black” President which Gooch had given him, he threw it on the ground in a rage. This was not the reaction that Gooch had wanted to see. Nor was he expecting the vicious glint that emerged in Jones’ eyes as he stalked back towards him.

“You be *foolin’* me, man!” shouted Jones. “That man ain’t no black president!”

“But he is, I assure you!” Gooch said, backing up towards the window at the far end of the room. “He was born and raised in Hawaii....”

“That ain’t no part of *America!*”

“He went to Harvard, and he lived and worked in inner city Chicago....”

“Dat don’t make no difference! I tol’ you, he ain’t no *black* man! His pop is African, and his maw is *white!* White, man! Where I come from, there ain’t no damn fool nigger who’d even try to make it with a white woman! No nigger wants a date with the hemp hangman for *that* one, man! You ain’t from no 2009- you a con man from right here in 1955! ‘Cause dere ain’t *no* country outside of Africa dat would elect a black man President! And this man ain’t even black- he a high yella MULATTA!”

Jones next proceeded to withdraw a switchblade knife out of his pocket and poke the blade towards Gooch's neck.

“Now, Mr. 2009, I's gonna give you a taste of 1955 black justice!” Jones warned Gooch. “'Cause there ain't *nobody* 'round that cons Abysinia Jones! Not NOBODY!”

“Please,” Gooch said as he backed up. “Be reasonable. I can...”

Gooch never finished his sentence. He backed up too far and crashed through the closed window to the street below, four floors down. A crowd gathered around him, and, as he lay dying, he could hear a few of the words they were saying.

“Damn fool nigger,” said one voice. “Why he go and do that?”

“Typical reason,” said another. “Money or women trouble. But he must've been filthy rich. Why else would he be dressed so fine?”

“Sho' nuff!” said a third voice. “He was a pimp, definite like. How else a black man gonna get that kind of money here in 1955?”

How else indeed?

Valhalla

Patty Papageorgiou

Some of the children don't believe me. They say my stories are made up. They say I'm so old, I don't know what I'm talking about anymore. But that doesn't bother me. I tell them what I know. I tell them what I remember. They can believe what they like; they'll make their own minds up eventually.

My bed is soft. My pillow rustles gently under my wrinkled head. The sky above me is red. Reddish-orange. I could never decide which. Never got used to it. Sometimes it reminds me of a sunset, sometimes it's just plain alien. But that doesn't matter. What does is that I am 126 years old and I am here to look up at it. There was a time when I wouldn't believe that. But, here I am.

The children like coming to me for stories rather than visit the public databanks. Even though they claim I am lying, they can't hide the sparkle in their eyes. I can see their wonder and amazement at hearing about things they've never seen and never will. They don't say so but I know they prefer to hear it from me than their teachers.

Creating databanks had been second on the priority list after oxygenating this atmosphere. Get the planet viable, then find every morsel of information available on human kind and back it up safely for the education of future generations.

They had tried Mars first. The plants in the "greenhouses" had lived long enough to give scientists hope of other life forms surviving on the planet. They set up experimental farms. Livestock. Pigs and monkeys. They were the closest types to humans they could test. And for a while it worked. The environment proved to be suitable for the animals and for a few months we followed the Mars progress on our TV sets like a bizarre science fiction. We had nicknamed it Planet of the Apes and Pigs.

Then it happened. First the plants dried up. Completely. They shriveled and turned black overnight. The pigs got sick next, then the monkeys. Within a week every living organism transferred to Mars had died. The research probes had registered no life forms whatsoever. Not even bacteria. They never figured out what happened. Plans to start transporting humans were cancelled and work began immediately on

Area B, a newly discovered small planet they were experimenting on. Some plants had already flourished in its new “greenhouse atmosphere” but there hadn’t been a chance to try animals. Time had run out and they decided to take the risk.

Before the chaos began, programs had already been underway to rehabilitate humans on other planets. Existing space science organizations joined forces to found the Salvation Space Program. The SSP held a global recruitment call for every physicist, mathematician, chemist, biologist and engineer left on Earth. Together they established the SSP Base and HQ at an old airstrip in Central Africa, the largest land mass not yet underwater. The first Space Bus was ready to fly within the year, with a capacity of 400 passengers. It was named Noah’s Ark II.

Tickets for the first Bus had been distributed by raffle. No one questioned the risks of being the first human to land on an untested planet. The floods had by now claimed nearly a third of each continent. Most of the remaining dry land was being ravaged by the earthquakes. Disease had done the rest. Billions were dead and survivors flocked to the SSP Base by any means possible. Quarantine and medical tests on passengers were unnecessary. Only the healthy made it to the Base.

Luck was on my side. My ticket got me on Ark II. It took off safely, landed safely and we didn’t choke on our first breath of artificial air. The handful of SSP officials who were on our flight guided us through the basic plans and we set to work immediately. We located the probes and cargo shuttles that had been sent during the previous year, all scattered across the rocky expanse of the planet. We built the first shelters and set equipment up and running.

They had thought of everything. Communications with Earth were established in no time and we prepared the ground for the arrival of the next Space Bus. Small cargo shuttles continued to arrive every few weeks with sundries, livestock, data files and occasional passengers.

When Noah’s Ark III landed 12 months later, Area B was a living, breathing replica of a little slice of Earth. Complete with approximately 500 inhabitants and an unusual conglomeration of flora and fauna. Sheep and antelope grazed on genetically modified patches of grass

surrounded by sprouting olive and palm trees. Kiwi birds and chickens pecked at bugs brought from the African plains near the SSP Base. An engineer had collected a few in a box while waiting to board. They had multiplied in weeks. We even had small vegetable gardens growing, which we irrigated with canals from our first artificial stream.

Ark III unloaded its bewildered passengers and together we continued working on making this planet our new home.

We built New Earth City with the first basic shelters becoming our houses. Even though the atmosphere had been oxygenated, we took precautionary measures. In threes and fours, shelters were enclosed in a shared oxy-dome, a kind of plexi-glass bubble which could be sealed in an emergency. Each shelter also had a sky-dome, a curved clear roof to allow light in. This remained a feature on all N. Earth houses built later on.

A parrot flies over my oxy-dome, a flutter of bright green against the red sky. I follow it with my eyes until it disappears from my line of sight. Strange birds. Of all the species we successfully brought, these green parrots have thrived. They are now all over the place. They are New Earth City's pigeons.

The thought makes me chuckle and it hurts my sides. I wince. Macrobiotic medicine does wonders for your life span but it doesn't make you younger. These old bones have come a long way mind...

I breathe slowly and relax. Not yet. Not just yet...

I think back to how our lifestyle began to inevitably resemble the one we left behind. We would gather in groups in shelters equipped with televisions, to watch the news transmitted daily from the SSP Base. Like those watching the first Moon landing centuries before us we watched the preparations for the forthcoming launch of Noah's Ark IV.

But things were getting worse. Europe, Russia, North and Central America were entirely under water. Earthquakes were shaking the planet on a daily basis. Subsequent damages kept delaying The Ark IV mission. SSP officials had announced that the Ark IV mission was likely to be the last.

The last Ark never made it. And it wasn't through TV but with our own eyes that we witnessed the greatest tragedy known to humankind.

We had developed a daily routine of facing Earth in the "mornings", while we could still make her out in the distance in the dark, maroon sky. A tiny speck of blue amongst the silver twinkles slowly fading away as maroon turned to brighter red. Through a telescopic projection, we were also allowed a closer view, which showed us wisps of clouds floating across her flooded surface. Someone had once saluted, hand on heart. Those who saw the gesture mirrored it and it became our morning ritual. Our daily prayer.

That unforgettable morning, we were one moment looking at the Earth, hands on hearts, the next she was gone. No big bang, no flash of lightning, nothing. The whole planet just crumbled into millions of little pieces that floated away into space.

Just like that, Earth was gone.

We stood staring at the sky for an hour. No one spoke. If we got tired of standing, we sat down. It reminded me of holding a minute's silence on memorial days. How unbearable that minute would be and how you'd always end up clearing your throat, or coughing, or fidgeting. That day we stood silent for an hour. Then someone started to cry.

I'm crying now. Tears are leaking into my ears and the red sky above is blurring. I blink slowly to clear my eyes and breathe gently. I sigh. I'm not ready yet, I'm expecting a visitor.

I look at the clock on my wall. Little Nicky has been coming to see me every day. Sometimes he brings a friend. He's one of the kids who believe my stories. He asks me about Earth all the time and I delight in telling him.

I like Nicky. I think he might become a teacher. Then he could share my stories with other little ones and that makes me happy. It makes me feel like I've made my small contribution to mankind.

But maybe he won't come today. Maybe they told him today is not a good day for visiting.

I close my eyes briefly. I see a blue planet with white wisps floating around it. I open them. The reddish - orange sky above me. I close my eyes again and listen to a memory. I long to hear the soft splashing of waves on sand. I long to smell sea salt in the air. To look at a blue sky and feel sunrays stroke my face. I open my eyes again and I am suddenly afraid.

I sigh again and this time my breath is shallower. I turn my head slightly to the left. At the point where the curve of my sky-dome meets the wall I can see the tip of a metal spire poking the red sky. The rest of it is hidden from my view but I have seen it a million times already. That's where Mount Ararat Cemetery is. The location where both Arks II and III landed, nearly a hundred years ago.

After the end of the Earth, the two shuttles were installed there as a memorial. There we held our first funeral thirty years later. Mount Ararat Cemetery grew over time, as one by one the people of Earth were laid to rest. It was unanimously decided that Ararat would be the resting place of Earth survivors alone. A separate cemetery exists for New Earthers, while Ararat remains a monument to Earth and all those who brought her memory and life to this planet.

The graveyard now embraces all of the one thousand and seventy three passengers who set foot here a lifetime ago. All one thousand and seventy three souls that put grief aside to build a new future for humans. All resting now, lying in peace and dreaming of their own Valhallas forever. All but one.

Another green parrot flies overhead. I notice for the first time how striking its green body looks against the sky. I guess it's not so bad here after all. You just have to look for the hidden beauty.

My chest feels heavy. My breath comes fainter still. With some effort, I turn my head slowly to my right. My vision is going but I know I am facing in the right direction. I am too weak to bring my hand up to my heart. It doesn't matter. No hard feelings Old Friend, the thought is what counts. I close my eyes again and I can see Valhalla. I can smell salt in the air. I think I hear waves.

AN EMBRACE OF THE AFTERLIFE
A One-Act Play
J.J. Steinfield

CHARACTERS:

WOMAN, elegantly dressed.

MAN, slovenly dressed.

[The two characters can be anywhere between her thirties and seventies, but should be approximately the same age.]

SETTING:

At a street corner, near traffic lights.

TIME:

The present.

At a street corner, waiting for the traffic lights to change, elegantly dressed woman taps a slovenly dressed man on the shoulder. No other people are in sight.

WOMAN

Excuse me, but you look burdened by the cares of all of eternity. Would you like me to ease your weariness?

MAN

(Both perplexed by the woman's presence and finding her appealing) I beg your pardon? Have we met before? Do I know you?

WOMAN

This is the first time that our orbits have intersected. We are, after all, complete strangers. From different worlds, so to speak.

MAN

I don't understand what you want. Don't get me wrong, it's nice meeting you.

WOMAN

I didn't intend to startle or disconcert you. I'm merely offering to escort you away from the onerousness of the everyday ... *(smiling)* the erstwhile every day, I should say. Language can be so imprecise and inadequate sometimes. *(Taking a step closer to the man)* I would rather deal in embraces and touches.

MAN

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MAN

(Nervously taking a step back) Onerousness? Erstwhile? I sure don't hear those words every day.

WOMAN

Words I've picked up in my travels. I have to dust off my use of English. I haven't been in this part of the world for a terribly long time. *(Moves closer to the man.)*

MAN

(Stepping back) Where have you been?

WOMAN

You name it and I've been there. *(Opening her arms toward the man)* I will need to embrace you...

MAN

(Takes another step away from the woman) We don't really know each other.

WOMAN

A warm, friendly, compassionate embrace.

MAN

A compassionate embrace?

WOMAN

The most compassionate of embraces.

MAN

Why are you talking to me like this? You're awfully mysterious.

WOMAN

I just thought I could help another human being. You look like you could use some pleasurable relief from the onerousness of it all and I can certainly offer you that. You have quite a miraculous voyage ahead of you.

MAN

I'm not someone who likes to travel, to tell you the truth. You know, I've never quite heard anyone speak like you.

WOMAN

I always speak like this. Oh, you'll get used to it. Earlier I had the most lovely conversation with a man in Italian...and, let me see, yesterday I was able to use my French and Japanese and Mandarin. Quite a day it was. A little later I'll be able to use my Hindi and Spanish and Russian... There are so many lovely languages.

MAN

I have some errands to run. It was really nice meeting you. (*Pointing up at the traffic lights*) I'm just waiting for the lights to change.

WOMAN

What if they don't change?

MAN

It will definitely change. That's the life of a pedestrian. Stopping at street corners, waiting for the lights to change, crossing the street.

WOMAN

I trust you're being metaphoric.

MAN

Not really. Pretty literal.

WOMAN

I never deal in the literal. It's so pedestrian.

MAN

You're making fun of me.

WOMAN

Not at all.

MAN

To get across the street you have to be literal—one foot ahead of the other.

WOMAN

The lights are not going to change. Not like you're expecting, at least.

MAN

So I'll have to jaywalk, won't I?

WOMAN

I'll lead you across the street.

MAN

A very generous offer, thank you, but I'm capable of walking across the street.

WOMAN

Do you not find me pleasing?

MAN

(Nervously) You are incredibly pleasing...and attractive...no problem there.

WOMAN

I'm not a sex-trade worker, if that is your concern. *(Laughs)* Definitely not of the flesh...not where we're going.

MAN

I never thought that, no, not for a second. I do have errands to run. Lots of errands.

WOMAN

Errands is a bit of a misnomer, I'd say. *(Taking the man's hand)* We really need to embark on your voyage.

MAN

(Nervous laugh) Crossing the street is not a voyage.

WOMAN

But it is a metaphor of the most significant texture. And I am here to help you on your metaphoric voyage. I hope I'm not disappointing you.

MAN

(Now totally captivated by the woman) I'm not disappointed, not at all. Good things never happen to me, no, no, not me.

(Colourful lights start to flash, at first slowly, and then faster and faster. The man is startled and bewildered.)

WOMAN

You don't comprehend yet, do you? Must be the imprecision and inadequacy of language. Look at the colours of the lights. Have you ever seen so many colours?

MAN

They're dazzling...so dazzling.

WOMAN

Keep looking.

MAN

I can't.

WOMAN

You must.

MAN

(His apprehension increasing) Where is everyone else? *(Lowering his head)* So many colours...so bright.

WOMAN

(With two of her fingers, lifts the man's head) Please, averting your eyes from the colours will not help.

MAN

They're incredible.

WOMAN

Later you will meet other people. An eternity of other people.

MAN

(Growing more and more amazed by the colourful lights) Every colour in the rainbow.

WOMAN

Look...behold...many more colours than in the rainbow...colours you have never seen before...colours I dare say you do not even have a name for.

MAN

(In astonishment) So many colours.

WOMAN

In time you will learn the names for all the colours...for everything. In timeless time...

MAN

Timeless time?

(The woman gently and compassionately embraces the man.)

WOMAN

We need to start to cross the street now.

MAN

The brilliant colours...

WOMAN

Yes, the brilliant colours...

(The man starts to tremble as he realizes that he has died.)

Play ends as WOMAN starts to lead MAN across the street into his after-life...

The Fool

Cathy Bryant

I was surprised when Andy announced that he was thinking of selling the Hall.

“I thought you said it was a goldmine,” I said, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, John, I thought it was,” he replied in even more lugubrious tones than usual.

Less than a year ago he had been telling me what a genius idea it was, and how it would shore up his marriage and his life and make him a pile of money - all in the sort of voice most people would use to describe a funeral. That was just what Andy was like. Now, however, he sounded even more miserable - as if he had been describing his own funeral.

“Go on then,” I said equably. “Tell me what happened. Did you get all the chambermaids pregnant, or something?”

Andy shot me a venomous look, and sighed. He had bought the crumbling Hall, former home of an agreeably dwindled disagreeable minor aristocrat with neither sense nor money, done it up, and turned it into the Manor Hall Hotel. Posh, attractive and set in what the website called “rolling acres of stunning traditional English countryside”, it had looked like a winner. How do acres roll, I wonder? And what would untraditional English countryside look like? And what had gone wrong?

“I’ll tell you, but you won’t believe me,” said Andy, looking glum.

“You’re probably right,” I agreed, and waited.

“It was that bloody ghost,” he muttered.

“The ghost? I thought that was one of the main attractions.”

“It bloody was.”

“So what happened? Didn’t it show up? Surely some nut out for publicity would claim to have caught sight of it, or another ghost, or something.”

“No, that wasn’t it, and it wouldn’t have mattered anyway. People don’t need to see a ghost, but they’ll pay a bit more to know that they might,” explained Andy. “The problem was that this ghost kept appearing and then - doing what it oughtn’t.”

“Tell me more,” I said, intrigued.

I had become fond of the ghost ever since Andy had told me its tale after buying the Hall. It was a jester, in traditional parti-coloured motley, cap and bells and all, and had been the favourite of a king, many centuries ago.

Fero the Fool had been blessed with many skills, juggling, tumbling and mimicry among them, but his most outstanding (not to say useful) trait was his ability to tell truth from lies. He would imitate cardinals, ambassadors and generals while juggling with their seals of office or mitres, and burst out laughing if they lied, as people at Court have so often to do. This diverted the king enormously, and he would wag his finger at the pompous courtier or slimy prelate and cry, “Aha, you’ve been found out! Fero has found you out!”

Many times Fero proved useful to the king when powerful factions attempted political manipulation. Once, two noblemen staged a disagreement during a State dinner, to try to force the king to make an unwise declaration on a matter of some sensitivity.

“A play! A play!” cried Fero, and clapped his hands.

The nobles frowned, and attempted to carry on their discussion.

“An Englishman’s religion,” began one, and as he continued Fero spoke in perfect time with him, but in a very high register, “cannot purely be a matter of conscience. We would appreciate your guidance, Sire.”

Hearing these solemn words duplicated by a falsetto Fero puzzled the Court.

“What means this?” demanded the king, his brows thundering.

“Please your majesty, please your majesty,” said Fero. “These fellows are at play, ‘tis a play. For last night I heard them rehearsing these speeches word for word, rehearsing every word! Yet it is a bad play, a bad play, your majesty.”

“Yes, a very bad play,” agreed the king, his eyes daggers, and he gestured for his guards to take away the now pale and sweating nobles.

“A bad play,” repeated Fero. “For how could it be a good play, with no pretty ladies in it?”

And the Court fell about laughing, including the king, and dinner carried on.

Of course Fero made powerful and important enemies this way. Like many before and since, he trusted too far in the love and honour of royalty, believing that he would be protected as long as he tried to please and was faithful.

The move against him was carefully calculated. A prominent family, one member of whom had been damaged by Fero’s capers, groomed a young and pliable daughter, prepared some witnesses, and waited.

The girl, who looked an artless child but had been brought up a wily pawn, had already been the mistress of a bishop and a cousin of the king. She was presented at Court, where the king’s eye rested on her with some interest. She played the ingénue, shyly drawing her mantle around her (and thus showing off her exquisite shoulders) as she curtsied, her eyes on the floor.

“You have nothing to fear,” said the king kindly, wanting to see if her eyes were as charming as the rest of her. “I would have you look at me, my lady.”

She did it beautifully. Slowly, very slowly she raised her blue, blue eyes and long tawny lashes, and gasped a little as she caught sight of the king. She blushed the prettiest of pale pinks.

“Am I so frightening?” laughed the king.

“Your majesty, I am overwhelmed,” she breathed, whereupon Fero let out a great guffaw.

The king waved Fero away in annoyance, and asked the girl to tell him about herself. Tremblingly she told him of a quiet life of study, of books and music, and dreaming of being one day permitted the glory of a sight of the king. She had not thought beyond this point; this was the summit of her hopes and desires in life.

Whereupon Fero laughed and clapped and cried, “She lies! She lies! The jade, the harlot! She lies - with other men, she lies! I’ve found you out, I’ve found you out!”

And he grinned and gaped at the king, only for the grin to fade as he saw the stone of his majesty’s face. For a moment it could have gone either way, but then the girl’s father spoke up.

“Sire, my daughter’s honour has been impugned,” he said with quiet dignity. “I beg your majesty that she be examined, that her chastity will be in no doubt, and her fair name at no risk from evil-wishers.”

And he glared at Fero.

The king could hardly refuse, and called the royal physician, who was in on it. He examined the girl - examined her, according to the servants, in great depth and with much giggling and many gasps of joy. He pronounced her *Virgo intacta*, and the king was overjoyed.

“But Sire, she lies!” protested Fero at exactly the wrong moment, and was thrown in the dungeons. Later the king relented a little and sent poor Fero to live with a dull minor aristocrat and his equally dull wife, far from the Capital.

Fero’s new master and mistress were as honest as they were boring, and few of the jester’s skills came into play at his new abode. He juggled or tumbled or made doggerel rhymes for them sometimes, and they clapped or smiled politely, but the light went out of his eyes. There was nothing for him to satirize or expose other than the occasional drunken valet or rapacious younger son, and they were always forgiven anyway. Within a year he died, just as the king was finding out what a lying witch his sweet-faced mistress - now his queen - was. Fero’s recall to Court came a week too late.

As for the aristocratic family, they flourished as only the unimaginative and dull can. They never gained enough political prominence to be in danger from any faction, never loved unwisely or too well. They plodded along stoutly through changes of monarch and government, saved from risk by a stolidity of nature verging on stupidity. Any sufficiently unimaginative peasant could have done as well. In fact the most exciting thing about them was the ghost of Fero, turning up every so often in his cap and bells to caper, laugh and make jests.

When Andy bought the Hall he gave the ghost its own page on the website, careful to suggest much without promising anything. There was a photo of a model in jester's motley, all red and yellow and shining as only polyester satin does; he looked as if he were about to tell a joke into a microphone. It drew ghost-hunters from all over the world, and for a while spooky weekends became all the rage.

"Yes, it was very popular," groaned Andy, "For a while. Until it became apparent what caused the ghost to appear. A ghost 'expert' would say that he was the greatest living expert on ghosts and had seen a hundred of them, and Fero would appear and laugh at him, and say that he was the first, not the hundred and first. No one wants to be mocked by a ghost. After all, how can they retaliate? And the sincere ghost fans would be horrified at the denouncing of their expert, and wonder if it meant that everything was fake, and not know what to think.

But the worst occurrence was at a Halloween event. We gave a huge feast in the Great Hall - we knocked through a couple of old parlours, and put in a fake marbled fireplace - and waited for the ghost. It was dead nice in the hall by firelight, looked just right - sort of gloomy but exciting.

Well one young lad, the idiot, had decided that this would be the ideal time to propose to his girlfriend, who was ghost crazy. So after the pumpkin pie and parkin and blood red wine and cups of coffin (I came up with that, though it's always a pain pretending that you've heard the joke for the first time when someone asks for 'de-coffin-ated' and laughs themselves silly), the lad gets down on one knee.

"Darling Tina," he says, clutching her hand, "I love you so much."

At this point we heard a rich chuckle, though we thought it might be one of the other guests. You know, nervous laughter.

Anyway, the lad carries on.

“I will never be happy without you, and I beg you to do me the honour of becoming my wife.”

She looks shocked, and so do the rest of us, because there's the jester. He's not like the photo on the website; he's a little fella about five foot high, very thin, in red and white. bells jingling. His face is all lit up with a fiendish glee, and he's laughing like a drain. He has a little black beard like, I dunno, Pan or the Devil, and he says, “He loves you! That's rich! That's rich? Honour of being his wife? The honour would be all yours; a rich jest. Very rich! I've found you out!”

It turned out that the girlfriend had money and the lad didn't, and he had 'borrowed' considerable sums from her. Hence the word 'rich' used over and over.

Well, she looked at him sadly and drooped, and he stormed and swore and threatened to sue, and they left that night. The other guests were thrilled to have seen a ghost, though many of them didn't believe it, and thought it was a computer image of some kind. I always let the sceptics examine the place, but of course they didn't find anything.

Anyway, the guests were saying what an awful thing it was to happen, and one of the women gazed into her husband's eyes and murmured, “Not everyone can have good honest love like ours, I suppose,” and held his hand and smiled. And there was a whoop, and the jester was back and pointing at her, and telling the husband all the things she had said about him to her friends; and then pointed at the husband, and told the wife all the things that he said about her to his friends.

And everyone went a bit quiet after that, because who hasn't got anything to hide, and who tells the complete truth and only the truth at every dinner with strangers? Fero would pounce on the slightest falsehood, damn him - even normal politeness like, “That was a delicious dinner,” or “I love your dress”. It was impossible to talk at all.”

“He's probably still trying to win back his king's favour, in some part of his mind,” I mused, finishing my pint.

“I don’t bloody care if he’s trying to become Pope or win the X Factor,” snarled Andy. “I just know that half the guests left, after demanding their money back, and that everyone gave the place bad or lukewarm reviews. Oh, they didn’t say that the ghost had showed them up, the lying toe-rags. They just said that it looked fake to them, that that the Hotel events were stagey, that the food was bad and the beds uncomfortable. Trade went down the toilet.”

He downed the end of his pint as if he’d been in the desert for days without water. I bought him another, and thought for a bit.

“Look here mate,” I said. “I’ll come and stay there, and pay your highest rate. I have to see this ghost. Then I can give you a good review, at least. It might not be too late.”

That way I could help Andy and his gorgeous wife Gwyneth (who was as buxom and vivacious as her husband was mundane and morose), and have some fun, too. He looked at me somewhat balefully, but nodded and grunted an affirmation of sorts.

And so a few nights later I arrived at the Hall. I was in the Royal Bedroom, so-called because it had royal blue wallpaper. If asked about the royal connection to the room, staff were under orders to say that security restrictions prevented them from talking about the personages who had slept there. So visitors assumed that current royals hung out there, whereas the staff hadn’t exactly lied - they weren’t allowed to give details of previous guests - so were at no danger from Fero.

I hadn’t seen anything unusual by the time I went down for dinner. There were no other guests, so Andy and I dined à deux.

“Where’s Gwyneth?” I asked, thinking how much more agreeable dinner would be with her around.

“She left me,” said Andy, laying down his fork.

“Oh! I didn’t know. I’m sorry,” I said truthfully, feeling very sad for my friend.

Andy waited for a moment or two and then nodded.

“Yes. She said that she didn’t love me anymore, and that having been unfaithful to me with several men already, she couldn’t go on pretending, particularly in a place with a ghost who catches you out in every lie. So off she went.”

“God, that’s awful.”

“Yes, John, it is,” said Andy, looking at me with hard eyes. “And that’s why I was pleased when you wanted to come and stay here - here, where you can’t tell lies without being found out.

John - were you one of the men whom Gwyneth slept with?”

I realized immediately what had happened. Andy had concocted the ghost story - or its modern segment anyway - specifically to trick me, and maybe others, into confessing to an affair with his wife. The poor fool.

Scarcely a beat passed before I said, very gently but firmly, “No, of course not. I would never do that to you -” at which point I broke off. Not just because of the misery and disappointment on Andy’s face, but also because I could hear the bells and the manic, terrifying laughter. Fero had found me out.

A Dead Sleep

Frank Morelli

It's funny how twilight never bothers to sneak past the boundaries of the canopy. As such, the two hikers fondled their way through underbrush. They moved cautiously and stopped often to untangle loose clothing from the clutches of thorny vines, or to allow vulnerable eyes to adjust to rapidly falling darkness.

The path had been abandoned hours ago and against Jason's better judgment. He was the level-headed one. The joys of hiking were enough to keep him occupied without having to search for additional thrills. For Devlin, however, the journey was often not considered an adventure until you faced a substantial element of danger.

"I don't know where the hell we are," Jason grumbled. "What the hell's a burial ground look like anyway?"

"What do you think it looks like?" Devlin was tired of the belly-aching by now. "You never been to a cemetery before?"

"They're Native Americans, Dev. You really think we'll stumble over a headstone or something? And even if we do, what will we do when we get there?"

"Don't you ever stop whining? If I wanted to hear this crap I should have brought my little sister."

"If I wanted to have any fun I should have stayed back with your little sister."

Devlin grabbed Jason by the collar and pulled him within three inches of his face. "You better take that back right now!" Jason broke free of the hold and pushed Devlin straight into a thorn bush. Guilt bit at his heels before his friend even hit the ground.

"Look, I'm sorry," he said, offering Devlin a hand to pull him out of the tangled mess. "I didn't mean it. I'm just tired, is all."

"Well, let's set up camp. No point in searching blind, right? We'll continue at first light." The two hikers set up their tent beside a tall oak

oak tree and climbed inside as twilight succumbed to the reign of a full moon.

“We never should have left the trail,” Jason said. “We’ll be lucky if we ever find our way back.”

“Will you relax?” Devlin responded with a chuckle. “We have a compass and we’ll have some light in the morning. We can’t be far from the burial ground anyway.”

“Burial ground? Will you give that up already? I’m through searching for that nonsense. Tomorrow I’m heading straight back to the trail and then on to base camp. I’m not spending another night up here trying to scare up a bunch of ghosts that don’t even exist.”

“Ok, ok. Keep your pants on. Get some sleep and we’ll talk in the morning.” Devlin used this strategy almost exclusively. Jason called it his delay method, kind of the equivalent of a parent’s “we’ll see.” But as Jason nodded off to sleep he could do nothing but remind himself of how badly he wanted to find the trail and make it home safely.

After about an hour of restless sleep, most of which was interrupted by Devlin’s nasally snoring, Jason decided to get a bit of fresh air outside the tent. As he reached for the entry flap he heard a distinct crack, as if someone or something had taken a rare misstep through the brush. Jason froze and then he slowly and cautiously unzipped the flap to reveal no more than a half inch hole he could peer through. He placed his eye to the hole and panned left to right. Nothing.

He began to unzip the tent further. Snap. His heart pounded in his chest. A lonely bead of sweat rolled from his temple and disappeared off his cheek. He grabbed Devlin’s foot and began shaking him awake, but his friend didn’t budge. His body seemed cold and lifeless.

Jason zipped up the flap and dove into his sleeping bag, shivering. He remained dead silent; hoping whatever lurked outside the tent would pass on without notice. After a few minutes and no result, Jason decided his own paranoia was getting the best of him and he closed his eyes and nodded off once again.

It didn’t take long, however, before more rustling from the brush

jostled Jason awake again.

“Dev, you up?” No answer. He grabbed his friend and shook him. No response. “Devlin, wake up!” Nothing. “Dev!” More rustling. “Oh my God, Devlin, stop messing around!” An army of feet were approaching. Sticks and twigs snapped all around him. “Dev!” Something brushed against the outside of the tent. A sudden gust of wind swirled and sent dried leaves and dust bouncing off the canvas. Devlin did not budge. His eyes darted back and forth beneath closed eyelids, the only sign of life.

A low hum rose slightly above the footsteps outside the tent, growing in volume. Jason could barely make out solitary voices buzzing within it in a language he could not decipher. Devlin was about as mobile as a damp log.

All at once a great wind swept through the camp. It whistled through the trees and brush, and then split the tent open from the top like a stale bag of potato chips. The wind raced off through the trees and the low hum, now a distinct chant, rose in intensity around him. *HEYYYYAA! HEYYYYA! heyaHEYAheya!*

Halfway transparent forms danced around him in a circle beating small drums, stomping mocassined-feet into dry earth, and staring blankly behind thick war paint. *HEYYYYAA! HEYYYYA! heyaHEYAheya!* There was a chill in the night air which bit at the cheeks and ears, but it was pure fright which held Jason frozen to the spot. *HEYYYYAA! HEYYYYA! heyaHEYAheya!* Before he could move even a fraction of an inch, one of the forms broke from the ranks and was upon him.

The ghostly brave held a strong, brown hand to Jason’s throat and a heavy stone weapon poised for use at his right temple. “Devlin!” Jason tried to shout, but any hint of sound was choked out by the strong hand and the rising intensity of the chant. *HEYYYYAA! HEYYYYA! heyaHEYAheya!*

The ritual seemed to last for hours. *HEYYYYAA! HEYYYYA! heya-HEYAheya!* Jason could barely breathe. He could not move or communicate. *HEYYYYAA! HEYYYYA! heyaHEYAheya!* Tears and sweat combined on his cheeks and poured down through the semi-transparent hand and onto Jason’s chest. *HEYYYYAA! HEYYYYA! heyaHEYAheya!*

Then the chant came to a sudden stop and all the forms froze on the spot. A chieftain with a headdress of hawk and falcon feathers stepped forward and handed Jason's captor a small, stone chalice about the size of a tea cup. The captor held Jason down with a knee to the throat and lifted the receptacle high above his head. The rest of the tribe responded with a series of shouts and whoops. Then the chalice was placed beside Jason's temple and the stone knife made contact with the skin.

Jason could feel the warmth trickle down the side of his head and run into the chalice. He could feel life and energy and love running out of his body all at once. He could see the moon and all the shapes growing darker and darker still, until blackness was all that surrounded him. His eyelids fell shut and all was lost.

Jason did not regain consciousness until the first rays of light from the morning sun fell upon the Earth and the twinkling banter of songbirds filled the surrounding forest. He opened his eyes slowly and was met immediately with a view of the tent's ceiling and the sound of Devlin's snoring.

"Dev, wake up," he said in a hoarse whisper. This time his friend grunted and opened a single eyelid the width of a stray hair. When Devlin's bearings came back to him, he shot upright as if he were spring-loaded about the waist.

"Boy, am I glad to see you," he said to Jason as he rubbed sleep from his burning eyes.

"You don't even know the half of it," Jason responded.

"Yeah, well, I had the most bizarre dream."

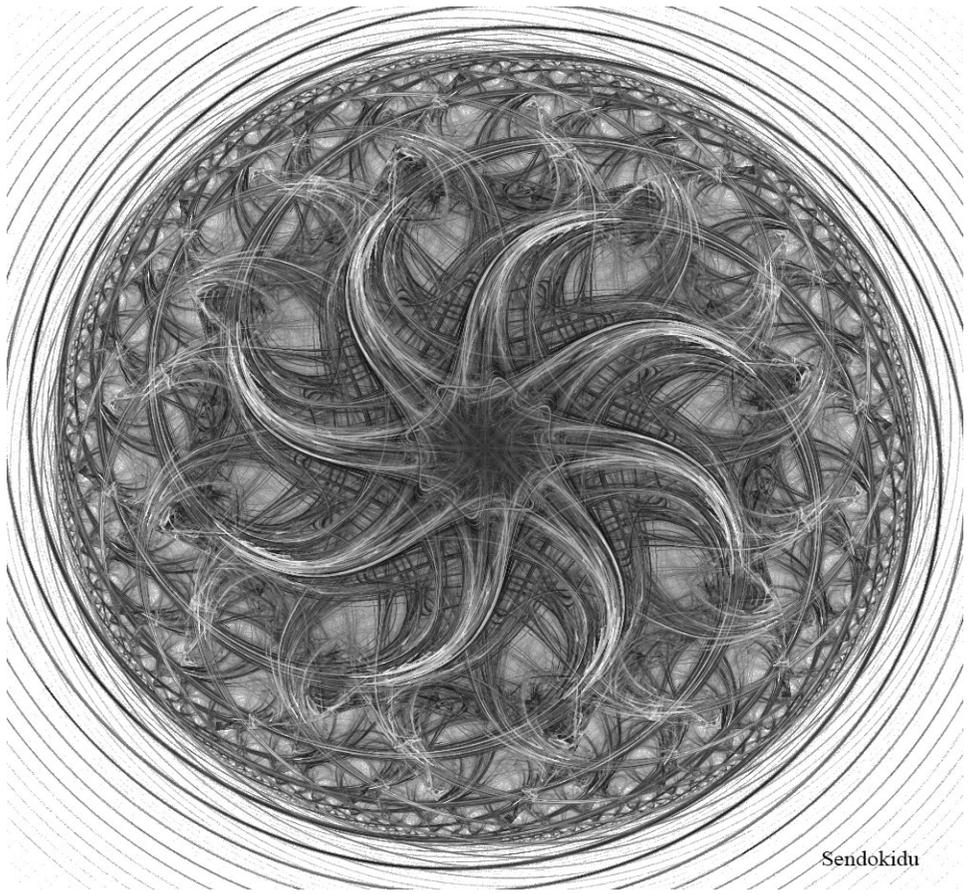
"So did I. I was trying to wake you up all night but you were colder and more lifeless than a week-old corpse."

"Wait a minute. I think you're confused. I was trying to wake you up all night. I was practically screaming in your—"

But Devlin never finished his statement. He was distracted by Jason's hand as it traced a small circle around the swollen patch of red which crept just beyond the hairline near his right temple. Instinctively and almost trance-like, Devlin stretched a bony index finger to his own temple and applied the slightest bit of pressure. Soreness. Just as he'd feared.

"I think it's time we head back to base camp," Devlin mumbled. Jason, eyes wider than saucers, issued nothing more than a nervous half-nod. The two hikers packed up their equipment in the blink of an eye and were gone. They never returned to the spot or spoke about their bizarre experience to anyone, and they never left the safety of the trail ever again.

But sometimes as Jason and Devlin hiked and the twilight failed to cast anything more than dark shadows beneath the forest's canopy, they would swear that a nearly imperceptible hum was snaking its way through the brush behind them. *HEYYYYAA! HEYYYYA! heyaHEYAheya!*



Sendokidu

The Drak’Krali **Ian Nafziger**

I am Yig, and I am You. I am around You; I am within You; I am without You. I am everywhere, and nowhere; as such, I can take any form I choose, just as I appear as words on this paper to You, for words are gates. Some of these gates transcend time; others simply cross space. Such is the case with the world you see now, orbiting the star of Thuban, which rests in the tail of the Serpent you call Draco. See the people called the Drak’Krali which I have made...

In the ancient city of Drak’Toor, surrounded by endless wastes and crowned by glass spires cracking from the countless millennia of wind, the Drak’Krali male writhes. Nightmares hold his powerful form in a grip more substantial than the darkness he is engulfed in, and through small nostrils, the reptilian pushes his panicked breath into the Underworld.

Taloned hands grip at the cushion he is situated on as he fights to control the images flashing through his mind's eye. Sensations of searing heat, cracking whips, and cackling voices take over the reality the dream is impressing on him, until with a shriek, the reptile-man awakes with a single thought.

“Leave me alone!” With his fearful exclamation, the tan-scaled lizard sits up on the cushion as he grabs the hilt of the roomoockt. His fingers hold the leathery grip with a ferocious panic-induced strength as slit eyes dart around the small chamber. The eternal shade of the subterranean metropolis sits, yawning and uniform, beyond the dim reflection of the glass blade, honed finely to lethal perfection by civil folk that have long passed into their final sleep.

“Nothing there... nothing there,” he hisses out through gritted teeth, their sharp points stabbing against the scales of a stumpy snout. Anxiety runs through his blood, now incensed by the imaginary foe that is occupying the circular chamber that is his chosen abode. The cushion that serves as bed, couch, and dining table takes up the entire space of the room; the blood stains of past dinners have stained the furnishing almost black, and the bodies of countless brethren have flattened the tikya cushioning that once made it so comfortable. Situated next to the male, just as naked as he is, is a beautiful female, her lithe form covered by grey scales. Her long tail is wrapped around her mate's strong leg, keeping watch over him in the ancient alarm of a thousand generations, and as his mind turns to dark places and darker thoughts involving the whip and the chain, she opens olive eyes and uncurls her tail from around him as she sits up. “Pofiri, what's wrong,” she asks in a distinctly feminine, though raspy, voice full of the tenderness and maternal instinct that makes up her kind.

Pofiri angles triangular head in her direction, that menacing scowl still crossing his long face. The lurking fear slowly fades away as her form is absorbed into a savage mind through eyes unable to see beyond what is resting before them. Concerned, the woman rests delicate hands, the four fingers each tipped with diminutive talons, on her mate's shoulder and thigh, and the subtle distraction manages to ground the male back to safe, fightable reality. “Nothing,” he grunts, not intending to sound grumpy though it comes out like that as a result of his natural suspicion of things.

The female, though, he can trust, having travelled with her from

Balti to the holy city of the Drak’Krali, where they first crawled out of the shadow to behold the barren wastes of the surface world; it remains permanently scorched by the blazing red sun overhead and the pale companion that occasionally makes itself comfortable in the grip of that gigantic, celestial king. One can only stare so long at the heights before the glare of glassy peaks above and red sand below result in one losing their sight forever. It is why Pofiri keeps his self to the ground, both in mind and body, for such dreams as can be inspired by the sky have no place in this world of extinct majesty. His kind live by the blade, and oftentimes they die by it, though whether the blade is wielded by a brother or the omnipresent planet is never fully certain. Indeed, one must kill to only live in this world called Hathid, and what can be taken oftentimes must be stolen.

For the Drak’Krali are carnal, and it shows in the way that the male looks to his companion as he falls back to the cushion, drawing the woman down with him by a hand that commandingly presses itself to her chest. “Only a dream, Tiri,” he explains further, the roomookt dropped as he does. The links of the long chain that link to the dagger by the pommel clatter loudly in the discomfoting quiet of Drak’Toor. Purring, Tiri runs her nimble fingers over Pofiri’s torso, comforting him as best as she can without resorting to more overt means of distraction. She knows Pofiri’s attitude toward mating, and that using her natural attraction as a means to get his mind off of things that don’t exist will incite his rage. The habits she had learned in the slave-brothel of Balti were hard for her to break, and Pofiri was beyond admirable in his attempts to make her understand mated life in comparison to slave life.

Though, by Your standards, the females of this race are hardly more than slaves even as a freewoman. The promise of a mate is only the promise of domination by the one who is stronger in body as well as mind. Indeed, this race lives on domination, but even the greatest of warriors will eventually come to a ceiling. At that point, there is nowhere to go but down, down, down...

“Dreams come and go, my Lord,” Tiri reassures as she presses herself into Pofiri’s side, allowing a gentle embrace from the powerful male to constrict her deceptively strong form. The club-like tail wraps around her leg and a hand graces her spine. “There is nothing to fear here. This is Drak’Toor, and the Brikongi will never rape its purity.”

The male's powerful head inclines upward, angling predatory eyes back to the ceiling that has been swallowed by the shadow of the Underworld. It is as if the Abyss itself is hanging over their heads, ready to draw them in with sharp teeth and slimy tentacles toward eternal torment. The memories flicker within that blank theater: memories of pain, and loss, and always of death suffered at the hands of Brikongi overseers. "I know. But I still worry about all my brothers still trapped in the fields of Balti. It's them I fear for; so many could suffer because of my escape."

Tiri knows just what is playing behind the steely irises. Pofiri has always been a loyal type who can be counted on by his friends, even when he was held in chains as a warrior-slave battling his own kind in the Brikongi's everlasting war over territories and slaves against the rival Gurithinki. The frequency of those skirmishes eventually dulled his interior pain at the direct disobedience to the Commandment of Lord Yig. It was only because of Talri, his bunkmate in the slave barracks, that he was inspired to make an escape from the fortified city of Balti and its vicious warlord, Grokti.

The thought of the young upstart, born into slavery rather than captured like he was, makes Pofiri clench the shallow pillow anxiously. "I hope Talri managed to escape. I wonder where he is, why he didn't meet us on the road..."

Tiri is always nervous about her mate's insistence to take care of everybody he meets, and it shows as her voice quivers with her response. "My Lord, you shouldn't concern yourself with him. I'm sure he's just fine. Probably took a different route to keep the Brikongi off of us."

Both Drak's know that the possibility is dubious at best, impossible in reality. Brikongi and Gurithinki overseers are among the best hunters in all of Hathid, and escaped slaves only remain that way if Lord Yig is smiling on them.

Are You smiling, my dear companion?

Pofiri looks back to her, the disbelief obvious in his face. "Tiri, you do realize that without him, I would never have been free, you would be shackled in Grokti's harem right now, and neither of us would ever have found each other? Did it ever occur to you that were it not for him, all of our

worst dreams would be lived right now because you attacked that slovenly bastard?!” His voice grew loud, even ferocious, as his anxiety fueled useless anger against his mate, whose leg was gradually gripped as the pointless emotion rose. Her scales crunched audibly under pressure, the tips of Pofiri’s talons grazing against the weak flesh underneath.

The growing hurt in Tiri’s spirit and leg has her pulling away from her mate, fearful of further punishment. But her retreat is only halted by a low growl as Pofiri pulls on her more, resulting in his talons, needlepoint sharp and malicious, to pierce into her flesh like a knife through ground meat. “You probably don’t realize this, but when a friend is lost on the road, it is a dishonor to his clan and to the Tribe to leave him alone in the wastes,” Pofiri rants fanatically. If the warrior is anything, it’s loyal, especially to those who prove themselves as worthy of their roomookt in the field of battle. “I am not just speaking of honor to the dead, though. We are entitled to each other as scalemates and brothers. I will not leave Talri to his fate if I have anything to say about it.”

Tiri silently listens, her head bowed and her tongue silent, as she waits for her mate to calm down enough for her to apologize. But the apology would never come as olive greens shoot up at Pofiri in shock of the proclamation he makes.

“That is why I am going back out and finding him. You are safe; now I have to make sure he is safe as well.”

“My Lord, you can’t be serious?” Tiri places her hands desperately on his shoulders, to which Pofiri growls and shrugs her off before standing finally and stretching his powerful body in every direction he can muster to work the sores out of his muscles, which have been threaded and made powerful over years of war and work shepherding and slaughtering the herds of Balti, giving him an appearance much like a swimmer though no water exists deep enough to provide an ample pool.

“I am serious, Tiri. I leave as swift as the rookmack runs. Now go fetch my shirya and cloth me. I must pray for my success.”

“Pofiri...” Her well-founded anxiety, emerging as a result of her domination by Grokti and his cronies, shows in her voice before she is sent scampering out of the room into the city proper by the warrior’s roar

that shows he has had enough of her lack of faith.

Now alone, Pofiri allows himself the luxury of a snarl before he takes roomoakt to hand, dragging the hilt up to open hand along the long chain that is fused to the pommel. The chain's strange metallic sheen shimmers even in the dim of Drak'Toor. At the opposite end of the chain is an open collar device, the action of its constricting motion operated by a button set in the hilt, which has been wrapped in farkmack hide as a grip. Pofiri's father told him that this weapon was designed by the great scientists who roamed these very halls so long ago in a time that was remembered only by ancient historians and the decaying texts they try frantically to save. The warrior could only take his departed kin's word for it, though he had never seen a chain so magnificent as his own on any other roomoakt. Pofiri admires the glass blade, curved so subtly to further add to its lethality, giving it the appearance of a crystallized tooth ready to partake of the flesh at any moment.

The warrior then, reverently, puts the blade between hands that have stretched themselves long as they lay flat on the cushion, and he lowers club-like snout to the blade before whispering out his prayer to god and ancestor. For he must curry favor with Lord Yig or face death in the sands. "Lord Yig, watch over your humble servant, who has never before shed blood that ran cold. The world is large and wicked, and without You, my only Master Yig, I will surely be lost to the sands. Let Your taloned hand be my guide, Your limitless tail my shield and path, and help me save those I care about from the whip and the shackle. To You, I plead, and may the winds ever favor You."

All he says is true, my friend. The world is hostile, and My favored line believe that only through Me—only through You—can they live long and comfortably, with a whole harem at their beck. But what they fail to understand, mortal god, is that You are only a mystery, a figment of the cosmos as distant as the end of the universe. You do not care about Pofiri, do You? You do not care about his life, his death, his quest, for You are here and he is there, across a gulf that is impenetrable—a river without a ford, black as black can get. You cannot help him. But You can watch. It is all We can ever do.

Pofiri's head remains over the weapon of his father, praying silently after begging for Yig's blessing on his journey until Tiri returns with a long fabric bundled in her arms and a vicious snarl flickering at the

corner of her mouth, displaying her displeasure at this sudden and unannounced quest. Though she knows that Pofiri would never, and has never, done something without profound thought as far as warriors are concerned, her ignorance concerning his plot drives her to a fury she has rarely felt even when she was driven to the cushion in the brothels. “I have your shirya, my Lord,” she says with a low voice, her eyes crossed evilly as she stares him down without fear.

Pofiri lifts his head from the cushion and stands up without acknowledging the female standing at the threshold with his clothes. Trim arms raise parallel to the floor in preparation. “Dress me.”

The command is responded with a snort that emits derisively from diminutive nostrils before Tiri approaches. She takes a moment to sling his roomoakt over her shoulder as she circles to his front and throws a loose end of the long, rectangular fabric over his shoulder. “I don’t suppose you could have told me that you were leaving so soon after coming here,” she snaps out at him as the sash portion of his shirya is arranged over bare chest, ensuring that the stitched symbol of the Raisikmi tribe the pair of them hails from is resting over his heart as it should be.

“Of course I didn’t, Tiri,” Pofiri responds as he angles his head away so he couldn’t look at those raging eyes. “I knew you would throw a fit about my going back if I told you. But I had decided two days out of Balti that I was going to return to find Talri and free him if he was captured, or ensure a proper burial if he wasn’t.”

Pofiri never likes seeing his mate angry like this, and he cannot help but flinch—partially from the pain and partially from his own growing anger—as she kicks his shin. The end of the fabric was directed around his waist to make a belt of sorts by the time she does this. “Why didn’t you tell me, Pofiri?! I’m not some house-slave that you keep around only to feed you and fuck you, and, by Lord Yig, I’m not a simpering fool like the other brothel girls in Balti! That’s why you took me as your own! Or was that just a ruse to have a strong travelling partner until we got to safety, because if that’s the case, you are a fool to leave me behind! You know I can hold my own in battle, and I’m not going to...”

With a roar and savage hit, Pofiri silences her. She was getting out of control, not to mention she knows that she could never get away with such words to her mate.

As he looks down at her sobbing form on the cushion, Pofiri, with teeth bared, breathes deeply to get himself back under control, and after an uncomfortable minute of silence, he raises arms again for Tiri to fix his shirya. “I wasn’t calling you weak, Tiri. I was calling you valuable. You have silver scales. Nearly every warlord in the Brikongi tribe is probably looking for you on the wastes. You would stand out too much, and then we will both be captured.”

Finding his tone calm, Tiri wipes her tears away and stands, continuing her work with bowed head so he would never have to look upon her unsightly reddened eyes. Silence only comes from her maw, however, so Pofiri continues with his defense.

“I know you are not weak, nor stupid, Tiri. I couldn’t ask for a stronger mate. That is why I need you to stay behind. If something happens to me on the road, or even Balti, I know you would be able to give me the proper warrior’s burial I require.”

Tiri sniffs once as the end of Pofiri’s cloth is looped through the belt, leaving it hanging between his legs to conceal the nakedness underneath. The blade of his roomookt is impaled in the side to keep the traditional tribal cloth secure around him. “My Lord, I plead with you not to do this. The suns are almost in alignment. We will be erupting soon.”

“Precisely, Tiri. Everybody will be inside. The search will either have been abandoned, or they figured out that we made it to Drak’Toor and therefore returned home. Either way, if I go now, the wastes will be empty, and I can trek faster there than we did coming here. What took seven days for the two of us, it should only take me three alone,” Pofiri explains as he checks everything.

“But, Pofiri... there are too many ‘if’s’ in this quest. Why can’t you wait until after the eruptions?”

“If I wait, then Talri would be dead and probably fed to the rookmacks by then. At that point, it would be useless to search for him. He never will be given the proper burial among the glassy peaks like he deserves.”

“Pofiri...”

The male silences her with a placement of fingers over lips before she can continue. “I promise you, I will be okay. Lord Yig is with me.”

Without another word, Pofiri turns away and plunges into the shade outside, leaving Tiri standing in their empty room with folded hands and worried eyes. Slowly, a tear rolls down her cheek as she looks up at the roof and whispers to the shadows hovering overhead. “Lord Yig, please protect him.”

“Please protect him.” That is all she asks, My mortal friend. I impart this question to You now. Does young Pofiri deserve Our protection? What shall be the outcome of his quest? Is he to roast, is he to be successful, or shall he be cast back into chains? There are so many questions and yet so little time to discuss them. You should ask Yourself now, my little God: Will You protect him? Will You help in his quest, or will You simply stand aside and watch him create his own doom? Or perhaps you have something more unique in mind. Please, do tell Me what Your mind is; for I am Yig, and I am You. We are one, and We are forever.

The Device

Daniel Ayiotis

Following his death it fell to me to see to my uncle's estate, but all I could think about were his last words, directing me to the attic. When I arrived at the house in Rathmines I wasn't sure exactly what I was looking for, or what I thought it was that my uncle had wanted me to find. During all my childhood visits I had never been in the attic; it was the one room that he had insisted on keeping out of bounds to all but himself. This was his private study and had housed his most prized esoterica. Now it had been stripped down and was dedicated to a single purpose. On a low table, in the centre of the room, was a peculiar looking device. Made of varnished and aged hardwood, it was about two feet in depth, height and width, with a single round speaker on the front. On the right hand side was a crank. Was this my uncle's final piece of research? Had he placed it in my charge with his final words? Out of curiosity I pulled up a chair and turned the crank, tentatively at first. Driven by internal mechanical workings a small trap door opened in the top of the box, through which extended a small oval mirror on a retractable brass arm. At the same time the speaker began to emit a strange noise that I can only describe as hundreds of oscillating frequencies layered on top of each other.

Mesmerised by the sound I found myself staring into my own eyes as my face filled the mirror. The sound had a strange, indiscernible quality; it filled the room like liquid smoke until there was nothing but me and the device. Once it had absorbed the room the sound absorbed my mind and I sat with singular intent turning the crank and staring in to the mirror. At some stage, the sound stopped by itself despite my winding the crank, releasing me. I was back in the room again. I'm not sure how long I had been sitting there but I could see the moon through the skylight. I hadn't noticed night falling. The room was deadly silent. Then, as I leaned back in my chair I noticed it. Reflected in the device's mirror, just in front of the door, it stood staring. I swung around but there was nothing there. Turning back to the mirror there it was, closer now, right over my shoulder. I froze in terror, staring back at it. When I felt it's breath on my neck I passed out.

That was three weeks ago. As soon as I had come to I fled, swearing I would never return to the house again. But that *thing* is following me. I forced myself to go back in to the attic to see what I could discover. I've come to realise that it's not the room that's the danger. I found a

journal among the notes in my late uncle's desk drawer confirming what I had pieced together about what had happened to me. That antique device (I have dated it to 1899) somehow creates a connection with a creature from another dimension that he referred to as 'The Explorer'. I do not understand the specifics of the science behind it. Something to do with "the effect of certain psycho acoustic resonances on brain waves" according to my uncle's notes. What exactly this thing is trying to explore only the darkest wanderings of my imagination can attempt to conceive. It dawned on me that this may explain my uncle's unusual brain activity in the hospital, even under sedation. His mind, altered by the device, just as mine is now, had become the gateway that allowed this creature a level of access to our own dimension. Was it in there with him when he was under sedation? Were they in there together, in his mind? I hate to think about it.

It's in every reflection I see now, that thing. It looks humanoid, but it is *not* human. It just stares, unblinking, unwavering. I don't think it has eyelids. Sometimes when I pass a mirror its face is inches from my own, just leering and grinning. That permanent, sickening grin! Its mouth is lipless and stretched twice as wide as a person's, with rows of tiny, dolphin-like teeth. Recently, I saw it in the mirror in the baby's room sitting in her cot, it's long, sinewy legs bent and contorted to fit between the rails. This is the terror that drove my uncle mad, that he was trying to warn me against.

So here I am, back in that old house in Rathmines, one last time. When I saw it in our daughter's cot and I covered every mirror in the house my wife thought I was losing my mind. I don't blame her. Maybe I am. So what else can I do? My hand has been forced. It was a moral dilemma of course, and I haven't made this decision lightly. But once I had it was easy to find people with an interest in the arcane to take up my offer to allow them study the device. I have just left one of them in the attic to examine it for herself. I desperately hope that thing will leave me alone now, given how intently I saw it looking at her from the mirror in the corner of the room as I closed the door.

Death Rattle

Miranda Stone

Irene breathed in the scent of freshly cut wood. The little chestnut coffin holding her younger brother sat in the middle of the front room. Norman, not yet four years old, lay in the box with his hands folded over his chest. As Irene gazed down at his face, she thought he wore a faint frown, as though he found the scene around him bewildering. He was dressed in a pristine white shirt and matching pants, made by the skilled hand of Mrs. Howard. All evening, neighbors had appeared at the door with offerings of food and words of comfort. Now it was close to midnight, and only the family remained.

Stella and Agnes, Irene's younger sisters, huddled on a bench that had been carried in from the kitchen. They wept and wiped their faces with stained handkerchiefs. Irene's older brother Russell stood near the door. Occasionally he slipped out onto the porch to smoke. Now he met Irene's stare and averted his eyes. Grief carved sharp lines into his face, and he swayed with exhaustion. Earlier in the day he went with their father to the small family cemetery behind the house, and with the help of a few neighbor men, they dug Norman's grave.

Irene's mother knelt by the coffin, her hands folded under her chin as she prayed. She was a stout woman, and her hair was drawn into a severe bun at the back of her neck. The dress she wore had once been black but was now so faded it was the same color as the dark gray mountains surrounding their house.

That spring was cruel to many families in the hollow. Influenza had descended heavy as a smiting hand, snatching up young and old, healthy and infirm, in its merciless grip. Norman had taken ill only the week before. Within three days fluid filled his lungs, and each breath he drew sounded thick and wet. Soon afterward, his breathing ceased altogether.

Irene's father sat in the corner of the room away from the family. He rested his forearms on his thighs, his hands held together between his knees and his head hung low. Irene wondered if he had dozed off and waited for him to pitch forward onto the floor, but then he rolled his shoulders in a shrug, and she knew he was awake.

It was just after midnight when her mother released a short scream. Irene started at the sound. Her sisters froze, staring at their mother with trepidation, and Russell rushed in from the porch, still reeking of cigarette smoke.

Irene's father leapt from his chair, hands clenched at his sides. "What's the matter with you, woman?" he demanded.

Irene's mother struggled to her feet. She hadn't slept since Norman had first become sick, and Irene knew she hadn't eaten in days. Irene hurried to wrap an arm around her waist. "Mama, what's wrong?" she asked.

"Look at him," her mother said, leaning over Norman's body. "He's still alive!" She turned to Irene's father. "Milton, don't you see? He's sweating!" Her voice was shrill, edged with hysteria.

Irene stared down at Norman. She didn't see any change in him, but still she hesitated to reach out and touch the body she had helped wash and prepare for burial.

"You're talking nonsense," Irene's father said. "You need to keep your wits about you, Harriet. The doctor's come and gone, and he said the boy's dead."

"Would you just look!" her mother wailed, holding out her hands.

Irene's sisters stared at Norman, their eyes wide with terror. Agnes began to sob. She tried to scramble to her feet, but Stella held her fast.

Irene's father refused to look at his son's body. Instead he grabbed her mother's arm. "For God's sake, Harriet, you're scaring the children. Now I'm warning you to be still."

Her mother jerked away and reached to gather Norman in her arms. "He's warm," she said, her hand pressed to the back of Norman's head. She whirled to look at Russell. "Go get the doctor," she ordered.

Russell shifted from one foot to the other, his mouth hanging open. Before he could decide whether to obey the command, Irene's father grabbed hold of Norman's body. Irene watched in horror as her parents fought over the limp form, her father pulling on Norman's right leg,

while her mother yanked hard on Norman's hands. Stella and Agnes both screamed, and Irene drew closer to Russell.

When her father realized he wouldn't win this battle, he released the boy and delivered a stinging slap to his wife's face. Stunned, Irene's mother loosened her grip on Norman. Russell lunged forward to catch the body.

"Take him out of here," Irene's father shouted. Russell disappeared outside, holding Norman in his arms.

"Russell!" her mother shrieked. "Bring him back to me! He's still alive." Tears of helpless fury popped into her eyes.

Irene's father turned on Stella and Agnes. "Quiet," he barked. When they didn't stop screaming, he held up a threatening hand, and they fell silent. "Go on to bed," he told them. They both jumped from the bench and ran sniffing toward the back room.

Irene's mother dropped to the floor, banging her fists against the wooden boards as an inhuman caterwaul escaped her. She sat up and tore at her hair, ripping the long graying strands out in handfuls.

Irene choked on her swallowed tears. Her father snapped his head in her direction, and his eyes narrowed in contempt. She bolted outside and braced herself against the rickety porch railing, allowing her cries to gush forth. The chilly night air cooled her feverish skin. She raised her head and spotted Russell in the yard, pacing slowly as he held Norman.

Irene slumped onto the top porch step. Behind her in the house, her mother continued to scream, while before her, Russell moved back and forth, sometimes staggering as he fought to stay awake. Norman's head rested on Russell's shoulder, his little suit shining a pale ivory in the weak light of the half moon.

Irene stood in the cemetery, staring at the haphazard rows of large field stones which served as memorials to bodies buried deep in the earth. The preacher clutched a tattered Bible as he stood at the head of her younger brother's grave. Norman's body was buried facing east, as was

buried facing east, as was custom.

Irene glanced at Russell. He struggled to hide his trembling lips, and he held his eyes wide so the wind could dry his unshed tears. Stella and Agnes stared at the wooden box nestled at the bottom of the grave. Their eyes were dull and glassy in their wan faces.

Her mother and father stood together near the preacher. Neither made a sound as they lowered their heads. Irene couldn't read her mother's expression, but she saw the livid purple bruise darkening her right cheek. From the way her mother held her arms around her middle, Irene imagined there were many more bruises beneath her dress, hidden from sight. Neighbors formed a wide circle around the family, keeping a respectful distance.

The preacher read several passages from the Bible and said a few prayers. Then the men began shoveling dirt onto Norman's coffin. Irene clutched her throat, shaking with the effort to hold back her cries. Dr. Ward stood at the crowd's periphery. Irene stared at him, her eyes pleading, but he never looked her way.

That night, after the neighbors had gone home and the rest of her family had retreated to their beds, Irene sat up in the front room and listened to her mother weep. The room felt too warm, and Irene stepped out onto the porch. A steady wind rolled down from the mountains, picking up strands of her hair.

She drifted into the yard and circled around the house. In the dim moonlight, she saw the cemetery at the edge of the property.

Irene told herself she was only going to use the privy, but once she was finished and standing in the darkness again, the cemetery latched onto her with an irresistible pull. She darted toward it, and before she could stop herself, Irene fell to her hands and knees on the fresh mound of dirt.

"I'm sorry, Norman," she sobbed, her fingers scrabbling at the earth.

The wind strengthened, and Irene shivered in her nightgown. She sprawled out on the grave, her arms thrown wide. Worms and insects crawled through the dirt, seeking out the folds of her clothing.

Irene pressed her ear to the earth and listened. At first she heard nothing but the wind sighing through the trees. But just as she began to doze, a new sound filled the night. Her eyes flew open, and she cupped a filthy hand to her mouth. Though it was muffled under several feet of dirt, the sound was unmistakable, one that Irene would never forget—two small lungs drawing in a rasping, watery breath.

Flesh Color

Ranylt Richildis

She was painting bare-chested when the couple came over the rise. Perched on her artist's stool, inches from the cemetery gate, she dabbed at the canvas before her. The easel's legs disappeared into a carpet of green. The grass was lush at the moment. Beyond Yocelin's promontory, the peaks and troughs of low mountains were covered in trees that were sun-limned on their western flanks. They spread a caper of emeralds that wouldn't still, and their branches tickled the belly of an enormous blue-and-white August sky.

There were trees at her back, as well, past the graveyard where the remains of Lester Bowles Pearson counted the seasons. Some of the tombstones were new and bland, but many were early nineteenth-century. The older ones had been pocked and tilted by weather, but their designs were more charming. Yocelin had sketched several of them while she bided her time, had even amused herself with tombstone rubbings that charcoaled her fingers and fluttered nearby birds.

These projects distracted her from harsh hunger, but not from the strain straining every ion around her—a tension that threatened to leach all color from her world. That tension was outside of her, out of her power, about to flex and suck and whitewash. So she swirled paint about her palette and canvas. The act was anodyne. Her landscape in oils comforted her and kept the pallor at bay.

It was also nearly complete. She'd had days to capture the view while she waited, ravenous. Familiar with desperation, Yocelin had always managed to find the bane she needed to keep herself in the world—to remain one with its color—so she refused to panic. Just a matter of constant movement and canny scheduling. She knew every wrinkle of Jersey Island, Port Louis, Lafayette, Grande-Anse, and Lennoxville. She'd tasted every crevasse, licking at whatever dregs of bane she could find.

She might never again have all of England and France to feast on, but the bane lingered in certain corners, yes. It waxed and waned with the times and it rolled between continents, but Yocelin at her hungriest could always feed in the Outaouais. She always circled back to this fruitful furrow of southwestern Quebec.

And now the payoff. She focused on her canvas, pretending preoccupation, as the couple crested the hill. They saw her at once. She couldn't be missed, nor could her toplessness. They paused, hand in hand, but rallied quickly and continued towards the hilltop graveyard. It was a liberal village, and the visitors seemed determined to prove that they belonged.

They were fetching creatures, their clothes tight, bias-cut, vintage. The man and woman had been rinsed out by wine and massage at the nearby hotel and spa—their shoulders were low and their eyes soft. Now they came to inspect the best view to be found in Wakefield, directed to the cemetery, no doubt, by hotel staff.

Yocelin's wait was rewarded. The colors had finally drawn people to her aerie. Not the fading color of her naked torso, which was unremarkable in this part of the world. She wasn't porcelain or gold or amber or mahogany or obsidian, but a middling tawny-pink, sporadically freckled. Her hair was a standard brown and so were her eyes. She'd rolled her locks into a bun, not to expose an interesting neck but to capitalize on her bare breasts. If her nipples were pale and her contours drabbish, the sheer incongruity of the picture she made might compensate for it all, as would the breathtaking view.

They were remarkable, even in the flesh. The young woman was porcelain and her man was boiled gold. They needed no highlighting, but like most people they daubed themselves in color. People had a habit of self-painting, as if their skin wasn't enough. They tatted, dyed, and bejeweled themselves, made themselves up, and they depended on their clothes (her shirt was lemon yellow, his red plaid). They were too hip for jewelry or makeup, but Yocelin spotted tattoos around wrists and forearms, inked in sophisticated black.

Skin was enough for Yocelin. So was broken skin. It glistened. It wept. It offered up the best of reds. It could be filigreed like marble, if you knew where to cut.

The couple neared Yocelin at the wrought-iron gate that welcomed visitors to MacLaren Cemetery. They sized her up among easel, canvas, palette, and paint-box. Unless they could stand to embarrass themselves with a prudish turning-back, the pair was forced to engage with the half-naked artist. They seemed game enough. Wakefield would not get the best of these Torontonians.

Yocelin lifted her brush at them. “*Degemer mad,*” she said, knowing it would fascinate them.

The Anglophones cocked their heads, arrested. There was no need on Yocelin’s part to guess ethnicities. They were clearly from out of province, else coddled by an English-speaking microculture in downtown Montreal. Either way, their expectations were successfully upended.

“Is that Scandinavian?” asked the pale young woman in the yellow shirt. Her dark hair was sleek, her eyebrows delicate wings.

Yocelin laughed amicably. “No, sorry, it’s Breton. I was showing off.” She gestured at her painting. “What do you think?”

The couple repositioned themselves in order to assess her work against the subject that spread before them. This time of year, the Gatineau Hills offered colors enough, but Yocelin’s canvas enameled them. The greens were deep, the browns transmuting to lacquered reds, the blue of the sky lowering to mauve, the clouds as white as an unexpected punch. The day was bright, but not that bright. Yocelin’s wished-for world was surreal.

“It’s kinda Fauvist,” the young man offered, proud of himself.

Yocelin slipped a smile at him. His dark blond hair and light brown eyes were pleasant enough, but his skin was captivating. It was unreservedly golden, and Yocelin had to admit that his red shirt, however superfluous, generated a contrast that would look magnificent in oils.

“This is—so you’re from France?” the young woman asked the artist.

Yocelin nodded and put nostalgia in her eyes.

The man shifted beside her. Her breasts, of course, were too present.

“Was it worth the walk?” Yocelin asked, and gestured at the view.

The couple clasped hands, nodded.

“This place is amazing,” the man allowed. “I mean, the whole town, but also this,” he clarified, tamping at their hill. “I mean, I can’t believe we’re the only ones here.”

Yocelin nodded. “You’re the first people I’ve seen for days. That climb might be to blame,” she added, nodding towards the edge of the bluff, where the road seemed to drop away to nowhere. “Isn’t it lovely?” she asked, and didn’t need an answer.

The three of them appreciated the sunshine, the breeze, the flap of a hawk’s wings overhead, and the delightful absence of blackflies. Below them, hidden by larger, lower hills, was a riverside town bursting with the crimson of a covered bridge and the cobalt of board-and-batten homes. It jiggled with tourists, bakers, boaters, shopkeepers, a music venue, even a steam train, but up on the cemetery bluff the world was at rest. There were only birds and souging trees and the odd plump bee—summer in its drowsiest, most indolent state.

The young man craned his head, following the hawk, following his girlfriend’s pointing finger as she described a burst of thrushes startled by the larger bird. Their gazes traced wing against sky while Yocelin studied the shining curve of the man’s wrist, which hung close to her face. His skin gleamed, caught light, beat with life. It was fragrant. Yocelin wrapped a hand around his wrist, another around his elbow, and ate into his forearm. Her teeth bit past the scroll of his tattoo, snagged a few light blond hairs, and gnawed toward bone.

His cry, naturally, rent the cemetery’s quiet. Yocelin expected this and let his voice yaw past her. She held tightly to his arm and wrenched her head back, taking with it a knob of golden skin. She was very strong, and the man wasn’t able to flail away. The young woman’s scream braided itself around his squawking outrage, but their voices were the only power they had.

Yocelin chewed and examined the hole she created. She grimaced. The flesh on her tongue was tough and flavorless. The wound was dry. Ruz? she wondered, waiting. The red wouldn’t come. The bane was absent.

She was taken by surprise, and in her shock the man twisted from her grip and staggered back. He staggered in the wrong direction, falling

falling on the cemetery side of the gate. Yocelin leapt from her perch and blocked his path to the road, wide-armed. Hemmed in by fence and aggressor, the man scrambled in the only clear direction—through the graveyard—while his girlfriend warbled. Her porcelain was safe; Yocelin was fierce but she could only handle one victim at a time. It was the gold, the denser, muskier warmth she wanted, and she gave chase to it.

The hawk and thrushes, the hovering bees and the delicate wind were gone. There was only the man in his enticing red shirt, his thick hair bouncing as he ran, his feet heavy and sure. Yocelin swallowed the dry meat in her mouth, perplexed, and squinted after any sight of blood. Nothing seeped through the man's fingers as he clutched his desecrated wrist. Nothing pattered to the ground.

Twenty strides into the cemetery he twisted to the left, resisting the wood that loomed on the far side. Yocelin herded him back towards the forest, and he took that path, unable to swing right, where the bluff dropped off entirely. There weren't many options left for the man, whose name was Jay (Yocelin, of course, didn't know this, though she generally knew an awful lot). He shot past tombstones old and new, gave Pearson's plaque no attention whatsoever, and crashed into the forest. It was a very small graveyard.

She couldn't smell that dry, characterless wound in his arm, but she could hear him, and his red shirt was a semaphore spinning between boulders and trees, aimless. She entered the woods seconds behind her prey, inert feet skimming the ground that turned from green to the leftover russet of last year's discarded leaves the moment she crossed under the canopy. Acorns wobbled under the passage of her feet, which needed no shoes, while pebbles and roots strained to scratch her soles, and failed. She was liquid—unlike the wound in the man's arm, which refused to bleed. Was it a withholding? Or a simple lack of bane? She skirted one of the six or seven boulders that interrupted the woods. They hulked under lichen, big as trucks, but the man was well beyond them now and couldn't use their cover.

He stumbled up an incline, negotiating the sloping woods. He'd grabbed a tool of some kind—a stick dense enough to cave in most heads with the right sort of stroke. His course remained aimless as he grappled about. He sought a path out of the woods but Yocelin kept him where she wanted him and directed him further uphill, towards the base of an

escarpment that couldn't be easily (or hastily) climbed. He met the rock face and danced a panic as Yocelin closed in on him, metres away.

Here is where another strange thing occurred—strange, but not unexpected, for Yocelin had felt that terrible tension for hours. The threatening pallor broke its levee, rushed in, and sucked color as it receded like a tide. The man's red shirt faded a degree or two. It wasn't Yocelin's imagination, because the canopy overhead—a salad of light, dark, and medium greens—also dimmed. The trapped man began threatening her with his stick, batting phantom pitches in the air, while Yocelin stilled, her toes lapping at the forest floor. She studied his shirt, and the blackish cliff-face that rose behind him, and the living leaves, all of which were suddenly drained of zest. With dismay she noticed that his skin was also losing its gleam.

It had happened once before, a century ago. Yocelin's memory was often formless, but she retained a crystal view of this event. Everything had been upended. Then, too, she'd been chasing a man—porcelain skin, on this one, and hair like ink, his torso wrapped in a jacket not unlike the jackets of mission figs. It was dark, its texture almost moist, and it beckoned her as eagerly as his smell. She chased him across chevrons polished to sunsets, his shoes making imperative sounds on the wood, hers inaudible. Her own torso was swaddled in violet satin and her shoulders cried revolution with their bareness. At some point her shoes fell from her drooping feet, pink candy on the sunset floor. If prodded, Yocelin would admit that she'd deliberately protracted that chase. It was delightful to follow that particular man (his name, Gwencalon, was known to her) through that enormous, empty house in the enormous, empty Breton hills.

Everything was decorated just so in that house. The porcelain man raced down hallways whose walls were curtained with dark laces curlicued with grotesque stitching. Breaks in the lace revealed staggeringly deep oil paintings: portraits and landscapes, of course, and battle scenes, and the sinking of noble galleons, but mostly still-lives of shining grapes and pears, pipes and fans, swords and books and blossoms. The furnishings and doorways in that house rejected angles—every line was curved, organic, every window tuliped, every moulding a delicate cluster of scrolls. At some point during the chase, hardwood floors segued to yellow marble that warmed the orange walls of a ballroom festooned with branch-like chandeliers. Here the man dashed past a body—a woman's—and leapt over a pool of blood. He flailed his distress but would not stop. With the

woman dead and the servants run off, he was far too alone.

There were no absolutes in Yocelin's world, or rather, there were genuine contradictions. The pool of blood on the marble floor was frightful, in some ways. It was pungent, unctuous, designed to revolt and harrow. But it glistened, too. Its pattern was gorgeously fluid—like the lines in the Breton manor—and its color was the precise red that fashion houses worked hard to reproduce. Yocelin's skim across the ballroom floor halted beside the blood. She took a moment to admire it, and in that moment the colors ebbed: blood, marble, floor, and satin dress. The man's expensive jacket lost its fig-like sheen and deteriorated to unremarkable roan.

Desperate, Yocelin surged and took him down. They fell in the neck of another polished hall. The man's head smacked the gleaming wood that replaced the gleaming marble. It split at the back and the red rushed out. The floors dulled beneath them and the jacket Yocelin gripped in both hands devolved from roan to sand. Her dress was a fading blush. Peacock occasion tables with matching peacock chairs grew modest. The man's hair lost lustre and greyed at the ends, turning up in sudden dryness.

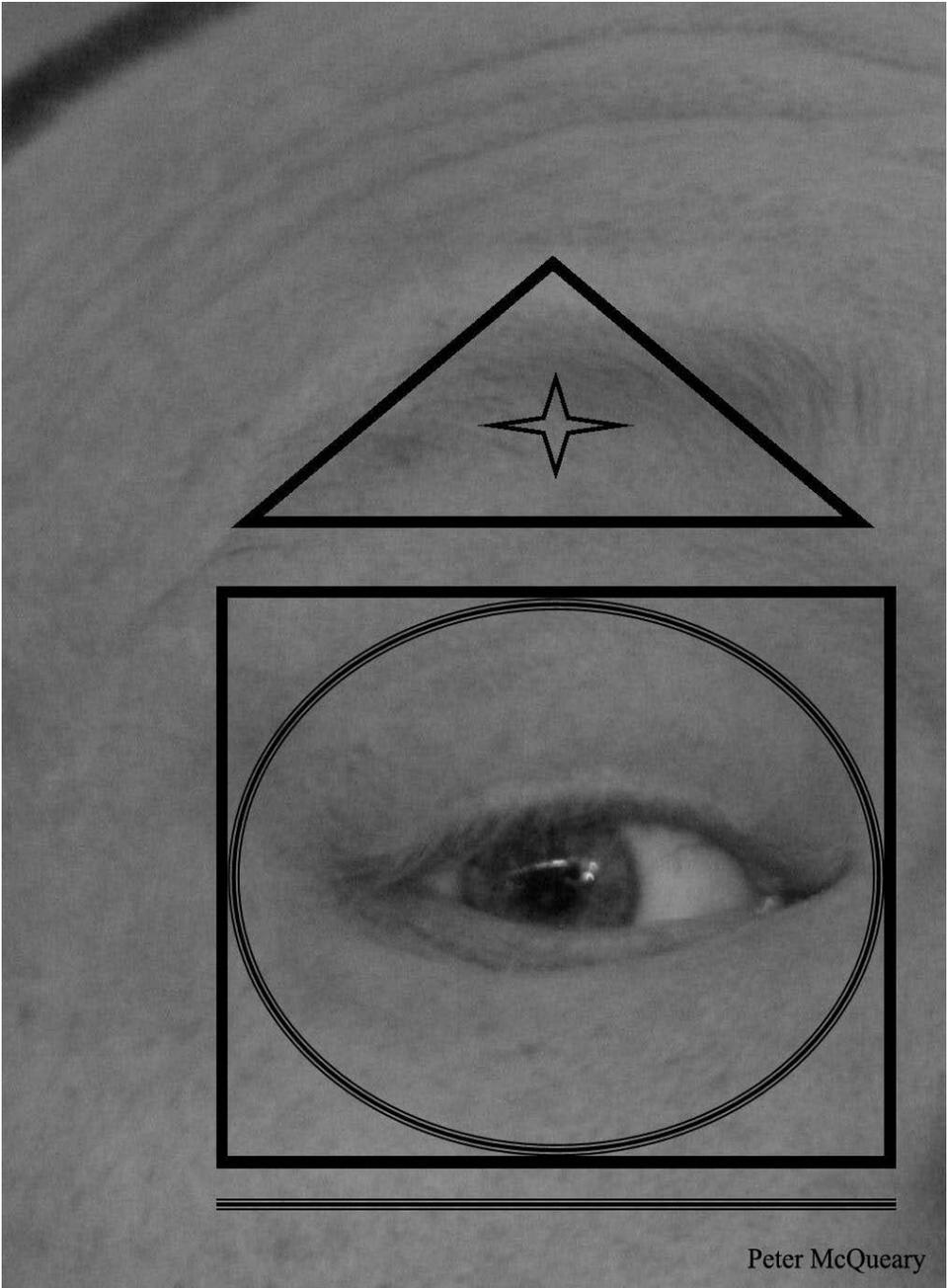
Only the blood that rushed from his head sustained itself. Yocelin bit into his cheek (not porcelain, now, but ash) and feasted on what bane she could. That man, at least, had held on to old woes. He had bled wet and ripe, and his bitten flesh had revealed its bright underworld where she took it apart. The world returned as she ate, and when she stood, her violet dress was plum, newly piped with running crimson.

Now another topography of hills, another man writhing beneath her. He was as lovely as Gwencalon, and how he fought! His struggle woke the ground, which erupted with smells that tried to compensate for the paling, draining hues. The granite had a steely scent. The odor of trees was damp with archaic rains. The needle and mulch of the Canadian Shield were sweet-earth in Yocelin's nose, but she barely registered this. She was committed to a path. She quested for red with her gaze, but this man's spiteless flesh wouldn't bleed. No fruit. It was as dry as cloth and mutton-bland. Yocelin dug deeper as the colors faded around them, but to no avail. He did not hate.

By then the porcelain woman in the yellow shirt (her name was Phoebe) had screamed over the hotel threshold, her noisy approach masked by the rushing of a waterwheel until she was manifest in the

lobby. By then others surrounded her, eager to help. Soon they would hurry up the hill and find no sign of the artist's easel, canvas, palette, and paint. But there was no help for the man beneath Yocelin, who faded as quickly as the world, and there was no help for Yocelin either.

Curled leaves, sere as thirst, tapped to the ground. Bugs dropped like plumbs to the forest floor. Weeds wilted, moss blanched. The carpet beneath her was nearly white, the acorns bulbs of ivory. The woods took on a negative exposure as Yocelin frantically chewed at the dry flesh in her mouth. Her questions were frantic, too, semiotic. She willed the bane out of his blood, but he did not hate. Unnourished, she slid off the dead man's chest and would have coughed had she the strength. Her jaw clacked and her fingers worked the air. Life puckered inside her. Netra, she thought, before even thought was beyond her.



Peter McQueary

What was I Thinking?

Mike Sheedy

It was dark and Grady felt as if he were floating on a cloud. A cloud of smoke? He thought he smelled something burning. He worried that there might be a fire nearby, but before he could look around he began to fall. The descent was slow at first, as he moved through the darkness, but then he fell faster, through gray, and faster, through white, and then he stopped with a jar.

He blinked and saw that he was on his side on a tile floor. A harsh light came from above. The floor looked familiar but it was covered with...what was that? Granola and jelly?

He rolled his eyes and saw that his body was backed up against a wall. His bathroom wall. He tried to push away from it but couldn't move. That was odd. He couldn't move, and he couldn't feel his body.

Then he noticed his pistol under the bathtub. He remembered putting the barrel in his mouth and pulling the trigger because... Why? He couldn't remember why he'd shot himself.

He rolled his eyes up as far as he could and saw that the wall above the commode was splattered with blood, hair and chunks. So it wasn't granola on the floor, it was pieces of his head. A bit of what looked like his brain was just a few inches from his nose, and he wondered if it remembered why he shot himself. Why the hell would he do something like that?

A minute or maybe an hour later the door swung open, but only a few inches. His feet stopped it. He watched the arm, shoulder and then the entire body of a young man squeeze through the narrow opening. The man wore a blue paramedic's uniform and he was blonde and good-looking. He glanced at Grady and spoke into a microphone clipped to his collar. "Arrived at scene. Over." The man pulled the door open a little wider so another paramedic could squeeze through. She was young, blonde and good-looking too, and she carried a vinyl bag with an EMS logo on it.

The man was listening to something through a radio earpiece when the woman saw Grady and flinched. "*Damn!*" She dropped her bag to the floor and gawked for a moment, then she opened the bag and pulled out a

of latex gloves. She snapped them on. Her partner was already wearing gloves.

“Looks like a suicide,” the man said to the woman after he finished with the radio. “Or it will be pretty soon. He can’t last much longer. I’ll take his vitals while you apply pressure to the wound and do the interview.”

“What? Where am I supposed to put pressure on that?” The woman pointed to Grady’s head.

“Just figure it out, Heather, *okay?*”

The woman, Heather, pushed her lower lip out and said, “Okay, Brad,” then she turned slightly and Grady saw that her hair was tied back in a ponytail. It reached almost to her waist and he wondered what it would look like loose and draped over her tits. They were large and mashed up tight against the front of her uniform’s shirt. He could make out the bumps of her nipples beneath the fabric.

The man, Brad, spoke into his microphone again. “We have what looks like an attempted suicide. Gunshot wound to the head. Name on the door is Pfizer, P-F-I-Z-E-R, male, Caucasian, about thirty. We’re going to stabilize, then transport. Over.”

Brad took a pair of scissors from the EMS bag, squatted down at Grady’s side and began cutting his pajamas up the front. Heather squatted down at his shoulder and reached forward. Her hand disappeared above his field of view.

“Jeez,” she said, “I’ve never had my hand inside a *head* before. What should I be looking for? Oh...never mind. I found the leak. Applying pressure.”

Grady still couldn’t feel anything, but he saw one of his hands twitch. Heather giggled. “Look at this,” she said to Brad. “Dot-dot-dot, dash-dash-dash, dot-dot-dot.” Grady’s hand twitched in time to the SOS Heather tapped out on his brain.

“Quit fooling around,” Brad said. He finished cutting away Grady’s pajamas, and Grady looked down at his naked body. A long, pale lump, helpless and pathetic.

Brad took a blood pressure cuff from the bag. Heather took out a roll of gauze. She tore the paper away and stuffed the entire roll into Grady’s head while Brad put the cuff around his arm and began pumping.

“Interview time,” Heather sighed. “What’d you say his name was?”

“Pfizer.”

Grady could see that the nametag on Brad’s shirt said “Bullock.” Heather’s said “Nethers.” He could barely see the tag above the swell of her breast. Heather Nethers. What a nice name.

“Mr. Pfizer,” Heather said, talking to him like he was a child. “You’re going to be all right. Can you speak, Mr. Pfizer? How many fingers am I holding up?” She was holding up three bloody fingers, but Grady couldn’t make his mouth work to answer. He could barely move his tongue. Heather pulled another roll of gauze from the bag, and as she tore away the wrapping Grady saw her tits jiggle. She was *really* good looking, maybe twenty-two or -three, with a well-rounded hourglass shape, like Carlotta’s. But where Carlotta was dark and Latin, Heather Nethers was blue-eyed and pink.

“Why did you shoot yourself?” Heather asked, and Grady finally remembered. He did it because of Carlotta.

They got married six months before and sex was all Grady could think about. Carlotta had insisted they hold off until after marriage, and that was torture, but then on their wedding night he must have screwed her ten times. And he kept up the pace for months. They screwed constantly. At first it was passion and then it became a point of pride. He was afraid she might think he wasn’t manly unless he was constantly at her, so they screwed night and day, day and night, but then he missed a night and the next morning she said it was good to get some sleep for a change. He asked what she meant by that and she said she didn’t mean anything, just that it was good to be well rested, but he knew what she meant. She was saying sex with him was so boring she preferred sleep.

That was three months ago, and the situation weighed on his mind so heavily that he began to experience performance anxiety. He screwed less and less, and the first time he fell below five times in a day Carlotta said it was nice to be able to get through a meal without stopping for sex. The statement wouldn't have bothered Grady so much if she hadn't been looking at a forkful of limp spaghetti at the time. After that he *really* began to suffer anxiety. Sex fell off to nothing. He couldn't get it up anymore. He would sit on the edge of the tub and watch Carlotta bathe, and sneak an occasional look at porn on the internet, but nothing aroused him. So he thought he'd try a sexual enhancement drug.

The ads for the drugs said to check with a doctor before using them, but he didn't. He bought a package of the pills and read the directions, and he assumed that if one pill was good, two would be better. Big mistake. The doctor at the emergency room told him later that he'd suffered a rare side effect, or more of a *reverse* effect. Instead of giving him a hard-on, the medication backfired and blew out his hemorrhoids. The accident occurred a week before, and he got out of the hospital just that morning. He decided to shoot himself while Carlotta was at a late mass.

"He has bandages on his ass," Heather said. Grady looked toward his feet and saw her squatting there. She had elevated his legs by placing his ankles on a stack of towels from the linen closet. She lifted a leg and pointed. "I wonder what happened back here?"

Brad was standing over Grady. He shrugged and Heather let the leg down so both ankles were resting on the stack of towels again. Then she unfolded Carlotta's Vatican beach towel and covered Grady's body with it. He watched the Pope's waving hand settle over his groin as she pulled the towel up to his chin.

Brad radioed. "We've done what we can to stabilize the patient. He's paralyzed and nonresponsive, but the bleeding seems to be stopped and he's not complaining of pain. We're ready to transport. Over."

Heather stood up and stretched. She put her hands on her hips, arched her back and pushed her chest forward. Grady felt a stirring.

Brad heard something unexpected through his earpiece and said, "Repeat?" He listened, frowned and nodded. "Okay. We'll wait. Over."

Heather looked at him.

“They don’t want us to transport?”

“Nope. We’re supposed to wait for the police. They don’t like it when we move shooting victims before they get here.”

“But he’s in *bad* shape.”

Brad shrugged. “They told us to wait. What can I say?” He leaned down and poked at Grady’s head. “Good job of stuffing and wrapping, Heather. No one would ever know this was half gauze.” He straightened up and looked around at the bathroom. “Man. These guys sure make a mess when they do this.”

“What’s that?” Heather asked, pointing. “A tooth?”

“I think so.” Brad stepped out of Grady’s field of view. “Yeah, it’s a molar. And another one’s stuck in this thing. What is this? A dildo?”

Brad moved back into view and he and Heather both looked down at Grady. Heather took a piece of chewing gum from a pocket, unwrapped it and popped it into her mouth. “I wonder if he can understand us?” she asked, chewing.

Brad shook his head. “I doubt it. I think he blew too much of his brain away.”

“Um. Too bad.” Heather looked at her wristwatch. “Do you want me to get the board, to get ready to load him?”

“Well...”

Brad looked at Heather.

Grady knew the look.

“How long ‘til the police get here?” Heather asked. She stripped off her gloves.

Brad stripped off his. “Maybe...ten minutes?”

The paramedics were on each other in a flash. Grady watched them grope and then reach down and unzip each other’s pants. Heather stepped out of hers and tossed them into the tub, and Brad pulled his prick out of his fly. It was hard. Heather slid out of her panties.

Lord her ass was beautiful, Grady thought. Her hips were perfectly rounded, just like Carlotta’s, but she was a little wider between the legs than Carlotta, up at the pudenda, and Heather’s mound was covered with a beautiful golden bush that...

Brad glanced down at Grady and said, “Wait a minute.” He pointed and Grady looked down and saw the Pope’s hand rising. “There’s a change in his condition! I’ll take his blood pressure again and you take his pulse!”

Brad dropped down and went to work. Heather asked him to move out of the way but he told her not to bother him.

“But I can’t get to his arm,” Heather said. “How can I get a pulse if I can’t...”

Grady watched as Heather studied the situation and made a professional decision. She squatted down, whipped the Vatican beach towel away, and grabbed his prick. She gripped it in one hand and looked at the watch on her opposite wrist. Grady couldn’t believe it. He never thought he’d be able to get it up again, and now a beautiful woman was holding his hard-on in her hand. It was too bad he couldn’t feel it.

When Brad finished taking Grady’s blood pressure he looked at Heather and said, “Pressure’s higher than it was when... Hey. What are you doing?”

Heather didn’t look away from her watch. She popped a gum bubble and said, “I’m taking his pulse. You were in the way, and this thing is *throbbing*.”

Brad chuckled. Heather looked at him. She smiled, and then she began to giggle. The giggle turned into a laugh, and she laughed so hard that one of her feet slipped in the mess on the floor. She leaned backward,

then she slipped again and leaned forward. Then back again, then forward. Back and forth, slipping, while she held onto Grady's prick.

And Grady could feel the familiar old itch in some part of his brain that hadn't been replaced by gauze--the itch of an approaching orgasm.

"Heather, you are *nasty*," Brad said, and he stood up. He was still hard. Heather let go of Grady's prick and grabbed Brad's. She began jerking him off.

"Noooooo!" Grady thought. Heather, still squatting, turned toward Brad, and as she did Grady could see between her legs to her beautiful golden bush. "*Please* finish taking my pulse," he thought. "I only need a couple more strokes."

But Heather had forgotten about him. She dropped one knee to the floor as Brad took a step back, out of Grady's field of view.

"We need to hurry," Brad said, and Heather removed the gum from her mouth. She stuck it on Grady's chin and leaned forward so he couldn't see what was going on up above. He heard a gobbling sound.

"Oh, yeah," Brad said. Heather began rocking back and forth gently. Brad moaned with pleasure.

Grady looked down and saw, beyond the wad of gum on his chin, that he was still hard. He wanted to cry.

Heather dropped her other knee to the floor, and as she did Grady saw it mash the piece of brain he'd noticed earlier. He wondered again if it was the piece that knew what the hell he'd been thinking when he shot himself.

Heather rocked and Brad moaned.



Timmy

Biographies

Daniel Ayiotis - My name is Daniel Ayiotis, I am 33 years of age and from Dublin, Ireland. I am a member of the Dublin Writers Forum for just over a year and have written and performed various prose, poetry and experimental drama pieces at various open mic / showcase nights around the City. Most recently I have had a piece accepted for a new Irish literary publication called Colony (www.colony.ie), the first issue of which is coming out in early 2014. I also write a comedy Facebook character called The Caped Commando, who is a 'Dublin based Real Life Super Hero'. I have had one horror story called 'The Priory' published online previously here: <http://short-story.me/horror-stories/564-the-priory.html> Top of my literary influences are Oscar Wilde, Saki, George Orwell, HP Lovecraft, Sheridan LeFanu, M.R. James, Jeremy Dyson and Stephen King.

Cathy Bryant - Cathy Bryant worked as a life model, civil servant and childminder (among other jobs) before writing full-time. She has won nine literary awards, including the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Prize in 2012, and blogged for the Huffington Post. Cathy's work has been published all over the world in such publications as The Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine and Popshot. She co-edited the anthologies Best of Manchester Poets vols. 1, 2 and 3 and her first book, 'Contains Strong Language and Scenes of a Sexual Nature' was published recently. Cathy is 46 and lives in Manchester, UK. See more at www.cathybryant.co.uk

Irving A. Greenfield - My work has been published in Amarillo Bay, Runaway Parade, Writing Tomorrow, eFictionMag and the Stone Hobo; and in Prime Mincer, The Note and Cooweescoowee (2X) and THE STONE CANOE, electronic edition. My wife and I live in Manhattan. I have been a sailor, soldier and college professor, playwright and novelist.

Jenean McBrearty - Jenean McBrearty is a graduate of San Diego State University, a former community college instructor who taught Political Science and Sociology, and is finishing a certificate in Veteran Studies as a Donovan Scholar. Her fiction has been published in a slew of print and on-line journals including Cigale Literary Magazine, 100 Doors to Madness Anthology, Mad Swirl and The Moon, and her poetry has been accepted by Van Gogh's Ear and Page & Spine. Her photographs have appeared in Foliate Oak Literary Journal and Off the Coast Magazine among others. Her novel, The 9th Circle was published by Barbarian Books.

Peter McQueary - Peter McQueary is a science major at Mendocino College. He lives in Ukiah, Ca.

Frank Morelli - Frank Morelli plucked his roots from the cozy, northern soil and buried them in the sun-baked clays of North Carolina. His work has appeared in Philadelphia Stories, The Ranfurly Review, Jersey Devil Press, Ghostlight Magazine, and Monkey Puzzle Press.

Ian Nafziger - Ian Nafziger is an emerging writer in the Weird. He is currently a student of Creative Writing at the University of North Texas. You can find him on Facebook, or follow his blog at: serpentservant.livejournal.com. You can also purchase his self-published novella, “The Plague of Innsmouth,” at the Kindle store for 99 cents.

Patty Papageorgiou - I am a writer and photographer, with a background in Film & TV production. A freelancing mother of two, my special interest is short fiction stories and writing for the screen. Current work also includes a monthly film review column in the Abergavenny Focus which can be found here: <http://www.abergavennyfocus.co.uk/category/focus-on-arts/> and commercial & creative photography which can be viewed here: www.leftofframe.co.uk

David Perlmutter - David Perlmutter is a freelance writer based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. The holder of an MA degree from the Universities of Manitoba and Winnipeg, and a lifelong animation fan, he has published short fiction in a variety of genres for various magazines and anthologies, as well as essays on his favorite topics for similar publishers. He is the author of the upcoming books *America Toons In: A History of Television Animation* (McFarland and Co.) and *The Singular Adventures Of Jefferson Ball* (Chupa Cabra Press).

Ranylt Richildis - I am an Ottawa writer/editor. My fiction has appeared in Ottawa Arts Review and Postscripts to Darkness Volume 2, and my film and book reviews have appeared in the NYC-based online magazines In Review Online and The Second Pass. My short story, “Long After the Greeks,” earned an honorable mention in Imaginarium 2013: The Best Canadian Speculative Writing.

Mike Sheedy - Mike Sheedy's stories have appeared in various magazines. His novel *The Living, the Dead, and the Double-Dead* and his story collection *Now is th Tim* can be found at Amazon and Barnes & Noble. Contact him at michael@moment.net.

Edward Smith - Reckoning with multiple muses, Edward W. L. Smith writes poetry and mystery, essays and non-fiction books, paints and plays tenor saxophone. Therein, he seeks balance of logos and Eros. His most recent book is "The Psychology of Artists and the Arts" (McFarland, 2012).

J.J. Steinfeld - J. J. Steinfeld is a Canadian fiction writer, poet, and playwright who lives on Prince Edward Island, where he is patiently waiting for Godot's arrival and a phone call from Kafka. While waiting, he has published fourteen books, including *Disturbing Identities* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions), *Should the Word Hell Be Capitalized?* (Stories, Gaspereau Press), *Would You Hide Me?* (Stories, Gaspereau Press), *An Affection for Precipices* (Poetry, Serengeti Press), *Misshapenness* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions), *Word Burials* (Novel and Stories, Crossing Chaos Enigmatic Ink), and *A Glass Shard and Memory* (Stories, Recliner Books). His short stories and poems have appeared in numerous anthologies and periodicals internationally, and over forty of his one-act plays and a handful of full-length plays have been performed in Canada and the United States.

Miranda Stone - Miranda Stone's work is strongly influenced by the setting and culture of the Appalachian Mountains. Her fiction and poetry have been published in numerous print and online journals, including *Parable Press*, *Prole*, *The First Line*, *Rock Bottom Journal*, and *The Bookends Review*. Her short story "The Confession" was published in the anthology *Southern Gothic: New Tales of the South*. She lives in Virginia and can be reached at <http://AuthorMirandaStone.com>.

Weasel - Weasel is a writer, and founder of the anthology *Vagabonds*. He received his Bachelor of Arts in Literature at the University of Houston-Clear Lake and manages the publishing press Weasel Press in his spare time. His writing has been accepted in several publications, some of which include: *Houston's Harbinger Asylum*, *San Jacinto College's Threshold*, *Di-Verse-City* from the 2012 & 2013 Austin International Poetry Festival. Weasel also appeared in a small documentary about art titled *Something Out of Nothing (S.O.O.N)* directed by Mitchell Dudley. You can find more of Weasel's work at the website listed. <http://systematicwzl.tumblr.com>

