



down in the dirt

revealing all your  
dirty little secrets

v.033  
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Scars art, pages 9. Cover art: ducks at a fountain at Heather Ridge.

# Not a Pretty Picture

Eric bonholtzer, from the book *Duality*

"I just don't know what we're going to do." Mary said it with emphasis, an overdue bill from the ever-growing stack nestled in her hand, waving it as a conductor might.

"Look, getting upset isn't going to help anything." Mike tried to console his wife. Throughout this whole ordeal he'd been a voice of reason, and that wasn't about to change. "We'll get through this. It's just a tough time. Something will be provided for us, it always happens that way."

"Yeah, well what if it doesn't happen this time? What if we lose our house, Mike? What then? It's been three months and nothing..."

Mike rose from his chair, a worn leather one he'd never had the heart to part with, and came to stand beside his wife. He looked at the house they'd called their own for the past twenty years, the spot on the rug where their older daughter had taken her first steps, the antique green couch where their younger daughter loved to nap, and thought about how they might lose it all. "I know it's difficult, but it's not like were not trying. We've been submitting applications. And at least I got that job at 7-11 and you're getting some part time work at the library."

"But it's not enough money, Mike." Now the tears did come, and Mike was sorely tempted to just join in the misery. But instead, he gained more resolve, letting her vent, his arms wrapped around her, feeling the plush softness of the sweater he'd bought her two Christmases ago, back when he'd had his career, before the company downsizing.

"I know, and I'm going down to Macy's today and..."

"It just isn't going to cover our house payment and with Nana's medical bills, I just don't know what we're going to do."

"Yeah, but at least it's a..."

Mary didn't let him finish. "What about the car payments? And tuition for the kids?"

"We're trying our best, sweetheart. We just have to have believe something good will happen."

Mary smiled a little bit, resting her head on Mike's shoulder. She was all cried out. Mike thought about the mounting stack of bills, having gone from the past due stage to the final notices. "Look, Mary. I love

you. And this is a really difficult time for us, I'll admit. I wish we had some rich parents or friends who we could ask for a little help, but the fact is we don't. And crying about it isn't going to help matters. Maybe you'll get that teaching job..." He let the words trail off. It had been almost three weeks and the truth was that if they were going to hear back, they probably would have already. Mary had left the teaching profession years ago to stay home and raise the kids and at that time the principal was practically begging her to stay; now they didn't want her back because of budget cuts. "We'll get through this. No matter what happens, we have each other, and that's enough."

"But what about the kids, their school?" Both their daughters were away at college, one an aspiring novelist, the other a scientist, different as the seasons.

"We'll figure something out. Maybe they'll just have to put their education on hold for a little bit..."

Mike was cut off mid-sentence by a ring of the doorbell. He shook his head, irritated. He was in no mood for visitors. The interruption did prove to be one blessing: it took their attention off the troubles. Mary was already daubing her eyes and preparing for company, always the consummate hostess, even in times such as these.

As they walked to the door, Mike tried for a little levity. "Hey, if things get really desperate we can always hawk the heirloom." He smiled as he pointed to the absurd avant-garde painting that someone had deemed 'art'. It was a running joke. Bought years ago by Mary's grandfather, it had been passed down through the kids hands until it graced Mary and Mike's mantle, the painting so ugly, so incredibly bizarre it had become the centerpiece of conversation because of its sheer gaudiness. Mike's comment did its job, eliciting a smile from Mary, something that had been scarcely seen for the past few months.

"And part with that masterpiece?" she replied jokingly. "We'll lose the house first." It was Mike's turn to smile, and with slightly lifted spirits, he opened the door.

The man standing before them looked deeply troubled. Tears streamed down his young face, through a beard that was rough cut, a style that was becoming more popular these days. Mike could tell something was very wrong with this picture. The man was shaking, visibly pale, and he favored one side, his left leg looking awkward and damaged. His t-shirt had a visible rip in the side, and the skin showed through the tear.

"Are you all right?" Mary rushed forward, placing one arm on the



young man's shoulder, steadying him, as the new arrival looked like he might collapse at any moment. The man was unresponsive, seemingly in a daze. "Mike, why don't you see if you can see what's wrong? I'll get him some water."

And with that, Mary left, at a near run, her problems temporarily forgotten in her need to help. Alone with this stranger, Mike felt the urge to hug the man, tell him that everything would be okay. But then he realized that he didn't even know what the problem was. "Are you all right son?" Mike could think of nothing better to say. "Look, my wife's going to get you something to drink. What's wrong?"

The man just stood there blankly for a second, blinking rapidly, and for an instant Mike wondered if this man was intoxicated or on some kind of medication. He certainly didn't look right. Then the stranger spoke. "I'm sorry...Look at me...I'm so sorry." Mike was taken aback. He didn't know how to respond. Luckily no response was needed, as the man broke into a fit of sobbing, spilling out what had happened. "There was an accident. Up the street...I think...I think someone's hurt..." Mike could barely make out the words through the hysteria, but something tugged at him deep inside. His wife was back with a cup of water in hand, forcing the man to slow down and take a few sips. "My leg..." The man rambled something incoherent, then continued on, "I tried one of the other houses...empty..." The man pointed across the street, "That house told me... 'get lost hippie.'"

Mike followed the man's finger and was shocked. That was the McCallister's home, good people who Mike and Mary had known for years. He sincerely doubted that their close friends would say such a thing, but the stranger was adamant. "No one will help me, please help me..." He was imploring.

Mike patted the man on the back. "It's okay, son. Now, calm down, it's going to be all right." He turned to Mary and said, "Call the police, tell them we need an ambulance up here right away."

That was when the stranger started screaming, getting even more agitated. He even went so far as to grab the front of Mike's shirt, the fabric bunching in his hands. "No, there's no time. You have to help them now. You *have to*. There's no time." Mike shot his wife a quick glance, as if to say *maybe he's right*.

In a split second they made their decision. "All right. Show us where it is." In an instant Mary was out the door beside her husband.

The stranger pointed, "It's up there a couple of blocks up." Mike mar-

veled, wondering just how far this guy had had to drag himself for help before someone opened the door.

“Can you take us there?” Mary asked it, looking at her husband who was already starting down the driveway.

The stranger shook his head, pointing to his leg, bending to the side to add emphasis to his pained state. He sank down against the side wall of Mike and Mary’s front porch, leaning his head against the wall and beginning once again to cry. No more words were necessary as the heroic couple was already in the street, taking off at a run, leaving the stranger on their doorstep to himself.



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“It was everything we had.” Mary was sobbing deeply into the couch. At least they had left the furniture, which was probably too heavy to move. Three days had passed, a time of sorrow with heartfelt condolences from friends, including the McCallisters, but despite it all, the thoughts of betrayal and grief hadn’t left.

“I know, sweetheart. I know.” Mike was sitting beside Mary, one hand on her leg, as he stared off into space. An insurance adjustor would be there soon and Mike vowed that he was done with tears. He thought of his friends and the well wishers in the neighborhood who were starting a collection, and he could almost smile. Almost.

“I just can’t believe someone would do that...” Mary left the rest of the words unsaid *especially to people who were already in need.*

“I know,” Mike said, not knowing what else to say.

There had been no accident, no trouble a couple of streets up. The stranger had been a phony, a thief with a good act who distracted people long enough, playing on their sympathy and humanity, to rob them. Mike and Mary had just been the latest victims. They’d searched two streets up and then three and then four, thinking the whole time that perhaps the man had been so confused he couldn’t tell where the accident had occurred, with each street the fact becoming more painfully obvious that they’d been duped. Then they had rushed home, only to find their house thoroughly ransacked. The rest had been a nightmare that they wished desperately they could awaken from. Still no great job had surfaced and Mary and Mike had

been cleaned out of just about everything of value.

A ring at the door jolted them from their misery, painfully reminiscent of the same bell that began their nightmare just days before. Mike could almost picture it being the bearded stranger at the door as he opened it, returning to the scene of the crime. But it wasn't, it was the insurance adjuster and Mike was less than optimistic. They'd dropped down their coverage last year to save a few bucks when Mike had taken his first pay cut, a precursor to the layoff.

The insurance man was tall and thin, the stereotype of an accountant down to the horn rimmed glasses, and Mike was not in a welcoming mood.

"Come on in to our home sweet home, which probably won't be our home for much longer." He was bitter, and made an expansive gesture taking in just how much had been stolen from them.

Mary greeted the man politely, the bills on the kitchen table glimpsed out of the corner of her eye. The thief hadn't had the courtesy to take those too.

"I'm really sorry about your loss. They informed me of your financial situation. It's terrible when thieves pick on good honest people, especially people in need." He said it with compassion, but from the look Mike saw in his eyes, he knew the adjuster did this kind of thing so much it was becoming more of a rehearsed recitation than a genuine display of sympathy. "My name's Luke White. I'll be taking down all the information on what you lost. Generally these things are kind of difficult for the parties involved."

*Parties involved*, Mike thought to himself, *he's already reducing us to a statistic.*

The man was droning on and Mike turned his head to the mantle and its rings of dust formed around where their trinkets and keepsakes had once sat. Mr. White was going on about some procedural nonsense and Mike was fuming. He felt anger at the horrible thieves who took advantage of kind people like himself and Mary. He even felt anger at this impassionate adjuster who was rambling on as if this was the most natural thing in the world. Mr. White was asking a question and lost in his ire, Mike had scarcely heard. "What?"

"I was just going over it with your wife and I was asking you, 'what exactly did you lose?'"

Mike stared at him, dumbfounded, wondering if this guy was blind, feeling a prickling seething emotion that made him angry at himself. "Can't you see we lost everything except for some furniture and that stupid painting?!" He gestured to the running joke.

Mike was about to say something else until he caught the look in the adjustor's eyes. Mr. White was staring, as if in shock, a look very similar to the one on the stranger's face from a few days before. "Is that...a..."

Mike just wanted to scream at him, *what you can't talk either, like that thief? Is there some kind of dumbness that's being spread in the water?*

"That isn't an original is it?" Mr. White stepped forward, touching the frame.

Mary had taken notice of the strange tone in the insurance adjustor's voice and her interest was piqued. "That? That's just some old painting that my grandfather bought. Ugly, isn't it?"

Mr. White stared at her as if she had just said Mona Lisa was a mere artist's doodling. "You're kidding, right? Do you have any idea how much this thing is worth of it's an authentic Pollack? Several of his originals turned up missing years ago and have been discovered at various obscure places over time, including yard sales. And if your grandfather bought this..." He stepped closer, examining the surface.

Mike went over to his wife, gripping her hands tightly. *If only what he was saying was true...* But somehow deep inside they knew this wasn't just some random set of occurrences. It was a sign, it had to be.

Mr. White turned to them with a little smile and said, "Um..I think that your financial troubles may be over. I'm no art expert, but I'd bet anything that this is an original. And that means...well I don't think you'll ever have to worry about money again."



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Mary turned to her husband and hugged him tight, thinking of all the time they'd joked about the painting. She thought about how they'd gotten through their problems and grown stronger because of it, the entire time the answer to their situation hanging above the mantle, turning out to be an authentic Pollack. But most of all she thought about the reasons behind the reasons, the big picture made their lives fit together. Mike and Mary embraced, warmth shared between them in their newly furnished living room, and smiled, thinking of all the good for the community and for themselves they would do, all because of a long running joke that turned out to be a painting of gold.



# Objects I Enter when I am Alone

*Michelle Greenblatt*

used to long mornings, looping hours.  
trying to conjure what you dispersed  
into the wind which the roar in the tunnels

of my ears. moon, eye hole, thrashing  
lip-hooked fish, objects I enter when  
I am alone. with you. your silence

creating craters, my small suicidal  
breaths coiling from my lungs, elixir  
of your saliva still scorching my tongue

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# First Flight

*Ben Barton*

I was born precocious  
No need for mothering  
or feeds.

# Tipping with Joy

Stephanie Maher

The kitchen is bright and cool,  
I am thinking about painting.  
Paul Simon is on the radio,  
Now I am thinking about dancing.

We were twirling,  
Every woman's secret favorite thing,  
And you said, "I am yours all night."  
My shoes scuffed with each turn,  
The band swirled, mixed with the dance-less partners watching from the side.

Watching us being happy, again.  
And they whispered to one another,  
"Remember, remember when they always looked this way?  
Spinning, tipping with joy?"

# OLD TOMCAT

Daive Trame

We've got so accustomed  
to your throaty wailing, the corners of our house  
filling with the swayings of your tearing chant;  
after all these years it brings quietness, lulls us  
into sleep, your desire gripping the stones of the street,  
the claiming of your territory stuck on us as time's skin.

# EDUCATE NOT.

Sharon Esther Lampert

No Time to Teach:  
In Class, They Give a General Overview.  
On Tests, They Want Particular Details.

No Time to Learn:  
All By Myself, I Got to Teach Myself a Zillion Facts:  
I Got No Study Skills, I Got No Tutor,  
The First Day of School, I Gotta Be Behind.

Students Got a Cheat-Sheet:  
I Use Citations From Books  
I Got No Time to Read.

Teachers Got a Cheat Sheet:  
They Got No Time to Read IT.  
They Weigh IT:  
Looks Beautiful  
They Grade IT A.  
Looks Pretty  
They Grade IT B.  
Looks OK  
They Grade IT C.  
Looks Ugly  
They Grade IT D.  
Looks Can Kill  
They Grade IT F.

Quantity Over Quality:  
Education System is Dumb  
And is Gonna Get Dumber,  
Wastes My Good Dime,  
My Good Mind,  
And My Good Time.  
I Survive, I Don't Thrive.

Facts Move From Textbook  
To Blackboard to Notebook.  
Gotta Get the Facts INSIDE of ME:  
No Time to Think,  
No Time to Write an Outline,  
No Time for Research,  
No Time to Write a Rough Draft,  
No Time to Reread, Revise, and Rewrite,  
No Time to Write a Final Draft,  
No Time to Write My Masterpiece.  
When I Get IT Back, My Work-In-Progress,  
I Trash IT. I Got No Time for Junk.

Teachers Got No Time to Teach.  
I Got No Time to Learn.  
No Time to Educate.  
EDUCATE NOT.

## **BIO:**

Sharon Esther Lampert has a POETRY WORLD RECORD: 120 rhymes from one family of rhyme. She is a poet, philosopher, pioneer, paladin of education, pin-up, painter, photographer, politician, prophet, and princess. Her publications are too numerous to list. She has an international fan club. She is also a poet-in-your pocket activist, and there are hundreds of people walking around with one of her poems in their pockets.

## **POETRY BIO:**

Sharon Esther Lampert, is a famous poet, philosopher, and educator. She is the Sexiest Creative Genius in Human History. She has a POETRY WORLD RECORD of 12) words of rhyme from one family of rhyme. In philosophy, she created the 40 Absolute Truths of "The Theory of Reality." In religion, she created "The 22 Commandments" a universal moral compass for all people, for all religions, and for all time. In education, she created the ACANDY Study Skills and she is the only expert in the country that can transform an F student into an A student. There are many more contributions and a movie is in the works, entitled, "A Complicated Woman."

# STRANGLER FIR

*Emily Criskavich*

She kept the tree in the beige-lace living room,  
where it often came up in conversation  
with guests who feigned interest  
over coffee and muffins.

“I had to put the pole in there.  
They can’t grow without something to strangle.”

On afternoons without visitors,  
I admired the lacy leaves  
dappled green and white.  
They made it pretty, from across the room,  
where you couldn’t see the bulging muscles  
of off-white wood wrapped  
around the dark brown stake.

After hearing my mother say “strangle”  
one time too many,  
I decided to set the stake free.  
I climbed the huge wicker pot  
that held the roots.  
I planted my feet, grabbed the tree,  
and yanked  
and pulled  
and strained  
and rocked  
from side  
to side  
to side...

Silently, she picked me up,  
leaving the overturned tree where it was.  
My dirty bloody hands  
grabbed her dress  
as she wrapped me in her arms.

Then I saw her hand  
wrapped around her favorite wooden spoon...



# At A Piano Bar

James Michael Ward

At a piano bar  
the buys drink turpentine  
drowning their miseries  
and I am with them  
sucking on my sorrows  
like an ice cold beer  
debating if I should bang some chords  
or play a melody  
this is the piano bar  
the only other thing to do  
bask in depression  
of lonely nights  
no lovers in sight  
just sad tunes  
resonating from the black tomb  
of the piano player's blues  
step aside in your penguin tuxedo  
I got to play a bar  
of an anti-war song I know  
"Waltzing Matilda"  
the crowd show disdain  
for my selection  
they've come here to forget  
the dead and dying  
just another drink  
to blind the sorrows  
to forget the soldiers howling  
that they hunt the blood  
of innocent children  
to hell with this bar  
to hell with the games

I got the Posies on cassette tape  
in the car  
as I drive  
four beers under my belt  
forgetting what the drunk tank looks like  
I'll make it home  
knowing the boys still up there  
weeping to songs of their youth  
sharing the truth of such miseries-

# Illusion of Loss

Kurt MacPhearson and Rick Yennick

time bubble like soap  
foam to the surface  
coating your lose dreams

scum on the pillow  
where your partner should be

singing a sorrowful  
lullaby-dirge  
you self-pitying loser

steeping sheet corners  
in your briny tears  
margarita glasses only break once

so what are you waiting for  
the world still whirls without you

love's a heartless bitch  
but it doesn't mean  
you have to let them both win

## Untitled

Milos Petrovic

As a murderer  
Who,  
As they say,  
Is always coming back  
To the crime scene

So are you,  
Coming back

To get something forgotten  
And always purposely  
Abandoned to come at me  
again  
and again.

## The Modern Parents

Christopher Barnes,  
UK

He jerks up the window,  
a peculiarly British house  
totting up the value,  
things he can take.  
They pirouette through rooms,  
the tips of their toes  
malingering to rhythms,  
the Burglars' Sinfonietta.

Forestalling limpidity.  
Bedsprings creak.  
Melodious questions.  
Half-light, dawn;  
shapes adumbrate.  
Powdery colours  
slowly possessable from grey.  
Dimmer houses conform  
on Espalier Street.

Mother steals  
across the landing  
into echelons, shadows,  
first Silk Cut  
pursed between lips.  
In a moment  
stairs expiate secrets,  
wooden phalanxes tense.  
Dad is at the sink.

The kitchen is a roulette:  
knives, pine, hi-fis, oleographs  
pictures, the tortured.  
She checks tools:  
crow bar, wire, glass cutter –  
slipping the door  
trap-spring quiet.

# EQUALITY

Cynthia Ruth Lewis

I heard in the local news the other day  
that women want to start going topless  
in public--  
if men can do it, why can't they?

there seems to be a slight confusion  
concerning anatomical differences here,  
but, that's the gender-oriented mentality  
of women's lib fanatics;  
judging people by their sex

they can walk around half-dressed if they want,  
but if a guy leers or makes lewd comments,  
they scream 'harassment'  
so, of course, walking around topless  
will completely solve the problem...

by that logic, maybe one day  
we'll all be able to pee standing up

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# Poverty

Michael Bonanno

Dull, dreary days of desolation pass,  
magnifying poisoned essence of poverty,  
immersed in a life of hollow-eyed generosity.

Successful stroke, serendipitous fortune, frowns  
upon ravenousness harsh hunger,  
deadly, burning sensation, like a lodged virus.

# THE TRAVELER

Michael Helvaty

The dead tore out of the ground, rending the earth to match their torn, decayed flesh. They dug their way out of their graves, swimming to the surface with slow, methodical, brainless strokes. All over the graveyard, hands suddenly broke free of the earth and rose quickly upwards like so many worms blindly burrowing to the surface. With their arms free, the dead braced themselves on the hard-packed surface and pulled themselves from the earth's womb, celebrating a new birthday. Their mother, the earth, groaned to be releasing them from her care. She knew her birthing that night was unnatural and evil but could do nothing to prevent it.

There were no moans, no cries. The dead returned to the world in silent surprise. With no minds of their own, they quietly followed some invisible guiding hand and shambled silently together into long lines out of the graveyard and towards the town.

Widow Hatcher was glad for the night's bright moon. She would have visited her husband's grave without it, but she was thankful for its light, that comforting glow of white light, a holy aura in the sky. If only those cursed women would stop harassing her, she wouldn't have to visit her husband by the cover of night. But they had said she mourned too long, wasted her time visiting the graveyard every day to speak with her husband's shade. They had said it was unnatural and unholy. They had even gone so far as to suggest that she might be up to witchcraft and had sent the village's holy man to visit her.

She was a meek woman, a pious and loving wife, so she refused to stop visiting her husband simply because of those women. But, they had involved the holy man, and he could cause problems for her. He obviously understood her devotion and didn't blame her for her acts, but influenced by those women, he had asked her, had pleaded with her, to let her husband rest and to reserve her visits for special occasions. Well, holy man or not, she loved her husband and knew a wife's duties better than anyone. Widow Hatcher would say a prayer for her husband's soul by the moon, if not by the sun.

Those women, though, oh those infuriating women. They still had-



n't taken their spying eyes off her even after two weeks. Still they watched, waiting, hoping to undo her for their own petty amusement, simply because she cared more for her dead husband than any of them cared for their living husbands. And, the town knew it. Widow Hatcher received praise, and they were chided, told to follow her example.

When Widow Hatcher saw the shadowy figure approaching her along the town's main road, she froze in her tracks like one of the town children caught at some mischief. She didn't know what to do. She didn't have time to hide. Whoever it was up ahead had surely seen her. She had to remind herself that she wasn't doing anything wrong, and once she realized that all important fact, she found the strength to continue forward and greet whoever else was out that night.

The figure was not alone, however. Widow Hatcher suddenly saw another vague, shadowy shape behind the first, and then another. Her first thought was of those women, those accursed women. Somehow they had discovered her and had been waiting all night for her pilgrimage to the graveyard. Well, they would not deter her. She would push right past them without a word.

It would have been better for the Widow Hatcher, though not for the town, if she had decided to confront the figures. But, her resolve was stronger than the town's oldest foundations, and she began shouldering her way past that first figure without even taking in the figure's appearance. But the smell. She couldn't ignore the overpowering odor. Death and decay stung the Widow's nose, and she gagged, retched, and turned her questioning eyes to the figure she had just brushed past.

Widow Hatcher knew Polly Spring. Polly had died three years before, her body burning up in a fever that had never subsided. So, when Widow Hatcher realized Polly was standing before her, she took in the dirt, the worms in her hair, and the loose flesh that hung on the young woman's reanimated bones. She was no magician, nor was she a scholar or a great warrior, but the Widow listened in the holy house, and she knew a zombie when she saw one.

Her recognition came too late. Thin, waxy hands grabbed Widow Hatcher from behind. She screamed out in surprise; in fear at death's touch; and her cries were a warning for all the village to hear. Widow Hatcher didn't stop screaming even as the dead around her used their teeth on her. Whether or not her god heard her last words is unknown, but she went into death screaming her prayers.

Jet burst into the Empty Barrel, banging through the door and hitting everything on his way into the tavern as if he was tossed through the doors instead of carried in upon his own power. His entrance wasn't enough to warrant too much surprise from the handful of townspeople drinking and eating in the tavern's sparse common room, but his words were strong and forceful. Before most of the townspeople fully realized what had been said, they were already doing what had been demanded, so assured was Jet's command.

"Your dead have returned to this world and have encircled this town. We need to barricade all the doors and windows, and if we can't do that, then we need to find a spot where we can shut ourselves in." Without waiting for anyone to join him, Jet pulled the nearest table towards the tavern's door. He was neither surprised nor pleased when he saw another man helping him, and together, the two men turned the table up on its side against the door.

Sparing a moment to glance around the tavern, Jet noticed the barman's disappearance. The man had been standing behind the bar when Jet had entered. Jet's words had been spoken more to him than to any of the others in the tavern, hoping that as the owner, he would help Jet rally the villagers. Minus the barman, Jet saw a man and woman pushing another table to the common room's rear entrance. The man who had helped Jet with his own table was already pushing another table towards the windows. A young serving girl, the inn's only other occupant, stood frozen in the common room, still holding a mug of ale she had been carrying to one of the tables. Ignoring her for the moment, Jet helped lift another table up, blocking the common room's only window.

Jet glanced around the common one once more. With the rear entrance, main entrance, and ground floor window blocked, Jet saw only the door behind the bar still unprotected. Jet knelt before the frozen serving girl, and gently took her stiff arms in his hands.

"What's beyond the bar, dear? Does that door lead outside?"

"No." A strong voice spoke from behind Jet. He turned and found himself facing the robust bartender who had disappeared moments after his own entrance. "It leads to the kitchen and food stores, and then outside. But, I've already taken care of that way." Jet had no doubt the man had done exactly as he said. The barman's disappearance was explained in his two possessions. First, a young boy was tucked in the barman's left arm. In the other arm, he hefted a large hammer that Jet recognized.

Horse owners used it to shoe their horses.

Before Jet could ask the man if he had any nails for the inn's other doors, strong hands began pushing open the common room's rear door, scraping the table holding it slowly across the floor. Before anyone else could react, Jet was across the room, long legs carrying him there with three swift strides. He threw his body against the table, forcing the door shut and braced himself for the inevitable shove from the other side that he knew must be coming. Jet could hear several fists pounding on the door from the other side, but what he did not hear were cries of help.

In smooth motions, the barman removed thick nails from the folds of his apron and hammered them through the table, into the wall—stakes in a wooden coffin to keep evil locked away. With the door secure, Jet moved to the table before the front entrance already held by the townsman who had helped him drag it there. The barman finished with that table and the one blocking the inn's window with no interference from outside. All the attention seemed to be on the inn's backdoor for now.

"What are you doing? How do we know those aren't villagers out there trying to get in?" A man spoke, and when Jet turned, he saw the man who had helped him earlier with the tables.

"Do you hear any cries for help, Rust? Cause I don't. Those are zombies out there, and they want in here."

"He's right." They were safe for the moment, but they didn't have long. Jet knew that. Now, he had to make sure the others did. "I have to thank you, all of you, for helping me. You didn't have to listen to me, but you did and that means a lot."

"Well, now that we're secure, it might be time for a story." It was the man again—Rust. Jet looked him over, and he knew the man was going to become a problem. His dress and build marked him as some sort of town guard. Here was a man whose job was authority and protection, and in the face of overwhelming danger he had been one step behind Jet so far.

"And I think it might be time for you to adjust your tone, Rust." The barman's voice was gruff, strong. He had gathered both of the young children into his arms, but now he pushed them aside and rose up to his full height, sticking out his meaty gut like a weapon. "This is still my inn. And, this man may very well have saved all our lives, including yours."

They were all gathered now. The man and woman who had blocked the rear door were holding hands. Husband and wife then, Jet thought. Both children, surely the barkeep's, were staying close to his side. That left Rust to the side, stuck between Jet and the barman, but he had been

overruled for now. He had no authority, so he waited to hear Jet speak.

“As I said when I entered, your dead have risen and have taken over the town. I was with your blacksmith when we heard a scream somewhere along the eastern road that leads past the cemetery. We both looked outside and saw them. They move slow, but they always come in great numbers. I headed in this direction, but your blacksmith wouldn’t follow. He clutched his hammer in his hand and stalked off to join your defender.”

“Defender Thorn! How did he fare? Was his apprentice with him?”

“Does he need our help?”

The married couple had spoken, first the husband and then his wife, and Jet hated having to dash the hope he saw on their faces. Even worse was the sudden light in the children’s eyes. They knew Defender Thorn’s name. Here was their hero, something they finally understood amongst the adults’ talk.

Jet motioned to the barman’s children. “Is this your son and your daughter?”

Without hesitation, the barman understood Jet’s gesture and turned to the woman. “Letty, could you take Daniel and Violet upstairs to one of the rooms?” The woman, Letty, nodded gravely at the barman, and then turned a beaming smile upon the children and scooped them into her arms like precious jewels. Once she disappeared up the stairs, the barman nodded once more to Jet. “Thank you.”

“They didn’t need to hear. Your defender is dead, and so is his apprentice, and unless the blacksmith gave up saving them, he’s also dead.”

“How is that possible?” Rust again, but now his tone was changing. Events were beyond him now, and hopefully he had realized that only by following the others, especially Jet, was he going to survive.

With as much force and emphasis as he could, Jet spoke a warning that everyone in the room needed to hear. “Because strength will not overcome the dead. Your defender and his apprentice swung their weapons and fought ferociously, but I saw them torn down, overwhelmed by the dead’s superior numbers. You can’t fight the dead with your arm. Even if you cut them down, someone leads them, guides them. The dead are simply puppets, and your only hope is to outsmart them.”

“Well, you’ve helped us do that so far, young man. I’m Harry, the owner of the Empty Barrel, and those were my children, Violet and Daniel.” The barman introduced himself, and the others took his cue, working around the room.

“I’m Burt, and my wife, Letty, took the children upstairs. We’re just

simple farmers from down the road, stopped in for a warm meal from Harry's kitchen, and I'm glad we did. Out on our farm we would surely be dead by now."

"You reacted quickly and without question earlier, so you might have survived. You've got good reflexes, and that's another edge over them." Jet motioned to the rear door where they could still hear fists banging against the well-blockaded door. "As for me, you can call me Jet. I'm a Traveler."

Rust was silent. Jet already knew the man's name, but he guessed withholding it was the only resistance the man had left. Harry put a quick end to that. A steady stare quickly caught Rust's attention, and he dropped his defensive exterior like a child before his parents.

"Name's Rust."

"Are we going to have a problem, Rust?" They already had a problem. Rust knew it, and Jet knew it. What Jet needed to know was whether it was going to continue, escalate, or stop right now. "Because I'll be honest, I need your help, and so does Harry, Burt, Letty, and those two children upstairs."

"We won't have a problem. These are my people, and I'll take care of them." Jet now saw the pride in his face and knew that his earlier assumption had been correct. This man didn't want anyone else defending what was his. These were his people.

"Good." Jet returned to his feet. Now was a time for action and preparation. "We aren't as safe as you might think. They might be out there, but we aren't exactly going anywhere. We have food and shelter, now we need weapons and a plan. And the weapons are urgent because I can't promise that whoever's behind the undead doesn't have other minions—more capable minions."

Harry rose his shoeing hammer into the air. "I can use this well enough. There's an old sword out in the stable, but that's lost to us now."

In answer, Rust pulled his own short sword from the scabbard on his right hip, and he retrieved a small wooden shield from behind the bar where Harry must have been stowing it for him. Jet kept his own sword in its scabbard but pulled aside his cloak, revealing the simple, smooth silver pommel of his own sword. Twice Rust's short sword, it was a serious weapon.

"What else do you have?" Jet spoke to Harry who began leading them back into the kitchen.

"There are knives in here, even some larger cleavers." On a much-used chopping block, a meat cleaver stained with rust and dulled from years of service bit into the wood like some torn-out monster's tooth.



With some sharpening, the cleaver would make an excellent weapon.

“That cleaver has a good grip, and you’ll have a lot of leverage when you swing it. Give Burt a whetstone to sharpen it with, and Burt, if you sharpen that cleaver, you should be able to bite clean through someone’s neck in a single swipe, but you’ll have to swing it hard. No holding back.”

Burt nodded and set about his task. When Harry and Jet returned to the common room, Letty was just coming down the stairs, and Rust had his ear pressed against the rear wall. He was concentrating intently, and Jet saw a look of real terror.

“What is it, Rust?”

“How many, Harry? How many do we have buried out there?”

Harry’s realization was like a plunge into icy water. “This town’s been here for almost 300 years. I’ll bet there’s at least twice that many dead buried out there, but I don’t know, Rust. I don’t know.”

“What are we going to do, traveler? How are we going to fight our way past 600 of our dead?” Rust was screaming, the panic in charge now, and Jet saw that if he had been standing closer to the man, he would have been covered in Rust’s spittle. Jet didn’t have time for tantrums. He wanted Rust strong; the others needed him. What Rust needed to understand, was that Jet did not need him. So, he pulled back his cloak, reminded the man of his sword, and spoke cool, calm words like the undisturbed surface of a pond lying about the churning masses below.

“There’s always the sword, Rust. Dying at their hands is a horrible way to go down. It’s not a quick arrow in your chest or a sword in your gut. They’ll tear you apart with their teeth, and you’ll die slowly. But, I can spare you that, if that’s what you want.” Jet placed a single hand on his sword pommel, a light caress to show Rust that he meant what he said. The effect was instantaneous. A new light came into Rust’s eyes. Instead of giving up, panicking, he became defensive, remembered how dear his life was. Jet reminded Rust what it meant to fight for your life, gave him an opportunity to do just that.

“No. No, traveler, I don’t want your easy way out. I said I’ll fight for these people, and that’s what I’ll do.” And whatever else might happen, Rust would now die fighting.

“Good, because I can tell you how to fight 600 dead, Rust. Fire.”

A new light now came into everyone’s eyes. Here was something they all understood, something familiar. While they might not understand swordwork or the magic required to raise an entire graveyard of dead, fire was no mystery. They knew how to make it, and they knew

how well it burned, how quickly it could spread.

“There’s an entire cask of oil in my stockroom. I use it for the inn’s lanterns, and I’ll bet it’s nearly full.”

“Good. Harry, you get that. Letty, Rust—I need both of you to gather up all the lanterns you can find in this inn. Find what you can on your own and then ask Harry if he has any extras stored in that stockroom. When you’ve found all you can, bring everything and everyone up to the roof.”

Rust looked as if he might argue with Jet’s plan, but the traveler was glad when he hesitated only briefly and then joined Letty. The man surely felt he belonged on the roof with Jet. He was wrong.

With everyone busy about some task, Jet ascended the dark stairway alone. The shadows here were thick and fitful. They tossed and turned like a witch’s brew pitting light against dark. Jet waded through and climbed out upon the Empty Barrel’s solid roof. He was immediately glad he had left the others to their tasks. Inside the inn, their fear was a banging against the rear door and imagination. Out here, fear was solid and overwhelming.

On his stomach Jet wriggled to the roof’s edge and saw the dead spread out before him like a giant flock of birds, perched upon this unfortunate town for an evening’s rest. They traveled in large packs like wild dogs. Some were a hundred strong, and Harry’s estimate of their numbers looked fairly accurate. Jet would guess somewhere between six hundred and seven hundred dead clamored about below him. To his relief, Jet saw that several of the larger packs were besieging other buildings just as they were battering upon the doors of his own stronghold. Others had survived, and that was good. That would help calm the others, give them some hope. They were not alone in their fight for survival that night.

Those houses not defended, not boarded up, were beyond hope. Jet could see the dead leaving empty houses, wet sticky blood covering their mouths. The traveler was glad he had spared the others this sight. That blood did little to affect him. It reminded him of his own mortality, but as a traveler he was well-aware of his weaknesses. The others, though, wouldn’t simply see blood. They would see the blood of their townsmen, blood of friends and lovers. The defender was already with them. Jet spotted his massive frame in the midst of chaos. Defender Thorn was like a rock battered by waves of undead, but he stood firm in the town’s center. Jet knew what new role the defender played. Here was the shell the necromancer must have chosen. Defender Thorn’s body was well-muscled, well-toned, well-worn, and the man was still equipped with a vicious great axe. With such a powerful shell, the necromancer could

guide his new army with little fear of Jet destroying his vehicle.

“Traveler!!!” Defender Thorn’s voice struck the village like a thunderclap, and although Jet did not jump when the voice startled him, his eyes widened, and his hand instinctively shot to his sword pommel. “Know fear, traveler! Know that you delay the inevitable!”

To strike his point home, Defender Thorn wheeled around and turned his gaze to meet Jet’s own. At the same time, Defender Thorn’s soldiers rose their heads as one and hundreds of dead began the slow march to surround the Empty Barrel and Jet. Locked in Thorn’s gaze, Jet rose to his feet, his cloak whipping ever so slightly behind him.

“The dead cannot stop me, Necromancer.”

“Ha, Ha, Ha!!! The dead are not for you, traveler!” Defender Thorn broke into an evil cackle, and Jet realized his earlier fears were true. Whatever else the necromancer might have to throw at him, the inn would not be safe for long. Two long strides carried Jet to the inn’s window, and he bellowed inside for those within to hurry, to join him on the roof. They would have to act fast, burn as many of the dead as they could and hope it would be enough.

Rust was first to the window, and he climbed through before Jet could voice any objections. He had found a sack somewhere, presumably in Harry’s stockroom, and Jet was pleased to see it full of lanterns. As soon as he stood upon the roof, Rust saw the hordes advancing, and Jet left him alone to his panic. The sooner the man dealt with it, the better. Meanwhile, Jet began pulling lanterns out of the bag. Harry, Burt, and Letty all arrived together moments later. Burt carried the cask of oil, while Letty had another bag of lanterns. Harry, on the other hand, had a box full of empty bottles.

Burt and Letty joined Rust, their gaze sweeping out over the dead, probably beginning to spot men and women they had known a few hours earlier—men and women who were no longer their friends. Harry took it all in, but he didn’t dwell. He helped Jet finish pulling lanterns from the bags, and then the two men worked together to turn Harry’s empty bottles into lethal weapons. Jet held each bottle as Harry poured a hearty amount of oil in—a metallic, liquid weapon cast in the moon’s glow. Rust joined them, dipping a strip of cloth into each bottle, the rough, dry fabric greedily swelling with oil.

Moments later, lanterns flew from the roof in all directions. Where they shattered, the oil spread over the dead and burned their rotten flesh. It wasn’t a quick end, and the smell of human flesh baking in the night

must have been overwhelming for Letty, Burt, and possibly Harry and Rust. But, each lantern tossed into a heaving mass of dead bodies often covered twenty or thirty bodies in fire. At that rate, Jet thought, they could take care of four or five hundred of the dead below.

When the first lantern struck and the first group of dead began to burn, Defender Thorn bellowed his rage. With the same fierce speed he must have possessed when alive, the large man began loping towards the Empty Barrel's front door, his great axe held high above his head, ready to bite into the now flimsy protection between the dead and the living. Jet watched the man coming, he waited for Defender Thorn to begin hurtling through a tight pack of dead. He chose that moment to cast a lantern.

The flame inside flickered between life and death as the lantern sailed through the air, but it stayed lit and struck Defender Thorn. Jet watched a strange transformation overtake the defender's body. He scratched viciously at his body where it burned, showing the pain that none of the other dead could feel. Suddenly, the defender stopped and a new, vacant purpose took over his movement. The man stopped screaming in pain, stopped rubbing his burning flesh and appeared to be just another one of the dead. Jet didn't know what the connection was between the necromancer and his shell, but from what he had just seen, he had hurt the necromancer. He might just have given them another important edge.

But then Jet saw the goblins approaching, racing out of the night into the red, fire tinged village. Their clan was a small one, only thirty or forty strong. They were stupid, small creatures who were only dangerous in large numbers. But, if the necromancer was guiding their thoughts, they would be able to think clearly. Usually chaotic attacks would become well-orchestrated with his instructions. And, Jet saw that the goblins had bows. The smoke would help with that, should make it harder to spot them and draw a clear bead on any of them, but Jet knew it was time to retreat inside. They had done their damage.

"Inside! Hurry, inside now!" Burt, Letty, and Rust all appeared from the roof's other side, disappeared inside. Harry joined Jet, two flaming bottles in his hands, and when the traveler pointed to the goblins, the innkeeper knew what to do. The two men hurled their fiery weapons into the masses before the inn, hopefully delaying the goblins for a time, long enough for those inside to take defensive positions. Arrows clattered against the rooftops all around, little black spears that might or might not have been coated with poison. Somehow, Jet pushed Harry through the

window and fell through right after him without a scratch.

“We don’t have much time. There’s a small clan of goblins outside, and they’ll have no problem climbing the walls outside and getting in these windows.”

“We should have nailed them shut.” Harry was enraged, and Jet knew that was good, knew they could use that in a short time.

“We could have, and then we wouldn’t have been able to burn so many of the dead. Was that the right thing? I don’t know. But we have to accept it and make a new plan because those goblins are coming, and they have weapons.” Everyone was waiting. They knew Jet was running the show now, and no one had any objections. “Letty, gather Harry’s children. Everyone else, downstairs. You need to find a place to make a stand. Under the stairs, in the stockroom, behind the bar—it doesn’t matter. Find a place to hide.”

The first goblins leapt into the inn’s upper rooms, swords drawn, expecting their prey to be waiting. Some of the archers even shot arrows through the unprotected windows, hoping to catch one of the stupid humans. When they found the upstairs abandoned, they came pouring in like bats screeching into some dark cave. The archers searched frantically for something to shoot. None of them looked up, though. They should have. They would have seen Jet perched on the wooden ceiling beams like a giant bird of prey. But they didn’t look up. They headed down because that’s where they knew the humans must have gone. They could smell them down there, could smell their sweat and their fear.

Evil, beady little eyes appeared at the top of the stairs like a swarm of fireflies. The goblins were hesitant at first, searching for the humans. A single lantern, placed in the common room’s center was the only light. Shadows battled across the walls, warriors of light and darkness. The goblins couldn’t see the humans, but they knew what they had to do. They had been...instructed. A wave of stinking goblin flesh poured down the stairs, weapons forgotten, and small, powerful hands began tearing at the tables blocking the doors. A few goblins sniffed about—the human smell was strong, almost overwhelming—and hefted their weapons uneasily. They knew the humans were hiding, stuck their noses into the hiding places and were the first to die.

No one had needed to tell Harry and the others what to do after they hid. They killed. Each became a warrior, swinging his or her weapon of

choice, cutting down goblins before they could react. Harry's hammer cracked skulls and sent limp bodies to the ground; Letty and Burt worked together, springing out from behind the bar. Letty forced enemies back with a chair while Burt went to work with his sharpened cleaver. And Jet had been right—the knife bit cleanly through goblin arms and necks. Meanwhile, Rust was putting years of sword practice to work. Whatever other failings the man might have had, his swordwork was tight, his thrusts hard and sharp.

The first goblins fell quickly without a real fight. The tables were firmly fastened to the walls. They hadn't been expecting that. They were to have the dead as reinforcements. Without them, the goblins retreated back up the stairs. But, Jet was walking down, his cloak thrown over his shoulder, the scabbard on his hip empty. Jet's sword was out. It cut. It hacked. It maimed and killed. Bodies became wasted corpses with each swing of Jet's sword. Small goblins fled before the sword, and they were split in two at the waist, from the crotch, or at their neck.

"Strike now! Finish these vermin!" Jet's words emboldened the others. With his sword, Rust was finishing off the last two or three goblins by the rear door, and Harry was holding his own against those at the front door, but he would need help soon. As a team, Burt and Letty seemed to be doing better than anyone. Until the runt.

He was smaller than the other goblins, and he was smarter. While the others turned the bar's corner, bottlenecking in a tight group like animals waiting for the butcher's cleaver, he climbed. Onto the bar stool, a small leap up to the bar, and he was on Letty. His small sword slashed and stabbed at her exposed neck. She was dead seconds after hitting the ground.

Burt saw it all. The corner of his eye wouldn't lie as much as he wanted it to. He wasn't sure what he had seen, but when he turned, his wife was dead. In his rage, in his final moments of helplessness, Burt turned his cleaver upon the runt. He hacked the small goblin into pieces, screaming out for his dead wife, even while the remaining goblins at the bar descended upon him. Their rubbery skin pressed tight against Burt's body, pressing him to the ground, and he was held there, suffocated by their stink, filled with visions of rotten teeth and inhuman eyes in his final moments.

Jet didn't see their fall. He fought his way to the ground floor, caked in goblin blood, his sword flinging beads of it to paint the walls red. Harry still had five enemies to tend to, and they had backed him into a corner. Several long lines of red marked the man's body. He had been

cut. All of Jet's attention was on Harry, but Rust was alone in the common room's rear. Rust saw the runt climb onto the bar, and he watched in horror, his feet moving too slow, his sword suddenly useless in his hands, as Letty and then Burt fell beneath the bar. Rust didn't know they were dead. He suspected. He feared. But, he didn't know, and that's what kept his feet moving, that's what pushed him into a run.

When Rust crashed into the remaining goblins behind the bar, they must have thought the ceiling had fallen down on their heads. Rust's weight was more than enough to bowl over the small goblins. Once Rust pulled a goblin he had accidentally skewered off his sword, the slaughter began. Burt had been the one wielding the cleaver, but Rust was the one doing the real cleaving. His sword hammered up and down behind the bar. He was a cook slicing meat, and he sliced it thin.

Jet and Harry stopped him. They saw the bodies, understood what had happened. Rust fell into their arms, exhausted. His sword clattered to the floor like a dinner bell, and the townguard pressed all-too-bloody hands to his head, ran his fingers through his sweat-drenched hair, streaking it red.

"You did what you could, Rust," whispered Harry. Jet knew there was nothing he could say. He hadn't known these people. They hadn't been his. Burt, Letty—they had been Harry's. They had been Rust's. "You couldn't defend us all, Rust."

"He's right." Jet needed this man, and he needed him now. "And your job isn't done, Rust. Harry's still alive, his children are still locked in the stockroom. You can still protect them because I can't, Rust. I need to make my move, and I need to make it now. So I need you to stay with Harry and his kids, Rust. You watch them, you protect them. Take them into the stockroom, lock the door and don't leave until the sun rises." Harry turned to Jet, clapped his hand and shook it firmly.

Jet was up the stairs while the others disappeared into the kitchen. He was a red shadow of death. With his cloak closed, the hood thrown up, the only glimpses of Jet's face revealed an intense, hate-filled, bloody visage. If the dead could know fear, they would have when Jet dropped down amongst them from the rooftop. Alone, he easily cut his way through their slow-moving numbers. Getting through them was never a problem. Defending yourself against their greater numbers was suicide though, and Jet wished the Defender had known that.

The holy house had been corrupted. Jet could sense it from a distance, could feel it on his skin when he stood at the double arched doorway. All the holy symbols had been blasted from the building's face. Now, the holy house looked like a man with the rotting disease, the flesh falling from his face. And Jet knew he would find rotteness inside, a source of decay.

Jet was no magician, but he knew better than to enter by the front door. A chunk of holy symbol on the ground gave him an idea. With the symbol in his hand, Jet twisted his body and then slung the symbol through the holy house's front-left window. As glass shattered, falling and breaking apart like raindrops, the traveler sprinted and hurled himself through the front-right window. Jet hit the ground and rolled to a standing position. He was in the rightmost aisle of the holy house, and as he pulled his sword, he could feel small cuts all over his body. Glass fell from his hair, his cloak, and his skin like grains of sand announcing the passage of time in an hourglass.

"Raaarrggghhh!" The necromancer's scream was like the dying of some great demon. From inside the holy house, Jet could see that he had been right to avoid the front doors. An evil yellow aura outlined the doors' edges. Jet could see another spell's remnants on the walls and floor where the holy symbol had crashed into the holy. The necromancer had wasted yet another spell.

With two of his spells wasted, the necromancer was enraged and weakened. The man stood upon the holy house's altar, a skull-topped staff held in both hands. Behind that staff, the necromancer's body was a wasted shell. Like so many of his kind, the necromancer ignored his flesh, honing his mind, and as a result, his skin was tight on his body, and Jet guessed the man had the physical strength of a child. The necromancer's hands shook and he breathed heavily. The man could barely hold himself upright and probably wouldn't have been able to without his staff. He was weak, and Jet's work was almost done.

From the back of the holy house, Jet charged down the rightmost aisle. He could see the necromancer summoning a spell, and Jet readied himself to move quickly out of the way of whatever might come. Before the spell was cast, Jet saw something important. Parts of the necromancer's face seemed to be burnt, the wounds recent. When the necromancer's spell—a magic arrow that split into three on its way to Jet—crack-



led through the air, the traveler hit the ground, tucked into a roll behind the holy house's long wooden seats, and popped up running. Where the arrows crashed into the wooden seats, they sent splinters of wood spraying in a wide arc like a million tiny arrows. Jet felt the blast on his back but continued forward. He didn't intend to give the necromancer time for another spell.

At the altar, the necromancer collapsed. Jet saw that he had been right. Large burns covered the man's face, and the traveler finally understood how much damage this man had suffered from within Defender Thorn's body. When he had failed to remove his essence from its shell, the necromancer had physically suffered the same as Defender Thorn. Now, the necromancer was helpless at Jet's feet. With his first swing, Jet severed the necromancer's staff, still clutched in both his hands where his limp body was draped over the holy altar like a sacrifice to the gods. Jet's second swing severed the necromancer's head. His sword covered in the magician's polluted blood, Jet dipped it into a basin of holy water and wiped it on the necromancer's own garments.

Fire marked Jet's departure from the town's edge. The holy house could not be allowed to stand after what the necromancer had done to it. Jet had made sure to soak the necromancer's body in enough oil to turn even his bones to ash. It wouldn't do to have him rise again. Lich king's were notoriously impossible to kill.

The night's fighting was finally at an end. Surely Harry and the others were now safe. Perhaps enough of the townsfolk had sought refuge and the town would heal. Jet didn't know and wouldn't be around to find out. His path was ever westward, and he had to continue. He was a traveler.

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## Once Again, With Feeling

*Linda Webb Aceto*

I fled through my childhood,  
leaving it to come at me  
again  
and again.

# DRIFTER

Mel Waldman

The snow drifted to earth and landed on the street lamp. He didn't see the snow for he was inside, watching the man murder the woman.

"What really happened?"

"The boy saw him snuff out her life."

"But he didn't kill the boy?"

"He didn't see the boy."

"What happened to the man?"

"Nothing."

"And the boy?"

"He grew up."

"Did he...?"

"There are different versions."

"I like your art work."

"Thanks."

"What's the medium?"

"Acrylics."

"I never mastered this medium. You're quite gifted."

"Thanks."

"Did you ever work 'big'?"

"No. All my pieces are small. Can't do a large piece. My art work is like my life. I'm a drifter. Can't stay with anything too long."

"A genuine drifter?"

"I suppose so."

"So what are you running from?"

"Can't remember. Don't wanna remember."

"What happened?"

"A long journey into Hell buried in the snow."

"What could be that bad?"

"Life! People. And the things they do."

"You ever think of killing yourself?"

"No."

“Ever think of killing someone else?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you?”

“Can’t recall. It mighta happened. Good probability.”

Sometimes he goes into a movie theater and projects his life onto the screen. Or late at night, he drifts into phantasmagoria and watches the old primal scene again and again until he wakes up or drifts into another dream and another reality where it begins again or ends once more but really, it never ends for he must forget or keep drifting.

At midnight, he looks in the mirror. He does not see the boy. Never saw the boy. Only the old man who lives inside the mirror. And the woman. He sees them, although the room is pitch-black and the mirror is imaginary. In a split second, he watches the man murder the woman. And in a split second, he forgets.

He sits in the center of the darkness and grins sardonically at them. Across a small infinity, he paints in human red-not in acrylics. And suddenly, the little painting of Death disappears too. The fragile self who remembers instantly forgets. And he slips off to another place or time or nearby, where the snow drifts to earth and lands on a street lamp, waiting for a drifter to pass by, stop, and watch, and by seeing, prove its existence. The snow covers the street lamp. Covers the earth. Waits.

## House of Cards

Raud Kennedy

“Hello?” I answer.  
Telephone silence.  
“Hello?” Again but with false cheer.  
Nothing.  
I hang up.  
Every few afternoons,  
during the trysting hour,  
the same call.  
Ring, ring, but only quiet.  
My wife and I joke  
that it’s a ghost,  
but I know better.  
It’s someone who wants  
to hear our voices.  
A past indiscretion,  
hers, maybe mine,  
don’t know and don’t want to.  
I’m worried. Instead of listening,  
they’ll speak, and my wife and I  
will look at each other  
and never be the same.

# What's in the Fallow

Walker Manning Hughes

I killed Big Head Bobby today. Just put a match to him and fanned the flames some. Maybe it was a little harder than that, but it was his before God rightful due with all the Good Book has to say about burning up the evildoers and bad folk.

It was early, before the Sun could get too rowdy. I was picking the newborn beans and felt eyes on my back.

“Go on, get!” I hollered when I saw Bobby had come up behind me. His bottle cap eyes pleaded with me, but I’m on to that trick. “I mean it Bobby! I can’t just while away the day like some I know. These beans need taking in, and I like eating as much as Adam or Eve. And what about them birds on the blueberries? Run down there and shoo at ‘em. Ain’t I paying you? Ain’t you got a job to do?” I said all that and didn’t mind being so hard. The crease breaking Bobby’s forehead told me he took my meaning. Still, he didn’t budge. I turned back to my business and a while later looked and he was gone. But the birds were still mauling the berry bushes, and it made me mad that Bobby was shirking work.

I pulled through by thinking about all the good times when I’d talk for hours and Bobby would sit and nod his head regular. Sometimes I’d stay late in the field and make a fire to chase the chill. Bobby’d squeak plenty then! Must have had a premonition. Plus, he made me look good as ragged and flat faced as he was, and I needed it with my lanky limbs and butterfly chest.

Towards the end of the last row I smelled a smell that wasn’t at all natural. Good though. I craned my neck and saw Beth from through the valley come switching up. She had breezy honey hair and blue eyes to drown in, skin like springtime. The Forbidden Fruit. She was barefoot in a half there dress, and I could sing that song all day and half the night. Her family had moved into the old Carver shack after what had happened to their girl, Emily. I couldn’t believe Beth didn’t know better than to be around there. Maybe she was a walking lie, not even there, a trick of the near noon sun. She stopped close, blocking the worst of the light and bathing me in cool shadow.

“Hey Jimmy,” she cooed. I knew she was dangerous, but I laughed it off the way people who make a game of their weaknesses do.

“Beth, you should be at home,” I said. I smiled my best smile and meant it some. But mostly I hated her.

“I don’t care what people say. I’m not afraid of you.” A cherry red strap fell down her shoulder and she eyed me through lazy lashes. She was all fresh cream and pure sugar under that dress, I knew.

“What do people say about you?”

“What do you say Jimmy?” She ran her hands down over her candy cane curves and back up again. “For five dollars I’ll let you see something. For ten you can touch.”

I knew her type. The Good Book had plenty to say on the subject. She needed fixing. But there was a lot of want in me too. Hell’s fires lapped my boot heels.

“You’ve got to leave now,” I said.

“Aw, Jimmy...”

“Now!”

She stared at me. “I thought you were a man,” she spat. “You ain’t no more a man than that dummy!” She pointed and I saw Bobby watching us through the corn, his big bushel burlap bag head bobbing in the breeze. I remembered how there’s a rule against beating up women somewhere, probably even whores.

“Come on,” I said, and reached to turn her around. She lashed out and slapped me across my face. I tried to tell myself she hadn’t done that. I thought about something else the way they say to. About how hot it had gotten so close to lunch, and how it was the kind of hot that left little room for reason. My vision tunneled and I sank into the heat. I waited unmoving for the next wisp of teasing breeze. Maybe it would keep me together, but I knew that if it did it would only be barely, and only so that when I snapped it would be oh so much more complete.

I heard a scream. Light flooded back in, and I saw Beth on the ground battered and bloodied. Her pretty dress was torn and hanging and hiked over her hips. Bobby was there. I saw the truth of everything and took him down. I beat him senseless, then checked on Beth. She wasn’t breathing. Her eyes were bugged and stared into the afterlife. I was tired of all of it.

“Bobby, Bobby,” I said, but he didn’t move. It was time to put a stop to things.

I fetched some gas from the shed and doused Bobby quick. I thumped a match. *Vroosh!* He went up so fast there was no time to scream. Course, he never was one for hollering or talking much.

I guess it was the smoke that brought the neighbors, but it’s a good thing. The corn had caught and it probably would have run all the way to the house if they hadn’t got started on it so fast. Beth’s broken eyes fol-

lowed them as they ran.

“Grab a shovel! Get that barrow!” people yelled. I didn’t know you could douse fire with dirt. There was only one fallow spot to dig.

After a while one man said, “There’s bones down there!” And there really was. Everyone ran over. I didn’t know what to say, but Sheriff Cooley was there and said I had a right to stay quiet. I was glad. I didn’t want to talk bad about Bobby and what he’d done.

Sheriff led me up to his car for a ride, and I thought that was nice. I felt like a hero. People pointed and whispered words like “Scarecrow” and “Crazy”. It’s good that we left. Sure Bobby was ugly, but they didn’t know him good enough to say. And anybody’d be crazy with last year’s dried cornhusks for brains.

I don’t know how long they’ll let me stay in this new place. It’s got air conditioning, and that’s good. The heat can do funny things. The door hasn’t got a handle on my side though, and I wonder if they know that.

Maybe they want to make me a deputy since I did so good upholding the rules. It could get lonely waiting. I’m used to having a friend. The kind I can say anything to. One who’s always in the garden waiting. Even if he doesn’t always do good and shoo at the birds, and sometimes kills girls like Emily Carver from through the valley and buries them in the fallow. He meant well.

Poor ole’ Big Head Bobby. Maybe I shouldn’t have killed him. Maybe I can make a new friend. Small Head Sammy or something.

Poor ole’ me.

## FROM METHUSELAH TO MARX

*jm avril*

The ancient biblical king  
In his Hebrew paradise  
Tells Karl Marx off  
For having moved the axis  
In spite of the lessons  
Of King Solomon.

And Karl Marx in his grave  
Arrived in London  
In the century of Enlightenment  
In a funerary box.  
The black sect animates the life  
Of this lord of the night.

And Marx in his sleep  
Attempts and tries  
To counter the black sect.  
But the biblical king is  
Against the philosopher’s wish.

The rose stings, naughtly,  
On the old verses.  
There is the law of chaos  
Coming from the watery depths.  
From biblical king to Karl Marx,  
Groucho Marx’s having a laugh.

# For Your Love

Timothy Woodlock

Graeme Osborn drove along Shea Boulevard going five under the speed limit. The rain glazed the windshield and the orange streetlights made it look as if fire were falling from the sky. Graeme felt like the devil driving through hell. He was on his way to do a horrible thing. It made him feel sick, but he kept his foot on the gas. The urge had been plaguing him for five years. If he turned around, it would only get worse.

Catherine was his high school sweetheart. Thirty seven years old, and he loved her more than ever. Things didn't get harder or less exciting when they got married. She was everything he wanted. She possessed knowledge and understanding Graeme never would. Catherine was always there for him in every way, and if she wasn't, he could talk to her about it.

Catherine was his high school sweetheart. She was the only woman Graeme had ever been with. Before they were married, Catherine had expressed her fear that years down the road he would regret marrying young, and resent her for all the things he missed out on. Graeme replied, "I'm lucky I met you so young. It means I have that much more time to love you." He had meant it. He still did.

Graeme had been propositioned a few times over the years. And it had been excruciatingly difficult to resist. Each time had been a reaffirmation of his love for Catherine, unbeknownst to her. His mind would toss and turn, wondering if he was missing out on something more amazing than what he already had. When he got home and held Catherine, and felt her skin on his, the doubts vanished. Graeme even told her about one such proposition. She didn't have much to say. Mostly she listened. When he finished, she kissed him and he felt better. What an incredible woman, he thought. Graeme pulled his SUV into the motel and looked around as if anyone in Scottsdale would recognize him. The rain had stopped, but the smell of wet asphalt rose up like a fog. It wasn't a good motel, but it wasn't a bad one. Graeme figured the worst motel on Scottsdale Road would be decent, and he'd been correct. He paid cash for the room and went up. It smelled like stale cigarettes and citrus wood cleaner, but the garishly striped wallpaper made it look like a circus tent. The Gideon Bible was in its usual place, and the remote control was glued

to the night stand. Graeme found the phone book and started looking.

It seemed impossible to know which escort service was the best choice. Only two groups had taken out large picture ads, while the rest settled for the name and number. He had no idea how to go about choosing. Did it really make a difference? Were Vegas Style Escorts better? Graeme read further and figured he didn't want a specific ethnicity or a fetish fulfilled. Finally he settled on Scottsdale's Hottest Babes. It was a nice and simple name, giving Graeme the impression of nice clean girls.

Graeme picked up the receiver and stared at the phone number, the dial tone humming in his ear. It reminded him of the first time he had called Catherine. He hadn't had the courage to ask for her number, instead getting it from one of her girlfriends. For a week he looked at the phone number, holding the receiver in his hand. Graeme hadn't imagined feeling that nervous again.

Graeme dialed the number and it rang seven times before a woman picked up on the other end. "Scottsdale Babes," she chirped. She sounded like a middle aged woman trying to sound like a babe.

"Hello, uh, I need an escort." Graeme looked down ashamedly as if Catherine were standing in front of him.

"Sure! What kind of girl were you looking for?" the woman asked.

"I suppose the standard kind. I've never done this before." Graeme almost laughed at himself. He bet the woman heard that every time from guys like him.

"Well, how about your fantasy? What kind of girl have you imagined?" Graeme closed his eyes. He had to do this right, because it would be the only time he'd ever do it. He ought to get exactly what he wanted so he'd never yearn for it again.

"I'd like a young girl with a nice smile. Brown hair and milky white skin. Slender but not skinny, you know? Classy. Wholesome."

"I think Candice would do great for you. May I have your credit card number and your location?"

Graeme reluctantly gave the woman his credit card information after she assured him the billing would be discreet. Fortunately Catherine didn't look at the bills, though she had her own. Graeme did all of the book-keeping. He had an hour to kill so he jumped in the shower.

The shower was so hot that when he stepped out steam rose off his skin. Graeme fell back on the bed, dizzy from the heat. His thoughts drifted to what he was about to do and if he could really go through with it. He told himself he was doing it for Catherine and the three month old



little girl they were adopting next month. It was a sacrifice he had to make for their sake, not his. It was for the good of his marriage. Graeme couldn't continue the way he had been and feel like he was giving Catherine all he could, which she more than deserved. He couldn't live with himself thinking those thoughts.

Catherine had been right to worry. Even at sixteen, she knew what she was talking about. But a few years ago something about her prediction changed. Whenever Graeme fantasized about other women, Catherine's words harped in his mind. "Things you missed out on." Both Graeme and Catherine had done all of their sexual discovery and exploration with each other, and that was it. Graeme began to wish he had done those things with other girls before he met Catherine, though he knew it didn't make a difference. It was the allure of a sexually inexperienced girl that Graeme's thoughts dwelled on. That he had become perverted tortured Graeme. He knew he wasn't one of those people, but he couldn't escape the thoughts. Graeme felt as though he betrayed Catherine without even cheating on her. And next month they were adopting a little baby girl because Graeme was infertile. He had to exorcise his rotten fantasy. Graeme knew if he looked at their daughter the wrong way just once, he would leave them both. Who knows what he would do to himself then.

"Hello?" Between the malaise of a high body temperature and deep thought, Graeme hadn't heard the door being pounded on. A towel wrapped around his waist, Graeme jumped off the bed and opened the door. She was beautiful.

The girl in the doorway was exactly what he wanted. Her shiny brown hair hung to her shoulder with short bangs curled over her forehead. Her eyes were a bright blue like early twilight, and her bright red lips shone. Her neck was slim, leading into a youthfully firm body. She wore a black one piece dress with shoulder straps, the skirt hugging her strong thighs two thirds of the way down.

Graeme stepped out of the doorway and she walked into the room and sat on the edge of the bed still holding her purse. Graeme was shaking and beginning to sweat again. How did these things work? What was he supposed to say?

"So, what's your name honey?" she asked. Graeme liked her voice. It was sweet and sincere.

"It's Graeme. You're Candice, right?"

"That's me." She tapped her thumb against her chest. It was cute.

“So have you ever done this before?”

“Well, yeah I’m married, so of course I-”

She laughed and said, “No, have you ever been with a call girl before?” She laughed some more, truly amused.

“No, I haven’t.” Graeme wanted to tell her his story. He wanted to assure her he wasn’t some sleazy husband who just wanted some young thing. He loved Catherine, and to Graeme she was still a beauty not of this world. But Candice didn’t care. This was her job. She probably didn’t even wonder why he was there.

“Well, tell me what you want. What have you been thinking about lately when you’re by yourself?” Candice bit the right side of her bottom lip, and Graeme’s blood heated.

Graeme told her he wanted her to pretend she was a virgin. He would be passive and she would do the work, all the while keeping a curious and excited look on her face. And that is exactly what she did. Graeme guessed he hadn’t been the first customer to make that request. The experience was a powerful nightmare that horrified him in a new way each minute. Everything felt wrong because he wasn’t with Catherine, and for that Graeme was in agony. But his body was aroused and sensitive in a way it hadn’t been since high school. Both feelings filled him with arduous guilt. When it was over he felt like he had been knocking around a clothes dryer.

Candice left and Graeme immediately called Catherine. She was on a road trip with her sister. She deserved a vacation before they finalized the adoption. After many rings she answered in a groggy but concerned tone, fearing something might be wrong because Graeme called so late. When he said, “Hi baby,” her body sagged with relief.

“Are you all right, it’s late,” she asked just to be sure.

“Yeah, I just can’t sleep. I miss you honey. Are you two having fun?”

“Yeah, we are. We’re in San Diego right now. Tomorrow we’re going to see how far north we can get. I love you.”

“I love you too. Sleep well,” Graeme said and hung up.

Graeme lay in bed smiling. He felt better about everything. All he could think about was Catherine. He was in love with her as never before. He just hoped it wasn’t a temporary illusion. Graeme had a family to take care of.

# Magnum Opus

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

this also appear in the book "Duality"

You wanted my magnum opus. Well, here it is, baby. Here's the intro.

I had saved enough money for a while, and I was fine with that. And then I was told I should become a model, so I applied to the first place I saw an ad for.

And they wanted me.

And I know, I know, this sounds like a good story, so far. Then came the twists. Then I was there for a photo shoot one day, and they needed someone to start working in their ordering department. What am I saying, that person WOULD be their ordering department. And I said I could do it and I was hired on the spot.

This is where this story gets more interesting, I swear, baby and this is where the screwing over begins.

Because being on the inside, and seeing how things are run from the inside... Well, I got to see how much of a scam this place really was. The building, all the offices, the changing room and the runway were in one room, and the office was no larger than my living room, and the owner spent half of each day there and the rest of the day working out, or going to the country club or doing something else that none of his meager employees did. And he kept that air conditioning blasted like my father always would in our living room when us kids watched television and were on the couch with blankets covering our feet and legs. Well, the boss would have the air conditioning on, and he would have no regard for whether his employees were freezing or not.

My theory is that he kept it cold so that when he took the pornographic pictures, the women would have hard nipples.

And while he was at it, he would pay his employees next to nothing (it might have been less than minimum wage). And he would care more about the cables that he very unsafely left strewn about in the main room.

(I'm sure O.S.H.A. would say that was a safety hazard, I'm sure of it)

As I was saying, he would care more about his camera equipment - these inanimate objects - than the people that chose to work for him. He once told me that there was a six hundred dollar cable on the floor, and I

wanted to tell that sorry bastard that I had the money saved to buy this whole building And if O.S.H.A. came in they could snag his ass for this office, and that if someone was late, paying them two dollars an hour was illegal (which he often claimed he would do), and with what I've got on him with all this evidence, I tell you, I could get a team of lawyers on him and take this whole scam -

I mean, excuse for a company - away from him.

I'm sure he doesn't have any lawyers covering his sorry ass in case a problem like that would occur. And the thing is, I do.

I would hear my coworker Chantene tell me she wanted to quit, and I would hear Joanne tell me she was going to quit, and I found out that the hired and fired Juanita in the two-week span I was working there. Everyone working there was unhappy. Chantene talked about the idea of taking a magnum to his ass. She had thought of it, of shooting him on more than one occasion.

And I made a decision then. I decided to keep my mouth shut because he could still keep money away from me as a model (because I didn't want to deal with the hassle). And he could still choose not to use my photographs in their magazine. But I figured, Hell, this pointless, irritating, inexcusable, childless, dehumanizing, humiliating, backwards, scam of an, Innane, Insane job has to have some utility for me...

In working here, I have lost my time, but didn't get enough money or any peace of mind for it

When my near full-time job couldn't even cover my rent I put in my two week notice And I quit.

Yeah, I quit. I think it's my record for the shortest time I have had a job.

I got to learn a ton of things while I was there. And I learned more in my last two weeks. They are the most unorganized, disorganized bunch of clods I have ever worked for, because everyone has to do things by the boss' back-ass rules that make no sense. They had no database for their orders or their models, so they had to make xerox copies in triplicate of every order that came in and file them in different places, one by date ordered, one by name (and yes, by the first letter of their LAST NAME, so "MADISON" could be after "MULROONEY"), and one in the back for their permanent filing.

When they do interviews they act like their video camera works, and it hasn't for a while. So someone there acts like they are using the camera so the models feel like they are being video taped. The owner asks his

employees to act cordial and civil, and tells them in the same breath that they are not allowed to talk to anyone trying to get a job there (and that employees should be taking care of the phone when they have not even been told how to put people on hold or transfer calls or get people off of hold).

(I wonder how many people I have disconnected unintentionally.)

I wonder if there's anything else I can get out of this place. I've become friends with the coworkers and they can give me a copy of pictures I take as a model with them.

And today is my last day of work, and I'm scheduled to do a modeling shoot, and I hope I get to have some of the picture back so I can see them. Chantene said she'd e-mail them to me, which is cool.

But I've had it with the "You don't get any break time" shit and "Know how to do this" even though something has never been explained to you. I found out here that if the boss takes the pictures, there is a chance of getting into the catalog, and if we employees take the photographs, well, the model has NO chance then.

One of my coworkers also told me that the boss asks most everyone to be a model. Doesn't THAT do something for my self-esteem. Well, you gotta make a profit SOMEHOW, I guess (get the coin SOMEHOW, I guess).

I'm counting down the minutes now. I keep thinking that it IS my last day. I've got an hour and fifteen minutes left. When here, who are you supposed to answer to, and what the Hell are you supposed to be doing.

And I only have one day left.

And then I'll have to be putting on make-up and curling my hair as he is getting his glorious camera equipment All set up (that is more valuable than the people that work for him)

So consider this my magnum opus, baby. This is my change to say all the things that I couldn't. All the things that I really think

So, go ahead and get all the glorious camera equipment

All set up and take the glorious photographs with your digital camera and make me look just fabulous. Because after today I'm just the model, that is my job, and you can never ask any more of me. Remember THAT.

# some people want to believe

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

this also appear in the book "Duality"

So we were sitting there at denny's in some suburb of detroit, I don't know which suburb it was, but we were there at like ten in the morning eastern standard time, I was grabbing a bite to eat before I crossed the ambassador bridge and travelled into canada. you know, I really only associate places like denny's with travelling now, I always stop at some place like denny's only when taking a road trip and just stopping for some food. I think if I went into a denny's and I wasn't travelling, i'd get really confused.

well, anyway, like I said, we were at denny's, and it was morning, so the both of us got breakfast. being a vegetarian, I ordered eggs with hash browns and toast, right? and the waitress says to me, like they always do in some no-name town in the middle of america, "yuh don't want any MEAT?", like it's so unheard of to not eat meat at breakfast. so I say, no, no meat, thank you, and then my friend orders pretty much the same thing, and we sit for a while, and talk and stuff, and then the food comes. so then she asks me, "you're a vegetarian, right?" and I say, yes, and then she goes, "but you're eating chicken." and I'm just like, well, no, I'm not, an egg is an animal by-product, not animal flesh, and I was about to say that that was the difference between being a vegetarian and being a vegan, and she says, "but if a chicken sat on it long enough, it would become a chicken." and I'm just like, well, no, it's an unfertilized egg, there was never a rooster around that hen, so it could never become a chicken. and she's like, well, it's a chicken, though, and she just couldn't think that this wasn't a chicken. and I'm just thinking, my god, does she really think that a chicken can lay eggs without them being fertilized? like only worms and stuff can procreate without two sexes present. so our voices start getting a little louder, and then it ends up where I'm saying "so are you having an abortion every time you have a menstrual cycle? are men who have wet dreams mass murderers?" and she's looking away and saying "i'm not listening to you -"

and then I realized that some people, with logic thrown in their face, will still believe what they want to believe.

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