

revealing all your  
dirty little secrets

down in the dirt

v.052

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Scars art, page 17. Cover art of rock formations in Utah.

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## Stoplight

Raud Kennedy

The Toyota had a Jesus fish with a cross for an eye, but the cross made the fish look dead like a cartoon with X's for eyes.

# Battle Scars

Eric J. Krause

The Garqin fighter dove beneath the clouds and unloaded a barrage of laser fire. None caused massive damage, but a few of the buildings on the human base caught fire. The fighter spun back around, ready to strike again, when Raul 141 swooped down and targeted it with a heat-seeker. Seconds later, debris from the Garqin fighter littered the sky. Raul 141 patrolled the low sky over the base for a few minutes, waiting to pick off any more rogue fighters, but none appeared. He launched his ship upwards to join in the heavy fray of battle.

The human force landed not long after. They'd successfully driven off the Garqins, but like most of this ongoing war, neither side had gained any type of lasting advantage. Raul 141 was among the last pilots to touch down. Commander Berl 429 met him as he exited his ship.

"Nice work, 141," the commander said. "We weren't prepared for a suicide run. The monsters haven't shown that side of themselves. That one would've made two or three more passes before we could've nailed it."

Raul 141 saluted. "Just doing my job, sir."

The commander returned the salute. "That's the attitude we like, the attitude that'll win us this war. We have a major offensive planned for the very near future, and I'd like you to help lead the assault. Rest up for a couple of days, then you'll ship out."

Raul 141 nodded. "Permission to ask a question, sir."

"Granted."

"I have a special lady back home I'd like to see. If I'm back in time, can I go see her?"

The commander frowned. "A special lady? Highly unorthodox, but I'll grant it. Go work out a schedule with the shuttle pilots. I'll let them know when you need to be back."

Raul 141 snapped off another salute. "Thank you, sir."

"At ease, 141. Just make sure your mind stays healthy. We need you at your best. Dismissed."

Raul 141 nodded and headed for the shuttle bay. Just before he walked through the door, he heard the commander talking to himself. "A clone with a special lady? Now I've heard everything."

#

Jena 6 heard her door robot admit someone. She wasn't expecting company, so she quickly tidied herself up a bit. Who could it be? Raul 141 was probably the biggest surprise of all.

"Aren't you at war?" she said.

"I can't stay long," Raul 141 said, "but I had to see you. I've missed you."

"It's good to see you, Raul. Whenever we part, I never know if or when I'll see you again."

“I’ll be leading an assault in our next battle,” Raul 141 said. “I had to come. I had to tell you how much I love you.”

“I know, Raul,” Jena 6 said with a sigh. “And I’m flattered. I really am.”

“Not the response I was hoping for,” Raul 141 said.

“Try to understand. Love is not for us. You’ve already cheated the system by staying alive as long as you have. I always think that the next time you walk through my door, it’ll be as Raul 142 or Raul 143. Maybe even higher than that. You’ll look and sound the same, and you’ll even have most of your memories, but it won’t be the same, Raul. It just won’t be. They’ve yet to figure out how to clone a soul.”

“But Jena,” Raul said. “We could win this war soon, and I’ll never have to fight again. We could be together forever. I love you, can’t you say the same?”

Jena 6 had to fight back tears. “I’ve given you the best answer I can. This is better for both of us. Why can’t you understand that?”

Raul 141 hung his head. “I guess I should leave.” He walked to the door, turned to look at her one more time, then left. The whole scene broke her heart, but what could she do? This really was for the best. She flopped down on her bed and put her hands over her face. At least she could take comfort in the fact that Raul 142 might not have this conversation put in his memory.

#

“141, watch to your right.”

“I see him, 212.” Raul 141 banked his ship and let loose a barrage of laser fire. The Garqin fighter went down in a blaze of flame. Two other Garqin ships flew at them. Regg 212 knocked out the first one with a laser blast, while Raul 141 dodged blasts from the other one and blew it out of the sky with a heat-seeker.

“I don’t get it,” Regg 212 said. “There should be an entire fleet of Garqins here.”

“Keep your eyes open. We’ll check a little farther before we bring back our report.”

“Just a second, 141. Are you looking at your scanner?”

Raul 141 saw it, but he wasn’t sure what it was. The scanner showed a solid wall in front of them. It didn’t take long for the two pilots to discover what it meant. They flew through a cloudbank and found an entire army of Garqin fighters laying in wait.

“Tell me I’m seeing things, 141.”

“I wish I could. Get back to the fleet. Open your radio channels.”

“Too late,” Regg 212 said. “Jammed.”

“Mine too. Here they come.”

“I’m already gone. Hurry up and follow, 141.”

Raul 141 watched Regg 212 turn tail and head back to the fleet. Regg 212 had a good start, but without help, he wouldn’t make it.

“Godspeed, friend,” Raul 141 whispered. He turned his fighter straight towards his enemies and launched the remainder of his heat-seekers as fast as he could.

#

Jena 6 awoke with a start and looked towards the door. Someone stood in

her doorway, but that wasn't possible. One of her robots would have notified her. They needed no sleep and were always on duty.

"Greetings, Jena 6, my love."

It was Raul 141. "How did you get in?" she said.

"I don't know, exactly," he said. "I was in the midst of a battle I couldn't possibly win, but I took a great number of them with me. I saw it coming. The one that got me, I mean. I dodged everything they threw at me and managed to blast a dozen or more Garqins out of the sky. But a stray laser tore apart my tail. I lost all mobility and had to watch the missile zero in on me. I had just enough time to wish I could see you one more time. An instant later, here I am."

Jena 6 stood up. "You're dead?"

Raul 141 nodded. "My remains never to be found. I love you, Jena 6. I love you with all my soul."

Jena 6 sat back down. "Dead?"

"Yes, but that's not nearly as important as the fact that I love you. I don't know what's going to happen to me now. I want to hear that you love me before I go."

"A dream," she said. "Yes, you're just a dream brought upon by your last visit." Jena 6 stood up and walked towards Raul 141. "You have to go. Get out. You're just a figment of my imagination. How dare you invade my dreams!"

Raul 141 grabbed her upper right arm. "I'm not a figment of your imagination, Jena 6. Don't you feel it? We're meant to be together. Just tell me you feel it and I'll find a way. There's no reason I can't become immortal as Raul 142 and Raul 143 and so on. You're going to live forever, and I'll always be with you."

"Let go of me," she said, and he did. "All of your clones will come and go, but they'll all be slightly different. It's how life works, Raul. The memory is there, but the soul only grows with experience."

"You really believe that?"

"Yes."

"And you don't love me? Me, Raul 141?"

"This is just a dream. Goodnight, Raul. I'll see the real you when you get back."

He let out a big sigh. "No, you won't." With that, he faded to nothing.

#

"Miss Jena 6. Miss Jena 6. Wake up call."

Jena 6 opened her eyes and groaned. She told the computer to hush and struggled out of bed. She remembered her dream about Raul 141 and wondered what it meant. Perhaps she felt guilty about how she treated him on his last visit. Yes, that had to be it. She really did love him, but it couldn't be. He was a war clone, bred to die, while she had been bred to live forever. It could never work.

She sat on her bed and it came to her. When he returned from his latest mission, she would stop being so coy. Why not make their short time together both happy and memorable? Sure people would talk. He was a war clone, after

all, but why should she care? Yes, that's exactly what she'd do.

She was in the middle of planning out whatever future they might have together when her bedroom computer piped in. "You have a personal news message, Miss Jena."

"Okay, I'm ready. Play it."

An unknown male voice came onto her speakers. "It is with great sadness that I must report the death of Raul 141. He died bravely in battle with the dreaded Garqin race. We've already begun the memory transfer process with one of his stored clones. It should just be a day or two before he is as good as new."

The message continued, but Jena 6 didn't hear any more of it. He was gone. Her Raul 141 was gone. It hadn't been a dream. He'd come back to say goodbye, but she'd just pushed him away. She fell to her knees and sobbed for her lost love.

#

"He's right over there, ma'am. He won't be able to talk long, though. He's due for a training mission shortly."

Jena 6 thanked the mess hall officer and walked over to Raul 142, who was polishing off his meal. He saw her and offered her a warm smile. A friendly smile, not a smile of love.

"Jena 6, how nice to see you," Raul 142 said. "I apologize I can't talk long. I've training to get to."

Jena 6 nodded. "I understand. I just have to ask you about the last time we talked."

A puzzled look crossed his face first, followed by a look of embarrassment. "I'm very sorry. As a war clone, I had no business bringing you feelings of love. I should never have come to see you before that big assault." He chuckled. "You must have made quite an impression on my former self."

"Is that the last meeting you remember?" she asked.

He gave her another puzzled look. "That's the last I remember. Was my memory not fully updated?"

She shook her head. "No, it's not you, it's me. Listen, I've kept you from your training long enough. Goodbye, Raul 142." She turned and hurried away before he could see the tears in her eyes. He didn't chase after her.

Raul 141 had said he'd try to bring his soul back into his clone, but Raul 142 wasn't him. She lifted up her shirtsleeve and touched the dull red handprint on her upper arm. It was in the exact spot Raul 141's ghost hand had grabbed her, and it would remain there for the rest of her eternity. Had he tried to come back and been unsuccessful, or had she chased him away? She would never know. She knew it would haunt her for the rest of her life. Sometimes having an infinite life span had its drawbacks.

# It's Dead On

Jeremy Billingsley

I

THE GRANDFATHER: ARTHUR CORNELL

HIS GRANDSON: MATT—AGE 10

Matt studied the sketch in the back of the minivan, oblivious to the talk of his parents. His dad smiled into the rearview mirror; his mom saw but Matt didn't. Matt had his sketch pad on his lap, folded open to the latest penciling to which he was adding the finishing touches. It was a portrait of the family dog—the black lab—Frazzle. Frazzle had posed for a headshot, sitting down. From that shot Matt had sketched this portrait. And it was dead on.

"It's dead on," Matt's father said, glancing again into the rearview mirror. Turning around in the passenger's side captain's chair, Matt's mother—smiling—examined the picture. It was obvious that she had missed the enthusiasm in her husband's voice, because her jaw dropped, her expression changed from a complacent *That's nice, dear* countenance, to one of awe. If she could speak, she would have said the same thing.

"What's that mean, Dad?" Matt asked. He was a bright kid for ten, but that was a new one on him. He maybe had heard his father use a similar phrase before, but it hadn't caught his attention until now.

"It means it looks exactly like Frazzle."

Matt frowned for a moment, and then perked up. "If I stay with you guys for the summer then maybe I could do more pictures of Frazzle. And of the house and of the yard and of the street and of the neighborhood and of the ..."

His mother faced front again. "Nope," was out of her mouth quickly.

"Your mom's right, pal. Your grandfather wants to see you."

Matt slumped down in the seat, frowning, arms folded across his chest, nostrils flaring. This had been the source of nightmares for some time. His grandfather was an outdoorsman, loved nature, didn't own a television—just a radio he kept on the oldies station. He was vocal about the waste of time of books, so, Matt figured, his grandfather wouldn't be too keen on drawings, either.

"You can still draw them, honey," his mom said. "Just imagine them."

"I can't!"

His father's eyes went to straight to the mirror and his mom spun in her seat, a look of shock on both their faces. Matt's eyes welled up; he looked frightened, and only after he took a few breaths did he explain.

"I only draw what I know is real, and I only know something is real if I see it. I'm scared to draw something if I can't see it."

"Everything will be okay, honey," his mother tried. Her hand touched his

quivering knee; she looked to his dad with worry.

“I don’t want to leave you guys,” Matt said, then, staring into his mother’s eyes.

“Your grandfather will take care of you,” his father answered. But for a while, that wasn’t good enough.

They drove. They stopped for gas and the parents found that the simplest way to turn him from his fears was, surprisingly, to draw them away. They pointed out a cow in the field and Matt drew the whole scene. They rounded a bend to a breathtaking view of the Ozark hills, and Matt sketched it. And always was the touch of realism, the shading, the layering and texturing—you could feel the bark on the trees and almost hear the leaves fluttering in the breeze. Matt was on a role, and as the light faded, his dad flicked on the interior light and asked Matt to sketch what he saw. His human profiles were accurate. There his mother turned around in her seat, smiling at him. There his father behind the wheel—we see the back of his head and in the mirror, the reflection of his eyes. The seats and dash were detailed, the glass of the windows held the glare at the right angles, and everything seemed normal and in place. Outside (the van had stopped at a country four-way, as Matt included the finishing touches) trees and brush and hills were there, but silhouetted against a deep purple sky. Stars were luminescent, amassing around a crescent moon, jaundice and hanging just above the tree line.

Matt frowned as he drew the last detail—cat-like eyes peering out from the underbrush, eyes devoid of irises or pupils or detail of any sort, except that they were a deeper shade of the pencil’s gray than, say the moon. It was no stretch of the imagination to know that these eyes were red, even in this black and white picture.

His mother commented on them and Matt just shrugged them off; he stared out the window to his right, to just past the stop sign where the big oak stood against that barbed wire fence. He turned in his seat and espied the area for as long as he could, until they topped a hill and he lost sight, and then they were there.

Gravel popped under the tires. The house was one-story, ranch-style, brick and siding with a brick fireplace. The porch light came on and Matt’s grandfather stepped out, waving to them. And as at the end of any long trek, the last leg began, the scramble to exit the car with all baggage and all the drama of releasing what once was confined.

Matt’s father pulled the grandfather aside, while Matt’s mom helped Matt get ready. Presently all were inside, and the grandfather approached Matt gravely. The boy was seated in the loveseat in the living room—quiet and timid—clutching his sketchpad. Matt was small for his age.

“Can I see your drawings?” the old man asked.

He had only met his grandfather a handful of times. He stared up at the stranger looming over him, nearly every inch of his body quivering. Finally, timidly, he handed his sketches over. Then he watched a smile creep to Arthur Cornell’s lips.



“Very good,” Arthur said, but in his eyes was the same awe Matt’s mother and father had shown.

## II THE LEGEND

It took Arthur several days to prove that he was not going to hinder his grandson’s creative spark. Realizing the task needed work and compromise, Arthur started by leading Matt outside—much to Matt’s chagrin—to draw. Arthur introduced Matt to a whole natural world full of rocks and flowers and fields of hay and streams and brush and trees and hills and plains and ponds, of cows and deer and fish and squirrels, of birds. And Arthur spurred the boy on. He reminded Matt to grab his sketchpad and pencils when the two were set for their walks.

Never did the boy disappoint; he drew what his grandfather showed him. They walked longer and longer, and Matt began to see the value of outside. Arthur’s lessons came after his grandson went to bed, and he began to thumb through the sketchpads, looking at all the drawings.

By the end of the first week, Matt actually smiled when Arthur suggested they go for a walk. It was just after breakfast when he gathered his freshest sketchpad and pouch of pencils, but a sudden thought stopped him. It was one of those worrisome thoughts that are ever so important to boys, incessantly asked until they had an adequate answer.

“But we walked everywhere,” was the best way his question could be posed. To which Arthur laughed.

“I got lots of land, boy. I got nearly two hundred acres, and only eighty in pasture. We ain’t touched the surface yet.”

Arthur walked and Matt followed. He asked his grandfather if they could walk to the end and happily, Arthur obliged. Matt watched Arthur stare at the canopy of limbs and cock his head toward the chirping birds of various species.

They walked up and down the woven path, under the trees, as forest undergrowth began to bloom. Stretching vines tried to trip them up as their feet stepped on saggy leaves and the moist dirt floor. Cedars were spaced intermittent among the oaks, the silver-leafed maples. Hints at a blue sky and sun spotlighted irregular points on the forest floor. There was a lot to draw here, but still they kept moving.

“Draw me a stream,” Arthur said. He sat upon a stump, smoking a cigarette; Matt stood dutifully beside him. “It rambles through some gentle hills.”

Matt began to draw. It took him twenty minutes, and in that time Arthur rested, smoking his cigarettes as the boy brought something he imagined to life.

They walked and for Matt, it seemed to take forever. They followed more of a dirt path and more of the same scene. It was worthy of a picture, but it was commonplace. Matt frowned and found himself sweating and wondering how far

they had to go, until they topped another hill, and found the path blocked by a single strand of barbed wire. But it lent a hell of a view—as his dad might have said.

To their left and their right, the bluff and the wire continued. In front their path continued down a very steep path that all but vanished before them. The path down the hill was surrounded by rocks and shrub, a few pines smattered on the vertical terrain, little growth; impeded by the single strand of barbed wire.

To look at the fencing, one would think it was of little value. It was a single strand of barbed wire and the barbs weren't evenly spaced. Arthur did not seem amazed that Matt noticed this eccentricity.

"Why do you think it's like that?" Arthur asked.

The boy frowned.

He looked downhill. Down the hill, even the bright green of the cedars and pines seemed scarce. Everything was gray, like spring had yet to hit. What green there was seemed an accident. Rocks were more appropriate. Dead trees were more appropriate.

"You're trying to keep something out," Matt said finally, firmly.

Despite himself, Arthur smiled. From his pocket he pulled another cigarette and lit it, took a puff and sighed with smoke, curling from his lips. He closed his eyes in ecstasy.

"Do you remember the picture of the stream and the hills?" Arthur asked.

Matt nodded.

"Do you think you could add a cave?"

Matt immediately sat upon a flattened rock and flipped his pad to an empty page. Again he began to sketch the stream, the hills, and Arthur had to stop him, a bemused look upon the grandfather's face.

"The last picture was finished," the boy said, simply. "This is a new picture, is all."

And he drew. He recaptured accurately the originally picture of this Ozark stream passing through some gently sloping hills, and then as naturally as Monet, he incorporated a cave's opening.

All through dinner Matt stared at his new picture, particularly at the mouth of the cave. There was something missing, he was sure, but he didn't know what. He studied, taking a bite only when his grandfather reminded him there was food on his plate. He missed Arthur's sad gaze to his own plate.

Matt waited, after the entire house was dark, and the evening news had been muffled. His blanket tucked under his neck, he was warm and secure in the covers. But his mind was working; Matt would not sleep tonight. He had to know what was beyond the barbed wire. Whatever it was, he knew it was linked to the cave in his drawing.

Matt waited until the sounds of life had died down in the house, and then he folded back the covers. His feet touched carpet and he waited, eyes unblink-

ing, until his vision adjusted. He could make out shapes and obstacles, tints and shades, just enough to maneuver quietly. Nervous but confident, the ten-year-old boy dressed in relative silence.

He opened his door a crack and listened into the darkness. No sound. No light. The darkness was as inviting as it was unnerving. Matt stepped into the hall and pulled the door too behind him.

The latching door stopped him. He imagined a world of sound but in the darkness, nothing came. It would almost be reassuring if his grandfather opened the door, Matt realized then. Then whatever was lurking in the cave wouldn't be after him.

*Not just in the cave*, a little voice in his mind said—it sounded like his own but not really. Thinking back, Matt remembered the eyes. He had drawn them into the picture of the interior of the van. Even then it was watching him.

He had to get to the barbed wire.

Every floorboard creaked with every step he took, and Matt wasn't sure until he pulled the front door too—and paused to wait as no light came on and no sound was made—that he had escaped. As he walked across the yard, the butterflies settled. As he climbed over the corner post of the fence that separated yard from field, and he walked briskly past the sleeping heifers in the pasture, he gazed back intermittently to see a darkened house, and so felt a little better.

Matt walked down the hill sloping toward the pond, saw a cow—perhaps searching for a midnight drink—lowering its lips to the water's surface. It espied him as he walked past, and he met the cow's eyes.

*Don't go!*

But cows don't speak, he scolded himself.

Matt reached the southwest corner of his grandfather's pasture, stopped to catch a breath and looked back. The field was dark. Silhouettes and shades and shadows permeated Matt, and thinking about the eyes, the boy again came unnerved. He was visibly shaking, but the urge to mount the fence was something primeval. He had to know what was beyond. He had to see the barbed wire, and what it could possibly restrain. Consumed by the eyes, he climbed the fence, and began down the moonlit path into the wilderness. He was oblivious to the two forces stalking him: one with a flashlight whose beam focused on a certain point; one guided by smell and a keen sense of night vision.

The land traversed was familiar even in the night, and Matt didn't even have to get his bearings. He saw but he didn't see. He walked, knowing where he was going, but not conscious of it. He was lost between sleepwalking and somnolence. He recognized where his grandfather had paused in reflection, trees and shrubs and such landscape points. He followed the trail onward, until his chest smacked against something sharp. It was a pointed jab; Matt could feel the blood instantly.

His hand reached up first, tugging at whatever invisible thing snagged his shirt in the darkness. It was a wrinkle in his line of sight, a simple snap that made Matt realize he had reached the threshold. The barbed wire had snagged

him, as it was supposed to do. His eyes adjusting again, Matt saw the hill fall away, the winteriness below. Everywhere else spring was in full bloom. The season had birthed with the bloom of the dogwoods, leading quickly into the Easter season. Overnight, the grass had greened and more trees had bloomed. Aside from a few late bloomers, nature had recognized spring. Except down the hill; Matt could still see the gray. Nothing was blooming.

The moon broke through the clouds and illuminated everything, painting the scene in navy. Uphill, color struggled to break through. Downhill was bare—the dark, the gray seemed to fit. Matt listened to the scuffling of things in the underbrush, things unseen, and it happened, that as he fully awoke, he became afraid. His imagination kicked in and he could imagine some pretty wild things, sneaking around out there.

“But none of it’s real,” he whispered, and the sound of his own voice calmed him.

Then from down the hill came a sound, unlike anything the boy had ever heard. Looking that direction he saw the eyes, millions of red eyes, highlighted and bright and sanguine and not tainted by the navy. He blinked and backed away, and imagined some of the eyes nearing. And then something strange happened. Most of the eyes blinked out. They were gone, and only a single pair stared up at him. He couldn’t tell if they were moving, but he would have been surprised if they weren’t. They were featureless, as all the eyes had been, and the same shade of red as all the others, but still he recognized them. These were the eyes he had seen the night his parents brought him up, and these were the eyes he imagined in the picture he had drawn.

He took another step back.

Long fingers wrapped about his shoulder blade; he was yanked nearly off his feet.

Spun around before he could scream, his imagination told him that he was going to face the rest of the eyes. They had ambushed him, blinked out and snuck around and now they were here, ready to eat him up. No, not eat him up, but play with him until the other one arrived. It would eat him up. It ... was his grandfather.

Arthur stared down at the boy with a solemn disapproval on his countenance. The old man tore his eyes from Matt as he raised his left arm, a pistol in his hand. Glaring down the hill, the old man pulled the trigger. Matt looked back, away from the gunfire, but he didn’t see the eyes.

“Come on,” Arthur said. “We still need to go.”

And so they left, and didn’t speak again until they were sitting in the living room, Arthur standing by the fireplace, frowning, looking at the ground.

“Torture from you to me,” Arthur mumbled. “We’ve always called it the Aminal,” he said to start. “The kids in town named it, years ago, when the first disappearances happened. Now we all just know. A child goes missing, the Aminal.

“The Aminal takes children. It has taken many children, over the years. It

looks kind of like a wolf, but it is the size of a cow. Your Aunt Shelly saw it. She isn't like most people though. Most people who see it become obsessed with it. And then they disappear. We've had a few adults, but most have been children."

The two locked eyes and stayed silent. This lasted a moment.

"Now get back to bed," Arthur said finally.

Matt rushed to him; hugged him. Arthur hugged back. Matt returned to his room.

He undressed and put on his pajamas quickly, and laid down in bed. Pulling the covers up, he could hear his grandfather through the wall, coughing, shuffling about—probably undressing and going to bed himself—and stared straight out the window.

The curtains were pulled back; the blinds were drawn up. Blackness stared in at him, framed like a portrait, though a portrait missing something.

Red eyes.

Throwing the covers back, hopping out of bed, Matt rushed to the cord that controlled the blinds and yanked it. The blinds crashed to the windowsill. Unhooking the satin cords, the curtains fell and closed, and the blackness was gone.

Matt laid back down and pulled the covers up. He felt safe under the covers. He believed, as most children believe, that the monster can't get you if you are covered up. So he tucked himself in nice and tight. He forced his eyes shut, took a few deep breaths, and then settled into the mattress.

Arthur laid in bed in the dark, thinking. The Aminimal had taken many children. He had watched it over the years, watched each of his friends fall into mourning. Frank Cross lost a son, some thirty years ago. Barry Levi lost a daughter five years after that. For some it skipped a generation. Kelly O'Roarke from Chicago had his grandkid to visit one summer about ten years ago—just a toddler—and the boy went missing one early June morning while they were getting ready to go fishing. And when Arthur was a kid, he remembered stories. He had friends that went missing.

The Aminimal. Always the Aminimal.

Even at seventy-five, the mere thought of the thing sent shivers down his spine, to turn an old phrase. Still the one questioned remained, and to it, Arthur had no answer.

*Why?*

He loved his grandson. He relished in the boy's talent. So why even introduce it?

They had hunted it, once. It had taken the mayor's nephew, back in '77. Still a younger man, Arthur—then a volunteer fireman and a deputy for Sheriff Larsen (Godresthissoul)—led the hunt. It was never a question for any of these people in this rural community if this creature ever existed.

Some twenty men tracked the Aminimal in the wee hours of the morning, in

separate packs of five. No Dogs. They followed tracks. They found first a stream, ambling through a gently sloping series of hills. They found a cave. Four went in. Arthur and the others heard a cry—"Red Eyes! Red Eyes!" And then they heard gunshots. They heard a growl and then all went silent. When the smoke wafting out the mouth of the cave evaporated, and no one came out, Arthur called. When no one answered, Arthur motioned and five guys inched forward behind him, gripping their guns like aimed teddy bears, quivering.

The four lay in the semi-darkness, mauled. The official report said missing. As the darkness enclosed the six armed men, as they pressed together, the heat wafted up from below. In front of them, as near as they could tell, the cave fell gradually; the wind softly rising from the depths was that of a furnace, not cool, as most Ozark caves. That was about all Arthur had time to notice before the eyes blinked and stared, and all six men opened fire.

The eyes were red, feline in shape, featureless. There was a growl, a guttural rumble emanating from this thing, and it didn't take long for the order. Shotguns and rifles fired at Arthur's command. The eyes stared. They unloaded their casings into the darkness, at the eyes, but the eyes remained unmoving, and when the guns stopped and the echoes faded, just below the ringing in their ears, Arthur and the men could hear it. It growled louder.

And then other eyes opened. Further back and further down, other red, almond-shaped, featureless eyes opened. The six backed out of the cave.

"Plan B" Arthur called out, and eight more guys carried up bundles of dynamite, wired to one charger. The bundles were set inside the mouth of the cave, even as one guy asked about the first group that went in.

Arthur didn't answer.

The charges were set. When the living stepped back—no barrel left the mouth of the cave, and nothing emerged into the sunlight—the charges were ignited, and the mouth of the cave and half the hillside fell in, burying the mauled men and the red eyes.

Tonight Arthur had seen all the eyes.

Sniffing broke his concentration. The sound came from an adjacent room. Walking down a u-shaped hall, opening a door, Arthur found Matt laying in the fetal position in bed, the source of the sniffing.

The grandfather sat on the side of the bed, pulled back the covers, stroked the boy's back. After a moment, the boy spoke.

"I don't like to imagination things, when I draw."

The grandfather realized his mistake immediately.

"The last time I used my imagination, Mommy got hurt. I didn't use my imagination in a good way."

"What happened?" Arthur asked; he did the best he could to mask the concern.

"Mommy and Daddy were fighting, and I wasn't happy. They told me to stay in my room, but I could still hear them. I imagined Mommy got hurt, and I wanted to draw, and I started to draw. I drew Mommy and Daddy fighting. I didn't really want

to, but I could hear them. I drew Mommy getting hurt. And Daddy hurt her.”

“I’m here,” Arthur said. He rubbed the boy’s back and hovered over, until Matt drifted back to sleep. He stayed a while longer, looking at his grandson, thanking his lucky stars that the curse that had struck his friends had avoided him. And he felt lucky, that the draw of the Aminal had not enthralled his family.

### III IN AUGUST

Two days before the birthday party, Arthur pulled a large tarp out of the shed and tied it to limbs of four trees, some fifteen feet overhead. Matt steadied the ladder for his grandfather. Then Arthur contacted an old friend at the school, and he and Matt drove the old pickup into town, returning with a truckload of metal folding chairs and three eight-foot tables.

Through this the phone kept ringing.

As they put the finishing touches on a banner reading CANTRELL FAMILY REUNION—incorporating Matt’s special talent—Arthur found his grandson frowning.

“But it’s my birthday,” Matt said, like someone forgot.

“We are using the occasion of your birthday to bring the whole family together.”

Matt scratched his head with the end of his pencil. “You mean all our family is coming to celebrate my birthday?”

“Yep,” and Arthur meant it.

With all this preparation, there still wasn’t enough seating. The house was full. Kids ran around with balloons and cap guns they won in the pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey game. Others sucked on lollipops and ate Tootsie Rolls and Sugar Daddies they won out of the busted piñata. The garage door was opened. Lawn chairs were placed on the concrete slab between the garage and the gravel drive. There was just enough concrete for the kids to draw a hop-scotch game in chalk.

Relatives Matt had never heard of—but he recognized from his drawings of their headshots on the banner—congratulated him on turning eleven, while those same people hugged Arthur. Arthur had come to believe he would never see some of them again, it had been so long. The cake was brought out and the audience focused on Matt, who walked to the table as nervous as a freshman politician at his first debate. His smile frozen, his eyes unblinking, Matt stood behind the flickering candles, as the wind threatened to blow them out. To his left stood Arthur. To his right stood his parents. In front of him the nameless horde that swore they were his family.

They all sang. And when they finished, expectant eyes were upon him. For a flicker of a second Matt swore the eyes were red, but he took a deep breath. The eyes were normal; Matt blew.

The candles flickered, but the wind and breath were too much. The candles

all went out.

The cheer sent the birds in haste from the trees; flutter of wings as thunderous as the applause that this child's wish had come true. Only when the moment of truth had come, and the wish had sprung to life in his own mind, did Matt realize what it was he truly wanted, and the notion that it was going to happen completely shocked him. He saw sanguine eyes again in his adoring loved ones, and after the blowout felt as though he had collapsed.

His parents ushered him toward the living room, along with his grandfather and Aunt Shelly, and Matt obliged. He walked and was cognizant of everything, but responded to nothing. Like a zombie Matt sat on the marble hearth, his body framed by the brick fireplace. Aunt Shelly sat in a recliner, as did Arthur. Matt's parents took the loveseat adjacent to the couch—all were situated in a very conversational way—and old times were discussed. To Matt it felt inevitable that the conversation turned to the Aminimal.

"I saw it," Aunt Shelly said, to start, "and I wasn't a child."

They had disclosed—without Matt's participation—the midnight sojourn he had taken to the brink of the Aminimal's lair, and how Grandpa Arthur had arrived just in time. Of course Matt's dad laughed it all away, but Arthur remained ardent in his narrative, and Matt only listened, occasionally nodded.

"I was driving one night, back home, when I still lived off County Road 314. I had just hit the gravel when I glanced over to the ditch and saw the eyes, those red eyes. I thought wolf at first, but it was standing as tall as a cow. It seemed to take notice of me, and it howled. Or it growled. I couldn't tell, but the neck tilted back and some sound came out.

"I slammed on the gas and spun the back tires and fishtailed just about in order to escape, and that thing watched me. And then it followed." She laughed, a humorless joke to herself.

"I was doing seventy on gravel and it was keeping pace. I could see it out my passenger-side window. It looked almost like a wolf but not quite. It had human features. It stood as tall as a full grown cow, though, and that is something that no wolf could ever do. I looked into its eyes. I saw its eyes, more than anyone else had ever seen its eyes, I suppose."

Matt kept silent. There were lots of kids that went missing, due to the Aminimal. They probably saw its real eyes, too, he thought. They probably saw its real eyes, before—

They had laughed, Matt thought, as he crawled out of bed. He was quiet. It was still dark, and he was sure that no one was awake. His parents and his aunt and his grandfather had laughed at his aunt's story. Only his grandfather had looked at him, with a kind of serious look that replaced the laugh. But it was only for a second; Matt had tried to smile.

He felt like an experienced dresser in the dark. He walked through the halls, and imagined the old black and white movies his dad watched, about the



prisoner, spread-eagle across the wall, dressed in pinstripes and wearing a burglar's mask, inching along the brick wall and freezing when the spotlight danced across. The spotlight danced across when he came to the archway of the kitchen, the light still on.

His grandfather sat with his back to him, alone in the kitchen. Arthur seemed sad, or deep in thought. Matt didn't stick around to find out which. He returned to his room, flicked on the light, and noticed all the pictures he had drawn over the summer, stacked neatly on his dresser.

Seated on the edge of his bed, the pictures on his lap, he began to sort through them. They were loose, and as he viewed each, he laid it face down beside him on the mattress. The last picture was not completed—Matt knew—as he stared at it.

There was a stream, and some gently rolling hills, and a cave, and stepping stones leading across the stream. There was barbed wire stretched across the nearest side of the stream, and flowers by the mouth's cave. But something was missing.

Wind slapped at the eaves with a screech; the house moaned in response. Albert tried to remember if the weather forecast called for a storm, even as he caught the faint sounds of rattling somewhere deep within the house. He stood, took a step toward the living room, then stopped and turned. Just behind the kitchen a crooked hall bent to the back set of bedrooms. Arthur stepped into the darkness and heard the strange sound more clearly. Like cards, shuffling, muffled only by the wind outside.

Like flapping, he thought, as he followed the sound—no cards, wait. It's a whipping noise. From behind he heard Matt's dad groggily ask what the noise was. Seeing Matt's parents triggered a spark in Arthur. Not enough to connect all the pieces, yet, but more a sick sense that he knew what was coming, he just didn't want to admit it. In that instant, Arthur understood what the sound was.

Despite the wind, the door opened easily enough, gaining them access.

All of Matt's drawings flapped and fluttered about the room. The screeching wind had found an entrance into the old house via a window in Matt's room. Where Matt should have been laying on the bed, however, lay only a single picture atop the covers. It was undisturbed by the wind.

The parents called for the child; Arthur sank to his knees and pulled the picture close.

The picture was of a familiar scene, a stream or a brook, ambling down a gently sloping hill, a series of stepping stones leading across the water, and a cave on the opposite side. On this side of the stream, a single strand of barbed wire, and in the cave, a pair of eyes. Just stepping across to the other side, a little boy.

Arthur cried.



# The Details

Kenneth Brown

I stare at your picture, just inches away  
and I'm comforted by the details of your face  
Your smile and your lips, the curve of your hips  
The small of your back, where my hands used to rest  
The inside of your thighs that I love to caress  
The taste of your skin, the smell of your hair  
How my heart starts to race, when I'm kissing you there  
When I'm doing it right, that sound you would make,  
You try to hold back, but you can't, it escapes  
You tell me slow down, not now, make it wait  
I stare at your picture, I honestly do  
for it always reminds me, the details of you.

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# Three Years of Prom

Stephanie Bernard

## *Year One*

My first year of prom, I wore a dark blue dress, short, with white lace around the bottom, small white gloves trimmed with lace. My feet were tucked into pointed toes—matching shoes.

My friend wore a dark blue dress. It was long in length but the sleeves were short. The sleeves made her arms look big and the dress made her look heavy.

My date had paid for his tuxedo rental by mowing lawns for six weeks. He was goofy looking with stringy blond hair, small pursed lips folded into a permanent smile. He was fairly attractive, loyal, friendly, but incredibly stupid.

We went to dinner. When we sat down my date exclaimed "I have two forks." No one said anything. Instead we trade glances as he stares at his utensils. We ordered our meals and when asked how he would like his steak cooked he looked panicked for a moment then asked "rare" looking proud, as if he had just answered the most difficult question. Everyone at the table cringed while he sat looking pleased, a silly grin on his face. The waitress explained the meaning of the word "rare." I think he went with medium well while I sat and wondered why I was with him.

We're in the parking lot, in front of the dance, the last stop for the night. My friend and I head towards the restroom. Her shoes and bag are dyed to match her dress. It's raining outside and her shoes get wet, causing the dye to run. Blue

coloring is all over her hands and feet and she wraps her bag in a paper towel.

At the dance my friend disappears with her date. I'm sitting while looking miserable. My date is becoming annoying. She comes back in a huff and sits down, hard. She's crying. I look at her and she answers my question without being asked.

"We got in an argument and I punched him in the face."

I try to ignore the rest of the evening and sit watching the rest of the horny teenagers gyrate on the dance floor. Some girl is wearing my dress. I feel something brushing against my arm repetitively. It's my date. He's petting my arm. I think it's time to leave.

We carpooled there and I'm the driver. Everyone, specifically the quarrelsome couple, is sick of the evening and wants to be dropped off. I'm somewhat reluctant to do so since this leaves me in bad company, alone with my date.

My friend looks tired, pale, and ugly with puffy eyes and make up smeared across her face. We're in front of her house now. She and her date pile out of the car. She gathers up her faded bag and shuffles off in mismatched shoes.

Down the street there's a bump in the road that I like to drive over. I drop off my date. Circle the block a few times, bouncing over the bump until I grow tired and go home.

## Year Two

My dress is royal blue, short, with sequins around the top. My shoes are dyed to match my dress perfectly.

My friend is wearing a short velvet dress in black. Her blond hair is put up with strategically placed curls falling out of place like a well planned disaster. She's put on weight since last year and to be honest the dress makes her look fat.

My date is wearing a tuxedo scarf that matches my dress. We've been going together for most of the year and he's something I call a boyfriend. He's something that I've kept around, reluctant to get rid of though I've grown tired of him. He told me that he was doing me a favor by attending this event, even though I paid for dinner, the pictures, the tickets, the whole thing really.

My date's best friend is the boy who I secretly adore. I threatened to ask him to the dance when my boyfriend balked at the idea. And my boyfriend states that his friend would never go with me—so I stop thinking about it. When my date/boyfriend finally agrees to go he spends his time leading up to the event telling me how great he is, and often tells me I'll never find anyone who will treat me better.

The boy in question, the object of my secret affection, who supposedly would have never gone with me, ends up going with my friend, my fat friend in the short velvet dress.

A mutual friend ends up dancing with our dates, looking stunning in a borrowed dress, as we sit at a table complaining about our shoes and how they hurt our feet. But we won't take them off. She's dancing in the dress that she borrowed from me. It's long and red with a beaded clasp on the back. It now has food

crumbs and a stain on it. Now they're dancing dirty.

We're invited to a party afterwards and I say it sounds like fun. My date has a fit right then and there, and refuses to go. My friends look annoyed but talk him into going.

At the end of the night we leave and my date refuses to go to the party once again when no one's around and I drop him off and he's crying as I drive away.

We break up a day later. He responds, "You were using me for prom."

## Year Three

I'm wearing a long black velvet dress with white trim. My hair is put up, held in place by tons of pins and whatever else and it looks immaculate.

My friend passed away during the year. Her ex, the boy she punched in the face a couple of years ago called me to tell me the news. She died some sort of rock star death, the type that involved drugs and car crashes.

My date for this year is dressed in black and white. His hair is fixed for the occasion, slicked back and wet with styling gel. He's much taller than I am and I wear heeled shoes to make up for it, plastic shoes three inches high that kill my feet.

We go out to dinner at a restaurant near the ocean. They serve seafood, no surprise, and the walls contain tanks full of living entrees behind glass.

We've known each other for years. But lately he's become moody and strange. We laugh and joke as we sit at the table but something's missing.

I stare at the crabs in the tank while he eats. They crawl up the side and slide down. They crawl over each other. One stands on another's back and raises it's pinchers to the top, reaching pointlessly.

My meal is served. The rest of the crabs have settled now, given up to the bottom.

We arrive at the dance. My date greets his friends who I've never met before who are brooding in the corner and I can already tell that they don't like me. They look at me disapprovingly and we scamper away. We dance. They're watching. He looks embarrassed. And some other girl is wearing my dress.

I stop to talk to a couple I know. They look miserable, like they just want me to go away and I leave them to their fighting and aggravated silence.

I watch an old obsession, the boy who I still harbor secret affection for. I watch as his date walks away from him on the dance floor. He had tried to kiss her but she doesn't want him anymore. He looks miserable.

Unable to have a good time I retire to a corner where I meet a friend who is alone, who used to date the mutual friend who borrowed my red dress the previous year, and we spend the rest of the evening licking the ice sculptures.

My date and I exit the dance. We go to a hotel and end up sitting on the bed smoking pot and laughing at the television as we make out. He's wearing red underwear underneath the black and white.

He falls asleep. I smirk and giggle at the television and realize I'm amusing myself with no one to laugh with. So I let him sleep and forget about it. It was no surprise when we broke up two days later.

# an outline to the apex of rites of passage

Janet Kuypers

It was one of those rites of passage. A Bah Mitzvah of sorts. But this was bigger, much bigger than shaving for the first time or getting your period. This was the chance for all young high school men to lose their virginity and a chance for all young high school women to dress up, feel like adults, look pretty. Everyone felt the driving need to go through this rite of passage, to not be left out, to be a part of the group. Either way, you got to take a day off of school.

But like every rite of passage, the high school prom is probably more traumatic than fun, because no matter what, you feel like you have to go, and the entire time you have to look like you're having fun. Especially for the photographers. You have to have a perfect record of your perfect life so you can upstage everyone else.

With every aspect of prom, there was always a conflict, an expense, or an irony. I mean, this is supposed to be one of the best times in your life, and it's wrought with confusion. First, find a date. Has to be someone socially acceptable, otherwise it would be less embarrassing to just not go. Then, go through the trauma of asking your prospective date to actually go with you, or if you're a woman, wait to be asked, which is almost more cruel. Then, see which of your friends are going, organize what group you'll go with to your prom.

Then you have to start working on the details. For men, this meant transportation, the cheapest tuxedo, what kind of corsage to buy, something that

pins on, something they wear on their wrist, or something they carry, like a bouquet. Oh, and don't forget the most important part: enough liquor and/or condoms. Note how suddenly the prospect of multiple hookers performing anything you'd ever want is both less expensive and less of a hassle than this quote-unquote "date." For women, the details meant picking out the right dress, the right shoes, the right purse, the right jewelry, the right perfume, the right make-up, the right hair style. Note how you have to then coordinate your clothing with your date. So much like real life.

Then, beg your parents to let you wear the dress you picked out, or keep the make-up and hair style the way you wanted it. Beg your parents to let you borrow their sports car. Beg your parents for enough money to pay for the limo, the flowers, the clothes, the film for the camera. Beg your parents to let you stay out past curfew, how about 6 a.m., just this once. But, come on, it's prom.

Then the Big Day arrives. Ditch school, because you know, getting you hair done can take hours, and you want to spend some time in the sun, so you don't look as pale as a ghost for the pictures. Then, after getting ready for an inordinate amount of time, meet up and take the pictures. Urgh. This usually entails the man picking up the woman, taking pictures at the woman's parent's house, then going back to the man's parent's house and taking more pictures there. It's almost worse than a wedding.

Then finally arrive at Prom. Take more pictures. Talk to as many friends as you can there, compliment their dresses and tuxedos. Find out what everyone else is doing after prom, see if anyone is doing anything better than you. Note how many women are repeatedly pulling up their strapless dresses so they don't fall out of them. Note how many men are already drunk, and look, it's not even dinner yet. Take lots of

pictures with your instamatic camera. Let's do a group shot. Oh, let me take a picture with so-and-so.

Then eat. Try to figure out how to eat your salad without using your knife. Check to see how little all the women are actually eating. Note how many women go to the bathroom in groups. In any case, whatever you do, don't stop feeling awkward. But keep smiling.

Then the dancing. Try to remember what your father taught you. Try not to look stiff. Try not to sweat. Dance in a box. Right foot forward, feet together, left foot left, feet together, right foot backward, feet together, right foot right, feet together. Or go for the high school standby; wrap your arms around each other and sway, occasionally making out in the middle of the dance floor. Note how many women have their lipstick smeared across their cheek, or on their date's collar. Note how many bow ties have loosened.

Then collect your things, say your good-byes, take a few more photos and head out for the after-prom activities. Possible options include a late dinner, a four-hour boat cruise, a walk along the lake, a bonfire, bowling, a hotel party, or the back of dad's sports car. Note how disheveled you look by six a.m.; try to clean yourself up in the car before you get to your driveway, in case your parents are waiting for you. Don't make out for too long as you say your good-byes in front of your house.

Then, get in the house as quietly as possible, drop all your clothes into a pile in the middle of your bedroom floor, and collapse on your bed. Here's a helpful hint: drink a glass of water and take a vitamin and some aspirin before crashing; it will help with the hangover. Try to get some sleep before the day-after-prom amusement park trip, and keep in mind that even though prom is over, your friends will be rehashing it for at least a week. This is the ritual. Now go to sleep.

# prom 97 ...or doing things right

Janet Kuypers

My mother just gave me a bunch of her cocktail and formal dresses that she wore when she was young. Floor length dresses, usually with some beadwork, all really spectacular, unique formal dresses, and I thought, wow, these are really great, I'd love to wear these dresses, and then I thought, wait, I have nowhere to wear these dresses, and then I thought, wait, no one I know of would have any place to wear these dresses, these are dresses that look like they should be worn to award ceremonies in southern California and there's nothing like that going on around here in Chicago and if there was, I'm sure I couldn't afford to go to it. So then the thought struck me, like a sequin that caught the light and glared into my eye from the shoulder of a floor-length one-shoulder satin dress with matching stole: I could have a formal party. Host it in my living room. Decorate the whole place. Well, then, since it was mid-May and I couldn't get a limo rented for a friend's birthday because they were being used by a bunch of sleazy seventeen-year-olds wasting their parents' money, it occurred to me that ten years ago this year I went to my own prom, and then the vision struck me with even more clarity. I was to have a prom party.

Prom '97, it was, I had to decorate and make it prom, except more fun, because we're older now and probably have a better idea of how to actually have fun. So, where to start, where to start. Needed streamers, hanging down from door frame to floor in every door way. Needed lighting... Got my white christmas lights out from storage in the basement and strung lights all around my living room and dining room, on the tables, on the walls. Needed balloons, so I got 75 large silver balloons, blew them all up and let them cover the floor. Bought a crystal punch bowl, made a punch that would force people to eventually have fun, got a ton of food for the buffet, sprinkled glitter and streamers and confetti all over the place, even got a disco ball.

Needed to make favors, remember at formal dances you'd get little booklets with the name of the prom and the location and the theme song and the class president? Well, had to make those, and they should match the invitations, and come to think of it, there's usually a photographer with a backdrop in the corner of the dance floor so you could get your portrait taken... Hmmm... I'd have to borrow the grey portrait backdrop my sister made by painting over one of those



maps they have in elementary schools, that roll down over the chalkboard like a projection screen and put it in one of the bedrooms so my friends could have their portrait taken.

And my friend Brian was even coming into town for this party, because in high school nine years ago I asked him to prom and he turned me down and we've always sworn that if we could do it over again, we'd go together. So I thought I'd surprise him, and since I sing I got my four-track recorder out and taped my voice over a slow George Michael song, kissing a fool, because we were both dorks in high school and both loved George Michael, and anyway, I sang over this song and was going to have us dance to it together.

So people start showing up for my party, and I'm playing big band and swing music, Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Harry Connick Jr., The Glenn Miller Orchestra, because you see, I have taste now and wouldn't play the kind of crap you'd hear at say, your prom or a wedding, like "When a Man Loves a Woman" by Michael Bolton or "At This Moment" by Billy Vera and the Beaters or "Truly" by Lionel Richie or Mariah Carey or Whitney Houston or Natalie Cole without her dead dad's voice in the background. And people are complimenting me on my punch, that it tastes really good, but I don't dare tell them that it's absolut vodka and absolute citron and rum and banana liqueur and a little whiskey and some left over red wine from my last party, all with a splash of orange juice and Ne-Hi fruit punch soda. And Scott is already starting to spill his drink on the floor and bump into people and it's only like eight o'clock so I'm thinking, this is going to be a good party.

And then Helen comes in with Steve, her fiancee, and she's got a new eyebrow ring, and I say, wow, did that hurt, and she said no, it hurt more to look in the mirror and see this big metal circle piercing through the flesh above my eyebrow, but no, when I got it done it didn't hurt at all. And minutes later I hear my roommate talking to her, saying that there's a theory among psychologists and such that if someone gets into multiple piercings or piercings in unconventional places or tattoos, that's a sign that they were abused when they were a child. So my roommate is asking Helen, "So, were you abused as a child?", and I try to cut in to halt this social faux pas, and Helen responds with "No, not really." So I think, okay, I need to know what that means, so I ask, "What do you mean, not really?" and she answers, "Well, my parents were Columbian and I went to a Catholic school. It's a wonder I'm not a serial killer." And I think, okay, maybe Helen's fiancee won't try to start a fight with my roommate after all, maybe things are actually going to be okay.

And more people start showing up, Rachel strolls in wearing her old prom dress, and her and her friend made wrist corsages out of broccoli and spinach leaves. And Dave shows up, that sweet thing, with corsages that match a few of my dresses for me, and I decide to change into dress number two, I mean,

there are only so many occasions where I'd have the chance to wear more than one formal dress to a function, I might as well take advantage of it, and everyone seems to be having a grand ol' time, and we start taking pictures and then I decide that Brian, the prom date that never was, should dance with me.

So I turn off all the Christmas lights so that all that's going is the disco ball and I play this goofy George Michael song and start dancing with Brian, and he's laughing hysterically that I remembered that he liked George Michael all those years ago and that I actually sung over this song, and we're dancing together, and then he says, "Oh, wait a minute. If this is supposed to be prom, I better act like I did at prom," and then he pushed me away and acted all stiff and started doing the box step and stepping on my feet, and it just made me laugh harder and harder.

And then I decided I needed to have everyone vote for a king and queen of prom, so everyone whispered in my ear who they thought should win, and I picked two women and two men so it wouldn't be such an elitist thing, and one of the kings won only because he got nearly as many votes for queen as he did for king. So when I tallied it all up in my very drunk head, all while wearing dress number four, I picked up the Burger King crowns I picked up last week just for this occasion and crowned the winners, and told everyone we should all dance.

So by the end of the evening we changed the music in the stereo so we were listening to the Bee Gees and Abba and Duran Duran and old early eighties crap that we could just thrash around to, and we were singing to all the songs and jumping around, and it was two in the morning, but we didn't care, because we were all at prom and having a perfectly good time.

And I thought about Brian dancing the box step and stepping on my feet, acting all stiff and scared because the high school prom was a time for awkwardness and uncomfortableness, and I thought, yeah, we really are more comfortable now. Everyone should have a prom when they're old enough to enjoy it.

# Water Witchín

G. A. Scheinoha

Each of us derives not from those moments; all the thoughts which fill up our days, bleed over into most nights. Rather, we're defined by hesitations: every ellipsis, hyphen, pause that slows down the sentence, pronounces judgment on our dreams. There are silences vast as prairies, great, empty reservoirs no paragraph or page, neither written or spoken idea can ever pump near full capacity. The aquifer of guilt, the substrata of artesian

grieflies too far down to sustain this popular, thirstyned.

# Major Obstacle

Sam Martin

“Hey, Mick! Wanna go to the Club Saturday night? Might be some girls there!”

“Sure. I bet they are.”

“Are what?”

“Some girls there.” *I hope she’s there.*

He couldn’t get over how his best friend and barracks mate, Buddy, had parked his 1955 Chevy on the previous Saturday night when they’d gone to the USO Club downtown. Buddy had turned the car’s wheels inward. Outside the car, Mick stopped briefly.

“Keeps the car from rollin’ straight down the hill!” Buddy smiled.

“Won’t it still roll down crooked?”

Buddy, a little bit older, and a lot more experienced, warned,

“Now don’t you go fallin’ in love tonight!”

But he couldn’t help it. He saw her. She looked as young as him, but she acted older. From behind the food table, she had asked,

“May I offer you something?”

She had smiled to the top of her teeth. Her eyes had smiled, too, but from their black depth. Her nose was neither short nor long, neither broad nor narrow. Her hair was long and black and lustrous. Her brown hands looked soft enough to hold, her smooth brown face seemed covered with unclaimed kisses. For a few moments, Mick left the ugly world and resided, without thought, without feeling, without movement, in a heaven-here. He didn’t see her again that night. *She must have left early.*

This night, he bypassed the tables, and headed directly for the dance floor. She glided up to his left side, and asked,

“Would you like to dance?”

“I have two left feet.”

“And one right one?”

As they moved into the music, he caught a glimpse of her figure, but holding her revealed its true lushness. As the rhythm swung her away from him, he couldn’t fill his eyes enough, nor could he fold her back into his arms soon enough.

At the end of the evening, she offered him a ride back to the Base, and as they passed through the gate, the A. P. saluted, and said something.

“What did he say?”

“He said, ‘Good Evening, Sir.’”

“Are you...an officer?”

“No, my husband is. He’s a Major, a Navigator in 124’s.”

“Where is he?”

She smiled. "In Alaska. On a one-year TDY."

"Oh." He suddenly remembered to ask about the delicious smell he'd noticed in her car. He elevated his inquiry to the formal level:

"What is that lovely aroma?"

She laughed. "Dates." she said.

"What?"

"Dates I prepared for the food table at the Club. I put in sugar and spice and everything nice."

"Meanwhile, back at the oasis, the A-rabs were eating their dates."

"Don't say that. My mother was Arabic. She showed me how to prepare the dates."

"I'm sorry."

"That's okay. By the way, what's your name?"

"Michael Wayne McMickle. They call me Mick. But I don't like it."

"I don't blame you. I'll call you Michael. Or Wayne-o."

"What?"

"*Bueno* is a Spanish word. My father was Mexican. That's where my husband found me—down on the Mexico border, working at the snack bar in the Airfield coffee shop. He plucked me out of poverty."

Mick didn't respond, so, to redeem his feelings, she added,

"I know why you don't like 'Mick;' they called me 'Spick.'"

"Who did?"

"The other officers' wives."

"You heard them?"

"I overheard them."

As he was exiting her car, he said,

"May I call you?"

"No. I'll call you."

A few days later, as he sat talking to a pilot taking a routine training flight, the Sergeant said,

"I'll take over, Airman. You got a call."

He handed the earphones to the Sergeant, then walked back to the desk, sat down, and picked up the phone.

"Airman McMickle. Sir."

A sultry voice asked,

"Would you like a date?"

"I said, 'would you like a date?'"

"What?"

"Oh. Yeah. I sure would."

"Okay. I'll pick you up at six. Okay?"

"Yes. Okay. Bye."

That evening, they went to her house.

She took his hand and led him past the piano to the bedroom, stopping to

retrieve something from a bowl atop the piano.

“Here.” she said, coming so close they almost touched, and inserting something sweet and spicy between his lips.

“Now,” she said, “feed me one.”

In the bedroom, she stood facing away from him and took off her blouse. Then she turned toward him and wriggled out of her skirt. She was wearing only a bra and panties and a garter belt holding up sheer stockings. She kicked off two shoes in two directions, then removed her bra in one quick motion.

“My God-ess!”

She smiled both sweetly and wickedly. Then she sat on the bed and slowly rolled down her stockings from one cocked leg at a time.

Mick rushed forward and jumped on her, and they fell together on the bed.

Afterward, Mick asked,

“What’s your name, anyway?”

“Edwina. But they call me Eddy.”

“Why?”

“It’s short for ‘whirlpool’.”

The next time they met, she said,

“Let’s go to a motel. It’ll be fun.”

So they did. Mick paid the \$5.00 (plus tax), and they fell onto the bed, and onto each other. The second time around, Mike flew solo. She excused herself,

“I was filled full, I mean fulfilled, the first time.”

Then she laughed, but Mike didn’t get the joke.

Late one afternoon, she picked him up and drove straight to the park, then started climbing over the seat.

“It’s still light out!”

“You work better in the dark?”

Of course, a policeman came, and ordered them to move along, but after he left, she insisted they finish.

Just as she drove through the gate, she exclaimed,

“Oh, Mick! Do you love it?” (She almost said “me.”)

At the barracks, he said,

“He’s too old for you!”

“And I’m too old for you.”

“But I love you!”

“And I love you.” she said quietly. “But I love him, too. So I have to choose.”

“Don’t.”

“He rescued me. He’s returning tomorrow.”

Mick blurted out, “I’ll always love you!” and ran crying from the car, like a teenage girl.

The next morning, Mick saw her standing at the perimeter fence, watching a C-124 taxi up. He ran outside and grabbed her arm, but she pulled away and pushed through the gate past the A. P. Mick ran after her, and grabbed her arm

again, but this time, when she jerked away from him, he stumbled, and fell under the moving wheel.

Telegram

Dear Mrs. McMickle:

I regret to inform you of the death of your son, Michael. He was killed on the flight line this morning, trying to save an innocent life. You can be proud of him. He will be awarded the Good Conduct Medal.

Cpt. I. M. Yeoman, Cmdr. (Acting)  
Flt A, Grp 123 MATS

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# luther

© devin wayne davis 07

genius ...  
it's vandross, i joke  
—about everything,  
including the kitchen:

*this sink is still a sink,  
even if no one's doing dishes there.*

*'but a house is not a home ...'*

see now, he's splitting hairs  
—getting deep into fission;

the man has an ear  
for quantum theory; &

a soul  
of subjectivism.

# The Man Who Played With Lightning

Don Stockard

Gregor stood up and stretched. He remained fully extended for several moments with his eyes closed, enjoying the tension flowing through his body. He exhaled and relaxed, opened his eyes, and stared at the valley that stretched out to the north. Narrow at first, the valley opened gradually until in the distance it was broad, encompassing fields and a village. He glanced to either side at the rocky peaks capped with snow that guarded the pass. He stretched again and then began to descend.

Gregor strode easily as the trail switchbacked down the headwall of the pass. He was a slight man with a beard and long hair — both dark and shot with gray. His clothes were well-worn and plain tan in color. His boots were equally well-used and in need of repair. He carried a canvas backpack on a wooden frame. Wide-set dark brown eyes dominated his placid face.

He glanced occasionally at the village in the distance. Perhaps twenty buildings were scattered about a square with a larger building on one side. Gregor assumed the larger building was the church. Soon the valley and the village vanished behind a wall of trees as Gregor entered the forest. The trail, which had been faint at the pass, was equally ill-defined in the forest. Switchbacks were no longer necessary as the angle of the slope moderated. The trail paralleled a rambunctious stream.

Rounding a turn, Gregor came upon an elderly man sitting on a rock beside the trail. The man was leaning back, his hands clasped around his knee. His chin was elevated and his eyes closed. Gregor halted, staring at the man.

“Hello.” The man neither moved nor opened his eyes.

“Hello. I’m sorry if I disturbed you.”

“Not all.” The man chuckled and leaned forward, opening his eyes. “It’s not often that I get company. Few come this way. I’m Arnold and you?”

Gregor introduced himself. “Are you from the village?”

Arnold shook his head. “No. I live here, in the forest.”

Gregor nodded. Occasionally he ran across a hermit.

“And you?”

“Just passing through. It’s about time for harvest. I thought I might get a couple of days of work in the village.”

Arnold nodded. “Wouldn’t be surprised.” He stood up. “I was just getting ready for some lunch. Care to join me?”



Gregor smiled. "Sure. I've got a bit I can throw in."

"Fine. Follow me." Arnold shouldered a small, leather rucksack. He led at a surprisingly fast pace up the trail for a quarter of a mile before he abruptly turned to the right and plunged into the forest, following a barely discernable path. The path ended in a clearing where a small stone hut stood.

Gregor ducked through the low door, following Arnold into the hut. His eyes were accustomed to the daylight, and he found the interior of the hut dark.

"Let's get a little light in here." Arnold pushed open the shutters and sunlight streamed in, illuminating the interior. The furnishings were simple — a stone sleeping platform and a small table with two three-legged stools. There was a fireplace across from the door and small windows on both side walls.

Arnold threw his rucksack on the table and swung the large iron pot over the coals. He took some mushrooms out of his pack and threw them into the pot. Gregor added some dried meat.

"Let that bubble a bit, and we'll have something to eat!" Arnold laughed as he stoked the fire.

The two sat on the stools while they waited for the pot to boil.

"Do you think I could reach the village today?" Gregor asked.

Arnold shook his head. "No. It's a full day's trek from here. You're welcome to stay the night if you wish and start out early tomorrow."

"That's very generous of you. I wouldn't be interfering with anything, would I?"

Arnold laughed. "No, not at all. I was just going to do a little hunting in the mountains. Might get a sheep. You're welcome to come along."

"Sure. Why not?"

"Great!" Arnold stirred the pot.

The resultant stew was hearty and tasty. Soon after eating, the two were on their way toward the pass. Arnold carried his rucksack and an ancient musket. Gregor carried his pack. He let Arnold lead and was surprised at the speed and agility of the older man. Gregor reckoned Arnold to be in his late sixties or early seventies, and yet Gregor, who was in his early forties, would have been hard put to force a faster pace.

They paused at the pass. "Where are we headed now?"

"Up there." Arnold nodded toward the peak to their right.

Gregor glanced at the mountain. When he had crossed the pass initially, he had been more interested in the valley and had given the peaks only a passing glance. The slope was steep but not sheer. Near the summit was a snowfield. Thick clouds drifted past the summit.

Gregor frowned. "Couldn't those clouds hold some rain?"

"I suppose, but I wouldn't worry about it." Arnold stood up and began climbing.

Gregor hesitated and then followed, leaving his pack at the pass. The two

ascended steadily. Arnold was clearly accustomed to climbing and familiar with the route. His pace did not slacken; instead, it increased. Gregor alternated between glancing at the valley below and the clouds above. Patches of dark shadow floated across the valley, mirroring the paths of the clouds. The two were halfway to the summit when Gregor heard the first growl of thunder.

“Are you sure this is a wise idea?” Afternoon thunderstorms in the mountains were not uncommon, and he had always avoided them.

“Good time to hunt!” Arnold laughed and increased his pace.

Although prudence told Gregor to begin his descent immediately, there was something recklessly intriguing about Arnold, drawing him on. The higher they went, the denser, darker, and more menacing the cloud cover became. Thunder was more frequent and much louder. Still Arnold pushed on. Gregor could hear the older man’s breath, deep and regular.

By the time they reached the snowfield leading to the summit, they were immersed in clouds. Despite the exertion of climbing, Gregor felt a chill. The snow was firm and Arnold kicked step as he marched up the slope. A clap of thunder exploded near by.

“This is crazy! We’ll get killed!”

“Come on!” Arnold never broke stride. “We don’t want to miss the fire!”

Gregor halted and glanced down the slope.

“Hurry up! We’ll be on top in a few minutes and then we’ll start down.”

Arnold was, Gregor decided, completely mad. Still there was something overwhelmingly strong about his personality, something that brooked no disagreement. Gregor followed the neat row of steps in the snow.

When Gregor staggered onto the broad summit, Arnold was fifty feet ahead and a dim shadow in the mist. Just as Gregor caught up with Arnold, a flash of lightning followed by a deafening clap of thunder split the clouds. The bolt was so close Gregor could hear the hiss of its passage and smell the nitrogen oxide. He collapsed in terror beside Arnold.

“It’s the fire!” Arnold raised both arms and laughed. “It’s the fire!”

A second clap of thunder drowned out his laughter.

Gregor remained kneeling in the snow as bolt after bolt ripped through the air nearby. He could feel his hair standing on end and see Arnold’s hair and beard glow with Saint Elmo’s fire.

“There!” Arnold pointed his musket to the right. A bolt of lightning flashed to the right.

“Now there!” He turned to the left and another bolt lit up that side of the summit.

“More! More!”

Gregor cried in terror as jagged bolt after bolt covered the summit in a bizarre white light. Intermingling with the claps of thunder, he could hear the maniacal laughter of Arnold. Gregor had no idea how long the display went on. Nor did he know if he were alive or dead.

“Now come to me!” Arnold’s voice matched the thunder itself. There was a horrendous crash, and Gregor clamped his eyes shut in sheer terror. When he opened them, the storm had abated. Although he was still surrounded by mist, the only thunder was distant and compared to what he had experienced, anemic.

There was no sign of Arnold. Gregor staggered to his feet, shouting the old man’s name. There was no response. Soon the mist dissipated, and the sun returned. Even in the full light of day, Gregor could find no trace of Arnold. He made a complete circuit of the summit, scanning the snowfield for tracks. Other than the set they had made on ascending, there were none.

Finally he was forced to descend as night was approaching. At the pass he retrieved his pack and continued his descent. He was unable to find the faint path to Arnold’s cabin in the gathering dusk. He camped beside a stream for the night. The next morning he searched again for the path to the cabin. Having no luck, he continued to the village.

Harvest was in full swing, and Gregor quickly found work. During a break, he asked the farmers about the elderly man named Arnold who lived in the mountains. None knew of any such man.

“Arnold, you say?” One grizzled old farmer frowned in thought.

Gregor nodded.

The farmer chewed on his pipe for a moment. “My father told me once of an old man by the name of Arnold. A bachelor that lived just down the road from him when he was a boy. Said he was killed during the harvest one year by a bolt of lightning.”

Gregor started in surprise. “A bolt of lightning?”

The farmer nodded. “Yep. That’s what my pappy said. Never heard of anything like it since.”

Gregor turned toward the mountain and stared at it in silence.

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## the truth of fire - Amanda’s haiku (2)

David McLean

your blows my freedom -  
for pain is the best cleanser  
when the fists are yours

# Worth Her While

*Sandra E. Waldron*

It was dark and cold outside, eerie shadows playing against the window panes.

Cindy Carlson didn't care as she lay in her bed, staring out into the depths of night. The wind was howling strong, pausing only briefly now and then to groan and whistle through the cracks around the doors and windows. Would Robert come home before daylight? The answer was probably no. Normally, when he was called out during a storm, it was the next morning or early afternoon before he was able to finish up and come home. But such was the life of a linesman. And such was the life of a linesman's wife.

There was a brilliant flash, all but blinding. She rolled over swiftly and instinctively covered her head with her sheet. A loud boom shook the house. And before she could take the covers down, a second, even louder, clap of thunder trembled her bed. "Crap!" She jumped out of bed and tried to switch on the light – but the power was off. She should have known. "Oh ...well," she said to herself. "Something else to keep Robert from coming home tonight."

There was a small nightstand to the right of their bed with one small drawer. She opened the drawer and found the flashlight, white storm-candles and a small box of matches. She'd recently purchased several glass candle-holders from Six Star and, after lighting the candles and dropping a few drops of hot wax on each holder, she stood a candle on each one and set them in strategic places: one on the nightstand by their bed, one in the hall on the small desk with the house phone (Robert had insisted on having one, though they each had cell phones) and one in the living room. She would use the flashlight for anywhere else she might need illumination.

Satisfied she'd done all she could, she crept back to bed and was just about to climb in when she heard a scratching at the window that was across the room from her bed. She looked and jumped back with a start. "Sssshit!" she cried. Looking in at her was a tiny little being, no taller than three inches, somewhat human in appearance but with very large eyes and dressed in a silver, looked like, a spacesuit. She shook her head. "What the—"

"Help us!" a little, vibratory voice cried. "Help us!"

This wasn't happenening. She wasn't seeing what she was seeing, nor was she hearing what she was hearing. She turned around, away from the window for a moment and then looked back.

Gone! Just lighting flashes and shadows dancing from the hedge outside the window. Damn! She thought. I am imagining things. She climbed back into her bed, as she was not the type to frighten easily, and just covered up her head. The wind was howling. Had to be the wind she heard, surely not some small creature's

tiny voice. And it had to be her imagination that had formed the shadows into what she thought was that little creature. “Yes! That’s it,” she said to herself and closed her eyes tight, hoping to fall back asleep. And she did, for a short while. But she was awakened again, this time, not by lighting and thunder, though it still persisted outside – It was the banging and clanging of pots and pans in her kitchen!

“What the friggin’—”

She got out of her bed and ran to the kitchen, flashlight in hand. Sure enough, in the middle of the floor was her large, porcelain soup pot, her wooden ladle, a large iron skillet and an assortment of lids. And standing in the middle of them were not one but two tiny creatures identical to the one she’d seen at her window. They stared up at her, bright eyed, crossing tiny arms over their faces. “Too bright...Too bright!” They said in unison. “Please turn out the light!”

“No! What are you doing in my kitchen? And...” she breathed, “What am I doing talking to you?”

Just then one ran up to her and bit her on the ankle, hard.

“Shit Shinola and save matches!” she screamed and kicked the creature away. “What did you bite me for?”

“Turn out the light!” the creature she had kicked across the room cried again.

“But then I won’t be able to see you!” she stated. Her ankle throbbed. She just knew it was bleeding, but when she reached down, she realized it wasn’t.

The second creature spoke up. “Then...please, at least, turn the light away from our faces?”

She stood there for a moment, considering if this was truly happening. She pinched herself. And felt it. That was silly. Hadn’t she felt the bite? And still felt it. She closed her eyes tight and then opened them again. The little beings were standing beside one another again, the one having scampered back across the room.

The light, Earth lady!” the one to the right reminded.

“Okay...” she said, and turned the beam just out of their faces, but not to the point that she couldn’t see them. “Now...what are you? And what do you want?”

“We need your help,” they said in unison again.

“How can I help you?” she asked, thinking to herself that this was some crazy dream and she’d wake up any minute.

“We’re from Largo...A planet from the far side of another universe. We came through a black hole and did a slingshot around your star to gain momentum to cross your universe and something went wrong with our ship...something about your star nullified our power supply. We lost our momentum just as we came around the other side. Consequently, we were forced to land here.”

Cindy knew zilch about this universe, let alone, any other universe. She only knew this was Earth and it revolved around the sun with eight or nine other planets. She couldn’t remember how many, for sure. Astronomy had not been her best subject. “Okay. Now, just how am I supposed to help you?” She studied the collection of her cooking utensils in the floor. “And how in hell are a bunch of pots and pans going to help you?”

“The elements, kind Earth lady. The metal.”

“Huh?”

“Yes! We need it for our reactors.”

“Don’t you need uranium or something like that?”

“Oh...that was thousands of your years ago. We can derive energy straight from your simple metals here.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she said and glanced to the kitchen window.

“Where’s your spacecraft?”

“On your roof, Earth lady.”

“My roof?”

“Yes. That’s how we got in your house. We climbed across a drain pipe and through a small window you’d left open that goes to a large room just underneath the roof.”

“That would be the attic,” she said.

“Yes! Attic. Then we managed to open the door and came on down here and found your pots and pans...as you call them.”

“I see,” she said, still trying to process it all. Did she dare trust these creatures? They appeared sincere. But boy did her ankle smart. However, they had asked her to turn the light away.

“May we then...use your pots and pans?”

She blew out air. “Well...I guess you can. But do you need them all?”

“Maybe not all. But we will need most of them.”

“Most of them, huh?” She didn’t relish having to go out and buy all new cooking utensils. And how was she going to explain to Robert that her cookware had been turned over to tiny aliens from another universe. Nope. Strike that explanation...even if it was true.

“Yes, kind Earth lady. If you will let us have them, we will give you something in return.”

“Aren’t they really large for you? Shouldn’t one or two be more than enough?”

“In the process of changing the metals to fuel, their size will be greatly diminished.”

“I see.” But she really didn’t. She could not imagine what on Earth they could give her that she could use, some kind of weird electronic device that she’d have no use for, better yet, understand how to operate. “How long will this take?”

“A few hours. Maybe by your midday.”

“Noon...that would be. Robert should definitely be home by then.”

“This Robert is your Earth male?”

“Yes. Why?”

The one on the right cocked his little head to the side and said something in some weird language to the other. The other laughed, and then they both looked back to her. “Your answer, Earth lady. May we use your pots and pans?”

Brilliant lightning flashed, illuminating the room completely. She saw other creatures had joined the two. They were ready to start hauling the pots and pans off.

Did she really have a choice in this? Should she comply with their strange request? Then the one that had bit her asked, “How’s that ankle, Earth lady?”

“Still smarts.”

“Sorry,” he said.

But she knew he had asked, not out of concern, but as a reminder. They could retaliate if their request was denied. She thought about it a moment. They were tiny, sure. But they were from God-only-knew where. And there was no telling what kind of technology they had. “Okay,” she said, rubbing the back of her neck. “Okay. You may take my pots and pans. But, if it’s at all possible, I hope you can finish before midday.”

Both the little creatures stood tall and thanked her in chorus and, again, promised to make her donations worth while. Then they began carting the pots and pans upstairs. It was then that she offered to help, as she realized she could carry several to their one and greatly speed up the process. Soon, they had all the pots and pans and lids on the roof and she returned to her bed to get some shut-eye before the sun came up.

There was a lot of banging and clanging for about an hour, and Cindy hoped the neighbors wouldn’t hear. Although, she realized they might not, as the storm was still lingering on outside, with a loud boom every now and then, shaking the house. She was certain she would not fall asleep, but before she knew it, her eyes popped open and it was broad daylight.

“What the—?” It was really quiet. It was 12:30 p.m. Shit! And Robert still wasn’t home. Figures, she thought. She jumped out of bed and ran through the house. No sign of her husband and no sign of the little creatures that had visited her last night.

Maybe it all had been some kind of weird dream. “Yes! Must have been a dream. She ran back through the house to the kitchen and opened up the bottom of her range. Empty. No pots and pans there. She turned around and opened up the lower cabinets. No pots and pans there, either. Cleaned out! They hadn’t left her a one. Not a one!

“Why those little shits!” She just knew Robert was going to walk in that front door any second. He would want something to eat. “Dammit! And she had no way to cook for him. Popping something in the microwave wouldn’t do. Not after he’d worked all night. He’d want a steak and eggs, the works. “Crap!” She’d just have to run to Safeway and buy a skillet so she could cook a steak, at least. She quickly dressed and shrugged into her sweater and was just about to leave, having grabbed her purse and keys off the table, when she remembered that her visitors had promised they’d make her contribution worth her while. She looked around the house for a minute and, finding nothing, returned to the living room. “Well...where in hell is it?” she said to the normal looking room, not seeing anything new. She glanced outside at the sunny daylight and went to turn away and it hit her: Robert’s black Dodge Ram was sitting in the drive, right behind her white Focus.

“When did he come home?” she opened the front door and went outside. He

wasn't in the truck. The garage door was closed. Where the hell was he? Had to have just come home. She hadn't heard him. She ran back into the house, expecting him to probably be in the bathroom. But he wasn't. "Robert?" she called out. "Robert, where are you?" Silence. Shit...he had to be in the garage. Just then her cell rang. She answered it. It was Jim, Robert's boss – wanting to know how Robert was feeling, since he'd gone home early with the flu. She was stunned. "I...I..." she couldn't speak. She stumbled over to the kitchen and went to the door that led outside to the garage and went to open it. "How early did he leave?" she asked, now shaking from head to foot.

"Oh...right after he got here. He threw up...looked to me like everything he'd eaten for a week...Poor guy. Tell him to get well soon."

And before she could respond, Jim hung up. Now, she was worried. She reached out for the knob to the door and slowly opened it, felt to the right and switched on the light. Just as she went to step down, she tripped and fell over something and went tumbling down the stairs. She landed on her hip. It smarted. She looked back up at the top of the stairs. On the landing, was a large bag of some kind. It appeared to be a metallic material. Must be what the little aliens had been talking about. But where in hell was Robert? She pulled herself up and worked her way back up the steps.

With shaking hands, she swiftly untied the bag and pulled it open. "My God!" she gasped. It was Robert! He was staring up at her with a fixed gaze, but he was very much alive. It looked as though he'd been heavily drugged. She noticed a note pinned to the collar of his shirt. She tore it off and read it. "We were going to eat this fellow, but quickly learned he belonged to you. Good thing his name was on his clothes. And since we made a promise to make your contributions worthwhile, we spared his life for you. Besides, he took up half our spaceship. Again, thanks."

## What of Truth?

*Michael S. Morris*

One almost hated to mention that wisdom would be knifed into his face. He was a fast talker as if he could out-race the razor. He didn't get the theory of clay, of malleability, of plasticity. He felt he was the shaper, his hands kneading the doughy materials seeking fertility statues of stone – belly-smoothness. What did he think he unsheathed when he bothered to read, books and sword in hand? One definitely hated to state that his mate would be his sculptor's conscience, sending slab after slab back to the quarry for marble blocks that might contain a human being the compression from which if he was lucky and lived fifty thousand years might through fire become a hardness that under the chisel's blow, dazzles



# When Sleep is Your Enemy

Richie Cook

Mechanical beeping...

I wonder what it is and wish it would stop  
My eyes flutter open and the light coming in  
Confirms my worst fears

I lost again

I lower my feet to the ground  
And let them guide me to the shower  
The warm water is my war nurse  
And that four by four fiberglass room is  
My infirmary  
She healed me  
And one day I'll tell her that I love her  
That I can't live without her

I really do appreciate his optimism  
It makes the days go easier  
That time of peaceful ceasefire  
Where the enemy leaves us alone

But not today

I find myself in a different room  
Opening the cabinet and taking out that  
Familiar bag, the one with the elephant and  
The word KENYA written in block letters

Pour, grind, pour, splash, drip

My veteran status makes the dubious process  
Seem much less deliberate and tender  
Than it really is  
Soon the smell wafts through the house  
The one that makes my heart beat a little faster  
My ally has joined me again!  
I pour him in my favorite mug  
And whisper the details of the battle in his ear

He assures me the next confrontation will go better

# Creationism Run Amok?

Pat Dixon

In ancient days, as many people know, copies of both the Old Testament and the New Testament often had many “books” in them that are no longer there—because, for various reasons at various times and places, some of the writings were pulled. You can look this up. Practically every encyclopedia says this, so don’t fret.

The Bible of today, say scholars who know, was actually put together by various Jewish and Christian committees over a long period of time. In fact, as most people are aware, the content of the current Bible for Protestants differs somewhat from that for Roman Catholics. (All of the committees were considered divinely inspired, so don’t fret about that either.)

Interestingly, we still have copies of many of those eliminated writings. Here, as an example, is a short passage from one of the many books that didn’t make the final cut for the Old Testament (Third Shem, 8:5-11):

5 And the Lord spaketh unto Satan and told him that He was most sorely vexed and much disappointed that both His son Adam and His daughter Eve had partaken and tasted of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, despite His commandment that they should refrain from so doing. 6 And to this Satan replied and said unto the Lord: Lord, surely Thou knewest it would happen thus, since Thou art omniscient and knowing in the ways of all things. 7 What seemeth therefore to have been the cause for their disobedience of Thy commandment [forbidding the tasting]? And the Lord replied and said unto Satan, We made use of inferior materials when We used the dust of the Earth to create Our son Adam and [subsequently used] the rib of the body of Adam to create [Our daughter] Eve. 8 Our children, both daughter and son, are flawed therefrom, despite that Our design were of and in itself most perfect. 9 And Satan spake unto the Lord: Lord, how might [these things] otherwise have been? 10 And the Lord replied unto Satan, saying, Our son Adam and Our daughter Eve would indeed have been perfect in every respect could but We have Fathered them with one that could be their Mother. 11 Verily, We say unto ye, Our problem hath been the proverbial one: Spare the rod and spoil the child.

## Illusions

Dimitris P. Kraniotis

Noiseless wrinkles  
on our forehead  
the frontiers of history,  
shed oblique glances  
at Homer’s verses.  
Illusions  
full of guilt  
redeem  
wounded whispers  
that became echoes  
in lighted caves  
of the fools and the innocent.

# Awake

K.J. Erickson

I awake trembling with coldness in my bones, unlike anything I have ever known before. Chilliness so profound, I feel my bones creak with its unmerciful vengeance, with the slightest of my every movement, which I cannot help. But with horrific anguish, I somehow succumb to the war raging inside the dreadful most parts of my innards. The pain is so overwhelming, so stimulating, for I know, I have to pluck it from my mind, if only for the moment, for I need a measure of escape of the naturals inside of me, an out.

Loose, freshly turned soil squishes between my bare toes. So sporadically my eyes dart to and fro, I can't seem to control them, as the comprehension of my surroundings bewilders me.

I look down, upon my gown of sheer silken white and delicate lace, as the bottom of my skirt fades blindly away into a sea of almost waist-length white soupy thick fog. Fright builds in my heart; I summon up all my strength and begin to run, to try an escape from the dark and coldness that has encompassed me. My bare feet skim lightly over the fresh dewy grass and the chilling gooeyness of fresh turned earth. My mind frantically races trying to make sense of it all, my memory frozen somewhat, absent of how I awoke to such blinding darkness and such brittle coldness.

Glimpses of memories flick sporadically through my mind, only pale vague picturesque flashes of the past flash, if somehow carved in memory stone lie in my mind, images of me so helpless in the warmth of strong and comforting arms, flow through my mind, arms of my true love.

A love that I knew was forbidden from the beginning, a love that would be shunned from the entire world, because I was married to a proper man, an older man of my father's choice. One that was old enough to be my grandfather, or more. But I could not help my self from the love and lust for such a poor, young, and so vibrant man. A man that I desired with every waking moment of my thoughts, so compellingly, so alluring, and so sensuous, that he had controlled my soul since the first moment I had laid eyes upon him, many years of my past, the lust of diabolism, according to the church.

Down the path I practically fly, trying to find a way out of the darkness, tears stream down my already stained scorched cheeks, they burn trails of indenture upon my chapped face, anguish and terror clench my insides in a grip so full of despair, I had never known such as before.

Such coldness envelopes me, I throw my arms around me trying to ward off the shrill bite of the persistent and invading chill. A cold that has sunk so deep into my frail bones, I am afraid I will never be able to ward off.

My eyes manically search my surroundings again, the ground churning with white fog lying as far as I can see, troubles my worries, even more. My eyes dart in one direction, and then another, I find myself running face first into a forever ending wrought iron fence of blackened spikes which sends spiraling white flashes behind my eyes. With compulsive instinct, I lick the oozing blood from my nose with my tongue. Grabbing the coldness of the heightened spiked barrier, I grab the slick coldness of the bars in my hands and rattle them with all my strength. Although, the towering bars of my prison will not relent.

Deep guttural cries escape from the pits of my winded lungs my desperate pleas of help, echo out throughout the darkness and return to me pitifully unanswered. The cold has somehow sank deeper within me through my unanswered pleading for help the fear by some means pierce deeper than imaginable into the pit of my soul.

I fling my body away from the stark darkness of the barracked like walls; I begin running again, my long hair and white gown billowing out behind me in symmetrical harmony like the wind rippling feathers on the wings of a frightened bird. I stumble over a fog blinding obstacle, my fingers and feet try desperately to claw in the wet fresh earth and grass to retain to maintain my balance. With my mind spinning wildly out of control and desperation seizing my heart, I dare not look back at the obstacle that caused my tumble; my only thought is to get out of here. As soon as I recover my footing, I am running again, no matter of the aches and pains in my weakened bones.

Once again, I stumble over another object, hidden discreetly by the blinding fog and distortion of tears in my eyes. With all my exertion, if only for a moment I scramble to my feet and take several deep breaths of ice-like air to calm myself. In the faint distance I hear a faint tinkling of water. With the blinding fog that has started to rise higher, I notice that I will defiantly have to depend on my other senses to search out its source.

Almost blindly, I slow my pace and walk upon the frigid coldness of the ground which has now turned to a mixture of smooth and somewhat sharp pebbles, piercing agonizing punctures in the bottom of my feet. Through the drifts of floating white mist that seems to continuously swirl around me, I can somehow make out a large, dark, and forbidding object in front of me. The jagged evilness seems to loom over me like some monstrous beast, as my heart begins to convulse in my chest. I blink several times trying to rid my eyes of my persistent salty tears. The white shroud of fog has now risen over my head making visibility nil. The forbidden creature seems to loom over me with its tormenting darkness, with unrelenting defiance; except for the spray of mist spewing from its head on to my face.

With all my courage summoned up, I reach out, cautiously, with terrifyingly, trembling fingers, and all I feel is a smoothed polished coldness the chill of cool surfaced stone.

Laughter gushes past my lips, before I realize it, as I know I have grasped upon a stone water fountain, so statuesque, so endearing in front of me. As my

eyes squint through the darkness and fog, I can make out a cherub of angelic qualities sitting so elegantly high on top, tooting a horn from which the tinkle of water is spraying forth.

I sigh with relief realizing my folly, without hesitation I cup my hands together and scoop the cool fresh water in my hands from its basin and splash its contents upon my face, drizzling some of its contents against my parch lips and into my mouth, which is such a welcome delicacy at this moment.

As I rise again, swallowing the last mouthful of cool substance.

I feel a familiar hand upon my shoulder. His hand is large and wide and I would know his touch even if I were blind. I feel a tingling sensation from my shoulder down to my tensed up toes. I know that only one man can make me feel this way — the touch of my true lover.

I turn around swiftly, so glad to feel his familiar touch. He stands there so god-like in black trousers and a crisp white shirt smiling down upon me.

“How did you know where I was?” I asked.

“I will always know where you are.” He replied in a low soft tone, unusual for him.

“How could you know? I do not even know where I am.”

He smiled, with that smile I could not resist, and then pressed his lips gently to Mine.

I closed my eyes and accepted his gift ever so willingly. Our kiss seemed to last for such a short eternity, an eternity I never wanted to end. For he was the only one that I knew would keep me safe from the cruel world around us. When it was finished I did not want to open my eyes but somehow I knew I had to.

I took a step back from him and gazed up to his face, I shrieked as I focused in on the bullet hole in his forehead and the blood that was incessantly oozing out. As I glared at him the memories came flooding back. The memories of my husband finding my lover and me together in our guest house, how he had come home early the afternoon in one of the hidden rooms, of our vacant cottages. In his despair he had taken his pistol of vengeance upon us.

I looked down upon my gown and the garment was suddenly covered in the bloody wrath of my husband’s punishment, riddled with his retaliation. I began to scream. My lover held out his soaked bloody hand. A smile of genuine quality was plastered on his face. The fog had miraculously cleared and the markers of the stones of the dead circled around me, the obstacles I had stumbled over with fog blinding unknowingness. The truth of its despair had taken his vengeance upon us.

All so confirming now, I placed my hand in his assuring hand.

“Even in death he can not separate our hearts!”

I felt peace as I left this world to be with the one I truly loved!

# No More

*Gerald Zipper*

This is it  
my personal terminus  
the needle and thread of my rebirth  
never again allow wanton weakness  
never again humility  
never again derided  
there are no more moments  
time has collapsed  
not another instant a victim  
not another tick or vagrant tock  
no more seconds reeling at the edge of the clock  
this is ultimate finality  
you can't hurt me again  
you can't use me  
you can't abuse me  
this is the absolute end  
what is left, you ask?  
to keep my distance from the exploiters  
to protect the precious granule secreted in my center  
the prized speck you will never reach  
I will be hard  
resolute determined  
until maybe next time  
and maybe the next  
and the next.

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