



056  
March 2008

down in the dirt  
revealing all your  
dirty little secrets

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Scars Cover art of Hoover Dam.

Per the request of the author, the story on pages 16-27 has been pulled from the Internet issue.

## Heart-shaped Drowning

*Amy Marie Hess*

Hands pressed together, vertically inclined  
My palms form an almost perfect heart-shaped reservoir.  
I watch as jets of water droplets steadily pour; collecting,  
Filling my palms within a matter of timeless seconds,  
And they laugh as they drown the only heart left in me.

# ONE MORE GIRL?

*Aneela Khalid*

Fire seared through her limbs,  
Acid rushed through her loins.  
A doleful howl escaped her lips.  
Like a leaf withered, warped with pain  
She wretched and screamed like a dying bird  
When the howls of babe mingled with hers  
“It’s a girl!” She heard the nurse exclaim.  
And a wave of dread burst in her head.  
He wanted a son, an heir to his domain.  
She shuddered and cast a forlorn glance,  
At the angelic face of the whimpering girl.  
Then looked into the harsh eyes of her man  
Harsh eyes laced with ominous gloom,  
Folds of frustration convulsing like doom,  
“Your daughter,” a mutter died on her lips.  
“A gift from God, that’s what she is.”  
A forlorn glance he cast her way  
Shook his head in marked disdain,  
An unfit wife that’s what you are  
A flawed vessel that’s what you are  
Incapable of producing sons I want  
This baggage of liability you call girl  
I refuse to carry this burden of shame  
Three girls in a row what have you done?  
I need a boy to carry my name,  
No, my name can’t end like this!  
I want a son, and a son I will have.  
Like a storm he raged out of the room,  
Leaving in his wake a torrent of tears,  
Withered, forlorn, she watched him leave,  
Then turned and stared at the newborn’s rosy cheeks.  
When will they learn the higher truth?  
When will they see the secret divine?  
Boy or girl each complements the other  
Like fire and water, day and night,

Both are just two sides of time,  
How many ages would come and pass,  
Before this truth a man is taught?  
A claw-like shadow gripped her heart.  
He'd rejected the holy gift of God.

## News Report *Aneela Khalid*

LAHORE, Apr 6: Samia Sarwar, 29, mother of two boys aged 4 and 8, was shot dead today in lawyer Hina Jillani's office by a bearded man accompanying her mother and uncle. The bearded man shot Saima in the head, killing her instantly. Married in 1989, Samia had left her abusive husband four years ago and had been living at her parents' house in Peshawar, but they, along with her brother and uncle, had threatened to kill her if she filed for divorce. Defying them, she ran away to Lahore and took refuge at Dastak, the half-way house for women run by AGHS Legal Aid Cell since March 26th. Her dissolution of marriage case was due to be filed any day.

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## Grains Of Sand *Chad Newbill*

Another grain of sand just past through my hand-  
Soon they will be empty.  
Each granule grows louder;  
Each speck grows more significant.  
The silt piles and piles into my casket  
The surf skips and laughs as it hurries the procession.  
As a youth, the beach seemed like a playground for the immortal- with  
infinite supply.  
With age, fewer morsels return with the high tide.  
I look out toward the sea for answers; but look back with even more questions.  
The same ground that once comforted my soles- now grinds at my heels.

# Weisz Words

Pat Dixon

“. . . On October 31, 1926, Houdini [Erich Weisz] died of acute appendicitis in Detroit, Michigan. On every Halloween night for the next sixteen years, Bess, his widow, attempted to communicate with Harry's spirit, but with no verifiable success.”

—“Houdini, Harry,” *Encyclopaedia Michigana*, 17th ed.

“I've got a little list, I've got a little list. . . .

The task of filling up the blanks

I'd rather leave to *you*.”

—W. S. Gilbert, *The Mikado*

1

“Beatrice, hold my hand tighter, dear. Yes. Yes—our spirit contact says that we have Harry now—that he's finally ready to send you his secret code-word. It's—it's—it's the word 'Wilhelmina!' Yes—it's 'Wilhelmina.' Does 'Wilhelmina' mean anything to you, dear?”

“'Wilhelmina'? Yes. Of course it does. I'm sure that you know that it has meaning for me, Madame Shovitsky.”

“Yes. Yes—I felt very confident that *this* time our contact had finally spoken with Harry—with Erich—and that we at last would get the proof all of us have been longing for. If any person could contact us from beyond the grave, the world's greatest magician and escape artist—Harry Houdini—would.”

“Wilhelmina—that was my real name—the name I had when Erich and I met. It is what Erich always called me in—in private, you know. Yes—and Beatrice—that was only my *stage* name, the name I took when I began working as his assistant. Often, in front of others, Erich would shorten Beatrice to Bess. But he—he never called me by either of those names when we were alone together. Always either Wilhelmina—or just Mina for short sometimes—when he was feeling—you know—affectionate.”

“Oh—this is such a breakthrough, then, Beatrice. It—it is all right if I continue calling you Beatrice, isn't it? You don't wish me to call you—Wilhelmina—do—you?”

“You may call me Beatrice. It is what most friends and acquaintances call me—when they are not calling me Mrs. Houdini—or—or the Widow Houdini. My rabbi often calls me 'Widow Weisz,' but Beatrice is a nice name. You may continue calling me that, Madame Shovitsky, if you are comfortable with that.”

“Whatever you prefer, dear. Are there any questions you would like to put

to—to Harry—to Erich? I—I would think, as long as we finally have made contact with him, that you might—you know—might wish to know something about the spiritual plane or his current feelings—or other things.”

The widow shut her eyes for half a minute and seemed to be in deep thought. Madame Shovitsky gave her right hand a reassuring squeeze and said nothing. At last the widow spoke.

“No. This may seem odd to you, for I am certain that hundreds, perhaps thousands of your previous clients have been brimming over with questions they put to their loved ones. Last Hallowe’en, the fifteenth anniversary of Erich’s death—his ‘crossing over,’ as you call it—I was prepared to ask him one or two things about his beloved mother, but this Hallowe’en I have no questions. I prepared none. I was certain that we would fail again. Like other people, I have been more concerned in recent years with the news of the war—the horrors of what the Japanese have been doing, but especially the horrors of—of Jews being rounded up by Frenchmen and handed over to—to—I cannot speak their name. It is too painful to me.

“I fully understand, Beatrice. Perhaps you would like to ask—Erich—what the Lord has planned as far as the—the war is concerned? It has been my experience that those in the spirit realm often can see something of the future and can guide us or—at least reassure us. Would you like to ask about that perhaps?”

“Thank you, but no. I think I shall continue to take comfort, such as I can, from the public words of President Roosevelt and from the more personal words of Rabbi Rumskopf—and, of course, the broadcasts of both Mrs. Roosevelt and that brave Mr. Churchhill. I doubt that any words you might convey to me as dear Erich’s would do anything but sadden me.”

“Because you fear he can see only pain and misery for the Allied cause, Beatrice?”

“No—because I am certain that you would be bullshitting me, Madame Shovitsky, and I would not like to subject myself to that experience. It would be a mockery to my husband’s memory as well as to the religious beliefs I hold dear. I regret to say that I see you, if you will pardon my bluntness for a moment, as one more charlatan, one more opportunist who is trying to separate grief-stricken people from their money when they are most vulnerable. I have decided that tonight, October 31st, 1942, will be the very last time I shall make any attempt to have contact with my beloved Erich. The experiment ends tonight. If he and I are to be reunited, it will be whenever I myself have ‘passed over.’”

“Am—am I to understand—are you giving me to understand that—the word—the name ‘Wilhelmina’ was not the special code-word that you and Erich had agreed upon.”

“It is common knowledge what my real name is, Madame Shovitsky. And I am equally aware that my name was printed in dark ink on a slip of paper that was sealed inside an envelope that has rested inside a heavy glass belljar in my living room for many years. I know this, because I put it there myself—and often look in at it to see the many ways that forces other than the wind have moved

that envelope just ever so slightly. I am confident in my own mind that Erich was not in touch with us tonight—just as he has never been in touch with us on any previous occasions.”

“But—do you mean to say that ‘Wilhelmina’ was not the correct word? I—I was certain that—that my spirit guide had found Erich for us—and that we—you and I—had at last succeeded where others—had miserably failed. I—I am still certain of it!”

“Alas for you, then, Madame Shovitsky. I shall be leaving now, and I shall be announcing to those reporters waiting outside that we again have failed—that this experiment will not be repeated in 1943—whatever else might, for good or ill, take place in that year. Or at any other time in the future. Now—Mr. Epstein and Mr. Kellock, will you kindly accompany me to meet briefly with the press and then see that I get home safely?”

These men rose from their seats and assured the widow that they would do so.

2

The next morning, newspapers carried a brief story on page 17 that yet once more the Widow Houdini had failed in her attempt to bridge the gulf between the worlds of flesh and spirit, adding that, as per her desires, no further attempts would be made.

In the early afternoon, the widow went to the belljar in her living room and removed the sealed envelope. Glancing calmly at its wax seal for fifteen seconds, she took a deep breath and then tossed the envelope onto the burning logs that warmed the room. Above the mantle of this fireplace hung a portrait of her late husband. She stared into his intense, penetrating eyes, while the envelope and its slip of paper were silently consumed.

“I am so sorry, Erich,” she said in a soft voice.

a. “You’ve done the right thing, Mina,” he replied. “There are some kinds of knowledge without which mankind is better off. It would not be proper for us to attempt to subvert the Lord’s will. As Dante so often tells us here, fortune-tellers and mediums of any kind are His enemies and must not to be aided or credited in any way.”

b. For a brief second, as the envelope burned, the slip of paper was laid bare—and it was blank.

c. Erich Weisz put his barely visible hands out despairingly.

“Mina! It will work! I know! You must try again on the twentieth anniversary! Anything less is considered shallow love by our Creator!”

The Archangel Gabriel glanced over at him and shrugged, knowing for a fact that Mina Weisz herself would be dying on February 11, 1943.

d. Mark Twain slapped his hand silently at—and partly through—his ghostly knee and looked gleefully up at Voltaire and Rabelais, who quietly grinned back.

“Damn, Volley! She-it, Rabby! I jest convinced that Madame Slippery-Ski that she had it. Damn! I don’t know when or how we’re gonna have this much

fun ag'in. If I still had any feces in me, I'd'a' messed m'self f'r shore!"

e. The widow opened a small safe that was set into the wall behind an oaken panel. She lifted out a sealed envelope with contained the maiden name of Erich's mother, written in Erich's hand. With a sigh, she tossed it into the fire-place and watched as the flames consumed it.

f. Erich, if he could still be said to have an individual identity, floated up to the spirit of what had once been know as Jersey Lily—singer Lily Langtree—and for a brief period of time “blended” with “her,” totally unaware that it was Hallowe'en once more on earth.

g. Saint Peter leaned over the Great Abyss and called downward: “Yo. Adversary. I guess you're not lettin' the Great Escape Artist take a call this Hallowe'en either, huh? The Big Guy doesn't really give a crap one way or t'other, but, with the World War keepin' us pretty busy an' all, some of us were wondering if you'd even thought about this year. Yo.”

h. Then the widow sat down in an overstuffed chair and read the morning mail aloud to herself: “My dearest Mina—I trust that you have kept your promise to end this ‘nonsense’ with mediums. Once you've put that part of your life behind you, there can at last be ‘us’ in the truest sense. Fondly, Samuel.” Pressing the paper to her nose, she decided that his note, like his previous notes, possessed a “very manly” odor, and she felt no regrets.

i. The Lord figuratively rubbed what would have been “His” “chin” (had “He” had any chin) in what figuratively was a mediative manner. *How odd*, “He” “thought” to “Himself.” *These mortals still believe that there is an afterlife of some sort!*

j. Erich Weisz “sat” at a poker table with the famous French magician Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin—the unwilling progenator of the stage name Houdini. As Erich attempted for the ten-thousandth time to play one of the aces he had hidden in his “sleeve,” Robert-Houdin remarked, “Oh, by the way, Sharpy-Schmucky, you had another call from your wife last ‘night.’ But I guess you can wait till next year to answer her, huh?”

k. The Creator “gazed” about the void that surrounded “Her” and “thought,” *How odd—these creatures still believe that “I” am capable of granting eternal life to them.*

l. Dante Alighieri, who, as usual, was “manning” the “switchboard” of Heaven on Hallowe'en, decided it would be amusing to “screen” Erich Weisz's calls. With grim humor he replied *for* Erich, using the first word that came to his “mind.”

m. Wilhemina Weisz picked up the morning newspaper and stared in horror at the headlines. Admiral Yamamoto's fleet was counter-attacking in the Solomon Islands, and Field Marshall Rommel was giving Montgomery a bad time at El Alamein. Tears welled from her eyes, and once again all thoughts of her late husband were driven from her mind—just as they had been during the spirit-crushing years of the Great Depression, which Erich had been able to “escape.”

n. Erich “stood” slack-jawed, insofar as he still possessed anything resembling a jaw, and wondered how he could have been such a forgetful dunderhead: he had erroneously sent the word “Wilhelmina” instead of “Mina.” He felt his ears, insofar



as he still had anything resembling ears, begin to burn with embarrassment.

o. The Creator “gazed” at the Horse-Head Nebula, unaware that life, let alone what was calling itself “sentient” life, had arisen on Earth, and “thought,” *Gee! That’s rather pretty!*

p. Bert Reese, Jr., son of the once famous British psychic, smiled to himself. It had worked like a charm! *His* contact had easily been able to “tap the lines,” pretend to be Harry Houdini, and provide Madame Shovitsky’s contact with false information, thereby thwarting Houdini’s spirit. *That*, he thought, *should pay him back for making a mockery of my dear father’s séance with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.*

q. The Lord “smiled” to “Himself.” Yielding to a “momentary” anti-Semitic impulse, “He” had chosen to disrupt *this* year’s experiment, too.

r. While Madame Shovitsky’s two sons twisted the widow’s housemaid’s arms, Madame S. slapped her senseless for deliberately supplying the wrong code word.

s. The Creator angrily shook “His” “fist” at “His” creatures, displeased that yet another attempt to use one of them (literally) as a “medium” of communication had failed. *Well*, “He” thought, *back to the “drawing board.”*

t. In the old Mercury Theatre, a Hallowe’en-night radio dramatization of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* had broadcast the word “Wilhelmina” just as Madame Shovitsky was about to reveal this year’s guess.

u. For a few minutes, the Archangel Michael “sat” before the vid-screen and watched the widow and Madame S. attempting another annual experiment. Then, with a deep sigh and a small shrug, he turned his attention to something of more interest: his own proto-Pac-man game.

v. The Adversary “shouted” at Madame Shovitsky (AKA Sarah Klein, Marcia LaTour, Nadine Steinberg, Cynthia Gordon, and Susan Litman), “Don’t blame *me*, you silly cow! I gave you the right word. Whatever happened after that was out of my ‘hands.’ Why did you say ‘Wilhemina’ instead of just plain ‘Mina’? Just don’t forget our bargain!”

w. The Creator’s “young” “cousin”—who had been “watching” the “store” for eons while the Creator took a “break”—had clumsily disconnected the medium from the message while “poking around.”

x. The silent, uncreated void dimmed slowly as planet after planet was engulfed by stars which went nova, swelled, and then shrank. Fortunately for the so-called sentient beings, all of their species extinguished themselves long before this with their own little nuclear holocausts.

y. The Creators rested—occasional snorts and snores incidentally creating small galaxies, while occasional farts—seven or eight per Creator per “century,” on average—caused black holes to form. Left on their own, the galaxies seemed to breathe—moving outward for, say, half a trillion years, a small percentage of them spontaneously evolving life forms—and then moving inward again.

# Modern Love Letter

*Tammy Manor 1/16/07*

Years ago men and women would write each other love letters  
The art of the love letter is almost lost  
We wrote e-mails back and forth while he was in the war  
He once told me he'd saved them all  
Somehow a love e-mail just isn't the same  
There was once a time when I would print out e-mails from a guy  
Somehow a typed note with a return path and maybe an ad at the  
bottom just isn't the same  
I want a man to sit down with pen in hand and scrawl me a note pro-  
fessing his desires and innermost thoughts  
Part of me wonders if that kind of romance is dead  
I spent a good 20 minutes tonight erasing text messages from him  
Words like "I love you" just gone at the touch of a button  
Erased off the screen almost as quickly as you said them to another girl  
I don't think you know the power of your words  
Or perhaps you do and you don't care  
Using the same words over and over to different girls  
Toying with their emotions before you get bored and move on to the next  
I know about four women, how many others were there?  
How many times have you uttered the same words over and over?  
You've got your lines down pat  
Your part has been cast but the leading woman keeps changing  
A week ago you told me you wanted to spend the next 70 years with me  
Now you lay in the arms of yet another girl  
I'm a strong person, I'll move on  
I just feel sorry for all victims that lay ahead in your path  
Save all your love e-mails  
Copy and paste them for the next girl  
This way you save time in your ADD of a love life

# Blurred

shaun Jordan

Thursday night she came pouring in so liquid-like, she could have made her entrance through the keyhole. There was something creepy about her; maybe she was a mist of fog lightly touching the ground, silently flowing from one darker area to another. Everything about her appeared complex, and irrational. She was a mix of stable disaster; a little beauty that hid in the edges of twilight barely seen. So when she came just pouring in Thursday night, it does not suffice to say that I was surprised.

Liz wasn't they type to drop by unexpected. She would call first, leaving you ample time to put away dirty laundry, sweep the grit covered floors, and take out the trash that had been overflowing for two days. By the time she arrived, you could have had bathrooms shining, windows spotless, and the coat of dust off the TV screen. But, this time she came in without warning, and I shot up from my lounging position on the couch and hopped over the back, hiding myself from the waist down as I was still in my boxers and had not been given time to tidy up the dirt in my life.

Her face was pale, and vampire-like, studded with oily diamond eyes that gleamed as though polished. They were green, I knew, but now, they hid so deeply in their sockets and under jagged locks of hair, they appeared dark and infinite. They were tiny voids shining without a corresponding soul. She looked inviting to touch, yet fragile, like a cold blade that had yet to cut anything. Maybe she needed something warm, but I could tell it wasn't a blanket she wanted, so I just kept my distance behind the couch.

Liz stepped inside, pushed the door closed behind her, and made sure that I saw the deadbolt lock. Turning around she looked at me, if that's what you can call it, and her mouth twisted open oddly like a misshapen oval.

"Do you remember when we met?" She asked me, the words dripping from her tongue and lips slowly, as though she were forcing them from her mouth.

Hesitant, unsure, mumbling, surprised that she had even spoken any words much less asked me a question like this, I responded, "I really don't know. It's kind of a blur. What are you doing here, Liz?"

"It was a bar and grille place. Café Toca. Remember, you were bartending there? I was waiting on a date to arrive. He never did. It was Thursday," she said. Each syllable was a piece of a puzzle, hard to place together.

"I remember it some. Not like I can remember everything that happened two years ago." I said. My courage was building some as the initial shock of her arrival and appearance was starting to fade.

"Maybe you were drunk. I'm pretty sure I was," Liz continued. "I never did like being stood up, especially by someone I loved. But, I had known for a long time it was over. I suppose I just expected at least a phone call or something."

I looked at her, my eyes narrowing, trying to understand. "What does this

have to do with anything, Liz? Why are you here? I don't want to play games with you because we're over, and you're bitter about it."

"No, I'm not here to play games. I'm here to remind you. Your room is hazy," Liz said. She tilted her head to the side slight, studying me, pulling me into her shadow covered eyes.

"It's probably the smoke," I said, trying to move her eyes off of me. "Remember? I do smoke. Don't change the subject, just say what you came to say."

Liz shifted her weight, and her heavy dark hair moved only slightly, collapsing against her in another direction. She had always been told she was attractive. Her round face, small nose and pouted lips, her best features. But, the way her neck melted down into her shoulders, the way her arms flowed following the curvature of her body, the way her hips, and the kinetic energy in them dropped you down to the floor was indescribable. I think what made her beautiful is that her beauty wasn't fake or polished. It was just there. It made you accept it without question.

"I kept ordering drinks, you know, because I was depressed, and when I started crying, you leaned in and whispered to me." Liz continued, pulling me out of my trance that had locked my eyes on her. "I was beautiful, you told me. Any man would be crazy to stand me up. Or gay, you joked and I smiled. I've thought about that many times since. See, I think you were good at catching rebound girls, and I had just bounced off the rim."

Her words were still slow, but seemed to flow easier, like her lips had become accustomed to her tongue.

"And we kept talking. We talked about dreams, and desires, things that had been trampled on. Past loves, and the worst ways to die—funny how those feel related sometimes." I thought she smiled at this, but I couldn't tell, her face really gave nothing away. "There was a click."

Voice trailing off, she appeared to be thinking. Her body suddenly seemed to sink into the air as though her substance was losing its density. I was going to offer her a bite to eat, but by her looks, I had no way to know if she would be able to keep it down. Thoughts raced through my mind, trying to understand why she was here. Why she was telling me all these things? Though her face was calm, her eyes emotionless and deeply voided, I could tell that I had hurt her.

"So time went by. You called me a cab, and I scrawled my number out on something for you." Liz said, becoming real again, drifting back into this reality. "Two days later the phone rang. I thought you had forgotten me. But, I was happy. It was officially over with Zach, and you seemed like my knight in shining armor. And that's history, I suppose."

Whatever pain I had caused Liz, she had to leave. I did not know if I ever really loved her or if I was just with her. I had ended this like snapping a twig. It was over, done, and I wanted her to go. So full of my own self-loathing, disappointment, rejection—hating myself so much that I actually hated her now as she stood in my door way.

"Can you just leave?" I asked, my tone sounding closer to desperate than

I wanted it to. “I want you to go. Get out. I want to forget you, and everything you and I ever were.”

The tension made the air heavy to breath. Even though I was standing in my own apartment, I considered leaving myself. Something was wrong here.

Daring to turn my back to her, I walked to the kitchen, and took a glass from one of my dusty shelves. Liz only stood there, watching me as I blew the dust from it with a quick breath, sending more haze into the already thick air. I ran the tap into the glass until it overflowed, and poured down onto my hand. It was cold and smooth.

As she seemed determined to stay, no matter what I demanded or asked, I changed my mind about offering her something. “You want a drink?”

Liz moved for the first time in what must have been minutes, shaking her head slightly and sending droplets of waters flying. I hadn’t noticed the water because her hair clung to her and slid down her skin. Now that I looked, she was completely soaked. I listened intently through an open window, but no sound of rain came though; only a warm breeze coated with the sticky, acrid taste of the city.

“Okay. Are you going to leave soon?” I asked.

She looked at me, and I dropped my eyes from hers for fear of being lost in them. With a quiet seriousness she said, “No, I will be staying. Possibly forever.”

The water sprayed from my lips, raining down on the counter and nearly choking me. “What did you say?”

For the first time all night, she actually smiled. I felt my hands numb, and the goose bumps raced down my arms, up my shoulders to the base of neck and rippled down my spine. I was suddenly cold. My legs felt numb, exhausted; my toes felt buried in ice.

“Oh, so hard of hearing sometimes. I didn’t stutter. I said forever. If need be,” she responded, still smiling.

“What the hell needs to be, Liz?” I was scared now. She was all wrong. Her eyes were truly blacked out. I couldn’t see them. I couldn’t find them. Her smile was deadest thing.

Liz walked towards me, taking long steps, but quickly. Her movements were silent and didn’t seem to have much regard for gravity at all. I backed up against the counter, stuck between a wall, and a dark nightmare. Her breath was cold. Her eyes were still dark, skin still pale; nothing changed as she got closer to me. Liz was as I saw her. I had not mistaken anything.

Then she leaned up to my ear, sliding the crisp index finger of her left hand along the right side of my face, tracing the jaw line, and finally wrapping her fingers around the back of head, burying them deep in my hair. With her other hand, she tapped the side of my head. Her whisper sounded like a knife being sharpened.

“I’m here,” finger still tapping my skull, “until you know what pain is; even if that takes forever.”

A loud knock on my hollow door reverberated through me, nearly tossing me from the couch. I tipped over an empty beer bottle as I searched for my balance. It

fell to floor, clanging loudly and rolled against many others that lay scattered about. I shook my head, blinking over and over again. Liz wasn't in the apartment. It had all been a dream. As I regained myself, I realized I was wet and my arms were sore and tired. I must have blacked out. I didn't remember falling asleep or hurting myself. What the hell was going on?

The sound of the door exploded into my aching head again, and I called out to whoever it was to hold on a minute. I plodded across the room, finally arriving at the door. The trip from the couch had seemed like miles. I shook my head, trying to gain a little more clarity. Through the peephole, I could see the look of exaggerated worry on the face of Gina, my neighbor from across the hall. I slid the chain lock out, unbolted the door with a thud, and swung it open.

Gina stood there for a moment, astonished and unsure how to take me.

Finally, she spoke. "Is, um, everything okay? I heard screaming so I came over to see what was going on and you're standing here soaking wet with half of Budweiser's stock scattered around your floor."

"Screaming?" I asked.

Gina looked shocked that I would even ask. "Yeah, I did. Where's Liz?"

Then I remember why my arms and legs were so tired. Why I was covered in water, and small puddles were splotted along my floors. Liz was still submerged under the water in the tub, with a ring around her neck like a broken amulet where my hands had grasped. By now, she would be pale and cold, like the water; the strands of her hair would be dark, and her eyes shaded with an ethereal darkness.

I knelt to the floor, gone from the world around me. All I could hear was her voice inside my head, echoing over and over again; the sharp knife of pain twisting through me, lasting forever.

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## The Intruder *Tony Concannon*

"You're not going out there?" Lisa asked.

"Of course I am."

"Be careful."

She sounded sarcastic.

I opened the door and bounded down the steps. My apartment on the north side of Tokyo was at the end of an alley and I had to go out to the street and then around the vegetable store on the corner. In front of me, in the middle of the intersection, four men were holding down an old man on his back. I froze ten feet away.

The intersection was well-lit. The old man was giving the four men a battle. He shook free one leg and landed a kick in the side of the man holding the other leg. Before the old man could get a second leg free, the man who had been shaken off pounced on the free leg.

"Hey, give us a hand," one of the men shouted to me in Japanese. "Hold him down."

I didn't move. The old man continued to struggle. His bare arms were thick. One of the men called for me to help again.

I was standing in the same place when the first black and white police car arrived a minute later. The old man had given up when he had heard the siren, and he was lying tamely on his back, each of the four men holding an arm or a leg. A second police car, followed by two policemen on bicycles, came up the narrow side street. Two of the policemen handcuffed the old man and shoved him into the back seat of the second car. A third police car, the siren off, came up the wider, main street and pulled in behind the first car. A thickset, middle-aged policeman got out on the passenger's side and walked toward the intersection.

"There was a second man," one of the policemen shouted. "He got away through the park."

The dark, tree-ringed park was on the right, beyond the police cars. The two policemen got back on their bicycles and rode down the street. One of them turned into the street in front of the park. The other waited for a fourth police car, which was slowly coming up the street. The car stopped and the driver spoke to the policeman on the bicycle. The siren came on and the car turned into the side street. The policeman on the bicycle rode into the park.

The sirens had brought out the neighborhood. I looked for Lisa even though I knew she wouldn't be there. She was of Japanese descent, but the only thing that seemed to interest her in Tokyo was the money she earned as a model.

Sachiko, the daughter of my landlord, was standing alone at the edge of the crowd. She was wearing a red sweater and a long, brown skirt. She had seemed older since she had gotten married in the spring. She and her husband lived with her parents in the big house at the end of the alley. She had studied in the United States, and four years earlier, when I had first come to Japan and when I had spoken no Japanese, she had interpreted for me with everyone else in the neighborhood. Now we always spoke in Japanese. I walked over.

"Good evening. What happened?" she said.

"I'm not sure. I think they caught a thief. They have him in the police car over there. I heard the shouting and I thought it was a fight."

She took a couple of steps toward the car. The rear door was open, but the policeman guarding the old man was leaning forward, blocking the view.

The man who had called for me to help had lit a long cigarette and was accepting the congratulations of his neighbors. He looked as if he had scored the winning touchdown in a football game. In Japan he wouldn't have to worry about a lawsuit over a citizen's arrest. I didn't know if there was even a word for it. I could hear the other three men talking with two of the policemen. Everyone was smiling.

"After last month we've all been on the lookout," one of the men was telling the police. "We figured they'd come back for the car."

A gray car was parked several yards behind the police car into which the old man had been put.

“You scared them off once and then they came back in a taxi?” the older policeman asked loudly, not smiling now.

“They almost took us by surprise. We didn’t know there were two of them, either.”

“The other one was younger?”

“Younger and taller. Hair cut very short. Thin face.”

The other policeman had a flashlight under his arm and was using it to write in a small notebook. Sachiko came back.

“You can’t see his face,” she told me.

“He’s old. He must be sixty or seventy.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I feel a little sorry for him.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s old, I guess.”

“Did something happen around here last month?” I asked her.

“Several cars were broken into in the parking lot behind that building.”

She was referring to the big apartment building just in front of the intersection.

“That must be what happened again.”

One of the policemen opened the door of the gray car and shone his flashlight inside. He shut the door and walked over and spoke to the older policeman.

“He might have dropped them or thrown them away around here. In any case, radio for a tow truck,” the older policeman told him in his booming voice.

I was beginning to feel cold in my t-shirt. The temperature had dropped since evening and most of the other people were wearing sweaters or light jackets. Summer was over. I looked around for Lisa again but she wasn’t there. She had probably gone home. The woman who owned the futon shop was talking with Sachiko. When the woman saw me looking at her, she bowed and greeted me. She always greeted me even though I had been in her shop only once, four years earlier. The policeman who had searched the gray car was now looking with the flashlight along the edge of the road. The beam of another flashlight was moving behind the apartment building.

I took a few steps toward the police car. The policeman guarding the old man was sitting back. The old man had his face in his hands.

Two policemen slid into the front seat. The driver started the engine and switched on the siren. The man who had called for me to help waved at the police car as it passed him and headed down the street.

There was nothing else for me to do and I didn’t feel like talking to anyone. I said good night to Sachiko and the woman who owned the futon shop and headed back to my apartment.

The door was locked. I knocked even though I knew Lisa had gone home, or more likely, to Roppongi or Shinjuku. I had run out without my key and I would have to ask my landlord to let me in. I had a good excuse, at least. I didn’t really care about Lisa, either. It wasn’t the first time and it wouldn’t be the last. Still thinking about the old man, I went back down the steps.



# Abrace Ardiente

*Adrian Ludens*

Miguel disliked tourists.

He sat ruminating on this as he watched the American drink. The gringo became more boorish as the night wore on. Rosalita was serving him. Each time she brought the American a drink, he slapped his money down on the far end of the table. Rosalita had to bend forward, giving the leering American an eyeful each time she retrieved the coins.

After his sixth shot of tequila, the American was having trouble keeping his hands off her. Miguel tossed back his own drink, then stood and approached him.

"I see you have met Rosalita," Miguel said.

The drunk American regarded him suspiciously with watery, bloodshot eyes.

"You are interested in her, no?" Miguel persisted.

"I'd like to sow some wild oats in that field," he slurred, giving Miguel a lecherous wink.

"Perhaps she is already spoke for," Miguel commented mildly.

The American stared down his nose at the smaller man. "By who? You? I don't think so old man. You wouldn't stand a chance with a spicy seniorita like her." He uttered a bark of derisive laughter.

"You misunderstand. Perhaps I can arrange an abrace ardiente for you?" Miguel offered.

"What the hell does that mean?" the American demanded, swaying on his barstool.

"The literal translation is a 'burning embrace'..." Miguel began.

The American's eyes lit up. "Lead the way ah-meeego!" he boomed, staggering to his feet.

The tourist followed Miguel outside the cantina. A saguaro cactus loomed beside the path ahead of them as they approached the rear of the building. As they passed under the shadow of the cactus, Miguel abruptly pivoted and shoved the drunk man toward it. The American tottered, and threw his arms out to break his fall.

He squealed like an animal caught in a trap.

Miguel left the disrespectful gringo sitting there on the sand, sobbing and feebly struggling to extract the broken cactus spines from his bleeding hands and arms. Having delivered on his promise of a 'burning embrace', Miguel returned to the cantina.

Rosalita was waiting for him.

"What have you done this time?" she asked him exasperated. "I am a big girl, Papa, I can take care of myself!"

# The Creation of a God

Mike Zakrajsek

My name is Arthur Vaughn, and I am a god. I'm not the "God" everyone prays to. I'm not delusional. Make no mistake, though, I am a god. I have the power. I control life and death. You might be wondering what I mean. I'll tell you. To explain my transformation into a deity, I shall return to my childhood.

I never knew my father, for reasons which I still do not fully comprehend. My mother changed the story a few times. First she said he was dead, then she said they were divorced, then she said they were never married. My mother said a lot of crazy things when she was drunk, which was pretty much all the time. My theory is that my mother was a whore and probably didn't even know the guy who knocked her up. All I know is that I was an unwelcome pregnancy. My mother made that explicitly clear to me. She reminded over and over again that I had fucked up her life. She stated on more than one occasion that she wished she had had the money to abort me. During one of her alcoholic rages she said, "I should have used a fucking hanger." I know it is a cliché for someone like me, but I really do hate my mother. The one thing in my life that I regret is not killing her when I had the chance. She did the honors herself when she got pregnant again, but I was gone by then.

Maybe it was not having a father, but for some reason I was an effeminate child. Some would say I'm still effeminate. I'm not gay, though. I AM NOT GAY. Never have been, never will be.

As a boy, I was terrible at sports and preferred to play with dolls rather than toy trucks and ray guns. Needless to say, this made me a target of my peers. They would call me names like "fag" and "queer" all the time. The name that bothered me the most however was "Art Fart." I was not a flatulent person, but I had the word "fart" attached to my name all through elementary school. It made absolutely no sense!

I eventually got used to being called names, but I never got used to being beat up. I never started trouble with anyone, and when the name-calling started, I just ignored it. But all too often some bully would simply walk up to me and start pounding the shit out of me. For no reason at all! I never put up much of a fight, and usually went home crying and bleeding. My mother did not care, so I would just lock myself in my room and cry myself to sleep.

Everything changed when I was ten. I was walking home from school one day when I had the misfortune of encountering Billy Palmer. Billy had beaten me up several times, and I knew the odds for getting my ass kicked just depended on what kind of mood he was in. He must have been having a shitty day, because as soon as he saw me he picked up a stick and started chasing me towards

my house. I ran as fast as I could.

My mother didn't get home from work until late, which meant I had to open the door with my key. I dug the keys out of my pocket as I ran up the front steps and desperately tried to fit the right key into the lock. Just as my key slid home, Billy arrived at a gallop and whacked me in the arm with his stick. I immediately began to cry and Billy bludgeoned me again and again in my arms and legs. Despite the fusillade of blows I was receiving, I was able to turn the key and open the door. I ran into the house screaming. As I stood inside trying to calm down, I heard Billy Palmer roaring with laughter on my front porch. That's when I decided I could not take this anymore.

I ran into the kitchen and grabbed the biggest knife I could find. I came back to the door with the weapon concealed behind my back. Billy was standing in the doorway, giggling like he was stoned. When he saw me he stopped laughing and said, "Hey Artie-Fartie! Are you back for more, you crybaby fag?"

Billy brandished his stick as I stepped out the door. He took a swing as soon as I was in range. I caught the stick with my free hand and brought the butcher knife out from behind my back. I'm not sure whether the look on Billy's face was surprise, fear, or amusement, but I know he only had that look for a second. I stepped forward and ran the butcher knife into his stomach. He tried to scream, but all he managed was a gasp and a gurgling moan, as if he were drowning. I twisted the knife around and he spit up thick blood. Then he collapsed, pulling the knife out of my slick, red hand.

I looked up the street and down the street and saw no one, so I grabbed Billy by the hands and dragged him into the house. He was gushing blood, and there were a few different organs protruding from the hole I had made in him. I wrapped him up in a blanket and dragged him into my bedroom. I was careful. I don't think I spilled one drop of his blood on the carpet.

I knew I had to hide him somewhere, but the only place big enough was my closet. I couldn't put him in there because my mother put my clean clothes in there every few days. (My mother was a drunk whore, but she did keep a clean house). I decided I would have to cut Billy into smaller pieces and hide him in my toy box and desk drawers. It was nasty work, but I got him diced up into ten pieces, including the head and torso. I put his arms and legs in my desk drawers and crammed his chest into my toy box. I buried the head in a pile of stuffed animals, just like in E.T.

Cleaning up was a bitch, but I was thorough. I was careful not to get blood anywhere except the blanket. The blanket was an absolute mess. It looked like a giant had blown his guts out through his nose into a tissue. I rolled up the blanket and stuffed it one of my desk drawers; the one with Billy's forearm to be exact.

Apparently, no one had seen me skewer the bastard in broad daylight on my front porch, because the police never showed up. I went about my life as usual for almost two weeks. I went to school, I played with my toys, and I got beat by mother. Everything was normal, until my room started to stink. The stench came on fast

and strong. Mother smelled it and that's when she found Billy, scattered around my room. I remember opening the top drawer of my desk, expecting to find an old bologna sandwich or something. When she saw the severed lower leg, her eyes got about as big as soup plates and she screamed so loud I thought my windows were going to break. She ran out of my room and locked herself in her's. I guess she called the police, because they showed up a few minutes later.

They took me away from my mother and my home. I didn't care. I liked the fact that I was out of school and wouldn't get picked on anymore. They obviously figured I was insane, or emotionally disturbed, or whatever they call it now. They blamed it on the physical and mental abuse my mother inflicted on me. Who knows, maybe they were right. They kept me locked up in a facility until I was eighteen. Then they let me go without a second thought.

That's basically all there is to tell. I started killing as soon as I was out, and I haven't let up since. I'm twenty-nine now, and I've killed thirty-seven people. Usually I kill children, but I also enjoy prostitutes. I've murdered five homeless men, and I think I might pursue that more. My trademark is that I always, when there is time, hack my victims into ten neat morsels and bury each piece separately in a shallow grave. I move around the country, rarely staying in the same town for more than a couple days. I sleep in car or stay at cheap motels. I live off money from odd jobs and petty theft. I also have several thousand dollars left over from my mother's house. I can't be sure, but I think I've got the police thoroughly baffled.

That is my life. I am a serial killer, and serial killers are gods.

## Line of Sight

*G.A. Scheinoha*

What if all your words were nothing more than just that; stories which sketch in the bony contours, mere fictions flesh in the wrinkled digit, each thought another elongated joint of a finger that points somewhere, anywhere else, needles the moral compass in everyother direction except towards you?

And yet, life finds you out here in the potato patch. Wrenching up lies by their roots. Spearing spuds with a pitch forked tongue in the cool darkness of a latesummer cellar.

Such justice rises in a slow simmer on the backburner, brought to a full, rolling froth up front.

# Blankness

*Eric J. Olsen*

In a heartbeat, he was awake. It wasn't the kind of gradual waking after a night of sleep. It was complete and it was instantaneous. Even though he didn't open his eyes, he could see. He couldn't see objects, but he could see everything. And he could remember

He remembered the bitter taste in his mouth, as if he had been sucking on a penny. He remembered the sharp tingle that ran down his spine. But he also remembered that it actually all began much earlier. It was three years ago. It wasn't something he had planned to do. The thought had never even crossed his mind.

Standing at the railing, he was gazing down at the traffic. He was thinking that, in theory, eight floors didn't seem very high. Of course, climbing the stairs every other day instead of taking the elevator kept him in shape, but the workout benefits didn't really translate to the height. As he watched the cars going by, he marveled at how small they appeared. Granted, it wasn't airplane-small, but details definitely were lost. The occasional pedestrian was lost to androgyny as those details disappeared to the distance.

The evening was no different than any other. With a few hours left of the sun, he was just standing there, looking down. No thoughts ran through his mind. No plan coalesced in his mind. He was familiar with the darkness of depression, but it had been a while since he had succumbed to it. He only saw the traffic, hearing the occasional siren in the distance. His mind was blank.

The next thing he knew, his mind was filled with a sound that reminded him of waves breaking on the shore, only much louder. It took him a second to realize that it wasn't the sound of waves. It was only air. Air that was rushing past his ears as he flew to the ground. Even though he knew he was falling, he had no idea how he had fallen.

He remained oddly calm as the cars continued to get larger. No screams came from his lips, not even a whimper. Time slowed. It seemed to him that he should've long since made contact with the ground, but it didn't seem to be getting any closer. Sort of like that dream of running down the hall and it just keeps growing with no progress ever made, except this was vertical and it wasn't a dream.

As if time suddenly realized that it hadn't been doing its job and needed to catch up, the ground hurtled toward him at a speed that seemed to defy the laws of physics. The harsh reality of the situation suddenly registered in his mind. But before he could attempt to scream, his body was wracked with pain as his fall was abruptly interrupted by the sidewalk. He began to think it funny that he had just proven that concrete was stronger than gravity. And then all went dark.

Except he knew it wasn't dark, it was blank. He knew his existence had changed. There were none of the signs that supposedly happen when a person dies. He didn't float down a tunnel of light. He didn't see loved ones frolicking in a field. He didn't hear heavenly music. He didn't feel a sense of wonder as he

basked in the glory of a higher power. All he felt was blank. It wasn't unpleasant. It wasn't pleasant. It just wasn't.

A noise began to seep in, destroying the void that had become his existence. He had no concept of time, no way of telling how long he spent in the blankness before that noise, that beeping, had interrupted his lack of existence. That was the only way he had to describe it and he didn't know how he knew that. He only knew that before the beeping, he had been nothing.

The beeping turned out to be the heart monitor in his hospital room. After awakening, the doctors could explain his injuries to him, but they couldn't explain how he hadn't died from them. The people in his life didn't care, though. On some level, he didn't either. But mostly he missed the blankness. He never mentioned it to anyone, but the memory of that feeling of nothingness never left him.

He knew he had to get back, but he wasn't sure how. Without any rational explanation, he felt he needed something powerful to get there. An ordinary death wouldn't bring it about. He had no idea what would happen with a normal death, but he knew he wouldn't go back to being nothing.

He continued to keep up the appearance that everything was fine. The shaky railing on the balcony hadn't shaken his psyche, or so he tried to convince others. All the while, he pondered his dilemma, trying to piece together the answer. Eventually, in a flash of inspiration, he found one. He knew what had to be done.

Constantly doing research, he kept trying to achieve his goal. The circumstances had to be just right. But time after time, his goal seemed impossible. He began to fear that he would never again get back to the blankness. Never again give in to the void and cease to exist.

But this night, things felt different. Even before the atmospheric changes began, he felt that success was near. His goal would finally be reached. As he stood alone in the field with his arms raised to the sky, a calm came over him, reminding him of the first part of his free fall from the balcony. That had to be a good sign, he thought. He tried to push those thoughts away, afraid that the joy at possibly reaching the blankness would break the calm that he was sure meant fulfillment was imminent.

The sky began to light up as the clouds released their tremendous energy. He knew it was close. Hair on his arms and along the nape of his neck began to stand up, causing goose bumps. He tried to push his growing elation aside and concentrate on nothingness. The taste in his mouth began to get bitter with that coppery sensation that reminded him of sucking on a penny. Tingling sensations simultaneously ran up his spine and down. When the two racing sensations met in the middle of his back, a blue light enveloped him. All thoughts cleared his mind. The acrid smell of burning flesh filled his nostrils. But he barely had time to register it as he fell to the ground unconscious.

As soon as his body collapsed to the ground he was suddenly awake, more awake than he had ever been. Memories came flooding into his mind. He had just enough time to start to doubt that he had been successful. Before he could complete the thought, his mind cleared. All sensation ceased. Blankness.

# An Article Of Faith

Matthew Hostetler

What's this you're trying to hand me? A Bible? The Koran? Something more exotic, perhaps from the Far East? A self-help book offering hopeful answers to absurd questions? (Or is it the other way around?) If it weren't for the vacant look in your glazed eyes, I would walk on, leaving you to arrogantly push your sect, cult or whatever upon other passerby. But, my intrusive friend, your confidence intrigues me. Or annoys me. In either case, I'm now going to waste your time as willingly as you attempted to waste mine.

I've always been a thief of some sort, starting with the time I lifted Todd Glassman's G.I. Joe tank back in the third grade. Well, I'm sure I picked my mom's purse before then, but you get the idea. By the time I turned twenty, I was quite a jack-of-wicked-trades.

I always worked alone. I prefer it that way. The only one you need to trust is yourself and the only rules you have to follow are your own. Sure, I had offers to partner up or join a crew, and I admit they gave me a boost of self-confidence, but I always declined as politely as I could.

But I fell into a slump and times got tight, which sometimes happens. The simplest con goes wrong, the cash registers are nearly dry, the guy you try to mug is worse off than you are. These things happen, and sometimes in a row. I was in danger of going broke.

Finally, I got wind of a local jewelry store with a weak security system. My fortunes were changing. When I got to the place, however, I found three tough guys who apparently wanted the same thing I did. We all stood outside in a drizzle at 3 a.m. trying to figure out what to do. The simplest solution, we quickly decided, was to do the job together.

Afterwards, they drove me to their headquarters to divvy up the take and to meet their boss. I nearly laughed when they told me his name: Trident. They warned me that there was nothing funny about him, that he was a man who would eat you alive if it would be good for business. I wasn't worried. We drove the rest of the way in silence.

Trident's office was located in a pretty posh complex. I'm not sure what he told the neighbors, or the landlord for that matter, but it was clear that nothing official or very legal ever happened there. When I walked into the room littered with miscreants and sinners, I could immediately identify which one was Trident. He was the large man, muscles tight against his teal suit, sitting behind an oak desk counting a massive pile of money. His formidable hands dwarfed the cash he was holding. He didn't look up, but I caught a ghastly glimpse of his cold eyes, eyes that had never known mercy. More disturbing to me, however, was the

unconditional admiration everyone else in the room was giving him, as if he had just discovered the cure for cancer or something.

One of the guys explained to Trident what I was doing there.

“You need a job?” he asked me without looking up.

“No. This was just a one-time thing.”

“Yeah? Business been good?” He finally directed his icy eyes at me and held up the thick wad he’d been counting. “This good?”

Trident was holding just a sliver of the money piled on the table; I knew the wad would never be mine, but my hungry belly would be happy if I could get just a forth of it. Maybe it was time to let someone else make a few decisions, I thought. At least temporarily. “I might be able to help you out with a few things,” I replied.

Trident asked for something like my resume and I told him. He still wasn’t convinced. He set down his cash, stood and pointed to the right. Some drugged-up chick was passed out on a dark green couch in the corner, blending in so well that her presence had avoided my initial attention.

“Shoot her,” he ordered me without emotion.

That wasn’t going to happen. While trying to appear cool, I looked around for an exit strategy. I couldn’t find one. Trident was eyeing me so hard that I could feel it.

Suddenly, he burst out in a sick, mirthless laugh, and everyone in the room joined in. “Good one,” said some lackey.

“Yeah,” I agreed, and forced a grin.

“I don’t test people,” Trident explained. “You fail, you get fired. Simple.” He went back to counting his money.

I started working a few days later. I don’t know what else Trident had going on, but the crew I was with mostly did smash and grabs of varying difficulty. We always got well-paid for our efforts, and after two weeks my coffer was full enough for my modest purposes.

I never knew much about the guys I worked with. No one ever spoke unless it was absolutely necessary, on or off the clock. Instead, they simply wore that stupid stone gaze of a hardened criminal that they must have picked up from watching a thousand gangster movies. The thing is, I know they had interesting stories (the history of Trident’s name for one thing). We all did. But it was like a point of pride with these guys to be boring. So after awhile, once the money wasn’t enough to keep me faithful to Trident, I yearned to get back to my independent life.

But breaking away wasn’t going to be easy, and I still hadn’t figured out how I was going to do it when Trident called me to the office one night. The place was unusually empty of cronies, except for some guy I only knew as “Jack.”

Trident asked me if I had brought a gun. I hadn’t. He tossed one on the table and told me to go with Jack.

I don’t like guns. Like a lucky cop, I’ve never had to fire one. They might be good to have in certain special circumstances, but I never saw the need to always



walk around strapped. I picked up the weapon and felt its weight. It was much heavier than my little peacemaker collecting dust back in my apartment. I don't like guns because I don't like violence. I don't mind robbing people because they can always replace whatever I take, if they're so inclined. But violence--taking someone's health or even their life--crossed into a territory where I wasn't willing to tread. My stomach felt queasy. I don't know why your God decided to make people like Trident, but I doubt it was a good enough reason.

Jack drove and I asked about the job.

"We gotta take care of something."

"Yeah, I figured. What?"

"Some accountant. Did something he shouldn't have done."

We didn't speak anymore. We came to a nice, clean neighborhood and parked on the street. It was about one in the morning and dead silent. Jack told me to follow him.

We approached a house that could only be described as "quaint." It even had a white picket fence. I didn't think such a thing really existed, but there it was. We went to the back and Jack got us into the house within a minute.

The kitchen smelled like sweet dough. We pulled out our guns.

The living room was decorated with flowers and paintings and framed photographs. The photographs continued to hug the wall up the staircase. As I followed Jack up the steps, I got a good look at old photos of young couples, new photos of old couples, babies, birthdays, the ocean, The Grand Canyon. At the top of the steps, I knew I wasn't going to hurt these people. I needed to stop Jack. I needed, for once in my life, to do something good. You've been talking about redemption all day, right? Well, I wanted to redeem myself, I suppose.

Jack swung open the first door we came to and pointed his weapon inside. It was the bathroom. I lowered my gun.

He crept to the next door. It was slightly ajar. Jack pushed it open and flipped on the lights. He blocked the doorway, so I couldn't see inside. I only could hear a woman scream and a man yell, "Wait!"

Jack took a few steps forward and lifted his gun.

I fired mine. The bullet shot through Jack's liver.

He froze, then dropped his weapon. He fell to the floor and that's when I saw where the bullet had traveled after it had torn through the bad guy: into the good guy's skull.

Jack was moaning. The man was dead. I ran.

And I'm still running. But your eyes compelled me to pause and tell you my story. Somewhere, perhaps in the very book you're pushing, it is written: "The road to Hell is paved with good intentions." That's too true.

I doubt you'll allow the deeper meaning of my story to shatter your faith. Fair enough. Like most people, you'd rather cling to the belief that anything means anything. You're wrong, of course, but I know that your lie is the only path to happiness. Too bad. Have a blessed day.

# Nothing Personal

Mel Waldman

It's nothing personal, you say. Just the natural flow-survival of the fittest-until inevitably all creatures succumb to the omnipotence of Time.

Nothing personal, indeed. But to me, it's quite personal and final.

In the end, Time, a butcher and mass murderer, devours us, as we travel through the mutilated maze of Eros, destined to arrive at a predetermined rendezvous

with Thanatos who will banish us to Oblivion.

My wishes and dreams, passions and obsessions, hopes and fears, unfinished work and purpose, and attachments and loves do not count.

It's nothing personal, you say. But with my last breaths, I will fight.

Your indifference fuels my rage. In the end, I will die a warrior, nothing more-nothing less,

a quixotic knight of Eros, dreaming magnificent dreams, chasing rainbows with every magical breath

that seems to span a lifetime.

# Litigants

Barton Hill

Hello, my name is Thomas Wilson, former owner and President of Happy Travel. Happy Travel was the first successful commercial time traveling company in the world geared toward the tourist.

When time travel was first introduced it was used solely for military and scientific research projects, but as it became more technically and economically advanced Happy Travel came to exist in order to attract the public who clamored to be sent somewhere, or perhaps I should say, to “some time”.

In the beginning we had more customers than facilities. As business grew we were careful not to over saturate the market, but we also managed to keep competition to a minimum. This was easy to do since we held the majority of patents necessary to build our time travel facilities. Plus, we had low prices and used advertising to our advantage.

At times, prices were so low that we lost money. As you can imagine, the government levied several large fines against us, but we managed to survive, since the fines could not be so large as to put us out of business.

Shortly, our mission was accomplished. We had cornered every available market in every inhabitable continent on the planet. Who says crime doesn't pay?

So there we were, the pinnacle of success. Not a day went by that people didn't line up to take a trip to another time.

Business was booming! People wanted to see their great ancestors or their great-great descendants. Others wanted to witness the Battle of Gettysburg or the Normandy invasion. Some wanted to be present for the birth of Jesus. Nearly any time period was available and for a price Happy Travel sent you there.

But sadly, as I said earlier, I was the President of Happy Travel. I wasn't fired, but you could say I was downsized.

You see Happy Travel no longer exists. In fact, no form of commercial time travel exists. What remains is strictly controlled by the militaries of the world.

The cause of our downfall is not that we were losing people in space or that folks were successfully evading capture from legal authorities, but rather our downfall came from that most horrendous creature ever to be created by man and society—the Lawyer.

You have to understand that there were many people who wanted to change history in order to suit their own desires. In some cases these would be minor variations such as buying stock at its IPO in order to amass a fortune in their own time, but in other cases people wanted to prevent the outbreak of war or to stop an epidemic. These subversive acts were corrected by our agents, with the offenders prosecuted to the full extent allowed by law.

Then things began to change when clients, and even non-clients, claimed Happy Travel was negligent in its business practices. They claimed Happy Travel was negligent in letting a tragedy occur when it was known how to prevent the tragedy.

For example: let's assume you knew when your Mother was killed in an accident and by a bit of intervention her death could be prevented. Is it not the company's responsibility to prevent her death? What about a large industrial accident, or the outbreak of war?

As the lawsuits mounted our expenses quickly began to overtake our profits. It did not mat-

ter that we were successful against these lawsuits. With each new suit we had to defend ourselves against a different technicality or develop a new defense strategy.

We were hemorrhaging money in the courts and our stocks were plummeting. Eventually, Happy Travel was forced to close its doors forever.

Perhaps some day someone will figure out how to get rid of all the lawyers, but I don't think that's likely since we all know there was at least one lawyer in the Garden of Eden.

## Grace of Gods

*Alan Britt*

It only appears primitive  
because  
traditional values  
herd our youth  
into  
Burger Kings  
and Pizza Huts,  
clogging their arteries  
profoundly  
as they search  
for the ideal American family.

Flat teeth chewing cud  
in Chicago stockyards at frosty 4 AM  
also explore innocence  
but sadly must await validation  
for their lives that involve a nagging grief  
they never seem to get paid for,  
and which, unfortunately, includes  
the ritual slaughter  
of those living  
just outside  
the grace of gods.

---

## Planetary Formation

*Martin Weeks*

Twin spheres made up of molten star,  
we float in intersecting orbits.  
Arcing thoughts and feelings  
race out to touch each other —  
electromagnetic currents of connection.

Gravity spirals us together  
for the grinding joy of friction  
that wears our shells smooth.  
We share mass in collisions  
of lives turned into liquid,  
then we separate and inertia  
pulls us apart into circles of isolation.

Past trails behind in fragmented memories  
of wholeness in combination.  
We spin in tandem, worlds alternately  
chasing the other, trying to combine  
down to the cores of us.

---

# All Will Go Black

Rob Plath

I tried to get off  
at my train stop  
after sitting for almost  
two hours reading  
schopenhauer  
with my knees bent  
against the seat  
in front of me  
I missed the stop  
because I had  
pins & needles  
to the point  
of total numbness  
I couldn't  
feel the ground  
& I fell  
people thought  
I was drunk  
so I sat back down  
& read some  
more of

schopenhauer  
as people  
still stared  
& I laughed  
inside my head  
that this whole  
world comes  
down to a system  
of highly sensitive  
twisted ribbons  
& that someday day  
like bare branches  
of winter trees  
snap in the wind  
& fall to the ground  
fertilizing the grass  
these inner  
ribbons will  
shriveled & all  
go black

---

## 55 known ways

Vincent Spada

There are 55 known ways  
to screw something up  
No, wait  
56

# Little Red in the Big Easy

Mark Scott

As the 1980's approached people were flooding into Texas from the north to work in the oil fields. Billy left Houston for New Orleans three weeks after his house burned to the ground. He got his health card and a negative tuberculosis test from the Orleans parish and started work at the *Chez Mon Ami*. He could cook like hell, Cajun style, and nobody cared if he was seventeen or seventy, from Texas or Timbuktu. Plus he could *parlez-vous* with the Creoles from his mother having been French.

Stephanie Tyler had gotten him the job after his parents and sister died in the Houston fire. Neither of them could stand the thought of Billy going to live at any kind of foster home. Stephanie and Billy had been neighbors growing up, first in Port Arthur and then in Houston when the oil company moved their offices. "His mother was a *Saucier*," Stephanie told Guy Palermo, who owned the *Chez*. "She went to school in Paris or San Francisco, somewhere out west like that." A few days later Billy was at the new place getting it ready for opening day.

He and a rag-tag crew of Haitians had done a bang-up job on the restaurant's opening night. The owner invited the staff over to his house to watch the return fight between Leon Spinks and Muhammad Ali.

The show started with a featherweight title fight where the champion actually wore a crown of feathers into the ring. Thirty seconds into the fight and, Bam! Down goes Little Red Lopez, flat on his face. He was up at the count of eight and Guy said "He's a goner," but then the announcer was saying to look out because Little Red was a slow starter and had never been stopped. "I give anybody 10 to 1 Malvarez takes that skinny son of a bitch out in less than two rounds."

Billy said "It's a bet. How much?"

Guy looked amused. "How much you got to bet, Mr. High Roller?"

"Hundred against your thousand?"

"Done."

Between rounds they gave Little Red smelling salts in his corner and he wobbled out on shaky legs for round 2. All of a sudden he crashed a right to the challenger's chin and laid him out like a junkie drops a drug habit going cold-turkey.

Guy handed Billy 10 hundred-dollar bills. "Hell, I knew the skinny

bastard was tough, but he looked dead in the first.” He pulled out a money clip from his back pocket. “This next kid from New York is pretty good. Anybody want to take Galindez and give me 2-to-1?” There was mumbling all around the room, as they showed clips of the light-heavyweight battlers’ previous fights. Nobody wanted to bet against the Argentine champion. Stephanie came over to see Billy’s money, gave him a kiss on the mouth, and sat on his lap, natural as could be. Leftovers from the restaurant lay around in an assortment of pots and trays, everyone munching. She had on a short skirt and a t-shirt with the restaurant’s name where the men were sure to read it even if they didn’t know French.

On the television the light heavyweight champion Victor Galindez was having trouble with a skinny Jewish kid named Mike Rossman, who made every move straight from the pages of an old-time pugilism textbook.

With Stephanie in his lap Billy really didn’t give a flip who won the fight, especially with the roll of bills in his pocket that he had just won on the Little Red Lopez fight. Next thing he knew he was kneading her thighs and one of his fingers slid between the slippery rose petals under her panties. “Hey tiger, hold on,” she said.

“Flirtin’ around the restaurant’s one thing,” Guy said, “But if you gonna do a *see-yus* number like that, you need to get a room.” He laughed and added, “And I don’t mean the coat room back there.”

“C’mon outside, honey,” Stephanie said. “I’ve got something to calm you down.”

Stephanie and Billy’s big sister used to talk in the next room when they thought everyone had gone to sleep. Stephanie’s parents sent her to a boarding school one year and when she got back she said to Billy’s sister, “I told him to stop, but then when he put it in I just started coming.”

“Did it hurt?”

“No, we’d been kissing and I was soaking wet.”

Billy’s sister had a lot of boy friends after that. When the house burned down the police asked about them, were any of them the jealous type? “No,” Billy told them. “They were just guys from the neighborhood.”

Valerie was the newest manager in the group that had been running restaurants since the old days when the Cajun chicken shacks were just starting to compete with Colonel Sanders. One of the original owners had been busted for pot but otherwise the whole group was a legend untainted in the eatery business. Valerie cast a reproachful eye at Stephanie but then someone from the back said, “I’ve got \$500 even money that Ali stops that kid on cuts.”

“You have a bet,” Valerie said to the man coming in from the back room. She reached into her purse. “Guy, can you spot me a hundred?”

Billy and Steph stepped outside while the Spinks-Ali bets were figured. When they were outside, Stephanie lit a reefer, took a drag, and handed it to Billy. She reached down between his legs. “I saw it pressing against your jeans when you got up. It looked good, really good!”

She reached out and stroked his chest. “You must work out a lot. Valerie said you were a fighter, Golden Gloves” Billy nodded. Her arm was around his neck, and then her soft warm tongue was all the way in his mouth. He was pushing her out towards the alley-way where he saw tree cover. The pot wasn’t calming him at all, only making his hormones race faster. “Back there,” he said. “Or else in your car.”

“You like it dangerous, huh? How old did you say you are?”

“Next month I’ll be~”

Stephanie put her hand over his mouth. “Shush! There’s a motel down the highway just a mile. You have that roll of hundreds and I made good tips today. You want to party with me instead of watching the fight?”

“We’ll split the room?”

“Deal.” They shook on it.

When Billy first put it in Stephanie’s legs flew up and she cried out his name as they rolled and thrashed around on the ocean of the *Motel Vendredi* waterbed. Between bouts she said, “You make it hurt so good down there. There’s nothing better than a hard young guy.”

Billy asked her if she had a boyfriend. “Screw *him*. I can tell he thinks he’s too good for me. Lately he’s been telling me I should get my mind off sex.” She laughed without any humor at all, handing him a joint she had just rolled and lit. “Best thing about a high-school guy, he’ll never tell you that.”

Billy shook his head at the pot and she put it out in the ash tray. Her hand was between his legs, making him hard again. “I can’t believe how long it is,” she said. Next she was arching her back to take it all in. As she rocked and swayed she closed her eyes and her face looked as if she would cry. Later she said, “Spend the night with me, okay?”

“Sure. I got nowhere else I need to be.”

“I’ll take you to my place in the morning, make you breakfast and we’ll eat together like a family.”

“Sounds good.” They lay there a while in silence except for the hum of the air conditioner.

“How did you know to bet on that fighter who wore the crown of feathers?”

“Little Red Lopez trains in the desert, runs ten miles a day. He takes care of business.”



“What about Malv~ the other fighter?”

“Valerie knows the bar tender at the club where he parties. He’d been out every night last week, so I knew he wouldn’t last.”

“Valerie likes you. You’re a nice kid.” She draped her arm across his shoulder. “I know you were afraid, you know, that they’d send you away. Your sister was Valerie’s best friend back in Port Arthur, they were tight.” Stephanie smiled and watched Billy’s face.

“I was gone the night of the fire.”

“Past is past.”

“I was in Galveston for the weekend.”

She put her finger to his mouth. “It’s okay, nobody thinks you had anything to do with it. You wouldn’t be working with us if we thought that.”

“I can talk to Valerie and see what she can do about getting you into a school that doesn’t suck too bad. She knows people. Her little sister goes to high school half-days, works in the afternoon. It’ll be okay, New Orleans isn’t as strict as Texas.”

“*Laissez les bonnes temps roulez*,” Billy said.

“Yeah, let the good times roll. You know that song, where Jerry Garcia says, ‘Houston, too close to New Orleans?’”

“Yeah, *Truckin’*.”

“He got it backwards, don’t you think?”

“I don’t have anything against Houston. Anyway, I’m staying in New Orleans, come hell or high water.”

She asked him if her teeth bothered him. One of them was chipped and dark, and made her look sexy like a vampire does. He said no and she told him, “I was a thalidomide baby, and this was my only symptom, so I’m pretty lucky if you ask me. Do you want me to talk to Valerie for you?”

“Okay.”

“For your part of the deal, you can help me ‘keep my mind off sex.’ And we’ll take care of business like that Little Red Lopez.” She pulled him tighter and they drifted off to sleep.

## The Real Origins of Trauma

*S. Progress*

Battered wives, rape, sexual abuse  
but the bible says  
women must submit  
What do we do  
to get them to see  
the bible is wrong?

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