

*down* in the *dirt*

revealing all your  
dirty little secrets

v.058

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Scars Cover art is of John, at a pool party.

## The Weather Report

Robert Fredrick Weaver

There is a rainbow in  
Your face  
And a tornado in mine.

# A Bottle's Worth

Robert Mitchell

The right swing clipped Claire soundly on the chin, causing her to cry out and fall to the floor. Marlin stood over the woman, swaying a little back and forth, noticing the blood and tooth on the floor.

"Serves you right, you faithless bitch," he growled. "I've seen you looking at the butcher, Stemple. Is that where you snuck out to last evening?"

She coughed and spit up blood. "I was out picking flowers, see!" she pointed to the vase on the rickety old table, an assortment of wildflowers in a pleasing arrangement.

"Bah," yelled Marlin. "I know you're lying. I can feel it in my bones. You got it in for me, and I know it!"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I, I love you, Marlin. We've been together for years. Have you ever heard me complain about anything?"

"You don't need to complain. I see it in your eyes. Ever since I lost my job at the mill it's been nothing but stares and unsaid words. Well, why don't you just come out and say it! You think I'm a bum! Well, a lot of people are out of work. It's not just me!"

"I know it isn't, Marlin. That's why I got that part time job at Tom's Market. I want to help till you get back on your feet."

"I am on my feet, you bitch. But, you treat me like dirt, and I won't stand for it anymore, do you hear? Do you hear?"

"Yes, Marlin," she whispered.

"Now wipe that blood off the floor and fix me something to eat. I've had a hard day." Marlin wandered out on the porch, bottle in hand.

Claire had some left over stew from last night. She'd been lucky and hit the squirrel with the first shot. Bullets were expensive. She took it out of the cold box, and warmed it over the fire, throwing in some more turnips and onions from the cellar. It would make a good meal.

She picked up the tooth, and put it on the fireplace mantle. Then, Claire got out an old rag and a bucket, and cleaned up her blood as best she could. By then, the stew was ready; she poured some well water into a clay cup and put in on the table, along with a wooden bowl of heaping with stew.

"Dinner's ready," she called through the door.

The old man sauntered inside, another fifth portion gone from the whiskey bottle, and sat down without a word, diving into the stew. Claire filled her own bowl, got some water and sat down across from him. Neither said a word.

Claire could still taste the blood in her mouth from the missing tooth. A bottom right incisor, too, she would miss it. She chewed slowly, doing her best with her remaining teeth to get down the meat and vegetables.

Marlin finished, belched, took a swig from his bottle, got up, and shuffled over to his favorite chair. In a few minutes he was asleep. Claire knew he would sleep in the chair all night. She waited a while; wanting to be sure that Marlin was deep in slumber.

Claire stepped over and picked up the bottle Marlin had left on the floor beside him. She noticed about half the original contents remained. It was just about the right amount.

She went over to the kitchen, and set the bottle on the counter with care. Reaching into a cupboard, she removed a small clay jar, filled with a syrupy mixture that gave off a pungent odor. It had taken her several days of collecting, grinding, and compressing to concentrate the oils.

With great care, she took a wooden spoon, and dribbled about three teaspoons into the open whiskey bottle. Then, she stoppered the bottle and shook up the contents. It seemed to fizz a little, but it should reside, she knew. Her earlier tests had confirmed it mixed well with whiskey.

She waited a few minutes, then took out the cork, and smelled. Yes, the whiskey had almost masked the scent. Whether it would mask the taste sufficiently, she didn't know.

Clair hesitated, considering throwing the entire contents out the door. Then she remembered this evening's abuse, and others she had endured during the last few years. She stiffened her will, put the cork back in the bottle, and set it on the floor near the chair. Marlin snored peacefully.

Clair went to bed. She woke up at the regular time, a little before five; and dressed in her best ragged skirt, visited the outhouse, and washed her hands at the well. She came inside and ate a breakfast of leftover stew, and left bread and cheese on the table for Marlin as normal. She had to be at the market early to set out the vegetables, and it was a mile walk to town. For some reason, she refused to look at the bottle by the chair. Marlin still snored away.

She worked hard that day. A lot of farmers had brought new produce to market, and her back ached from lifting heavy sacks of onions, yams and potatoes. It was almost seven when she finally staggered home, dreading what she might find.

Claire pushed upon the frail door of the shack, and stepped inside, placing each step with care upon the boards that creaked with more than their usual protest. There sat Marlin in his chair, eyes closed, bottle on the floor, contents half spilled and leaking between the wide cracks in the floorboards.

"Marlin?" she said. He didn't respond.

"Marlin, I'm home." She approached him, and reached out to touch his shoulder.

Bloodshot eyes opened, eyes wide with fear, loathing, and hate. He wheezed and reached out, catching Claire around the throat. "Bitch, bitch!" he croaked, spittle streaming down his chin.

Claire pulled back in fear, and her husband followed, sprawling on top of her, his hands still on her throat, trying to choke the life from her. She pulled at

his hands, and at first they wouldn't budge, but then the grip seemed to loosen, and her own strength, hardened by years of hard toil, began to overcome Marlin's failing body. Claire could breathe some now, but her husband's horrid face still stared into her eyes as he directed all his remaining efforts into a last attempt to take her with him into the death he knew his wife had given him.

But it was not to be. He was too weak, his strength failing. Claire loosed his grip completely on her neck, and rolled his weight off of her. She stood up, still gasping for breath, watching her husband's struggles grow weaker by the minute, his movements less, until even his breathing stopped, and eyes stared blankly at the bare roof above.

With an effort, Claire dragged the body back into the chair. She picked up the bottle and wiped up the spilled, tainted whiskey. Then, she took both the bottle and the clay jar, and tossed them into the privy, each making a content plop that echoed in the darkness below.

Claire considered her options. She'd have to go get Doc Cleaver, she thought. He was old and senile, and the best choice. Maybe he'd put the death up to heart failure, or something, and not to the hemlock. At any rate, Marlin wouldn't need to get a job any more.

She giggled at her joke. She'd have to get her story straight, but she could do that on the way. Well, better get a move on, old Doc Cleaver's house is on the other side of town, and she was already tired. Still, her step seemed to have a spring not there for years, as Claire walked up the dirt road towards town.

Randy was five feet down, and hitting pay dirt. He saw the brown neck of a bottle sticking up where the soil had been carefully removed by the small shovel. His hands caressed the glass form, clearing away clinging detritus, and a gentle tug brought out the find for inspection. He wiped away the dirt from the embossed emblem of the flask, reading it.

"Wow, a 1906 Steinweiler whiskey," he ejaculated. "Worth at least a hundred bucks. The wife will be happy when I bring this baby home!"

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## Second Time Awake Today

*Benjamin Giddings*

our last call back  
through the glare of light  
guitars jam  
three singers hum and dance  
in unison

the cavalry disappears  
recants their country's  
benevolent bet and bluff  
and the crowd chants along

the difference was the trees  
the difference in between  
of the two photographs  
faded and holding  
a house in a square

second time awake today  
keep the lights off  
Weston Hotel  
the chair's arms have grip  
the difference between is destiny  
the choice is destiny  
Dire St. Mark struggled on  
the madman has the microphone  
the tutelage of crossroads

# Doppelgänger

Ken Dean

Sam Hosta was being held in a death grip against the kitchen wall by his wife, Jackie.

Since when had she become so outrageously strong? She worked out at the gym, yeah—but this kind of strength?

He had been walking out to his SUV in the garage, balancing his travelers coffee mug and briefcase while jostling for keys in his pocket. He was already late. They weren't in his pocket; must have left them on his nightstand upstairs. He didn't need this and couldn't afford to be late for an important stockholders meeting.

Sam had rushed back in the interior garage door to get upstairs to hopefully find his keys when he had passed the kitchen. He noticed his wife with her arm resting on the kitchen table. What she was doing with her arm stopped him dead in his tracks. A small panel was open on the inside of her left arm and she was manipulating something inside with her right hand. Her arm looked to be full of little sliding light gauges that you would see in any number of sci-fi movies.

Jackie was engrossed in what she was doing until Sam asked, "What are you doing to your arm?"

She was suddenly aware of him, and had closed the twenty feet between them in a blur. Damn she was fast! He couldn't budge her; it was like trying to move a brick wall. Then what was usually a warm, feminine voice demanded from him in a tone that was flat, cold and authoritative:

"What did you see?"

He didn't know how to answer, so he lied.

"Nothing, Dear. Didn't see a thing." He was beginning to sweat.

Her response was to push Sam a little harder against the wall.

"I asked, what did you see? And just so you know, I can tell when you're lying."

"Okay, Okay! I saw what looked like electronic crap inside your arm. Satisfied?"

"Yes. You're telling the truth. Obviously you've seen too much."

Realizing the strategic and calming advantage of doing so, she changed her voice back to the one he was used to, full of fuzzy animals and sunshine.

"Listen, we need to discuss this. If I let you go, do you promise not to run?"

"Sure," he lied, "Where would I go?"

"Stop it, you're lying again. Plus, I could run you down within fifteen feet."

Shit. Probably couldn't get anything past her. He might as well go along; maybe wait for an opening to take action.

"Okay," he said as he gathered his wits about him, "I take it with your arm full of electronics plus your strength that you're not my wife."

"Correct."

"What are you then?"

"An android, sent by my masters to study the average human family in all its aspects."

It was all too fantastic, too unbelievable.

"I don't believe you," He was slowly inching his way to the wooden knife holder on the counter. "Prove it to me."

"Very well, what would you have me do?"

"Grab that bicycle tire pump from beside the refrigerator and see if you can bend it. I'm assuming you have greater than average strength."

"Yes, you are correct."

As she turned to get the pump, he quickly grabbed the biggest knife from the wooden block on the counter. He lunged at her back, hoping to bring the knife down on her neck.

Suddenly, in what seemed like a millisecond, she turned and brought her hand up to block the thrust. She caught his forearm as he was bringing the knife down. It was like striking concrete. The knife clattered to the floor. He fell to his knees also, his arm in agony. Along with the enormous pain, it felt as if something had torn loose inside and his shoulder was on fire.

"My arm", he screamed.

"Why are you so foolish as to attack me like that? My reaction time and speed are too fast. You've hurt your arm needlessly. Let me take a look."

She began to examine his musculature and bones with a fair amount of prodding. This sent waves of increased pain up into his shoulder.

"You've torn a ligament, try to remain conscious."

"Yeah...right." he grimaced.

"Your arm needs repaired."

She went to the cupboard and pulled out what looked like a square bandaid, peeled off its cellophane-type wrapper, and stuck it to his upper arm. He began to feel a lessening of the pain almost immediately.

"Oh thanks, that's starting to feel much better. What is it?"

"A combination analgesic, rapid healing compound, and a mild sedative. It should heal the damaged portion of your arm in about five minutes."

He could feel parts of his shoulder and arm tense and relax on their own, along with an occasional popping feeling inside. There was a little light-headedness also.

"I feel a little woozy. Is that normal?"

"Yes, the sedative will do that. Plus the rapid healing component of the medicine draws a lot from your body. You may also feel some weakness."

"Thanks for helping me. You didn't have to do that."

"Yes, I did."

"What, you can't let me get hurt?"

"No, not intentionally. But accidents can happen. That's why you need to be careful."

He was feeling quite good right now. Whatever was in the patch was giving him quite the buzz, really loosening up his tongue and taking away his apprehension.

"Okay. Let's talk about that. What study are you talking about, and how does it involve my wife and family?"

“Like I said before, I’m here with several others like me to study the human family. It’s a multi-generational endeavor. There are so many parameters to examine. Your species has extremely complex inter-personal relationships. It took my masters many years worth of study just to comprehend the latitude of adult male and female physical and psychological makeup. Only then were they able to develop a baseline in which to produce female androids like myself along with several male units.”

“Produce? So you guys are like exact copies or something?”

“Exactly. We study a specific target first, and then apply the baseline we developed to the target. The match comes out to ninety-nine point seven percent accuracy.”

“So you’re like the perfect match for a female, in particular, my wife?”

“Yes. You wouldn’t be able to tell the difference, except that you caught me with my pants down, so to speak.”

“You’re that close? So I could make love to you and not tell the difference?”

“You already have, Sam, for the last year.”

Okay. That was a shocker. He couldn’t comprehend that and sat there for a few minutes, dumbfounded.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah,” he snapped back to reality, “I really lost you after that one. I forgot to ask, are the twins okay?”

“Yes. It’s still early. Katy and Ruthy are still asleep. You don’t have to worry, Sam. Along with being their surrogate mother, their well being is paramount to me.”

“Sure. Whatever you say. I guess I’ll have to see it to believe it. That brings me back to the other question. If you’re here, where is my wife?”

“Totally safe, I can assure you.”

“And where would that be?”

“Okay, your conversation is deteriorating again. Don’t be so defensive. I can’t tell you where she is, and it wouldn’t make any difference anyway. Do you comprehend that?”

“Yes, I’m not stupid, just desperate. What if I go to the authorities?”

“Go ahead, Sam. Take it from me, they won’t believe you, they may even think you’re crazy. Do you want that for your family? Let me explain the big picture for you, and I’m not trying to be threatening. The study will go forward, with or without you. We can always take you to a safe place with your wife, but we’d rather not do that. No matter how perfect I can be as a wife and mother, I’m still influencing the study somewhat by replacing your wife. We would rather not have to replace you as well; it would affect the study even further. And wouldn’t you rather be here with your children during their development? Just so you know, every memory that I have of being a mother and a wife will be translated to your wife’s memory. She won’t even know that she was gone after we bring her back. I will approximate aging right along with her, so that every thing appears natural. Any time you want we can discuss this whole matter, although in private.”



“Okay, when will you bring my wife back?”

“That’s subjective. It will depend on how the study is going. Some things we can deduce as we learn more about the human family and it’s behavior.”

He had to think about all this. What was to become of his wife and children? Could he trust them to an alien android? It didn’t seem like there was anything he could do anyway. Maybe he could take the children and run somewhere.

“You’re thinking of running, aren’t you?”

“How the hell did you know that? And what the hell, yes.”

“It’s one of the standard reaction profiles we’ve encountered in the past when we’ve been discovered. Another point of interest, we can always find you. Your entire family has been tagged with a health status and location indicator, sort a technological equivalent to your cell phone GPS locator, but much smaller and efficient.”

Damn. He was starting to feel like he lived in a big zoo.

“Okay Jackie, I can still call you that right? I feel like I don’t have any options. Can you understand that?”

“Of course you can. And I know you feel trapped. But look at the big picture. If you go along, I will be the perfect wife. In fact, I can be any kind of wife you want, as long as it doesn’t vary from the profile norm we’ve developed. That could affect the outcome of the study. Along with this you and the children will have near perfect protection. I can promise you that. And my profile is to be the most loving mother and wife that I can be. It’s a win-win situation if you go along. What do you say, Sam?”

“Listen, this is hard for me. It’s hard to accept that I can’t do anything worthwhile.”

Especially when she sat there being so perfectly feminine and beautiful.

“But you can, Sam. Be there as the girls loving father. That’s what you ultimately want, right?”

“Can I try it for a while and see how it goes? I still need to see how you act around the girls.”

“You’ve already seen that for about a year now, right? Haven’t I been the perfect mother? But that would be fine. All we want is you to be happy with the situation.”

“True. I guess I will give it a try and see where it goes; what choice do I have?”

“Oh excellent!” She reached across the table and gave him the perfect hug, smelling so much like a woman that it hurt. “I know you will be happy with everything.”

It was true. He thought back to how she had been with the girls as infants, and she had lacked nothing in her loving care of them.

“Shouldn’t you get to work, honey? Wasn’t there an important meeting this morning which you’ve probably missed? Your arm should be fine by now.”

He had forgotten the meeting and his arm in all the discussion. The patch had come off his arm at some point, but it felt perfect as he flexed and moved it around.

“Thanks for that. It does feel perfect. I’m going to stay home if you don’t mind, and keep an eye on you. I still don’t trust you with my children.”

“My children too, Sam,” Jackie began to cry, “I truly do love them as much as you do.”

He reached out to hold her, not realizing he could have hurt her feelings.

“I’m sorry, I keep letting the situation rule my judgement. But you can’t blame me if I hang around for a while.”

“No,” her sobbing was easing up, “I understand. But you have to understand that one thing you can expect from me is consistency. The way I’ve been the past year is the way I always will be.”

“Okay. Okay, you can stop crying. I realize you care for the children as much as I.”

“Thanks. I really need to be getting them up. They are used to their routine.”

“Sure.”

Sam wound up taking a whole week off work, keeping an eye on Jackie as often as possible. Her treatment of the children was exemplary. After the next couple of months had passed, he truly felt he could trust her.

They were alone in the kitchen one evening talking about finances when Sam brought the situation up.

“Jackie, I’ve come to the point where I feel as though I can trust you.”

“Sam, that’s wonderful,” she said, giving him a big hug, “I knew you would eventually come around. I’m sure you’ll find that it’s actually a benefit having me around.”

“Well, I feel that I have no choice. But I also feel that you may be right.”

“Okay, I can accept that. But as time goes by, I feel that you will become totally used to the situation.”

Of course she was right.

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A couple of years passed. Sam had become used to the idea and was almost totally accepting of Jackie. He had even overcome his mental block about her being a machine and was able to finally make love to her again. She had been totally patient with him until he was ready. After that, it was pretty much back to normal. Jackie did inform him one night in bed that there could be no more children, because of what she was.

“I hope your not upset, were you planning on more? It’s one thing we couldn’t anticipate.”

“No, Jackie. It’s okay. Jackie and I had already discussed this and were going to stop at two.”

“Oh good, that’s a relief,” She said as she hugged him, “I’ve been worrying about telling you.”

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The two girls were growing fantastically, and were going to start preschool in about a year. They had their mother’s beauty which was also reflected in Jackie’s face. Sometimes he was utterly amazed at their growth and Jackie’s solid influence.

Sam was moving higher in his firm and his income was matching the rise. Jackie and the girls wanted for nothing. He was becoming quite proficient in the stocks and bonds industry and would like to start his own brokerage someday. Jackie had agreed and was enthusiastic about his ideas, urging him on.

Four years had gone by. Sam’s memories of his discovery had managed to sink far back in his mind. It seemed so real that he let himself think that it

was. Blissful ignorance.

Then there was the visit to the zoo. They had been making the trip to the Central Park Zoo a couple of times a year. The girls loved it and, frankly, there always seemed to be something new to see. They had just finished their latest visit. It was a beautiful Saturday fall afternoon that was to die for. There was a good breeze blowing and it was about sixty-eight degrees. Perfect. They had crossed Fifth Street and were walking up Sixty-Fourth off Central Park. A friend of his owned a building a few blocks away and they had been able to use the parking garage.

“Jackie, do you and the kids want to stop at Joe’s and get some coffee and ice cream?”

The girls answered as one, “Ice cream!”

“I take that as a yes.” He said while grabbing all three of them in a bear hug.

Joe’s had some of the best flavored iced coffee in the city and made any trip to Manhattan more enjoyable. They had started to cross Madison Avenue on the way to Sixty-Third. Jackie and Katy were in the lead crossing Madison. Sam was still in the crosswalk with Ruthy as the wind whipped up and blew something into his eye. He had to stop for a second, his eyes closed, hurting and watering. He lost his grip on Ruthy’s hand and she began to weave her way back to the corner they had just come from. Sam fumbled for her hand and was finally able to open his eyes in time to see a metro bus coming fast down the curb lane directly towards her.

“No!” Jackie screamed from the far curb. Everything seemed to be in slow motion. Jackie was suddenly in front of him, handing Katy to him, and just as quickly gone. He looked up just in time to see a blur come between Ruthy and the speeding bus. Jackie grabbed her up in her arms just as the bus hit her square in the back. The bus stopped cold, the back end raising ten feet in the air from the impact. It settled back to the street as Sam turned his eyes back to where Jackie and Ruthy should have been. All he saw was a blur snapping down Madison turning on Sixty-Third and was gone. Impossible, he thought. He took Katy back to the far corner, away from the bus. Looking back he saw the ruined front end of the bus. It looked like it had wrapped itself around an invisible telephone pole and there was a fire starting to burn in the rear. Luckily all the passengers had gotten off; he could hear sirens coming from the south and north.

“Bus went boom,” Katy said. “Where is Mommy and Baby?”

Katy always called Ruthy baby.

“I don’t know, sweetie. Let’s go try and find them.”

He began to cross on the opposite corner where the bus rested, holding Katy close.

His cell phone began to ring in his pocket as soon as he crossed. The caller ID showed it was Jackie.

“Where are you? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Sam. Just get over here to the parking garage where we parked. I need you.”

She needs me; that was rich.

“I’ll be right there.”

He ran down the same direction that he saw the blur go, holding Katy as he ran. He arrived at the parking garage and went up to second level where the SUV was parked. He found Jackie up against the wall, holding Ruthy, who was still bawling.

“Jesus, are you two okay?”

He grabbed and hugged them both while still holding Katy.

“I’m fine, but I think Ruthy is terrified. She won’t stop crying. But she’s okay; I can tell by her medical implant.”

“And good reason for crying. How did you do that? I didn’t even see you.”

“Fast Sam, remember? Uberfast. I couldn’t hang around and try to answer questions from the authorities. It would be too hard to explain. Plus I can’t be seen in public like this.”

She turned and showed Sam her back. Her jeans, shirt and jacket were completely shredded. And her shoes had melted on the bottom from the friction.

He examined her back through the shredded clothing and couldn’t see a scratch.

“This is incredible.”

“I know. But right now I need you to go get me some clothing from a nearby store so that I can change in the SUV. Please hurry, before the girls start asking too many questions.”

“On my way.”

He traveled over to Bergdorf Goodman and purchased some casual jeans, a shirt and jacket in her size. Oh, and some shoes too. He arrived back at the SUV to find all three girls inside.

“Anyone else see you?”

“I don’t think so.”

She began putting on the purchased clothing.

“Nice fit, thanks. Pretty good for a man’s shopping.”

“No, Jackie. Thank you for being there for my, I mean, our daughter.”

“Sam, you would do the same for them or me if you were able.”

“Right,” he laughed. “Let’s go get something to eat and put some normalcy back into the day.”

“Great idea. How about the steak house on the way home? The girls love to throw the peanut shells on the floor.”

News reports that evening talked about a metro bus hitting something in Manhattan, but no one could be sure what. One woman in the front of the bus thought she had seen a woman in the street before she got tossed out of her seat. But in the hospital later that night she said most likely she was seeing things, since there was no one there after the bus came to rest. Authorities reported they had found some shredded clothing on the front of the bus, but had to surmise that it had been there before the crash since there was no one injured to connect it to. Luckily no one had been seriously hurt. Also no one had seen a strange blur flying up the street directly after the crash.

Life began to settle back down to normal again. The girls continued to grow up tall and beautiful. Sam was able to open his own brokerage house. His income

naturally went up. He was able to put back quite a bit for their eventual retirement, the girl's college and their possible weddings.

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It was Sam's sixtieth birthday and there was a big party thrown by Jackie. Even though she had aged the same as Sam, she was still beautiful. Hopefully she still found him handsome. The girls were there with their husbands and Katy's young boy, Sam Jr. Sam was always so proud introducing his grandson. 'He's named after me, you know.'

Sam had just about forgotten their special situation. He had talked to Jackie the night before about retiring soon, and she was very encouraging.

"What would you like to do after retiring?"

"I don't know for sure. I know one dream I've always had, the one I've mentioned before. About traveling the world."

"Always a high goal, Sam."

"Yeah. But I'm not sure if we can pull that off. Yes, we have quite a bit saved up. With the grand-children's trust fund, and the two girl's inheritance, there would still be enough to retire comfortably. As far as a lot of travel, well, that might be out of our reach."

"Sam, I wouldn't worry about the cost. I'm sure it will work out."

How could she say that? Had she stopped worrying about money with his good income over the years? He had run the numbers already; something he was good at. There just wouldn't be enough to do all the things he was talking about.

His back was bothering him again and he was sleeping fitfully. In his dream he was off in one corner of a boxing ring, being faced off by two women. They looked exactly the same, and they were both claiming to be his wife. Both were asking him defiantly which one he loved. He couldn't think of a good answer except for telling them he loved them both. He awoke in a sweat, screaming.

"I love you both!"

"Sam, I know you do."

"What, who's that?"

"It's me, Sam."

Jackie was knelling by the bedside, holding his hand, stroking his hair.

"Jackie, you're so beautiful."

"Thank you, Sam. And you have always been handsome. I'm happy to have called you my husband."

He was starting to wake up fully, comprehending what she had said.

"What do you mean, 'called'?"

"Sam, it's time for me to leave. The study is complete."

"What are you talking about?"

"The study, Sam. Remember thirty years ago? It's over. It's time to bring your wife back."

"But you're my wife!"

He realized she looked thirty years old again.

"Yes, I have been and I've loved every minute of it. But it's only fair to her to let her come back. Don't worry, she will be the same as me; all the same memories,

but just not with my special abilities. Listen, we want to leave you and your wife with something, a way of saying thanks for your cooperation through all the years. We've credited your bank account with five-hundred million dollars so that you and Jackie can do whatever you want during your retirement. Don't worry; we've arranged it so that if anyone looks closely, you will have won the state lottery about half a year ago. Also, the best gift of all, perfect health."

She put a patch on his upper arm. It slowly began to tingle; he could feel it spreading down his arm and across his chest.

"We've given Jackie the same treatment. It's a permanent, full body health booster. You both will look about sixty years old on the outside, to avoid suspicion, but will have the bodies of twenty-five year olds on the inside."

"I'm starting to feel dizzy."

"It's okay, just a side effect of the booster. It will be done by morning."

He said woozily, "Why do you have to leave, can't you stay with me?"

"I'd love to dear, but I can't."

He was starting to drift off, couldn't keep his eyes open.

"Sam, I know I shouldn't feel this strongly, but I do. I love you, Sam. I always have. You and the girls."

She was crying. Tears rolling down like she was human.

"Don't ever forget me, Sam. I'll love you forever."

She kissed him for almost half a minute, her tears running down his cheeks.

"I love you too, Jackie. Forever." He was drifting off to sleep.

He awoke the next morning, feeling better than he had in thirty years. Jackie was beside him, still asleep. He shook her awake.

"Jackie, wake up. You're still here."

She answered groggily, "Of course I'm still here, you goofball, haven't left."

He came to a sudden realization; his wife was back. His Jackie was back. But he would so miss his beloved Jackie.

# A Night on the Town

John Grey

Light from windows  
is out to get me.

Doors slam like daggers.

Cars are masters  
of the drive-by evil lair.

Bricks leap up at my face  
and stones project themselves  
inches from my head.

Cats may gnaw on rats  
but I'm the prey  
they're really after.

And I don't need to read the headlines  
to know what newspaper boxes want.

I'm more pre-emptive than I used to be.

That's why I bust store windows,  
stamp down grass,

set fire to some empty boxes when I can.

A cop was by here before,  
looked me up and down

like he suspected me of everything.

So what if I get twenty years  
for strangling a rose bush.

Better that than thorny hands around my throat.

j . c .

Thom Miles

j. c. and his big brother john the baptist  
play chess at the red horse on a rainy saturday  
night.

they've exchanged their old religion  
for the new ways of gold  
in a dying nation. sold the souls they found  
too expensive to keep.

they buy their drinks by the pitcher.  
they stiff the waitress. their bony fingers  
crawl across the wasted board  
while their eyes crawl out the back of their heads  
across the room to the young cunts  
strutting their stuff on the floor.  
the old whores gone from their minds.

the cathedral is closed and the tree temple  
rotting.

they grind their bones. plot the government's  
overthrow by force. withdrawing the peaceful ways  
of their earlier antique days. divorced

from the stuff of solemn journeys. the battlefield's  
overflowing  
and going down, the blood  
something running quicker now.

tired of being forgotten  
and tired of the mock rotten apples hurled  
in their direction, they curse  
the masses of malcontented fucks  
who refuse to have their own lives, to live

as they once did and now do, their backs  
to the sadsacks of a world gone mad with grief,  
anger and frustration heaped upon the helpers  
finally burns the backs of the godfearing groupies  
of sin.

and the devil laughs at the game. at the pieces  
moving  
in his direction. the constant erection of his cuckold  
penis prodding the pants off mankind's ass,  
withering his woman's flower, the power of winning  
of choosing the grinning chimpanzee for all his  
doings

dongs on

breaking the scabby skin of law's half-naked  
commandment,  
blessing in boatloads the cleft of her lower chin.  
going in, going in...

halfway to paradise, his zenith  
eden, his apex  
the glad men and women of sinning in silence.  
the passive is good, but for what? the plate is  
warm, but the food is cold

slop

slow roasted rotting oatmeal for the soul

slop

the degradation of her ditches  
filled with dark and lowly  
corpses. a copse of trees behind the barren  
wasteland.

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ABZ #035

*George Gott*

Even Ajax understands  
the nature of terror.

Even Ajax has been  
in Iraq  
and trembles again.

And all who are aware  
of the beast within us  
have known fear.

Fear for the victorious.

Fear for the defeated.

Even Ajax understands  
why we are enamoured  
with the profession of death.



# You never know who you'll see on the beach

Benjamin Green

Water lapped gently at the pilings. Seagulls wheeled and squawked as they flew through the sky. Two seagulls fought over a jellyfish that washed up on the shore.

Elizabeth Mayhews picked up a pebble, and threw it at the seagulls. It ended up hitting the desiccated jellyfish. Marjorie watched in wide-eyed amazement. Ramona, the middle sister, announced, "You didn't scare them."

Elizabeth hefted another rock, and said, "No, *duh!*" She leaned back, and whip-cracked her left arm, between underhand and sidearm. Elizabeth played softball for twelve years, and fast pitch softball for three years, and it paid off. The fastball hit the first seagull dead on. He gave a surprised caw, and fell over on his side. The other seagull looked at the humans, his black obsidian eyes registering surprise. Then he opened his wings, and took off. Ramona said, "You killed the seagull."

Elizabeth snorted. "Aw hell, he's just stunned." She was very careful not to swear in front of Marjorie.

Ramona ignored Elizabeth's remark. She pronounced, "It's wrong to kill seagulls. They are part of the ecosystem. You shouldn't tamper with the ecosystem."

Elizabeth snarled, "How about we put the ecosystem back in whack? I'll feed you to the *seagulls!*" Ramona screamed, and scrambled back. Marjorie watched wide eyed, then giggled, hiccupped, and clapped.

Ramona sulked. "That wasn't funny."

Elizabeth retorted, "It was hilarious. Wasn't it, Marjorie?"

Marjorie chimed in, "Lizzy was right. It was funny."

Ramona exploded, "You little goober!" She stormed off. Meanwhile, the seagull that had been rather rudely interrupted from his dinner got up and tried opening his wings. The left one opened fine, but the right one was broken, and could only move two inches from his body. His only route of escape was the sea. He began hobbling toward the water.

Elizabeth noted him trying to get away, and shouted, "Oh no you don't!" She began chasing after him.

The seagull saw her coming, and began hobbling faster. For a minute, it looked like the seagull would win. She slowed a half-pace as she approached the water.

Cold chills moved from her loins to her midsection in clammy waves. Memories came to her in an unwanted rush. If she allowed herself to give in to the fear, he would be able to swim out beyond where she was willing to venture...

Elizabeth managed to ignore the fear, wading into the water up to her ankles to catch the seagull. He looked unhappy about being caught, but there was little he could do about it.

Elizabeth walked back onto the beach, and showed the seagull to

Marjorie. She stared in wide-eyed fascination at the bird before her. She asked, "Is it poisonous, Lizzy?"

Elizabeth grimaced. She hated being called Lizzy. However, since Marjorie idolized her, Elizabeth let it pass. She said, "No, seagulls aren't poisonous. They're just vultures with a coat of paint. They are carrion eaters."

Marjorie asked, "What does that mean?"

Elizabeth asked, "What does what mean? Carrion?" Marjorie nodded.

Elizabeth continued, "It means they are nature's garbage scows. Carrion is dead bodies, and seagulls, like vultures, eat dead bodies."

Marjorie stuck out her tongue, and said, "Yuck! That's really gross!"

Elizabeth said, "That's dis-*g*uuuuu-sting!" her voice rising an octave on the middle syllable. Marjorie collapsed to the sand, laughing and hiccupping. Finally, she got up, and asked, "Can I touch him?"

Elizabeth said, "Sure, I don't see why not."

Marjorie tiptoed up, and gently prodded the seagull. It regarded her quizzically. She squealed with delight, and ran back. Then she came up to the seagull again, and poked him. Once again, the seagull only stared at her.

Marjorie exclaimed with delight, "The birdie is *soo* soft."

Elizabeth opened her mouth to say something. An unfamiliar voice shouted, "Heads up!"

Surprised, Elizabeth turned around. The Frisbee ended up hitting the seagull. He cawed with anger. A tall boy said, "Well, hello there, good looking! You happen to see a Frisbee around here somewhere?"

He had long blonde hair, a deep tan, and earthy California good looks. Elizabeth decided he was a pretty boy, and she wasn't interested.

After flashing Marjorie a warning glance, she pointed with her toe. The boy said, "I didn't happen to catch your name."

Elizabeth said, stiff-lipped, "I didn't throw it." Marjorie giggled.

The boy looked shocked to get hit with that hoary old chestnut. He recovered fast. "Well, what is your name?"

Elizabeth said, "Liz."

He said, almost reverently, "Liz." Then he asked, "Is it short for Elizabeth?"

She retorted, "No, it's short for Lizard."

For a minute, he looked like Elizabeth had puked on his sandals. He quickly regained his equilibrium, and decided to press his attack. "Well then, Lizard, when should I stop by to pick you up? I realize you are just dying for a date with me, but I won't be available until three."

Marjorie marched up to him, and scowled. She announced, "You are not nice." With that, she kicked some sand onto his sandals.

He took off his sunglasses, and glowered at her. Elizabeth realized Marjorie had handed her the perfect opportunity out of this situation. She stepped into the situation, and asked, "Marjorie, do you know where your older sister is?"

Marjorie looked up at her sister, and caught the expression. She said, "No,

I have no idea.”

Elizabeth said, “Go find her, or mom will have a bird.” Marjorie looked at Elizabeth, and then giggled.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes, and said, “Pun not intended. Now get going, munchkin!” Marjorie took off down the beach.

Elizabeth said with mock sadness, “Gee, I was so looking forward to a date. Unfortunately, responsibility intrudes. But I suppose you wouldn’t know anything about that. By the way, could you help my friend here? He’s a little down on his luck.”

With that, she handed him the seagull, and ran off after her sister. He looked at the bird in his hands, and threw it down in disgust. The seagull responded to this abusive treatment by pooping on his sandals.

He made an abortive attempt to kick the impertinent bird. Then he picked up his Frisbee, and stormed off.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth had caught up with Marjorie, but neither of them knew where Ramona was. Elizabeth confided in a low tone, “Personally, I’d be happy if she stayed lost.”

A familiar voice shrilled, “Well then, why didn’t you?”

Elizabeth said, “Selfish self interest. If mom and dad would have a fit if they found out I left you running around by yourself.”

Ramona was silent. She desultorily threw stones into the water. Elizabeth perched herself on a log, and brooded. Finally, she said, “Marjorie, go get me a flat, smooth stone. I’ll teach you to skip stones.”

Marjorie nodded with great enthusiasm, and then took off. She came back five minutes later with an armful of rocks. Elizabeth picked up a rock, and went into her stretch. Her left arm snapped forward, the rock flew through the air, and skipped ten times. Marjorie heaved her rock, and it *plunked* into the water. Ramona laughed.

Elizabeth challenged, “Alright miss bigmouth, put you money where your mouth is. I dare you to skip a stone.”

Ramona gulped, and threw. It *plunked* into the water.

Elizabeth didn’t say anything. She just turned toward Marjorie, and said, “Look, skipping is in the arm. First, you cock your arm back, like this, see? Then you throw it. I recommend sidearm. First, snap your elbow, like this. Then your wrist, like this, see? Then release!”

The stone skipped six times. Marjorie clapped.

Elizabeth handed her a rock, and said, “Here, you try it. The secret is to put a spin on the stone.”

Marjorie threw, and her stone skipped twice.

Ramona grabbed a rock, and said, “Let me try!” She managed to make her stone skip three times. Then she crowed, “Look! I made it skip *three* times!”

Again, Elizabeth said nothing. Scooping up a flat stone, she cocked her arm back, and then whipped it forward. The stone skipped thirteen times.

Ramona’s eyes widened then narrowed. She scowled, and then declared, “I hate you!”

With that, Ramona ran onto a pier, fifty feet away. Elizabeth shouted, “Get off that pier, right now!”

Ramona retorted, “Go to Hell!”

The rotting wood gave an ominous creak, and then took a drunken lurch. Elizabeth shouted, “*Ramona!*”

Her sister grabbed onto a piling, and began to blubber. Elizabeth shouted, “Don’t move! I’ll be out to get you!”

She took three steps forward, and stopped. With a loud crash, the dock came apart, dropping Ramona into the water. She began to scream and thrash.

Elizabeth was rooted to the spot. She looked around wildly for somebody to help her. She was terrified of the water. It hadn’t always been that way.

She used to be a great swimmer, and loved the water. Then, when she was nine, she swam into a kelp bed without realizing what she was doing. She had gotten tangled up, and started to panic. Then a riptide started pulling her out to sea. It was only the intervention of a lifeguard that saved her from drowning. Since then, water more than knee deep terrified her.

A few people began looking and pointing. Elizabeth waved her arms at them in a frantic manner. They waved back at her. She wanted to scream. They didn’t get it!

Marjorie’s finger poked her in the side. Elizabeth whirled to snarl at her sister, and found herself face-to-face with an elderly man. The corners of his eyes drooped down, giving him a sad-eyed look, and he had a bristly white walrus moustache.

Elizabeth grabbed him by the forearms, and said, “Oh, thank God! You’ve got to help me! My sister is drowning out there!”

She swept her hand out to indicate Ramona thrashing. He looked sorrowful. “I’m sorry, young lady. I can’t help you.”

He looked down. Elizabeth looked down, and felt a wave of dismay go through her. The old man was leaning on a cane, and his right leg was twisted at a pigeon-toed angle. He looked her straight in the eye, and said, “You have to save her. Nobody else could get to her in time.”

An icy wave of fear washed over Elizabeth. She shook her head, and took a step backward. “Huh-uh! No way! I *can’t!*”

The man hobbled closer, never breaking eye contact. “You can, and you must! Otherwise, your sister will drown!” He tapped his cane on the sand for emphasis.

Elizabeth held up her hands in a defensive gesture. “I just *can’t!* I had an accident, now I’m afraid of the water!”

The old man’s expression softened. “You can do it. I have faith in you.”

He grabbed her by the shoulder, and she was surprised at his strength. Then, for a brief, shining moment, the fear was gone. She looked out at Ramona. Her sister was subsiding to gurgling and flailing around, and was starting to sink.

Without conscious thought, Elizabeth stepped out of her sandals, and began running toward the water. Marjorie had been staring at the man slack-jawed the entire

time, her index finger curled over her lower lip. The man smiled and winked at her. Then he disappeared. Marjorie stared at her where he had been, goggle-eyed.

As she began running along the sand, a voice in her mind demanded to know what she was doing. Her response was to run faster, as if to outrun the voice. When she didn't answer, it grew shriller and shriller.

She began to pant, and her limbs grew heavier and heavier. Elizabeth tried closing her eyes, and thinking about her sister Ramona. The briny smell of the ocean filled her nostrils. The rising panic threatened to engulf her.

Elizabeth opened her eyes, and saw that she was only a couple of feet from the water. By a supreme act of will, she threw herself into the surf. The cold water was a shock to her system. Panic exploded in her chest like a pocket of noxious gas. She couldn't breathe!

Fighting to retain her reason, Elizabeth thrust herself upward. Her head broke the surface, and she took a deep breath. Then she gagged on some saltwater she swallowed by accident. Then she forced her eyes open, to see where Ramona was. The saltwater burned her eyes, but she ignored it.

There! Ramona was bobbing like a cork, her flailing growing weaker. She took a deep breath, and dived back down. She thrust out with her arms, while kicking with her feet. Muscle memory began asserting itself, and she fell into a natural rhythm. Endorphins began flooding into her brain.

She soon reached Ramona, and put her arm under her sister's armpits. Ramona started to panic, and started flailing again. Elizabeth treaded water as she said, "Stop it! You'll pull us both down!"

Ramona didn't stop it. She continued to flail. Elizabeth said, "Stop struggling, or so help me God, I'll let go of you!"

Ramona still refused to listen. Elizabeth loosened her grip on her younger sister. With a gurgling cry, Ramona went limp in her arms. Elizabeth tightened her grip, and began using a modified breaststroke, using her feet to propel her.

Her muscles began to ache from the unfamiliar exercise, and then to burn. The shore seemed so far away. Elizabeth began to be assailed by doubts. Then she heard the cheering from the crowd on the beach, and felt a renewed surge of energy.

Her feet touched bottom, and Elizabeth felt a surge of elation. She stood up, and began walking toward the beach, dragging Ramona behind her. The roar of the crowd rose to a crescendo. Then a riptide grabbed her, trying to pull her back to sea.

Elizabeth stumbled, and clutched her sister tighter. People began surging out in the water. Hands pulled away Ramona, and dragged her onto the beach. They were wrapped in beach towels. First aid was administered to Ramona, who began coughing up great gouts of seawater.

Elizabeth was told over and over again that she was a great hero, but she was only interested in the old man who had driven her to do it. However, whenever she asked about him, she was met only with blank stares.

Then Marjorie came up to her, looking solemn. She said, "Elizabeth, the old man go bye-bye." Then she waved for emphasis. It was at this point that Elizabeth fainted.

# RANDOM FEAST: Never Without

G.A. Scheinoha

What's the one thing I never leave home without? No, it's not the obvious, tooth brush, razor, etc. Though you'd sometimes wonder from the way I look while on the road, dishevelled, a three day shadow.

Or the given; clean underwear. Once it might've been the trusty Smith Corona word processor, you know the device, a hybrid between typewriter and computer.

Despite the fact the little circular table beneath the hanging lamp in most motel rooms was never near enough an outlet to plug it in. So now, I carry my version of Mark Twain's lap desk. Though not as ornate as his cherry wood and polished brass fittings with a fold-up felt writing surface.

Like him, I recline in the act, get up under the bedside light and while away the hours. We haven't journeyed to exotic locales but we have wandered widely, up to Quebec, southwest to Kansas, as far south and west as San Antonio one spring.

Everywhere I go, a zippered nylon binder, large enough to carry a couple paperbacks besides the blank sheets of paper and an electronic thesaurus, tags along.

Maybe my travelogues will never be as popular as Twain's "Innocents Abroad" or Steinbeck's "Travels with Charlie". Still, if as the saying goes, the unexamined life isn't worth living, so too passage without a succinctly detailed record to remember it by later, just wouldn't be the same.

# Fashion Plate

Anselm Brocki

"See," Louis says standing still with one foot out in front of him, his hands gripping the lapels of his suit coat like a male model, to Harvey seated in an All-Nite booth. "Everything I have on didn't cost me a nickel, and it took me only two days shopping in the trash bins behind apartments where outraged women threw out the clothes of their lovers—all-wool, Italian-tailored coat, gabardine slacks, even this gold medallion, and these Adidas—only the laces I did have to pay a buck fifty for. I really feel good being all dressed up, like in Chicago. I get tired of seeing all the homeless guys out here in shorts, sandals and those dirty tank tops."

# Out of the Corner of Your Eye

John Ferguson

In my growing madness I soon fear my untimely demise. I know I can not keep going; death follows me everywhere. My nightmare started a long time ago, but it has only been in the last few weeks of searching for the answer do I reveal the horror in the truth.

My damnation down this one way path started as I was sitting in my den one evening for my nightly reading. It had only been ten minutes when I saw it, something right at the edge of my vision moving across the room distracting me from my reading. I looked to see what it was, but nothing was there when I turned my head to see. Considering it might be my mind playing tricks on me or some type of optical illusion, I dismissed it and went back to my reading. Only to find that with in a few minutes I saw it again, moving from one side of the room to the other just at the edge of my vision. Once again upon looking I only found the familiar furnishings of my room greeting me and nothing more.

I have seen it before many times in my life, so have you. We all dismiss it as a trick of optics or demented hallucinations of our mind. We have all seen it or at least thought we saw it. See, you just turned your head looking for it. You know you saw something, was that just your imagination playing tricks on you? You know what I'm talking about, that something you saw out of the corner of your eye just now, moving across the room just in your visual range but right on the edge so you couldn't see it clearly. You turned your head away from the page trying to see it. I did the whole time in this writing. There it is again. Did you see it?

As I retired to bed that evening my mind could not be released from thinking about the image I saw out of the corner of my eye. Even upon waking the next morning, my mind still mulled over the thoughts from the night before. My fascination grew the next two days into an obsession as I gave considerable thought to the problem. Were we being stalked day and night by some unknown creature, or was it some undiagnosed form of madness we all share? My mind would not rest without knowing the answer and surely madness will take hold of me if I do not try to discover the truth.

It was that evening that a possible solution came, through pure logic it occurred that if the creature was real, in flesh and blood form then it would leave tracks. I immediately went to the den not realizing in my own embarrassment that the den floor is made of oak and would be quite impossible to leave tracks unless it was scratched or scraped. Disappointed I went to the kitchen to cook dinner. As I was eating I realized I could put something on the floor in the den that would leave tracks and I would then have the answer to my problems. Finishing dinner I quickly searched through the kitchen for the ideal substance to use and settled on flour for my experiment. I remembered in my nightly readings of a character

in one of the books using flour to catch the tracks of animals that had come onto their porch in the night. Going to the den with a bag of flour, ready to settle in for an evening of reading; I left my current book on the table next to my chair and started sprinkling flour around the edges of the room on the oak floor. Careful not to step in the flour myself I made a huge circle around the room, wide enough that nothing could jump over it without being seen. Satisfied with the circle I settled in my chair for a night of reading and discovery. As I became engrossed in my book; time went by at a faster pass until the grandfather clock chimed ten. I had been reading for an hour and have noticed nothing. I got up and checked the floor; circling the room the flour had not been disturbed. In my dismay I returned to my reading. It wasn't long before the grandfather clock was chiming midnight, growing tired I decided to go to bed. Checking the flour once more, it was as I had suspected; nothing. Being too tired to sweep up the flour I left it for a task in the morning and carefully crossed it, so as not to track it through the house. The night went by slowly. Trying to sleep I begin to doubt my reasoning and my vision. I began to fear that an unknown form of madness has taken hold of me and is leading me down a path of delusion and deception. The fear of starting to lose touch with reality began to fester deep within my conscious mind.

When morning finally came and the sun began to peek over the horizon, I got up for my morning walk. Stepping out of my bed chambers, I froze in utter terror. The length of the hallway was scattered with wisps of flour! Before taking a step further I backed into my bed chambers, the first thought that came to mind was I must have tracked it up stairs last night when I retired. Checking the entire bedroom floor and my slippers I found no trace of flour. Surely I must have left a window open, some crack to the outside let in the spring wind to cause this flour to be deposited in the hallway. Putting my slippers back on, I made my way to each door and each window in my large two levels manor. Careful not to disturb the wisps of flour, I carefully checked each window and each door for its security. Finding nothing out of place; all the windows and doors were closed and locked. No leak of air could be found compromising the interior house to the outside world. Even in desperation to discover the cause I checked the door going to the attic and basement, as before each was secure.

As fear begin to rise in my mind, I began the laborious task of cleaning up the flour using a broom I had retrieved from the utility closet. It began to occur to me that something must have made this mess, it was only logical. Logic dictated that nothing could have made this mess, not by any means I have discovered yet. The only other conclusion that it could be was my impending madness. In the back of my mind the terror that reality must be slipping away from me caused sheer terror, have I gone mad? Deciding I must now with all effort prove I have seen something out of the corner of my eye, only to prove to myself that I have not been taken by growing madness.

As I did my daily chores around the manor, it came to my attention that I did not have to be reading at night in my den to see the thing out of the corner



of my eye, it would happen at random times through out the day. The first time I noticed it was when I was cleaning my yard, I thought I saw something move across the yard but like always when I looked there was nothing. Later that day as I made lunch, I noticed something move just out of the corner of my eye pass the kitchen door and down the hallway. Checking the windows and doors once again I found that they were still securely locked as they have been all this time. During dinner I saw it move just out of clear vision range towards the den. Every time I would check and find nothing.

I slept with the lights on the following night, I don't know if it was madness or fear. If whatever caused the wisps of flour to be in the hallway would easily be able to come into my bedchamber; I would never hear it. Retiring to bed every night had turned into a ritual, as I checked all the doors and windows. The following morning was my weekly shopping trip to purchase items for the week; passing the local sporting goods store in town I decided to stop. I had seen it many times in the past, but I do not indulge into the sports like as many of my neighbors do, so I had never found a need to visit. As I wandered around the store I found myself wondering into the trapping department. Trapping is a popular sport in this part of the country and the section was very large, looking around I wondered into the live animal traps department. Looking over the traps it occurred to me that if whatever I was seeing could move flour then maybe it was flesh and blood and could be caught in a trap with the correct bait. The only question was what size of a trap would be needed. My madness in this affair had not overwhelmed me yet for I did not asked the clerk what size of trap needed for an unknown creature that had invaded my home. Browsing the trap further it occurred to me that all the times I had seen the creature it never seemed large in size, at least not any larger then the local wild cats in the area. I asked the clerk for a trap that would be fitting for the local wild cats, purchasing the trap I headed for home, in my obsession I had forgot all about doing the weekly shopping.

Assembling the trap it was quite larger then I had thought, but it still would be small enough to fit in the hallway in which I had seen the creature from the den and the hallway to my bedchamber. Moving the trap to the hallway outside my den I placed it next to the hallway table, the creature had come from this direction each time to cross the hallway past the door. It was only then that I realized I had no clue as to what the creature would eat. In the past years I have seen the creature; I could not remember a time food had been missing. Going to the kitchen to search for bait, looking over possible baits, not knowing if the creature ate meat or plants to increase my chances of success on my first attempt I decided on lettuce and left over cold cuts from yesterday's lunch. Now all I had to do was wait until evening, when I retired to the den for my reading.

As evening approached, I baited the trap and retired to the den for my reading. In my overwhelming anticipation it was hard to read that evening, my lack of interest in the book made it hard not to watch the door for movement. I concentrated on my reading as hard as I could when I saw movement out of the cor-

ner of my eye. I tried my best not to look and continued to read, over the course of the night I saw the creature several times. As the night grew on I continued to read until I could no longer stay awake, I never heard the trap engage. Checking the trap on my way to bed, it was as suspected the trap had not been tripped. Neither of the baits showed any signs of being touched. Surely the creature eats, as my mind continued to ponder what kind of bait to try next; I retired to my bed chambers for the night. My growing fear of this creature did not feel any comfort though until I had secured the chamber door and locked it.

The night was restless, even in my locked chamber I kept looking for movement. My lack of success in my first attempt to capture the creature caused me to sink into a dark despair; I feared my own madness had erupted into full blown insanity and hallucinations as I pondered what type of bait to use next in my attempt. As soon as sunrise came I set about returning to town in search of new bait. At the farmer's market I bought one of each type of vegetable and fruit, a trip to the butcher shop weighted me down even more and got some strange looks as I purchased a small quantity of each meat in various cuts.

That very night I started on the methodical task of trying each of the meats and vegetable and fruits, to expedite the process I use one meat, fruit, and vegetable each night. As the week progressed, each night I was met with failure as the bait and trap was ignored. I grew more restless with each failure; I was haunted now by the thought I might be going mad. The trap had been ignored, but the sightings of the creature out of the corner of my eye had grown exponentially during the week. My nights had turned completely to sleepless as each night has progressed to a ritual of securing the house in an effort to keep the creature out, all to no avail as the sightings increased.

It has been over a week now, all my attempts have failed, the sleepless nights and failure I know now is causing me to go mad. It was in the lowest hour, as I sat in my den reading, that a possible solution to end my madness and discover once and for all if the creature was real or just a figment of my growing insanity. The book I was reading was the story of a crashed plane in the arctic wilderness, in the latter part of the book the victims of the crash in desperations of not being rescued had turn to cannibalism. Was that the answer? Have I over looked the simplest solution, did the creature feast on human flesh?

As soon as sunrise came I was looking for a source of human flesh to try out the grisly solution to this nightmare. My first choice would be subtracting a bit of flesh from a recently deceased cadaver, but I doubted access to such would be limited once it was discovered my dark purpose. In my efforts to find a source I checked the obituaries in the local paper and found that today was the funeral of the accident victim, the female victim died in a car wreck of the highway just outside of town when her car tire had a blow out. The grave would be fresh that night so it would be the safest and freshest source of human flesh. I spent all day planning my raid on the cemetery to retrieve the gruesome bait I needed to make another attempt in my capture of the creature. When night fall came, I made my

way to the cemetery. The freshly placed earth gave up easily the prize for my digging and it wasn't long before I was prying the lid to the casket open.

The entire time of my excavating, I kept seeing things move just out of visual range, the creature had followed me to the cemetery. My anticipation in capturing the creature had expedited the digging a great deal. I was also beginning to fear being in the cemetery any longer than necessary. Even out weighting the risk of being discovered, there was the added risk of the creature, at this point it hadn't made any harmful moves but if it wasn't a hallucination of my impending insanity I didn't think I should take the chance of being in the cemetery alone with it at night.

Surveying the female cadaver, she was beautifully dressed. It was a shame to start cutting parts off of her. Looking her over I decided to take the smallest pieces in locations that would be hidden to the casual viewer if she was exhumed and examined. Laying the tools I had brought for this task next to the edge of the hole, and opening up the plastic bags, I decided to remove the left pinky since it was being covered by the other hand. Cutting off the pinky at the second joint; I dropped it into plastic bag and sealed it. I also decided to remove her big toe, since it was covered by her shoe. Placing it in the second bag, I started wondering what other area I should take flesh. It was then I realized I should collect a larger piece with out bones. I was trying to be as logical about it as possible, even as I doubted my own mental state. After carefully looking over the body, I decided that collecting a section from a thigh would be the easiest. Raising her dress I collected a five inch oval section from her inner left thigh; I knew I needed to hurry I only had a few hours until sun rise and I still had to cover the grave again. Bait in hand I placed them in the backpack that I had brought along with the tools. As quickly as I could I covered the grave and headed for home. I was seeing the creature more and more out of the corner of my eye. I felt a deep sorrow for what I had just done to the female in the grave, but she was dead and didn't and never will suffer. I tried to reason what I had done, to justify it to myself. I had kept coming back to the same logically conclusion though, "Only a madman would cut up a dead person for bait". The image of her face as I defiled her remained in my mind the entire trip home.

Arriving home, I placed the bait in the refrigerator. Taking a shower to wash all the evidence of the cemetery away, I couldn't contain my desire to try out the new bait and went to the kitchen. Removing just the finger, I decided to bait the trap and read in the den. Settling into my reading chair, I quickly became engrossed in the book, trying with all effort not to look to the hallway even if I saw movement. Shortly after the grandfather clock chimed eleven I heard the trap snap shut in the hallway. Startled by the sound it took me a moment to realize what the noise had been, leaping from my chair I raced to the trap to see. To my dismay however, the trap remained empty. Then I noticed it, I noticed the trap was indeed empty! The bait was gone! I couldn't contain the joy. I wasn't going mad!

After a sigh of relief, for my fears of madness had disappeared, I was overcome with the real fear before me. I really did have a creature stalking me. My

hands started to shake as I opened the trap to reset it. I quickly went and retrieved the toe I had collected for bait and baited the trap. Once again I retired to the den to read in hopes this time the trap would capture the creature. It was even harder this time to ignore the movement of the creature out of the corner of my eye. I kept finding myself looking in the direction each time I thought I had seen something. I continued to read until the grandfather clock struck noon, I was about to set the book down and eat lunch when I heard the trap snap closed. Racing to the trap, I was again met with disappointment. The trap was empty again, though the bait had been removed. Disappointed I sat down next to the trap to once again reset it. Leaning back against the wall once the trap was reset, I was quickly greeted with a rush of air past my face. Looking around the hallway I saw no reason for the movement of air, the manor had been known to have leaks of air from the outside regardless of how well the windows and doors were secured. Assuming the air was the result of another leak I made a mental note to call the repair service in the morning.

My appetite had waned in my disappointment in the trap's second failure to capture the creature that stalks me. As I continued to sit on the floor next to the trap I began to meticulously look at it for any defect or flaw that might be preventing the trap from successfully closing faster enough to capture the creature. It was then that I saw a couple of holes in the plate that the bait is placed. In my own rush and ignorance I failed to secure the bait to the trap like the design had intended. Retrieving a short piece of wire from the maintenance shed, I also brought the last place of bait, the section of thigh, in my last attempt to capture the creature before I would require more human flesh. Running the wire through two locations on the flesh, I threaded the wire through each of the holes and securely tied it. Once everything was ready, I went to the kitchen to get a drink, the morning activities had me exhausted. While I was in the kitchen I heard the trap snap shut. Racing into the hallway way I was once again met with an empty trap. Sitting down on the floor next to the trap, I could see the last of the bait was gone and only small drop and bits of flesh remained. Once again it had failed to capture the creature. I was debating returning to the cemetery that night to collect more flesh when it happened. I could feel my heart stop as the cage began to shake violently. Rocking back and forth the cage moved slightly on the floor. I was at a loss, as I could not see anything causing the cage to shake. Fear coursed through my veins as the cage stopped shaking. As the cage settled down I began to slid backwards, trying to put distance between the cage and myself. I had managed to slide four feet away when once again the cage started shaking violently. I stopped moving for fear that my movement had provoked it further, the cage continued to shake violently for some time.

As the cage begins to slow down in its shaking once again, I begin to notice movement inside. As the cage settled to a stop a form inside the cage was beginning to take shape. It was a vile form, short in statue at approximately two feet; it had thick but short elephant shaped legs. Two arms protruded from each side of a thick body, while the head of the creature was out of proportion to the body

size. It looked like a child in some ways, with the head proportioned like that of a baby to its body. The creature had no hair that I could see and was naked. The head was a mass of veins, two small black eyes looked back at me, as the huge mouth opened and closed. I could not see any ears or nose on the creature. Its skin was veined extensively, and was of a dark greenish black tint. As the creature stood there looking at me, it looked tired. As the creature gained its rest, it turned invisible once again and the cage started to shake violently. As I approached the cage, the creature became more violent and viscous in its attempts to exit the cage: fearing it might break loose from its cage I retrieved a sheet from the linen closet and covered the cage. After a few minutes the creature started to calm down and soon was no longer shaking the cage. I sat back down on the floor to watch the cage and ponder the inevitable question that would arise if my attempt proved successful. Now what do I do?

A few minutes later I heard a knock at the door. Startled by the sound, I hadn't expected visitors. Jumped up from the floor I headed to the door, opening the door I was greeted by two of the city's police officers. After confirming my identity, they soon had me in handcuffs and escorting me to the police car. Asking what I had done they told me I was under arrest for grave robbing. They said cameras had been set up in the cemetery for some time due to vandals turning over markers and breaking other head stones. In their attempt to catch the vandals on tape, they caught me on tape.

At the station, I tried in vain to explain why I robbed the grave and the creature I had captured that now sat in a cage in my hall. It wasn't long before they presented the cage from my hallway and asked me to show them the creature I claimed to have caught. They broke out in laughter when I explained that the creature could turn invisible but it was truly caught in the trap. I explained to them everything that night, I figured it was the truth and even with the crime of grave robbing haunting me, I still had the proof the creature in the cage if I could get it to show itself. I knew they must not let the creature out though or my proof would be gone.

Since the crime of grave robbing was a very unusual crime for the area, I had gone to court quickly. A media spectacle was made of my crime and the news reports blanketed the area. As I sat in the court room listening to the prosecution, I noticed they had found the bags I used to store the human bait I had gathered from the cadaver. The cage was also in the court room being used as evidence. As the prosecution recreated the night I collected the bait from the grave, I noticed movement in the cage and the trap bait holder had moved. They hadn't opened the cage, so the creature was still inside. As the prosecution continued he went to the trap and started to explain as he reached down to open the trap. In an instant I had jumped up from the defense desk I was sitting at and darted across the room screaming at him not to open the trap. Bailiffs tackled and cuffed me halfway across the room, as I was being dragged from the court room I pleaded with them not to open the trap that if they did the creature would escape.

I was convicted of grave robbing. My outburst in the courtroom and my insis-

tence that a creature was in the cage caused them to find me mentally unstable and I was sent to a mental hospital. When my lawyer came to visit me one last time in the mental hospital he told me they had opened the cage in the court room. He said he thought I should know since I had been barred from the court room due to my out burst. I thanked him for all he had done, but I didn't need to know they had opened the cage. I told him the creature was already here stalking me once again.

I fear now that I may be killed soon. The creature knows I am aware of it stalking me now. I see the creature more and more frequently, it must be plotting my demise. I am drugged every night now, they tell me it is to help me sleep but I know they are lying to me. They started drugging me when I started waking up screaming during the night. I told them that something had bit my foot while I slept which caused me to scream. They examined my foot and found teeth marks. They claimed I was biting my own foot for attention. Each morning now, I awaken to sore bite marks on my body. The creature had apparently never had to kill for its food, just only devour the dead flesh it found, but it seems to be learning.

Did you see it? It was on your left just then running behind you. We both know you saw one of the creatures. You don't believe me either. You think I am insane. Catch one and see for yourself. There it goes again. Did you see it? It was out of the corner of your eye on the left, you saw it I know you did. Don't let it get you.

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## Talking loudly to the empty air

*Vincent Spada*

Down the street he went,  
his hands waving wildly above him  
Hair all messed and matted  
Crazed, like a lunatic

Shoes falling from his feet  
Jacket split and frayed and ripped  
Face with a beard deepest brown  
Fingernails, full of the dirt

Seeing and hearing no one  
Walking quickly in his direction  
Going where nobody knows  
Talking loudly to the empty air

# When You are Young and Free

Timothy J. Willis

Roethke has just returned, as of two months ago, from Japan, via New York—where he was to have settled a second, had not misfortune forced him home-ward. He had been tutoring in Japan with Emily, his girlfriend: but, as his contract had expired, and as he had it not renewed, and as Emily's was not nearing expiration, he loosed the restraints of their courtship (as land was about to lengthen it, anyway), and he set off for new adventures. And, a day outta last month, we met up at the library and, as much as I had no intention of carousing at all hours, we got to drinking in the Loop then on over towards Halsted, and Boy's Town, where was near the residence of one of his schoolmates, now freshly out the closet and the only able one nice enough to put Roet up upon his return.

"It's all right, I don't fucking care about that. I'd stay here forever if I felt welcomed." His hand went instinctively to his cocktail, a potion that was rich yet miraculously underpriced. If there is a drunk ever tough-enough in his manhood, I would highly recommend gay clubs and bars to drink away in, for in the joints we had been in that night, in that neighborhood, anything asked in a glass was priced lower than anywhere I have ever been, excluding the barest cavern of all taverns. In a White place, such as we were, the drinks are almost always cheap, if sometimes more or less full-strength; and, in Black places, if the prices are not unlike any hetero bar, any mixed concoction will burn straight-up and have you wheeze for the first time in life for a li'l more juice sommore ice. And, while my retort was on whether my friend meant "forever" in that glass, "forever" in such pleasant establishments (but, for its lack of ladies), he meant with his host. It seems that, despite Roethke's voiced lack of -phobia for homosexuality, his host is not very comfortable with this sudden company, not very welcoming of a roommate. "Anyway, I asked him for at least a month, or two, if he could swing it. Either I'll find some work, somewhere, or move back to my mother's, or geez! with my father—if he'll let me—and his wife (she'll love that)."

"Hmf: I'd like to get a real gig my damned self. If I had known what I know, I woulda stayed recepting with the law firm."

"Yeah, it was rather dumb for you to leave that place."

"Ah, thank you, you're too kind—kinda ugly, but"

"What I mean, Tenn: you were there that long, and you picked up not one reliable contact. You could go back there, right now, if you weren't so arrogant, and probably get something out of it; while I—my only option now is to stand out on Michigan, with a cardboard sign reading 'WILL FUCK FOR NEPOTISM', just to get my foot outside the door."

"Well, it's easier in life if you start off like you may want to be, I dunno, average, or something—if ever you think mediocrity is okay. But, it isn't for me (and,

it isn't for you), and it does seem a lotta the time that I've set out to make life even harder than it already is, but it's okay, even though sometimes I do go on, unlike Dire Straits: I shoulda learned to be a pediatrician; I shoulda learned plumbing or auto repair."

Roethke laughed—over this low singing of mine—a spirally high-pitched laugh that drew our bartender's attention a second. Eventually, we got way back to a much earlier discussion of his Japan jaunt. Although he was always wont to welcome my arrival, very charitable in his offer to put me up payless with no responsibility but to play TENNYSON CONNORS, SCRIBE, I never learned much, from his letters, about Japan: other than that it is rutted in the appearance of 1950s America; that there is nothing "mystical" about their form of capitalism, and their sun is not rising as rapidly as is their GNP; that Thailand and Korea, which he also visited, dismayed from equal unoriginality, dissimilar only in that their whores are forthright with their profession, whereas the Japanese force the euphemism "hostesses" upon theirs. But, despite all his good-natured barbs, he would stay, repeatedly renewing his contract to teach; and, finally, he did concede that, as there was never a splendid reason whatsoever for him to leave, "It was nice while it lasted." Then, as a devilish aside delivered during drinking, "But, even nicer that it didn't."

In New York, however—and this town is what was most in his thoughts—Roethke befriended this saloon keeper who permitted him to drink free, to sleep in the bar—all if he would clean the place up a bit throughout the night. The owner had just married and, as he was still frantic and excited by said situation, would always be in a hurry for home, and thus had begun the neglect of his place. Well, he had met Roethke Hatcher, and from Roet one can tell instantly whether one will be done right by him or not (what it is is that effortless 'I need to be taken care of' Caucasoid face, while all I can manage is that handsome 'I want to be taken care of' Negroid face; and, while both are easily recognizable, it is another matter whether or not anyone is inclined to play benefactor). As Roet was on his last leg in New York, just a week or two from leaving, he accepted his duties, as if knighted by a king, and his daily habit became drinking and puking and sleeping and waking to breakfast brought in to him, in addition to a little cash to carry when he walked round town. He accepted all this as a personal experiment, to see how long he could do it, would want to do it—all the while, of course, always keeping an eye open for "another something to do", for yet another opportunity he would provoke someone into asking him to undertake. All ended, however, with Roethke's realization that the saloon keeper was just as interested in this experiment—almost as if this guy was the scientist and not the subject. So, with feelings of being used, like a toy for another's amusement, Roet rebelled and, out an act of planned vengeance, after receiving funding from a relative for his midnight train to Chi-Town, he threw an after-hours open-bar party for all the sickly disturbing drunks and derelicts he could unearth. He says he simply "neglected" locking-up.

"So, where's this girl," Roet asked, with a swallow, annoyed, as he sometimes gets with the protraction of a story he finds less interesting, "you met?"



“Who?”

“That always pisses me off when you say ‘who’, when you know full well who I’m talking about: Barbara, no, wait”

“Oh, y’mean—”

“Wait! I’ll get it,” and Roethke raised his hand to stifle my assistance. He likes to work his memory, he likes to find for himself the answers that are in any textbook he has steadying any wobbly table. Whether vitally important or not, if he has ever known it, he must remember it; if something new suddenly confounds him, he must work it through—no matter the time, the energy expended, the effervescent pointlessness of the entire mess. And, the times have been rare that he has given it up. (“You’re such a little pedant, sometimes,” so I have said to him. And, it was only on the first occasion that I broke his concentration: “You call me a ‘penis?’” “No, a pianist.”) So, there was he, paused and still, but for flicking imaginary ash into its tray, his brow furrowed, the thoughts collecting under the cranium like kid after kid bunching up under the covers of a small bed, every so often mumbling to himself or to me for affirmation, all this elliptical matter in the rotation of his equation. His deferments are merely strains for precise wording, for the full thought, for a clarity within himself to then share with any undeserving interlocutor.

“How’s Beverly?”

“Vamoosed,” I blurted, having waited so long, having sat there watching him think, hearing to my right these two effems criticizing the chosen apparel of a wanna-be transvestite friend of theirs, drinking my drink, smoking his smokes, and regarding the brushes against my back in this jammed joint as sometimes unalarming and sometimes rather curious.

“You stopped seeing her?”

“Well, I guess y’could say she ‘stopped seeing’ me; but, what I think really happened was she forgot I was there.”

“Do you miss her?” and, unlike regular male bonding, Roethke discourses on dames like a Barbara Walters’ interview, like any overread yet underpaid and jaded psychoanalyst with a boring patient.

“Naw—well, I did, for a minute. Y’know, you’re not thirsty until your canteen’s empty, then you’re bashing your head in over all the times ya coulda, shoulda, woulda—Pursue to do, I believe it’s called.”

“So, you just miss the occasional fuck?”

“Well, I did. But, there’s a new maniac on the horizon, now: Lindsey. Yeah, it has been quite an extraordinary year for me: I’ve felt quite a number of breasts, this year; Hell, last year, I don’t even think I kissed anybody. This one’s a good kid, though: she likes poetry, she likes me—did I mention she likes me? Nerve o’ the girl: she isn’t even interested in me ‘cause of the Myth—”

“No, ‘she thinks’ you’re ‘a good catch’.”

“I’ve used that line on you before?”

“Fives of times.”

One thing about Japan, there was Emily. I met her last year, when she returned temporarily to take care of some business as it pertained to her passport. The peculiar thing in our meeting was that Roet had not accompanied her but had encouraged her to contact me to go with for drinks, an evening out for conversation and company. And, as I was only too happy to do so, we made a night of it, sharing, for the most part, anecdotes on Roethke, while downing Martinis at the Drake, and eventually getting drunk to the point where she passed out and I had to carry her to cab, cupping my hands under her mouth as a way of shutting up “She isn’t going to throw up! don’t let her throw up on my seat!” from our concerned cabbie, all the way to her sister’s Wrigleyville apartment, coasting on all I could find in the girl’s purse. I thought, at the time of her phoning in this request, that maybe it was I who was a wee bit old-fashioned in this, but while another friend also thought vaguely of this act of Roet’s as unprecedented, it was one buddy in particular who put it most bluntly: “Hey, I don’t give a fuck who you are, how good or best a friend I think you are—I ain’t ever letting my girlfriend go out alone, witta guy, and for drinks? all night, and I ain’t even in town? and, witta guy who ain’t had none since—” “Okay, we get the picture! And, for argument, whether Roet knows or not, all my ungovernable lusts are strictly professional.” “—Aw, Hell, naw!” and, this bud thus began his summation: “And, I damn sure ain’t setting the shit up!”

Yet, whether Roethke really considered the vulgar repercussions or thought himself all-that or thought Emily so much not my type, all he was suggesting was that, for Emily to reconstruct to an extent the world they shared away, she should phone me—for I am a drinker, as Roet is a drinker, as we have drunk and been drunken from the get-go of our own friendship and can puke in each other’s company and lay our heads on pillows of fluffy regurgitation and still look each other proudly in the eye; as the two of them have tutored their “good English speak” classes in between the times they have caroused for cocktails. These stories, that he would let loose about Japan, were the best: for Roet had gotten to be dissatisfied settling within a place so frequented that everybody knew his name; for he and Emily would move on, motorcycle beneath them, to place after place, each successor less fluent in speaking English or speaking to English-speakers. Within these stories, Roethke would defend his girl from the patriarchal misogyny of an old man who would push her out his way; Emily, in drunken jealousies, would attack the prettier patrons who would dare whisper suggestive bon mots in her beau’s direction; and, then, the two would swerve on down the lonely, provincial back roads, returning to their apartment, and again into their sterling responsibilities the next day of tutoring Japanese juveniles towards an understanding of English!

The most interesting thing about these two is that they are so excruciatingly compatible! because none of it seems quite fair in the whole of its inequality. Roethke is the dispassionate and undisputed leader of his relationship, and not, I think, because he is the man, but because his will is incredible; not because he demands to be, but because it seems preordained, because his oratory is hypnotic, his faculty comes through as such as to subliminally suggest, upon his awed

auditors any and all, his station as supreme kindergarten teacher. And, Emily is his adoring votary: gratefully elevated by him, not so much to act as second-in-command as to be a distinguished audience for his warm-up; left to lovingly acknowledge his wisdom and follow his guidance with faith unimagined; and, always there to alleviate his aches, sudden frustrations, and ever urge him on towards denying any potential personal doubts. He was her champion, her Petruchio! and she wouldst not have him fail. Aye, and she was finally his Katharina! and, if he please, she was about to do that brother some ease.

He can concede, now, that he sometimes forgot Emily was this spotlight Love of His Life, “and not just another person”; that little, pretty Emily was to Roet a “sweet, tender responsibility” and, with one word, he could send her to sleep with a peaceful smile adorning her face or leave her totally shattered and wondering her worth to him, to his relationship with her, Hell! her usefulness to the universe. But, as Roet is that kinda pragmatist who values intelligence over sentiment—even over passion, and in spite of the fact that frank, sterilized observation can be misplaced and wounding to one knighted above being “just another person”—it seems, uncontrollably, to be all he can offer, all he ever asks in return. Really, it may be all that is easiest for him, instead of straining the limits of his faculties trying to understand the emotions he elicits out people—those senseless, erratic emotions confronting the absolute emotionless.

“I just think that everything I had theretofore considered fine—‘fine’ as in there was nothing extraneous fucking anything up—to us, to us both, surprisingly, she thought of it, I think, as insufficient. But, I don’t know what was lacking: we didn’t have everything, but we didn’t have nothing. Really, I don’t know what she wanted, whether even she knew—I, after all, as far as I know, want nothing, nothing but to go on, and she was made aware of this from the very beginning—and, as she could never voice it for my total comprehension’s sake, it is this—in addition to her insane possessiveness, tantrums, a barrage of questions every time my pattern changed—that created our dissension. She was becoming annoyingly difficult to be around.”

“Actin’ like your girlfriend, or somethin’, y’mean?”

“That’s a thing, too. I would love to say it, I would—well, I don’t really know if I’d love to say it, maybe need to say it, but I never feel it necessary, just excessive—but if I were to say I loved her—love her—I always feared it would come off like a very bad movie.”

He paused all, as if awaiting some revelation outta me, requested of the bar-keep a drier coaster for his cocktail, then resumed: “So, I left her. I left her before she could leave me—or, should I say, threaten to leave me; I didn’t want to go through that type of bullshit.” Roethke never shared with me the (“bullshit”) scene of separation he did go through. All he would say, before turning such a subject over, onto something easier, was, “I imagine, if this is all meant to be, we’ll migrate back together, some day.” At his most emotional, and still that is saying very little for him, he has uttered such nonsensical matter as “What were

we—really!—doing? going? That Emily’s a woman and that I am a man was the only thing keeping us together; and, at any given time could a door-to-door cosmetics woman or a fucking plumber trade places with either of us.”

Anyway, we returned to his first days of New York, and he has met a few people, mostly after-work crowds unwinding in nice neighborhood bars and not his preferred bad ‘hood bars, where you meet the “more interesting people”; but, he did what he did, on this occasion, for connections, and one such landed him a decent job interview. He never got to go on it, though. The night before, while out, he came across someone half-homeless and part-prostitute. She was attractive, if still slightly ordinary, and deceptively youngish. “Do you know the woman who played on the television program *Seinfeld*?”

“Elaine: Julia Louis-Dreyfus.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Roethke had been passing out one bar for another when this chick had asked him for the time and he gave it. She had not propositioned him, and this irritated him, for he was not looking any worse off than anyone else out at that hour. Still, at this point, he was not certain of her vocation, only that she was fairly chatty with strangers for a lady alone; all he knew was, there is a lady standing out on a bitterly cool midnight, just standing full-weight leaning one leg after another, not hailing a cab from against the wall of some closed-up storefront, a man’s large suit jacket on her over a spry granny dress with patent-leather shoes on her naked feet. Even in the dark, when she would cross a foot over, you could glimpse a great ankle, inviolately pale and perfect. Anyway, under the active features of her face, she replied to his casual question of “What’re you doing out here?” just as casually: “Just standing.” She then asked, as Roethke was taking her in, what better thing was there to do “when you’re young and free?”

“My plan was to sit down in an air-conditioned place, have a drink, a smoke, and listen to whatever music is played. I wouldn’t mind sharing.”

That was, roughly, it. They shared it all, with Roet flipping the tab, and Elaine repaying it all with her life’s saga. This is all Roethke wants, ever asks for—to experience life through his own vivacity, or vicariously. Plain or stupid-fine they may be and they may come, but Roethke is the only guy I know who does not clap-on under the fragrance of femininity; is not moved to mount immediately by the light laughs, the flighty and adorable topics chicks find important; does not care about their silky hairs, that luxuriously inscrutable gaze, a busty brush against the body; will not ask for her “Sure” with an eloquent entreaty for intercourse under a summer’s night air.

So, what, in addition to this girl’s life saga, did he get? he got screwed (figuratively, full-bodied and full-contact). They drank a better part of the night away, returned to his hotel, where he had her sleep safely in the bed while he took the couch. When he awoke, finally, the next morning, head throbbing from something other than all alcohol, Elaine had gone, having absconded with all Roet’s worldly possessions, which was one single suitcase and ostrich wallet (within which was the address and phone number of his potential interview). But, was Roethke pissed? No.

He was not mad, there was no feeling of violation—and if there had been such a feeling, it would be accompanied by the appreciation for such a surge of emotion.

“Uh huh. So, you’re hanging out with harlots and I refuse to conform even slightly and getta job. Yeah, whadda we do with such jacked-up lives?”

“Live them.”

“Spoken like the last line of any classic lit.”

There was a titter out either of us, then that nada that is left over from dried talk of recent pasts, such pasts not easily escaped by simply tossing away a napkin with a number on it. Being with Roethke, though, this is supremely okay, monumentally all right. I simply pretend, throughout this night, that I am like him: living a little for the now—that is, for the immediate money, no matter how much or mulch, but mostly for the fun one can find with whatever funds, and within the company of whoever is nice or interesting and down for the adventures presented, overlooking sometimes personal safety or complementary aesthetics and mental mutualities. Yet, while I naggingly realize that such will not suffice twenty years down the line, onward goes Roethke, wandering in and out of every day—savoring it, exulting throughout it, and perhaps never conceiving middle America’s criticism that he may have wasted his life. Ah, what happiness it is to be with people who all are happy, to press hands, press cheeks, smile into eyes (Katherine Mansfield).

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## Last Image      Sabrina Dawkins

Blood oozed from her neck as I sloppily applied pressure to the wound, my tears diluting the red liquid. Her mouth was agape and it trembled slightly. I turned my ear to her dry lips—a final sigh. Then I involuntarily jerked my head around so that my lips were almost touching hers. It was over. I ran from the apartment. The darkness protected my mindless departure, since I was still wearing her blood. It wasn’t until the steering wheel restricted the slide of my palms along its leather rim that I realized that I was losing it. Eight murdered and not one mistake until now. The sound of warm blood in her throat filled me with disgust that was almost unbearable. I pulled over to the side of the road along the empty highway. I gagged. What was happening to me?

For as long as I could remember, I harbored an insatiable desire to view dead bodies. Not the powdered up pansies in ridiculous attire, placed neatly in boxes, and with no real resemblance to anything that once housed life. The exact moment when the soul escapes, as it were, interested me the most. That clumsy stare, those flaccid eyes, beckoned me to a world that only they had knowledge of. So I guess the body itself only indirectly interested me, while the escaped life eluded me. And it has been mere science—an objective and

healthy curiosity about death, that has made me effective until recently. I would passively and unemotionally store the data in my mind, effectively stealing the last living image of the recently deceased. However, something went horribly wrong during this particular murder. I drove on, briefly ignoring the speed limit, until my better judgment kicked in.

I removed my shirt in the car and pulled off at the exit. I looked in the mirror and noticed that there were small specks of blood on my face. Using my shirt to remove them, I pulled into my apartment complex. No one was outside, so I pulled into the closest parking space and walked briskly to my door. I heard footsteps nearby and fumbled with my keys, holding the bloody t-shirt. The keys slipped out of my hand and a young couple approached, nuzzling and giggling. I froze. No—they were headed toward their car. I balled up my shirt and picked up my keys. As they passed, I unlocked the door and walked in. The sour smell was embarrassing. I checked to see where the couple was; they were turning the corner. I had to wash clothes and get some air freshener. Suppose I got another girlfriend—what would she think of such a stinky, slovenly bastard?

I washed up and stretched out on my bed. I could not sleep. The body was still there, visible for all to see. What an idiot. I finally fell asleep. When I woke up, the image of her was still in my mind—not a picture to casually be unearthed from time to time to marvel at the science of soul loss, but a persistent flash of information that refused to obediently disappear when not needed. Red hair and grey eyes are indeed rare; I understand that. I don't care about the beauty of her face. And the continual flashing of her image will certainly cause me to burn the body when I get around to it, in order to deface her once and for all.

I wooed her, unlike any other. All of my other subjects were strangers. It is indeed convenient that people wander into my life, begging to be examined. Telepathically, they offer themselves up to be dissected and discarded. How passively they appear within their own lives, stumbling through their pointless existences. I didn't love her. How could I have? I only knew her for less than a month before killing her. I remember her fitted yellow shirt and expressive eyes. I hated her at first sight—that is why I decided to humor her. Her delicate hands gently touched me at every opportunity and I became nauseous. Was I attractive to her? What did she see in me that made her smile so foolishly? It was a façade, and I knew it. Humans live behind the masks of their temporary bodies, afraid of the moment when they are no longer protected by such an effective means to hide who they truly are. But when the mouth is agape and the last breath escapes so clumsily and conspicuously, the shell is shown for what it truly is: an animation, a puppet, an image, a stench. What I was interested in was the entity that pulled the strings; unable to see it directly, however, I settled for the result, or effect, of the energy leaving the useless puppet.

She always smiled. We went out to lunch a few times and she just could not stop smiling. I dreamed of knocking her teeth out with a baseball bat or a hammer. I wondered how cheerful she would have been then, without her animation to hide

her secret contempt for my perpetual sadness. Each time we went out she stole a portion of my energy, my life, and claimed it for her own. Her eyes drained my happiness through their unyielding stare, and her lips continued poisoning me with tales of pleasure I would never know. She was mocking me from the beginning—mocking my inability to experience real joy, mocking my lack of any real friends, and mocking my uneasiness around her. I was not a charity case, and when she approached me at the car wash, not long after my last impersonal killing, I knew then the secret of life—at least I thought I did. From her imposing disposition, I knew immediately that she differed from my other subjects. I had thought that they held the secret of life through their lifeless bodies, but after eight murders, life was still taunting me, still flitting around my peripheral vision. And that became obvious to me when this lively woman appeared in a bright yellow shirt, flashing perfect teeth. She wanted to know the time, as if wearing a watch would have actually inhibited her in some way. So full of life, I could not stop staring at her, and she noticed. That is when she started patronizing me with her worthless pity clothed in the invitation to lunch.

I'm sure I had some inkling after murder number three that the only information I'd ever receive about the nature of life would be through the lifeless corpses I was left to dispose of. It was as if life was an acrobatic firefly that always escaped the enclosure of my hands while laughing at me. Each time, the corpses became more disgusting and difficult to dispose of. Ms. Thomas, the elderly woman who lived in the apartment complex across town, was the hardest of all. That was totally unexpected, since she was like 200 years old. But apparently she had more life in her than the seven prior subjects. Her soggy flesh pounded me ferociously as I tried to collapse her neck. The more she scratched and punched me, the quicker she would die. But she was oblivious to that, as if keeping her life bound in the animated vessel was all that concerned her. She was illogical and frantic. Death was certain, and perhaps had she not fought me, her death would have been less painful for us both. But I envied her fight, her courage, at such a time that she should have been thanking me, rather than trying to hold on to the maybe five years she had left. And since she screamed and fought, I had to be extra careful disposing of her body so not to arouse suspicion. I even stayed with her for eight hours after her death in order to make a clean getaway. Finally, her soft flesh yielded to me as I carefully wrapped it in plastic bags and emptied it into my trunk.

Crystal approached me while I was contemplating the difficulties in the last murder, and spoke to me as I pondered the inhuman strength of the old crone. It was as if life was winking at me that very moment, egging me on to try and catch it once more before it ceased to be. But I was in a tug of war with a 200-year-old, and suffering an embarrassing loss. Then the seeming embodiment of shining life approaches me, grasping life so effectively that it permeated through her skin. She was a social worker who took a special interest in abused and neglected children. How sweet. I played into her patronizing me because I was sure that she held the

answers I was looking for. And this time I would trick life into opening its mosaic in order to provide a clear and unified picture of the energy behind the animated veil. But the more I talked with her, and after the second time we met up for lunch, I realized that she wanted to keep the secret for herself, that she would taunt me until I had no choice but to take the answers from her. I'd rip open her tender skin and smile at her twisted face, lifting my bloody hand to show her my theft: a throbbing red glob dripping on her concave chest.

We had only gone to lunch about five times before she foolishly invited me to her small house. I knew she was not desperate from the beginning, but her having me over and then not yielding to my attempts at sexual friendliness, I could not forgive. Although I always hated her, I was hesitant to murder her until the moment she refused my sexual advances. It was at that moment that I unified my muddled thoughts about her and focused only on one goal. She did not want to hand over the secret of life, even though I was trying to take it from her in the least painful way possible. I sat there quietly for a while, listening to her talk of us being just friends. Concurrently, I envisioned her separated corpse, her wavy red hair matted down to a head sitting perfectly on her upper thigh. I dreamed of stabbing her repeated in the stomach in order to watch the irregular fountain of blood from her lips involuntarily wasting life like a leaky faucet—more like a busted water pipe. I wanted to bash in her perfect face and then take a picture of her mangled profile to admire later. But for a while, I just sat there, captivated by how artfully and skillfully she navigated her soon to be corpse, how everything attached to her operated in such musical harmony and awareness. My stomach moved. She was doing something to me even then, before I watched her last animated image fade away. And now, as my skin crawls with nervous twitches, my stomach aches with anticipation, and my heart pounds uncontrollably, I know that whatever she transferred over to me will last longer than expected.

I watched her glide effortlessly around the kitchen, preparing our meal like I was her child, home from school. I ate calmly and politely as she sat across from me at the tiny table on the mats we used for chairs. We ate silently—I suppose my earlier conduct contributed to that. No longer did her eyes and teeth flash at me; however, I still felt the drain that I noticed the first day I met her. She was mocking me, refusing to even look at me. And she was whispering with life, in order to negotiate a way to keep me always wanting and never quite getting there. I watched her delicate throat as she swallowed the meat she had carefully cut up. The small, perfect pieces she meticulously separated entered her mouth effortlessly, and every time she swallowed, I imagined my own flesh and life force being devoured by the deceitful keeper of secrets. So I dislodged the knife from my steak and pierced her thin neck with its tip. Pushing it all the way in, she gasped and grabbed for my arms. Maybe I was on the verge of losing it even then, but I swear I saw steam rising from the hole in her neck as she fell backwards; I assumed it was my life force, which she had been stealing ever since we met. I jumped on top of her and punctured her neck in as many places as I



could. Unlike the old lady, she did not fight; instead, she seemed to remain in a state of shock, even after her life force was gone. Maybe that is why I almost began resuscitating her—I knew that through some force of nature she was still alive, and still laughing at my infantile attempts to catch life by the tail.

The nervousness and sloppiness followed that illogical action of almost resuscitating a life I'd taken; now I lie in my bed feeling like another person. I mean, I don't even know if I can continue these experiments with my sudden, uncontrollable nervousness and chest pains. My skin is soaking wet and my eyes will not blink. What has she done to me? I want to enjoy these new feelings that seem to be connected to life in some way, but they are quite unpleasant. For once, the thought of blood, especially her blood, bubbling from her mouth and ripped throat, is unbearable. My vision is blurred from water-coated eyes. An image of her marble eyes appears, searching and questioning. My chest pains increase and I fear a heart attack will result. Good. Then I won't have to worry about going back to her house and seeing her interrogative eyes once more. But then the images start appearing, previously innocuous and passive, they now elicit emotions that are unbearable. It is as if all of the images are blending into one, and conspiring to overwhelm my feeble brain. They occur in the form of a slide show, moving too quickly to be passive and uninvolved. Are they taunting me? Immediately, I try to block them out with my realism. I picture them rotting silently in their hidden graves. I think of the small creatures tearing away at their flesh and conquering them effortlessly. I know that the last images that I stole are no longer real; they only exist in my mind, yet I can't make them go away, or appear only for entertainment, anymore. I hear the last sighs over and over again, each one a unique contribution. The vacant eyes transform from flaccid buttons into points of infinity. And they beckon me to a place that I want to go.

My skin tingles pleasantly, and my chest pain has turned into a painless throbbing, as if to simply make me aware of its existence. I relax my arms and legs and place my palms neatly by my sides. The images stop, and focus only on one—hers. I feel a surge rush through my veins and seem to hear a faint music generating from my limbs. A smile creeps onto my lips. “Yes, she has definitely transferred something to me.”

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perspective:  
overpass

devin wayne davis

rome of tomorrow;  
parthenon off-ramp;  
swap-meet coliseum;  
car lot catacombs  
beneath the freeway.

# Something More

Steve Land

Roberta Newsome deserved to die but redemption required bloodshed, not death. To that end, the end he knew she wanted, Marty Byron Brown programmed 9-1-1 into his cell phone so that when the task was completed he'd simply press the numeral one, state his address, and notify the operator of needed assistance. Surely, things wouldn't get that far out of hand; no more so, say, than they already had.

At present, Marty was in control of the situation. His victim lay taped to the coffee table in what Marty called his living room. He referred to the other room as the bedroom only because it held the futon upon which he slept, but the space could not accommodate a dresser or nightstand. The final room in the apartment was one that the apartment manager called a kitchenette, but which Marty called a closet. The bathroom, shared by all the tenants, rested two floors below. All the rooms lay silent now, save for Marty's ragged respiration and the hum of the overhead florescent light.

Of course, it's quiet, he thought. His victim was small, insignificant even, and unable to make a sound. Taped to the table through no fault of its own (and what once had a name was now an "it"), and it was unaware of Marty's intent. Said intent, obsession perhaps, and the reason behind the call for redemption was planted in Marty's mind not by an it but by a woman, one made not of sugar and spice, remarkably like all women.

"Roberta Newsome," Marty said, wondering at the ugliness with which the words rolled off his tongue. His voice sounded infantile as it pin-balled around the room. The tiny voice reverberated off the front door, upon which hung a poster of Guns 'N Roses' front man, Axl Rose, brushed over the nineteen-inch black and white television set, swirled its way like smoke from a demon's throat along the arm of the recliner and down the length of the second-hand brown sofa back to Marty. Upon reaching him, it snaked into his ear and wormed into his brain.

Once there, the tiny voice spoke.

"Roberta?" it said. "Old news. Why all the drama now?"

Heat seethed into Marty's cheeks. The mention of her name was still too much, somehow; somehow taboo. These days, hearing the name meant hearing the giggle. And what right had she to giggle? Her with hair the color of dying leaves, eyes brown as fresh-tilled soil, and a thickness in the middle that stole forever the woman she wanted to be. She was an average thinker and, though he'd now never know, an average lover. But he had

loved her long before that little black dress hit the floor and she'd shown him there was no such beast as love.

"Look around," Marty said in reply. "I don't have squat. A junker t.v...a threadbare recliner.

Marty wanted to continue his indulgence in pity but the voice interrupted.

"Yeah, but you do have a good sense of humor...

"But not enough money...

"And a nice smile.

"Money--it's all about money. That and--

"And emotional compatibility?" said the voice.

"Emotional what?" said Marty. He chuckled, slid his hand across the scratched and dented surface of the table. His palm left a trail of sweat as he reached past the duct tape for the hatchet. He'd bought it yesterday at Dewey Hardware, disposed of the receipt and noticed no security cameras as he left the store. Even if the store was equipped with a video surveillance system, it didn't matter, as death was not a necessary component to his redemption. Death, no, a mere bit of dismemberment.

"How 'bout trustworthiness?" asked the voice.

"Not what girls want."

"Faithfulness?"

"Fat chance," said Marty.

"Kindness? Responsibility?"

"Kindness and responsibility don't...um...satisfy them. No. It's money and..." Marty didn't want to say it. Didn't want to think about the implications--the shallow, physical implications of that all-important void women so greedily needed filled. He wanted a drink--just a swill of beer--but for now couldn't go to the fridge to get one. Well, he thought, maybe after...

After, all would be well.

"So," said the voice that had wormed into his head. "They'll only stay for money?

"Well, regardless of the rest of you--all you've mentioned and other...things--they'll stay, they'll 'love' you if you have enough green."

Marty wrapped his hand around the hatchet handle. It was cool to the touch for he'd earlier opened a window attempting to dry the sweat derived from his preparatory exertions, most of which were mental. He struggled with the idea for two hours, weighing the pros and cons of his plan, before accepting it and deciding to make it fact.

"But before that," said Marty, "I sifted through the grains of reason for two months. Two months. I wouldn't have had to, but she giggled. She giggled. I had offended her, and she me. But it's okay now."

"Is it?"

“Oh, yes. Just think how much more I’ll achieve. When I’m done with this and done with her, I’ll be able to concentrate as no man ever could. My days will gain hours. Clarity will spread apart the clouds of confusion and... Well, let’s just say there’ll be no more miserable wishes in the shower or over the toilet. Just time to accomplish...things.”

A shiver worked up through Marty’s body, grazing his spine with electric and invisible fingers. His shoulders tensed. Gooseflesh sprouted on his bare legs. His calves, feet and ankles tingled with numbness from kneeling before the table and his victim for well over an hour now, his resolve strengthening with the passing minutes. Despite the voice in his head, and the pain in his body, his will hardened.

“So,” said the voice, “no love then?”

“Sure. There is love. But it’s between parents and their children. Well, there’s even love between friends. Between men and their male friends. Between women and their female friends. People even love their pets. But there’s no romantic love, not between men and women. Lust. That’s all there is. An image in one’s mind of what should be. And if that image manifests in a member of the opposite sex then all is well. If not...”

“If not, she giggles?”

“Yes,” Marty said, his voice too loud in the confines of the room.

“Despite one’s wit, one’s charm? One’s intelligence, education...common interests? Opinions?”

“Yes. I told you. Money and--”

--And if not--”

“If not, you already know. She’d taken off her clothes. And she was no Victoria’s Secret model, but she could have what she wanted when she wanted. That’s what women do. They say when and how and it doesn’t matter why. They say ‘yea’ or they say ‘nay.’ They take a look or cop a feel, decide, and if need be, search for greener pastures. See, we’re back to money and...”

“She lay there waiting for you and...”

“And I thought she loved me. Thought that was why people did what we were about to do. I thought, silly me, the person in the body was most important. Now, she was no looker, but still good to see. And I liked her, her opinions, her charm. And, I’ll tell you this, I’m thankful to her because--”

“Because she giggled.”

Marty’s face flushed. The remembered embarrassment equaled the initial embarrassment. There’d been nothing to do then as he looked upon the woman he loved, loved despite her own faults--her belly, her non-existent bosom, and the saddlebags at her thighs--but pull up his pants and go. At the time, he figured she would still acquiesce, but his desire wilted like the rest of him. She could go find her own Long John Holmes, if that’s what she

needed. But it had been clear that she didn't need him. He wasn't, it appeared, man enough for her.

The cutting edge of the hatchet gleamed in the light. It, at least, was ready. It didn't feel. It didn't receive giggles when it was bare. No, its hardened, sharpened curve could treat a woman the way she needed to be treated. It could pound, drive, and go as deep as necessary. Marty once believed he could, too; thought that because he was who he was that Roberta wanted to receive him, that she'd enjoy his body as she enjoyed his presence, but...

"She giggled," said the voice.

"Yes. And pointed," he said and sighed. "I wasn't enough. Because I was excited, though, I went home and finished the job, sweating over the toilet for almost an hour because I wanted her...needed her, hand lotion dripping to the bowl with each subsequent application. Lubrication wasn't enough, though, for I needed to forget her giggle. I had to be big enough for me. So, in addition to the lotion, I brought a ruler to the bathroom. I measured myself in the instant before I finished and found that she giggled at six and a half inches. Nearly two across. But..."

"Still she giggled."

"Yes. Money or a big dick. Imagine if you had both. Still, she giggled, this woman I loved. It offended her that I had so little to work with, so little with which to please her. So little as to be unable to please her. And that offended me. I didn't choose my penis. And only it counted. My love did not. What matters is my member. And it offended me. And you know what the Good Book says about the body's offending members. Money. Big dick. I've neither."

"But average is five and a quarter."

"Six in some books."

"But you're better than both. Why, that means some guys have but three or four inches."

"She giggled."

Marty lifted the hatchet. He looked down at the table. A ruler lay there. It showed that the limp penis, the one he'd once named "Big Red," taped to the table was exactly four inches long. The two and a half inches it grew when he wanted a woman weren't enough. They just weren't.

Sadness and hope mingled within Marty. He'd miss himself, but he hoped the loss would increase his happiness. He'd devote himself to life, not women.

"I'll just press one when I'm done," he said.

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